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Why manage terminology? Ten quick answers

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Best Practice

Why Manage Terminology? Ten Quick Answers

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Terminology management is a hot topic these days. At the tcworld conference 2006, terminology had its own forum with hundreds of participants. And a number of highly visible institutions like the LISA Terminology Special Interest Group (SIG) has been evangelizing the development and use of standardized terminology in the business world for many years.

Yet a terminology survey by the SIG (*LISA Terminology Management Survey)* reveals that even in the localization field, where the benefits of terminology work are most palpable, a high percentage of businesses does not systematically manage terminology. Why? Because there is still a lot of confusion surrounding the why's, what's, when's, and how's of terminology management.

If you and your company are struggling with some or all of these issues, here are some initial answers that apply to any organization that cares about quality, customer satisfaction, and, ultimately, the bottom line.

1. Why should my organization manage terminology?

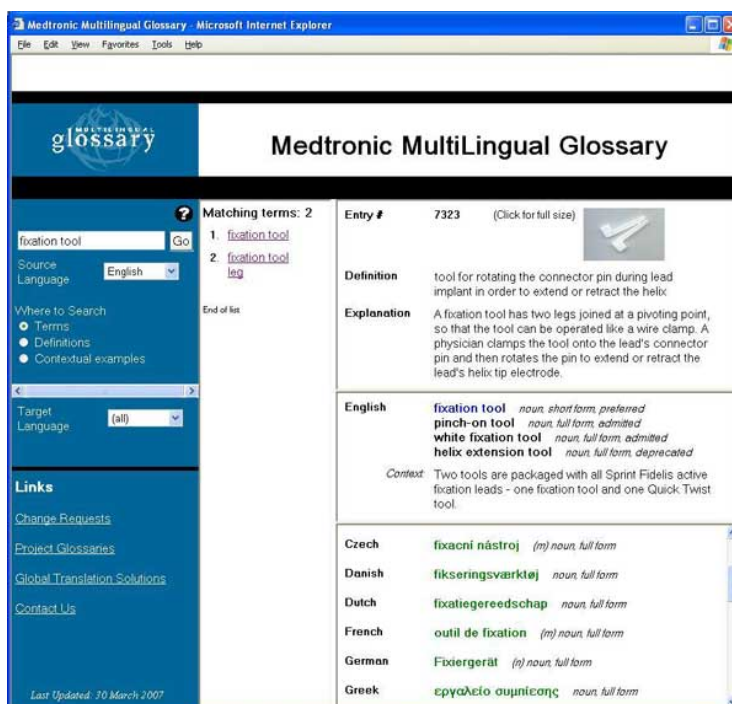Your organization can benefit from terminology management in several ways:

- Terminology management reduces time-to-market by streamlining the development, writing, editing, review and translation cycles. With a terminology program in place, developers, writers, editors, reviewers and translators can use automated tools and processes to use and validate shared terminology.
- Terminology management enables organizations of any size to use the same terms consistently within and across all types of communication that accompany a product or service. Typical communication types include specifications, drawings, GUI, software strings, help systems, technical documentation, marketing materials, regulatory submissions, etc. As multiple authors typically contribute to each one of these communications, terminology management is the most efficient solution for ensuring that the organization communicates the same message and speaks with one voice.
- Terminology management is an excellent strategy for sharing knowledge within and across organizational units. A well-designed term base that is continuously updated provides valuable information to all communicators inside the organization (e.g. authors of technical, marketing and legal texts, including software engineers) and outside the organization (e.g. advertising, marketing and language service partners). In fact, such a term base is useful for almost any employee, especially for those who need to familiarize themselves with an unfamiliar domain, e.g. new hires/transfers.

2. When is the best time in the product life cycle to start a terminology management project?

The best time to start terminology management for a project is during the specification phase, i.e. the time before the actual development effort for the product or service begins. Controlling project terminology at this early stage is the most efficient method for ensuring that all communicators, including developers, use the same terms for the same features and functions throughout the life cycle of a product or service. Starting later, e.g. during the documentation or even as late as the translation phase, prevents effective source control. For example, once software development has reached a certain point, correcting inconsistencies carries such a heavy cost and time penalty that such changes are prohibitive. And if the software is inconsistent, the documentation, as well as the localized versions of the software and the documentation, will be as well, resulting in a sub-optimal user experience.

3. What type of tools does my organization need to manage terminology?

A customizable terminology database system forms the core of any terminology management effort. Organizations that do not develop terminology at an early project stage may benefit from an automatic terminology extraction tool to help build the terminology database. The content of such a terminology database needs to be easily accessible to all communicators, e.g. developers, authors, reviewers and translators. Today, that typically means exchanging terminology data between multiple systems such as software development systems, authoring/content management systems, terminology/controlled language checkers, translation/machine translation/globalization management systems and CRM/ERP/inventory management systems.

As the importance of consistent use of terminology is better understood, more and more tools vendors are providing direct interfaces between terminology databases and the environments in which terminology is being used. A potentially easier-to-implement, but less efficient, solution involves the deployment of a terminology website that gives all communicators online access to terminology. Note, however, that many web-based terminology management systems require manual look-up on the user side and have only limited capabilities, if any, for checking documents for consistent use of terminology.

4. What is the concept-based approach to terminology management?

A typical dictionary lists entries in alphabetical order, with each entry consisting of one term per language. In this term-based approach, synonyms (e.g. *display* and *monitor*), variants (e.g. *peripheral device* and *periphery device*), and different forms (e.g. *Department of Defense*, *Dept. of Defense*, *DoD*) are each listed in separate entries. In a concept-based approach, all terms that express the same concept (i.e. unit of knowledge) are listed in the same entry. It's the concept-based approach to terminology management that enables organizations to actually manage the usage of terminology by identifying desirable and undesirable terminology and marking terms accordingly, e.g. as either 'preferred', 'admitted' or 'deprecated/do not use.'

5. How much information should go into a terminological entry?

ISO 12620 specifies almost 200 possible data categories for a terminological entry, and yet ISO 12616 lists only three of those as mandatory, i.e. term, source and date. For many organizations, the most practical solution will probably be a data model that involves less than two dozen data categories. The LISA Terminology SIG has just released a proposal for TBX-Lite (see the sections on standards below) that lists 23 data categories, many of which will be automatically populated within commercial terminology management systems. The data categories specified in **TBX-Lite** are ideally suited for organizations that wish to build a powerful, standards-compliant – yet easily manageable – terminology database.

6. What is the most important type of term that is missing from many terminology databases?

Trademarks! Trademarks and trade names are core intellectual property in any organization and must be used correctly in all external communications in order to qualify for legal protection. A terminology database is the tool of choice for enabling consistent usage of those key communication assets. In addition, maintaining trademarks in a terminology database is an excellent safeguard against accidental translation, an error that can cause major financial damage, not to mention embarrassment. By the way: The correct part of speech of a trademark is proper adjective since it modifies a generic descriptor, as in *KLEENEX® tissue paper*.

7. Why are definitions so important?

Writing definitions can easily be the most time-consuming and expensive part of managing terminology. On the other hand, the definition is often the most valuable part of a terminological entry, especially if the organization uses the terminology database as the universal knowledge base that it truly is. It's the definition that helps developers pick the correct term from a range of options, and it's the definition that lets a new employee understand an unfamiliar concept better than any other information in an entry.

A quick note for those who struggle with definition writing: Remember that a terminological definition is not the same as an encyclopedic entry. A good terminological definition is a brief, to-the-point statement that should not be longer than one sentence.

Example:

computer keyboard: *input device that consists of multiple sets of keys for entering data*

8. What standards should I consult for terminology management

- *ISO 704:2000 Terminology work – Principles and methods*. This **38-page document** is an excellent introductory text to terminology management, including guidelines for writing definitions.
- *ISO 1087-1:2000 Terminology work – Vocabulary – Part 1: Theory and application*. This is another **overview text** that describes the major concepts used in terminology management.
- *ISO 12616:2002 Translation-oriented terminography.* **This document** provides information on managing terminology specifically for translation environments.
- *ISO 12620:1999 Computer applications in terminology – Data categories.* **This document** specifies the data categories that form the basis for the TBX and TBX-Lite terminology exchange standards.
- *LISA Proposal for TBX-Lite*. This document lists 23 data categories for building powerful, standards-compliant term bases (available online at **http://www.lisa.org/sigs/terminology/**)

For a more comprehensive overview of terminology-related standards visit **http://www.muegge.cc**.

9. What are the three terminology imperatives for managers?

Here are a few terminology-related tactics mid-level managers involved in a globalization initiative should keep in mind:

Find what's already out there

Even if your organization doesn't currently have a formal terminology management program, there is a good chance that some units or individuals within your organization already have established terminology collections for their own domain. Hardware and software developers, marketing and legal specialists – not to mention writers and translators – may keep lists of products, features and functions that are just waiting to be consolidated, reconciled, expanded and updated.

Also, many international, national, and domain-specific standardization bodies make monolingual and multilingual terminologies available. For instance, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) publishes virtually hundreds of terminologies for a wide range of fields. Recent examples include *ISO 2424:2007 Textile floor covering – Vocabulary*, *ISO 9999:2007 Assistive products for persons with disability – Classification and terminology*, *ISO/TR 24098:2007 Intelligent transport systems – System architecture, taxonomy and terminology*.

Share data with all stakeholders

Once a terminology management program is in place, it is essential that managers and communicators alike are made aware of the existence of such a program, and provided with easy access to the organization's terminology resources. The most effective solution for ensuring that all communicators use only authorized terminology, as mentioned above, is the implementation of a controlled language solution, where writers use a tool that's integrated in their authoring environment for terminology checking. However, just having a website on the intranet that either provides an interface for searching the corporate terminology database, or simply lists all terminological entries in alphabetical order, can significantly improve the adherence of communicators to the established corporate terminology standard.

Editor's Note: For more information on controlled language, see Muegge, U. (2007). Controlled language: the next big thing in translation? ClientSide News Magazine. 7: 21-24. Available online at http://www.clientsidenews.com/downloads/CSNV7I7.pdf.

Start early and never stop

It cannot be repeated too often: Effective terminology management starts long before the first source document in a global campaign is ever written. Terminology stakeholders should decide on new terms for features and functions at the specification stage. Starting later always leads to changes. And changes are always expensive and time-consuming. A study conducted in the automobile industry indicates that a terminology change at the maintenance stage (i.e. after publication) is 200 times more expensive than a change at the specification stage. *Reference: Schütz, J. (1998). MULTIDOC - Controlling language in multilingual documentation. Proceedings of the 1998 EAMT Workshop. Geneva, 2-3 April 1998. Translation technology: integration in the workflow environment. J. Hutchins, V. Hansen, D. Marty-Albisseret al. Genève, European Association for Machine Translation (EAMT): 55-63.*

Also, it is important to remember that terminology, much like language in general, changes over time, so the terminology database needs to be continuously updated to reflect those changes. If users are to fully embrace a corporate terminology program, the terminology database needs to reflect the most current terms and definitions.

10. How do I convince my C-level executives of the value of a terminology management program?

Reliable, vendor-independent ROI data for implementing a terminology management program is hard to come by. The studies that do exist suggest that launching a terminology initiative may neither be easy nor cheap. However, the payoff is significant both in terms of enhanced quality of deliverables (in the source and target languages), as well as in improved productivity throughout the content creation/localization cycle.

Here are a few key benefits that characterize the outcome of a successful terminology program that you can include in your business presentation:

- A comprehensive terminology database frees developers, writers – and ultimately, translators - from the tedious task of researching terms on their own. It reduces the danger of multiple communicators coining multiple terms for the same feature, which either goes undetected and causes confusion for the user, or causes unnecessary expenses and delays for terminology harmonization throughout the product lifecycle.
- Having an approved multilingual terminology database available gives translation buyers more control over the quality of the final localized product.
- A properly administered terminology program allows organizations to centrally manage and distribute core intellectual capital. Making a database with a concise description of the features and functions of the organization's products and/or services available to all employees will have a significant effect on training existing employees – and even more so on training new ones.

As with many new initiatives, a terminology program can be started with baby steps, such as a pilot for a single new product launch. Typically, the benefits of managing terminology from source to target manifest themselves in the very first project. And, don't forget, start early and never stop!

Editor's Note: If you're interested in reading more about terminology management, here are links to recent articles:

A Terminology Standard for Arabic
http://www.lisa.org/globalizationinsider/2006/02/a_terminology_s.html

Terminology as a Key Driver in Business Communications
http://www.lisa.org/globalizationinsider/2006/04/terminology_as.html

TBX-Lite News
http://www.lisa.org/globalizationinsider/2006/07/tbxlite_news.html

LISA Promotes Terminology Standards in Beijing
http://www.lisa.org/globalizationinsider/2006/09/lisa_promotes_t.html

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