



How to Select a Language Service Provider (LSP)

It can be difficult for technical writers to hand over carefully crafted English documentation to a Language Service Provider.

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Writers take great pride in their work and may cast a watchful eye over it as it is reviewed, modified and distributed by colleagues. Yet the translation process, to some extent, is beyond our control. Few technical writers are sufficiently fluent in a second language to verify whether a translation meets high standards.

Working with a Language Service Provider (LSP) can be a leap of faith, but it also can be a rewarding experience. Our common goal is to communicate our message to the world effectively and efficiently. Some may feel anxious when you start interviewing translation companies, and wonder what questions you should ask and how far you should pursue the discussions. It might be helpful to approach the translation process with the idea that it will enhance and reinforce the best methods you adhered to when creating your English documentation. With this in mind, we offer some advice to those who are about to hire a translation firm.

Taking Stock Internally

When considering translation vendors, among the first questions to ask are: “What questions should I ask my managers before I start interviewing translation firms?” “What information do I need to have a productive conversation with an LSP?” Asking yourself the following questions before you start interviewing firms will help you choose the right LSP for your unique needs.

Are we really translation-ready?

Two factors to consider when answering this question includes the current state of the documentation to be translated, and the company culture and processes that may affect the translation workflow.

Any technical writer can assess the readiness of documentation for translation with the help of checklists and guidelines obtained from translation vendors and professional groups

such as the American Translators Association (ATA), including:

- Can you give the LSP a written overview of your documentation procedures?
- How do you handle revisions, and how often do they occur?
- Is your documentation cross-platform in nature, and what desktop publishing programs do you use?

It is important to realize that information technology is changing so rapidly that you will never be truly ready.

The fact that you are concerned about your company’s translation readiness means you have already won part of the battle: Many companies are completely reactive when it comes to translation. For example, some companies have exported products to Europe without giving any thought to EU translation regulations, only to have their products stopped at the border due to regulatory noncompliance. At that point, rush translations might be required before any products are allowed through customs. Translation vendors are familiar with these ever-evolving regulatory issues, so take advantage of their experience by asking questions before a problem arises.

It is important to realize that information technology is changing so rapidly that you will never be truly ready: The more complex your documentation process, the greater the need to consider how any anticipated changes will affect your translations. Keep your LSP project managers informed about radical



changes to your English documentation process. It should come as no surprise that communication is key.

Putting together a comprehensive translation strategy could save thousands of dollars in the long run.

What are your current and future translation needs?

Knowing the answer to this question could help you negotiate a substantial savings in projected translation costs. At first, your managers might want only the administration manual and user guide translated. Perhaps later they will want the user interface, website, marketing materials and training manuals translated. Putting together a comprehensive translation strategy could save thousands of dollars in the long run.

How can a cloud-based translation management system save time and money?

Today, virtually all translation vendors use a cloud-based translation management system to help them manage and utilize repetitive text. Within the cloud, you are able to view the translations in real-time and track the progress of your translation projects. Most important, translated text is imported into the translation management system and made available for future projects within your own translation memory. As more of your company's materials are translated, the translation memory grows, and your translation costs decrease. In your initial discussions, make sure to ask your LSP how a cloud-based translation management system can benefit your organization.

As an added benefit, if the LSP knows that more work of a certain type is coming its way, it may be able to offer you some guidance or advice that will save you even more money down the road while also paving the way for smoother, faster project turnaround.

What timeline do you envision for completion?

This question is particularly important if you have a large amount of documentation to be translated. Typically, translation is one of the last steps in a company's documentation process, and translation vendors are often faced with very tight deadlines for the completion of various projects. If you want the LSP to translate a large project in a short amount of time, it may need to assemble an expanded team of translators. Extra editors may be needed to ensure linguistic consistency. This situation affects not only the quality of the end product but also the cost charged to the client, as some documentation may have to be rushed.

Are you willing to consider long-term rather than short-term cost savings?

A number of tools and methods can be used to reduce future expenses, but some of them require larger initial costs in time and/or money. For example, have you and your company considered setting up your documentation in a single-source framework? Have you looked through all of your written material to determine if you've made a concerted effort to "recycle" text from your user guides to your website to your technical specifications?

It is very important that any user documentation remain consistent with your user interface.

Do you plan to translate the user interface into the same target language(s) as the documentation?

To answer this question, you will want to consult with your software engineers, web developers and international employees.

It is very important that any user documentation remain consistent with your user interface. Large corporations often possess a hodgepodge of documentation: Some user interfaces are translated, some are not; some screenshots in user guides are translated, some are not. Often times, companies will try to save costs by leaving one

documentation component in English, which is counterproductive from the end user's standpoint. If a customer is sitting in his office with a user interface in French and a user manual containing screenshots in English, it will be expensive from a customer service standpoint to help him resolve the difficulties.

This is not to say that user interfaces should always be translated. It is important to consider the opinions of any international employees in the target country. In many countries, the targeted end users may be quite comfortable working with an English language user interface, particularly in the medical and software fields.

Most vendors are careful to modify their procedures when doing so will work to their clients' benefit—so you should be skeptical of anyone who seems inflexible.

Looking for Red Flags

In a typical year, most translation vendors deal with hundreds of companies and organizations from dozens of fields, and trying to impose one way of doing things on potential clients is a recipe for conflict and miscommunication.

A good LSP will be happy to share its expertise with potential clients. Make sure that the LSP you choose works with qualified translators and has already integrated cloud-based translation memory tools into its translation process.

Many vendors will have opinions regarding translation workflow and how they can help clients receive quality translations at a good price. Most vendors are careful to modify their procedures when doing so will work to their clients' benefit—so you should be skeptical of anyone who seems inflexible.

Watching Your Language(s)

When you ask firms if they can translate to your target language, remember that different versions of the same language may be spoken in different countries. You do not, for example, want a translator from Portugal translating documents that will be used in Brazil—the two countries have their own versions of Portuguese. Similarly, if your documentation is being translated for use by clients in Mexico, you want a translator who is fluent in Mexican Spanish, not Castilian Spanish, which is used in Spain or American Spanish, which is used in the United States.

A Realistic Approach to Tests

Some vendors may suggest that a client send a test file similar to the kind of documentation that will eventually be translated. Remember, though, that it can be difficult to estimate the cost of a project on the basis of test files. Because all translation vendors prepare their quotes based in part on raw word count and other production factors, it is not feasible to extrapolate a translation cost from sample files.

You can also have various vendors produce the same language sample translation for you. Then run the translations by your regional offices and ask for their feedback. Test files can help in a variety of ways. First, the LSP can send sample files to its preferred translators to determine whether there will be language-specific terminology problems or challenges. Second, if the sample file is submitted in its native format (e.g., FrameMaker, Interleaf, Adobe InDesign, etc.), file compatibility and layout style can be evaluated. This will help the LSP's desktop publishers evaluate the proposed project and identify potential problems up front. In short, test files can be particularly helpful for companies that have never had documentation or other materials translated. If you decide to do a test translation, make sure your sample files are short but representative of your project as a whole.

Most reputable vendors provide test translations free of charge. You need to understand, though, that test translations will give you very little insight into the

Questions To Ask

The key with almost any interview process lies in the follow-up questions you ask. The following questions should get you off to a good start when interviewing a Language Service Provider (LSP):

- ***How long has the LSP been in business, and can it provide verifiable client testimonials?***

Many new vendors pass themselves off as much larger and more experienced than they really are.

- ***How long has the LSP been translating documentation for your industry?***

Each industry has its own vocabulary and style, and you want a firm that is comfortable with yours. An LSP that focuses on the translation of medical software applications may not be the best choice for, say, a manufacturer of high-end kitchen appliances.

- ***What services does the LSP offer?***

Many LSPs offer desktop publishing services; some smaller vendors do not. One may offer English technical writing services and software localization, while another prefers to specialize in a different area. Think of additional services you may need in the future, and ask if the LSP provides them.

- ***Into what languages does the LSP translate?***

- ***With what languages does the LSP work most often?***

- ***Are the LSP's translators accredited?***

Beware of cut-rate vendors that are vague about the qualifications of their translators: They may cost you more in the long run due to inaccurate translations.

- ***How experienced are the LSP's project managers?***

Will you work with one specific project manager, or with various project managers? How current and specialized are the project manager's information technology skills? Will he or she be able to handle a complex project that might involve FrameMaker, XML and translation memory components—and deliver on time with minimal difficulty?

- ***What type of quality control processes does the LSP employ?***

Every LSP's translation process, including quality assurance, is different. Make sure the

LSP describes their specific processes for quality assurance, such as proofreading, editing, spelling and grammar checks and client review.

- ***What are the LSP's average turnaround times on projects?***

Most translators can translate between 2,000 and 3,000 words per day, but many variables may come into play, such as difficulty of material and production requirements.

- ***How does the LSP handle client changes or revisions on documentation that has already been translated?***

If the changes are minor, some vendors will implement them free of charge. If the changes are numerous and stylistic in nature, additional charges may apply.

- ***What is the LSP's policy regarding translation memory databases?***

- ***Will it provide you with a translation memory based on your translations, or will you be told that the memory belongs to the LSP?***

- ***What types of tests must translators pass before they can work for the LSP? What are the minimal qualifications?***

Before you make that first phone call to an LSP, check its website for a FAQ section. Many of the questions you were going to lead off with may already be answered, in which case your first interview can be targeted specifically to your project needs.

- ***What kinds of questions should you expect to hear from an LSP?***

Typically, the sales representatives will ask you general questions about the history of your company, the types of products you sell, your target markets and your anticipated volume of work. Be prepared to answer specific questions about your documentation process, preferred computer platforms and software applications, and your anticipated timetable for certain projects.

Other Keys to Success

For a translation project to be successful, you need to establish good communication during your interview process. A translation service provider's cost and time estimates are only as good as the information you provide.

Localization is schedule-driven, and the way to have a reliable schedule is for both parties to understand the tasks in the same way. If anything changes, this must be communicated early and the impact determined as clearly as possible.

We can probably agree on several other cardinal rules that should be followed from the earliest stages of the process, for the benefit of both client and LSP:

Document everything in writing.

Conversations between the translation firm and its clients can be lengthy, and even the best note takers (at both ends of the conversation) will miss something. Communicating everything in writing, either via email or snail mail, will help both sides as you move forward with the process.

Inevitably, there will be difficulties with one or more of your translation projects.

Not all problems are predictable, and new challenges may arise during the production process. If you have established a sound working relationship with an LSP, trust your project manager's judgment and try to work through the problems. Successful vendors provide a high level of customer service and have an interest in ensuring that your translation projects are completed with a minimum of difficulty.

Trust your instincts.

If you have doubts during the interview process, look for another firm. Translation projects are very detailed endeavors, and there is little room for miscommunication, mistrust and misunderstanding—any of the three could cost everyone involved time and money.

type of relationship you might have with a translation firm. Don't assume that you should send a test file for every project—vendors have to pay translators for these translations, and if you have established a sound working relationship with an LSP, there should be little need to constantly test translators.

The main purpose of a test translation is to determine whether the LSP's product is of acceptable quality. Your company should perform an internal review of the test translation, ideally by an employee or distributor in the target country. The problem is that a linguistic critique is subjective by nature: Your reviewer may dislike the translator's writing style and give it a poor review even though there is nothing technically wrong with the translation. Ideally, you should submit a test translation to more than one reviewer.

A very small number of vendors have been caught using the "bait and switch" tactic. It works like this: The LSP sends a sample file to an excellent translator to make a favorable impression on a client. Once the LSP lands the account, it switches to a less talented and lower-paid translator. If you have an in-house language reviewer, have him or her do a quick check of each translation to make sure that they are of acceptable

quality. You can also check the client references that a firm gives you. When you call the references, don't be afraid to ask questions: They knew that their agreement to serve as a reference for a firm could mean that they'd have to field a lot of questions.

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Talking Money

When during the interview process should you ask about project costs? The answer is: Whenever you are prepared to discuss the volume and scope of your work. Most vendors will offer discounts for volume, but only after you have discussed the LSP's quality standards and safeguards. Anyone can get a cheap translation, but if the price sounds too good to be true, the LSP is probably cutting corners.

Please note that not all languages—or file types—are equal when it comes to price. You will pay more for a Korean translation typeset into a FrameMaker

document than you will for a Spanish translation in a straightforward Word document. Make sure the LSP's quotation spells out exactly what services you will receive. Don't assume that a cost of thirty cents per word for a German translation includes desktop publishing or editing services. Make sure you specify what type of final output you require—you probably won't be able to open a Japanese Word document on your desktop computer, so you may need the LSP to generate PDF files for you to send to your customers or reviewers. Take advantage of the experience and expertise of your LSP project manager—he or she should be happy to help.

Some of the information we have provided may be a little daunting. Translations are highly detailed, time-consuming projects that require everyone's project management skills to be in absolutely peak form. You just have to know the right questions to ask to make an informed decision. And now you do! **ICD**

Original content published in *Intercom*, May 2002.
Updated 2016.

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