

## **We Think, Therefore We Are . . .**

Imagine this scenario: Your new business brochure is all written. It's gone through layout and all the necessary quality checks, and it just needs to be printed. So you take your PDF file to your local print shop, where the print shop owner tells you that he would be glad to print your materials. There's only one small problem: He really doesn't know what to do with that PDF file. He admits that he's not interested in the technology of the printing business—he loves the beauty of the fonts and prefers type-setting the old fashioned way. After all, Gutenberg didn't use PDFs.

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Sound rather unlikely? Which part? Maybe both the idea that you created a business brochure and the fact that the printer could not do his job? Be that as it may, I would like to primarily focus here on the printer's failure to do his job.

It may sound implausible for a professional print shop to be unprepared to handle new technology. However, in my world—translation and technical writing—this unfortunate scenario is a bit more likely. We expect other service providers to be highly experienced in all areas of the service they provide, but many translators and technical writers exclude themselves from this expectation when it comes to the services we provide. Like the print shop owner described above, we are probably very skilled in our professions—that is, as far as our linguistic skills go. But why are so many of us unwilling to extend our skill sets to include some of the tools that are required to put our existing skills into practice?

I'm talking, of course, about technical skills, especially those that involve a computer.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about what makes so many of us shy away from becoming more skilled with our computers. Here are some of the root causes that I've unearthed.

### **Perception of Self and Others**

I teach courses to stimulate interest in using technology for translating functional texts, such as technical, medical, or legal texts. During the last several years, I've made it a practice to always ask my audiences how they view themselves. The answers are always the same: We see ourselves as artists, authors, communicators, bridge-builders, and cultural transition-makers. While all of these are true, it's striking that so far no answer has been technical in nature.

Because we define ourselves in one of the proud categories above, we tend to close doors to other categories that we view as less attractive. Being an IT specialist just doesn't stand up well to the more lofty aim of the cultural specialist; a database administrator doesn't have the flair of a literary artisan. The image most often found on translators' home pages is that of St. Jerome, the patron saint of translators and the grand translator of the Bible into common Latin. Now, St. Jerome achieved great things as a linguist, but his image on some of these websites with a quill in his hand, bent over a roll of parchment, seems to communicate something else: a highly romanticized idea of translation that has very little in common with our role as modern translators in a highly computerized world. I may be overextending my interpretation of this a little, but I think that many of us would prefer to identify with figures like St. Jerome than with a computer expert. In fact, however, we need both sides of the coin to have a meaningful impact on the course of our profession.

## No Business as Usual

Another possible reason for our shyness in regard to technology may be an attempt to avoid acting like businesspeople. Translators and technical writers come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but one common thread that connects especially the freelancers among us is the desire for independence. Many of us share a desire not to be employed within a traditional business framework. However, we tend to mistake this to mean that we should also avoid acting within a traditional business framework. The fact is, we are businesses, albeit ones that (sometimes) allow less structure than other models. And one of the common aspects of any kind of business is the need to invest. Necessary investments for businesses include marketing, equipment upgrades and purchases, familiarizing ourselves with that equipment, and engaging in other forms of continued education in areas such as technology and marketing. Just like a printing press and other printing equipment are the primary tools for jobs that the print shop owner needs to perform, the computer and computer software are our main tools.

## Rage Against the Machine

A third reason that I can think of may be an almost instinctual fear that computers are a real threat to our livelihood. Translators feel threatened by translation memory and machine translation, and technical writers fear controlled language or database-based authoring. There's a deep-rooted fear that the machine may take away our livelihoods and, in the process, produce a product greatly inferior to what we pride ourselves in producing. But let's not kid ourselves: The kind of texts that machines can produce are not the kind that you and I want to waste our time on, anyway. These texts are highly structured and repetitive and come from a closely defined subject field. The best counter to this kind of fear is to reach back to our self-perception as artists and artisans, and use these skills for texts that are worthy of that talent. Let the machine do what it's good in—we'll do what we excel in.

Descartes did not have technical literacy in mind when he crafted his great philosophical principle: *I think, therefore I am*. Yet his statement still may help us to find a better approach to technology. If there's any truth to the points I've presented, the reasons many of us reject technology have little to do with technology and much more to do with ourselves—how we view ourselves in comparison to others, and how we let ourselves be intimidated by the great unknown.

How's this for a new paradigm: *We think* we are technical translators and writers, and so *we are*. But the choice is ours to expand the way we think about ourselves. *Therefore, we can also be* technology experts, harnessing the power of technology for our professions to achieve excellence and make our jobs more interesting. *We think, therefore we are*.