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Faster translation, anyone? Strategies for reducing translation turnaround time

Uwe Muegge

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Faster translation, anyone?

Anyone who has worked long enough on the service provider side of the translation business knows that translation buyers typically only have two types of translation projects: the ones that are urgent and the ones that were due yesterday. As most commercial translation projects are closely linked to the effort of selling a product or service in international markets, the time required for translation can mean lost revenue due to the inability to generate sales in a given market. While many in our industry consider lengthy turnaround times for high-quality human translation a given, there are, in fact, many steps translation buyers can take to expedite the delivery of their most time-sensitive projects.



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By Uwe Muegge

Plan for translation

Integrate translation into your marketing plan

It may sound trivial, but planning for translation from the outset of a project – and acting upon that plan – is the single most important factor for reducing turnaround time. Many of the steps discussed below (e.g. developing project-specific glossaries, style guides, document templates, etc.) are typically too complex, time-consuming and expensive to be performed from scratch on an ad-hoc basis for a single, high-priority translation project. However, if maintaining multilingual glossaries and style guides is part of a global communication strategy, updating these resources where necessary for a specific project is generally much more feasible.

Build a strong relationship with your service provider

Today, many (corporate) translation buyers treat translation as a commodity, and, consequently, use a transactional business model where individual translation projects are awarded via reverse auction to the lowest bidder. In an e-auction environment, depending on the size and duration of a project, it may be difficult to align

processes, schedules, and resources between the translation buyer and language service provider. If, on the other hand, the buyer and the provider of translation services form a strategic partnership, it is much easier for the service provider to establish and maintain client-specific resources and workflows. In this type of environment, a language service provider typically uses a team of professionals who, based on continuous exposure and, ideally, product training, knows the client's products and/or services inside out. It goes without saying that completing translation projects with a dedicated outsourced team involves little 'friction' (e.g. queries, review and correction cycles), which leads to faster turnaround times than typical for outsourced translations.

Involve your service providers early in the product cycle

For many projects, it's not uncommon for language service providers to learn about a new translation project the day it shows up in their respective mailbox. If that project has a tight deadline, the only option available to most translation service providers is to distribute the work to many linguists simultaneously, which might negatively impact the quality of the deliverables. However, if a translation buyer coordinates his or her efforts with the language service provider early in the project stage, additional options for early delivery become available. For instance, linguists may successively translate text as authors create it or revise translations in sync with changes in the source. In this scenario, even a

single translation professional may be able to not only complete a large project on his or her own but deliver the final translation only hours after the authors have finalized the source text.

Standardize terminology usage

Create project-specific glossaries

Few factors have a more detrimental effect on the timely completion of a translation project than the discussions about correct terminology usage that often occur if there is no comprehensive glossary. The translator uses 'USB stick', the editor prefers 'USB drive', and the reviewer insists on 'flash drive'. With a comprehensive, project-specific glossary, these unnecessary, expensive and, above all, time-consuming controversies are a thing of the past. While every translation project (in fact, every communication project) benefits from the availability of a glossary, the advantages are most apparent in translation rush jobs: with an available glossary, translators can focus on translating, thereby maximizing the translators' productivity instead of spending valuable time on terminology research.

Have glossaries reviewed by the client

Having a project-specific, multilingual glossary available in electronic form early in the project is good; having such a glossary with the client's

Definitions

language service provider (LSP)

type of business that offers linguistic services such as translation, localization, interpretation

glossary

collection of words that have special meaning in a project

term

word that has a special meaning in a given subject field

termbase

database that contains a collection of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

terminology

collection of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

terminology management

effort to control the usage of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

terminology management system

type of translation software that enables users to efficiently collect, process, and present terminology

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stamp of approval is even better. For terminology matters in particular, the old adage applies: the customer is always right! No matter how well-researched a glossary the service provider creates, if the client prefers other terms, changes will have to be made in the translation. To avoid these types of change requests, create and update the glossary early in the project, have the client sign-off on it, and make that glossary available to translators as soon as possible. Following this strategy ensures that translators not only use terminology consistently, but that they will use the 'right' term every time, which reduces time required to edit and review. For clients who have a recurring need for fast turnaround, high-quality translations, playing an active role in creating and continuously updating multilingual glossaries is a must.

Minimize the number of new words

Use boilerplate text where possible in the source document

One simple way of reducing the number of words that need translation – and maintain a quick translation turnaround – is by using boilerplate text, or standardized text modules that can easily be re-used. This means that every time writers use boilerplate text when composing new source documents for translation, they not only reduce the translation cost of these documents, they also accelerate the delivery of the translated documents. In other words, the more boilerplate text a document contains, the faster it can be translated!

Minimize the need for translation review

Re-use previous translations

Using a translation memory system (TM) for every translation project should be a no-brainer. But it is astonishing how many large, global organizations fail to profit from this technology. The most basic benefit that translation memory products offer is the fact that these systems help users leverage previous translations: if a previously translated sentence, or one similar, occurs in a new document, the TM automatically proposes the existing

translation to the translator. Using a TM for every commercial project offers many advantages, such as ensuring consistency within and across documents. In the context of urgent translation projects, the general rule is (and there are very few exceptions to it) if you are not using translation memory, you are wasting time – and money!

Provide a translation style guide

One of the overarching goals in every rush project is to eliminate repetitive work and the risk of corrections – in other words, enable team members to get it right the first time. So how do you make sure a translation meets the client's expectations? By using the client's approved translations (via a translation memory system), by using the client's approved terminology (via a terminology management system), and by following the client's translation style guide. But wait: most clients don't have a style guide for each language for which they buy translation services! That is typically not a problem, as, in the absence of a formalized set of rules, reviewers on the client side are usually happy to come up with one of their own. If speed is of essence, however, a language-specific style guide is an effective tool for avoiding post-translation changes concerning capitalization, representation of numbers, and the like. Who should write these style guides? Ideally, the person(s) who typically performs translation review on the client side. If that is not an option, creating client-specific translation style guides is a service many language service providers offer. And while the creation of a style guide does cost money, it is typically a minor investment that has a considerably higher pay-off, especially in terms of time-savings.

Eliminate desktop publishing work

Create document templates designed for translation

Many, if not most, commercial translation projects involve some sort of desktop publishing (DTP) effort. However, for urgent projects, it may be possible to eliminate most, if not all, DTP work. If the documents you typically have translated are not created in a content management system, it is helpful to have templates in place that were created with translation in mind. Generally speaking, a template is a standard that allows multiple

writers to create documents with a uniform look and does not require DTP work after the authoring process is complete.

From a translation perspective, it is important to leave plenty of blank space in the document template, as text expands by up to 30 percent when translated into certain languages (e.g. Finnish, German and Russian). Text expansion also needs to be considered when setting-up tables/nested tables, text boxes/frames, etc. to avoid truncated or cut-off translated text.

Finally, it really helps if documents for urgent translation do not contain images, graphics, or diagrams with embedded translatable text, as handling this type of text requires special DTP skills that many translators do not have.

The bottom line

Yes, improving the turnaround time for urgent translation projects is possible; in fact, most projects could be delivered much faster if buyers of translation services followed the small set of guidelines outlined above. Some of these recommendations are easier to implement than others, e.g. it is much easier to create document templates optimized for translation than to develop and implement a process for comprehensive terminology management. But if fast translation turnaround is the top priority, all of the measures outlined above are well within the reach even the smallest organization that buys translation services.

contact

Uwe Muegge

has more than 15 years of experience in the translation and localization industry, having worked in leadership functions

on both the vendor and buyer side. He has been with CSOFT International, a provider of language services based in Beijing, since 2008, and he currently serves as Senior Translation Tools Strategist for North America.

uwe.muegge@csoftintl.com
www.csoftintl.com

