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QA in translation: a process approach

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In a rapidly expanding market driven by continued globalization, the translation industry faces difficult and ever-increasing challenges. Today, translation is no longer merely a tool to market and sell products abroad; for some industries, new safety regulations imposed by local governments require product labeling – which includes labels, stickers, disclaimers, operating instructions, cautions and warnings – to be provided in the native language of the target market to avoid injury by incorrect use of a device or drug.

And yet even with so much at stake, individuals and companies facing the daunting task of finding a suitable language service provider (LSP) are often not familiar with the translation process and its complexity, let alone the target language or languages into which their product literature needs to be translated. Thus, as customers of a service, they cannot easily determine the quality of the final product they receive and may have to rely on third parties to tell whether a translation is adequate.

Add to this that language in general is a rather inexact science, something that cannot be placed into a test tube or taken on a trial run to determine whether a text “works” or not. Needless to say, a core requirement for any competent translation is the absence of spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes. But even a linguistically flawless text may “work” just fine for one reader or application, but might not work for another. No two readers are ever the same, no two customers are ever the same, and no two translations of the same document are ever the same.

How, then, can an LSP not only ensure technically flawless and competent translations, but also satisfy customers who want to be sure that they have received a quality service? The answer is a transparent and easily verifiable process approach to translations based on a comprehensive quality management system that defines and monitors adherence to strict quality assurance procedures in all language conversion activities, from specifying customer requirements, through translation and proofing tasks, to the final delivery of the translated and formatted text.

At a minimum, a quality management system for LSPs should define and constantly monitor the following processes.

Project inquiry, feasibility and quotation

LSPs have to be proactive to ensure that client requirements are completely understood and correctly specified up front. Individuals and companies requesting translation work often do not understand the various tasks involved in creating competent and adequate translations; thus, the LSP cannot always rely on its customers to give clear and precise instructions for translation work. The LSP must ask a comprehensive list of detailed questions to ascertain the particulars of an assignment as well as customer expectations, such as the intended target audience (professionals or lay people), the target market (locale, regional dialects), the medium of the text to be translated (electronic or printed matter), the ultimate purpose of the translated text (for publication, for reference only), project due dates (firm or flexible), and any reference material that might be available to guide the translators in their effort. Reference material might include previous translations of a similar text, training material or web content that speaks to the subject matter at hand, illustrations or instructions that describe the customer’s device and its use, information about preferred terminology and trade names, or a glossary and terminology database already in existence. Although customers, at times, may be reluctant to furnish such material, considering it proprietary information, such reference material is invaluable to a translator who will then be able to familiarize himself or herself with the subject matter, match the translation more closely to existing customer literature, and deliver a competent and expert translation that is consistent with the customer’s company image and linguistic style. Therefore, it behooves the LSP to make every effort to



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The Translation Quality Checklist

- Correct up-front determination of client requirements
- Assigning competent translation resources to the project
- Adequate tools to handle the job
- Established and consistent translation management workflow processes
- Checking, proofing and revising translations before final delivery
- Ensuring quality of added-value services

International Standards and Guidelines for the Translation Industry

ISO 9001:2008	Quality Management System Requirements
EN 15038:2006	Translation Services – European Standard
ASTM F 2575-06	Standard Guide for Quality Assurance in Translation – USA
CAN/CGSB-131.10-2008	Translations Services – National Standard of Canada

nurture a relationship of trust with its customers by explaining to the customer the translation process, the challenges typically faced by translators, and the need for transparency and the free flow of information among all parties involved in a project.

The importance of correct and comprehensive job specifications cannot be overestimated. All too often, time and money are wasted, and customers end up dissatisfied with the service they received because of incorrect or incomplete job specifications up front. There could also be misunderstandings between the buyer and the seller, a communication breakdown in which crucial information is not passed along to those working on the project. Or there could be unreasonable customer expectations stemming from a lack of understanding about the complexity of translation work in general. Ultimately, it is the LSP's responsibility to avoid these pitfalls by setting up each translation job with the utmost care, educating customers about the intricacies and challenges of translation work, and keeping the communication channels with the customer open for the duration of a project in order to capture any last-minute changes to the project. Likewise, it is the LSP's responsibility to undertake a thorough feasibility study before taking on a given project, including an analysis of the source material provided, making sure that the LSP has the resources, both human and technical, to handle the assignment. There is no shame in turning down an assignment if it clearly falls outside the project scope or level of expertise the LSP can comfortably handle. Customers will appreciate and respect a truthful response to their inquiry rather than running the risk of ending up with a mediocre translation or significant delays in project closure because the LSP was ill-prepared for the assignment.

Competence of human resources

A major issue with translations is the competence of individual translators. An LSP must test its translators for both linguistic competence and subject-matter expertise. Translators, typically external subcontractors residing in foreign countries, need to be reliable, meet deadlines and be available at a moment's notice to take on translation tasks of varying sizes. Creating a large pool of competent translation resources in any language and in any subject matter is key to the success and continued viability of an LSP. Therefore, it is not by accident that internationally recognized quality standards, such as ISO 9001 and the new EN 15038 standard for LSPs, place special emphasis on what is called the "Control of Outsourced

Processes." For an LSP, the very core of its service – the actual translation, review and proofing work – is typically an outsourced process performed by external subcontractors thousands of miles away. Therefore, an LSP must have sound processes in place that not only test and evaluate its subcontractors upon initial engagement, but continuously monitor the quality of their work.

The LSP may want to establish a spot-check method for subcontractor performance above and beyond the standard job-specific review and proofing activities, whereby the LSP evaluates a subcontractor's work periodically – for example, after the completion of a certain number of jobs or words trans-

lated. This extra quality check on translator performance is well worth the time and money spent on it. Not only will the LSP be able to weed out subcontractors whose work turns out to be substandard despite impressive initial credentials and test scores, but giving feedback to even the seasoned and highly qualified subcontractors will ensure their continued engagement and commitment to quality, if they know the LSP cares about quality and routinely checks their work.

Adequacy of technical resources

For any business, it is vital to have the tools necessary to perform assigned tasks. For an LSP, this means having a functioning IT department able to maintain the latest tools – computers, servers, software, e-mail, printers – to handle translation jobs in any medium and in any application. An LSP must have processes in place that maintain the integrity of electronic files, prevent accidental deletion and loss of vital information, and protect confidential and proprietary information received from customers or subcontractors from dissemination and misuse.

In an age of identity theft, fraud and the loss of privacy stemming from the illegal harvesting of unsecured electronic data, the LSP's processes for data protection should be well established and documented. These processes should be made transparent to concerned customers who might have to adhere to strict guidelines concerning the privacy of information, such as information contained in medical records needing translation. In recent years, state governments have implemented ever-stricter governmental regulations concerning the privacy and integrity of personal data. An example is the new Massachusetts regulation 201 CMR 17.00, which requires any business that stores personal data to have in place a Comprehensive Written Information Security Program ready to be audited and inspected for compliance by government agents. In addition to secured physical premises with locked doors and filing cabinets, the LSP must secure its electronic network and e-mail exchange server, establish policies and procedures to limit access to certain types of data, and use encryption software on electronic devices such as laptops and personal digital assistants, which may carry electronic data outside the secured premises. In short, in today's world, any quality service an LSP provides to its customers must include sound processes for the protection of proprietary information and personal data, which requires

the LSP to purchase, install and maintain sophisticated technical resources.

Translation project management

The LSP must establish comprehensive processes for translation project management, covering all stages of the translation workflow. This includes the identification, management and version control of electronic files, assigning work to external translators, receiving translated files back from translators and guiding the proofing, revision and review activities. Even a small mistake, such as mislabeling versions of electronic files or placing them in wrong file folders, may cause thousands of dollars of unnecessary correction work.

In order to minimize opportunities for error, the steps necessary to manage a translation project, from receiving the source files to delivering the translated files back to the customer, should be documented within the LSP's quality management system so that the process is consistent rather than variable. In fact, the ultimate goal of any quality management system is to reduce variation in a company's processes so that the company's product and service consistently meet customer specifications and requirements, rather than leaving it up to chance or the skill of individual employees to deliver quality. As a business, no company can solely rely on particular employees for quality, but must prepare itself for all eventualities, including having highly skilled employees leave the company. If this happens, training of replacements or temporary substitutes becomes ever so much easier, if documented procedures are in place which can serve as training material and a reference guide to new employees.

Project conclusion and delivery/added-value services

The LSP must establish sound processes to ensure a rigorous review of every translation before files are delivered to the client. Based on the project specifications agreed upon with the customer during the inquiry and quotation phase, the review typically includes a check of the completed work by the translator, a revision of the translation by a second translator (unless the customer conducts his or her own review and waives this part of the LSP's review process), and a review of the translated

target text for style, terminology and locale, as specified by the customer. If the job includes added-value services, such as layout and graphics work, the final project review must also include a quality check on the layout and graphics work, both by the LSP and the customer.

Since every quality check costs both time and money, the LSP, during the inquiry and quotation phase of the project, should discuss with the customer the nature and extent of the quality checks to be carried out by the LSP. The trick is to avoid duplication of effort and agree upon the most efficient and cost-effective workflow for the project without compromising quality. For example, if the customer is a large international company with worldwide offices that can provide in-country linguistic reviews of every translation, that customer may not want the LSP to use a second translator to review the translation. On the other hand, if the customer does not have any linguistic resources for the review and revision of translations, the LSP should structure and sell the job in such a way to include all the standard quality checks the LSP can provide. In customizing each job, the ultimate purpose of the translation must also be considered. There are times when a customer may request a rough translation "for information only" rather than a polished, publishable text, in which case a multistep review process and editing of the target text would not be necessary.

Coming full circle then, the steps for project conclusion must be defined and agreed upon up front so that a perfect balance between quality and cost-effectiveness can be reached. It is the LSP's responsibility to ensure precise communication with the customer and then structure the translation service accordingly. An informed and engaged customer is truly the best customer. That customer will ultimately be a satisfied and likely a repeat customer whose requirements have been understood and met.

A well-established, documented and transparent quality management system ensures not only the best possible product – a competent and flawless translation – but can also inform and educate customers about the nature and complexity of translation and language conversion activities. An educated customer will appreciate the due diligence applied by an LSP to every step of the translation workflow. The customer will then be able to rest assured that the LSP has delivered the best possible product and service. **M**



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