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Technology

The Catch-22 of the Translation Industry

During the Internet boom of the 1990s, at a time when new technologies and new language for these technologies were being developed and invented at a hitherto unknown pace, the makers and shakers of the translation industry did not want to be left behind.

Language was revamped (some might say this is only too fitting for the language industry). "Translation" no longer seemed adequate, so new terms were coined – *localization*, *globalization*, and *internationalization*. And because that was not complicated enough, the "acronyms" *I10n*, *g13n*, and *i18n* -- or the latest guilt-ridden term, *GILT* (*Globalization, Internationalization, Localization, Translation*) made this into a real "lingo." Unfortunately, service providers have not yet come to an agreement or understanding of what these terms really mean, and (with the exception of some very advanced players) clients most certainly do not understand what this is about and how all this is different from "translation".

In my opinion (and this probably comes as no surprise by now), the translation industry has not done itself a favor with the linguistic confusion it has created. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that this confusion has slowed some acceptance of the technological advances made by the industry. Things just sounded too complex and complicated to be used by normal project managers, and some of the technology vendors contributed to this notion.

Despite this proliferation of industry babble, however, there was some real movement in language technology: while the old concept of machine translation continued to be generally disappointing, the (equally old) translation memory market was being flooded with new players and significant improvements, effective quality assurance and tracking tools were introduced, and a number of medium- to high-end workflow applications were offered.

But even in light of these developments, here is what I have seen in many small- to mid-sized translation companies that I have consulted and worked with throughout the last few years:

- They had invested a great deal of money and time in the development of custom workflow and management solutions – even though there are a number of applications on the market that do the same thing.
- They had purchased at least one translation memory application which they had marketed heavily to potential clients as a technology solution that allowed for greater consistency and savings on long-term projects.



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- The staff was either untrained or severely undertrained in the use of the translation memory application(s) and most employees hated it.
- The actual savings that were accumulated in the use of these applications were minimal or non-existent.

In summary, most translation providers have recognized that technology is useful as a marketing tool, but they have either not found good ways to use it effectively (as in the case of translation memory applications) or they feel a need to re-invent the wheel (as in the case of project management and workflow applications).

What do translation companies need to do to work more effectively with technology? Here are some starting points:

- Use terminology that both you and your client understand.
- Before considering the development of a proprietary tool that is likely to cost tens of thousands of dollars, make sure that you know what is available on the market. Even if it does not perfectly fit your needs, would it be worthwhile to develop your own application to make up for those few missing features?
- Use technology as a marketing tool, but only if your staff knows how to use it effectively.
- Train yourself and your staff in the technology that you already own or should own.
- Force yourself and your staff to use the technology that you already own or should own. People are lazy and tend to do it the way that it has always been done, even if it is much less efficient.

Technology does nothing more nor less than what it's intended for. Let's not pretend that it is more than it really is; instead, let's wisely and effectively mine the true power of what is already available.

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