Did You Know?
In May, NPR reported that the first news of China's devastating earthquake came through text-messaging. A follow-up broadcast explained how Chinese messages are entered on cell phones that have English letters on the keyboard. The sender types in a transliteration, at which point all of the possible Chinese characters come up on the screen and the sender picks the most appropriate ones. The commentator remarked that even though this sounds complicated, “millions of Chinese send millions of text messages every day.”

A transliteration is a representation of a word by spelling in the characters of another alphabet. The question of transliteration comes up frequently when company names are represented in Chinese. We asked Xiangxiao Dong, a respected Chinese translator, how a company name such as “Temporacin” would be transliterated. He responded, “Most translators will use Chinese characters to represent as closely as possible the pronunciations of the four English syllables (tem-po-ra-cin) respectively.” He added, “Since there is a surprisingly large number of homophonic characters in the Chinese language, care should be taken in choosing characters for transliteration so that they don’t accidentally form funny or even ridiculous phrases.”

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So you want to be a translator?

We receive many contacts every month from persons wanting to do free-lance translation. Some are professionals with lengthy credentials; others are beginners wondering how to get started as a translator. We review all information thoroughly, and refer the novices to the American Translators Association (ATA) website for information on becoming a translator.

Of the professional translators that contact us, a select few fit our requirements and specialties. Here are some of the qualities we look for:

Mastery of two languages (or more)
A translator must be fluent in both the source language and the target language to fully comprehend the material and provide an accurate translation. Mastery of a second language results from years of study combined with living in-country for an extended period of time. As noted in “What does it take to be a good translator?” (Multilingual magazine July/August 2007), “Knowing another language is necessary but nowhere near enough.”

Writing ability and grammatical skills
Merely knowing the language does not guarantee a good replication of the thought behind the words. Translation requires composition and grammatical expertise. Dena Bugel-Shunra, a professional French translator, comments in the same article, “For actual work as a translator, one must read and write at such a level of proficiency in two languages that one could have made writing a career.”

Attention to detail
Translators have to pay attention to details. What exactly is a “constant wire feed speed control”? If the translator doesn’t clarify the meaning, it’s for sure the customer won’t understand the translation. Translators must also be consistent. Unlike advertising copywriting, technical translation requires calling a widget a widget everywhere the term appears.

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So you want to be a translator?

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Subject matter knowledge
Technical terminology is unique to each industry. Translating clinical research reports requires extensive knowledge of the pharmaceutical and medical fields. Translating service instructions for a “compressor inlet valve” requires an understanding of engineering principles. There’s no substitute for a command of industry vernacular.

Experience
Breaking into the translation field is like other careers; beginners start with basic translations before moving on to more advanced projects. It may be years before sufficient skill is acquired to tackle complex subject matter.

Computer hardware/software proficiency
Translators must have systems with lots of memory, the latest software and high-speed Internet connections. They need to own and be proficient with translation memory programs such as SDL Trados. The majority of translation projects today involve some type of software tools; it has become the norm instead of the exception.

Professionalism and full-time availability
The best translators are full-time professionals. They are available during business hours, in an office with phone, fax, e-mail and Internet connections. They meet deadlines reliably (taking different time zones into account), and produce a consistent level of quality. Since free-lance translators may never meet the client in person, the ability to communicate in a “long distance” manner is a critical requirement. At the same time, a certain amount of autonomy is required to work alone. Professional translators also recognize that confidentiality is an inherent part of the profession.

A thirst for knowledge
This is an intangible that’s hard to explain, but all good translators have it. It’s what sets them apart from their mediocre counterparts. A good translator enjoys delving into, say, the intricacies of pneumatic drives – using reference materials, on-line information, technical dictionaries and industry contacts to research the topic. Experienced translators are excellent and resourceful researchers.

How do we qualify translators?
When we receive a résumé from an experienced translator, we may ask the translator to provide a sample translation for evaluation. If the sample is judged to be of good quality, we first use the translator on a small project, with evaluation and supervision by experienced translators. Eventually, the translator may advance to larger projects as ability is demonstrated. Even then, the translator’s work will be edited and proofed by additional linguists to ensure accuracy and consistency.

In summary, it is challenging to become a professional translator. The requirements go far beyond being bilingual. The best translators possess a unique combination of knowledge, creativity and skill combined with a commitment to their profession.
Too Many Words

by Don DePalma, Chief Research Officer, Common Sense Advisory

When describing their products or unique selling proposition, many companies invert the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. They subject readers to a numbing deluge of text on websites, in printed collateral, online help systems, knowledge bases, technical user guides, and training materials. This logorrhea (excessive flow of words) has caught the attention of executives who see an ever-expanding morass of content as a drag on their companies’ performance and product usability.

Our research at Common Sense Advisory has shown that few firms know what it costs to write a word, but invoices for content and translation management systems (CMS and TMS) evidence the high price of maintaining, updating, and translating them. Companies must take control of the content beast rather than just feeding it more words, however more efficiently the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) or any other approach makes them.

Today’s knee-jerk reactions to any content question – CMS, TMS, and XML – will not eliminate this glut. CMS is functionally a workflow for a database of flat files, in effect a supply chain mechanism that keeps the content running on time. All too often, companies deploy expensive content management systems to ease the difficulty of posting whatever wisdom comes into their employees’ heads. Their future plans call for low-level XML to integrate content- and data-heavy systems. Both CMS and XML (and its many derivatives) laudably improve process, but neither addresses the core problem of too many words or the low quality of what most firms publish. Consider the role content, writ large, plays in companies today and how most handle it.

Companies manage a wide range of information assets. We define content as any digitized information used to convey meaning or exchange value in business interactions or transactions. This broad definition includes highly structured data like that found in SQL databases, plus text, documents, images, video, scripts, application code, and metadata. All of these datatypes come under the CMS rubric and are subject to being managed and translated for other markets.

Content may be managed, but it is rarely controlled. Companies manage structured databases with cradle-to-grave procedures, but – except in regulated arenas like pharmaceuticals – lack a policy for creating, managing, publishing and retiring freer-form content. Its unbound nature prevents the control found in SQL databases that deconstruct data into atomic components, assemble them into highly normalized records, and use mathematically provable operations.

From my conversations with planners trying to cap their content exposure, I contend that companies will have to become more authoritarian about what they publish. They must:

1. View publication as a privilege not offered to every employee
2. Train those allowed to publish in writing and editing best practices
3. Develop editorial and review processes that improve content quality
4. Support writers and processes with first-quality tools

Clean out the attic and reuse what’s there. Companies need to catalog the content they have, use it again wherever possible, and retire it when its freshness tag expires. Procedures for pulling documents off the shelf when their “use by” date expires rarely show up in practice, although many CMS solutions offer such triggers. With a content inventory in hand, companies need to encourage writers to reuse what already exists. Glossaries provide a quick path toward building a taxonomy and content library that encourage and support reuse.

Improve writing quality. Products like Word can check spelling and grammar, but only for a single writer and standalone desktops. Server-based tools like Acrocheck provide collective spelling and grammar checks for commonly used writing tools like Word, FrameMaker and XMetal, and for translation memories like SDL Trados, thus establishing a shared foundation for corporate style and editing. Planners need to remember that writers need to conform to standardized processes and information models, not to the rubric mandated by their En101 Introduction to Creative Writing professor in college. Finally, companies in industries like aerospace can always turn to restrictive language solutions like Controlled or Simplified English that tackle the problem by limiting the universe of words and grammatical constructions that a writer can use.

Measure results. The volume of words being generated inside any organization makes human management of metrics a Sisyphean task. Managers need to identify areas with too many words. Content quality management tools like Immedius Horizon can help documentation managers keep tabs on how much content their staff is writing, who is creating it, where they are in the process, how long it took to write it,

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Truth or Dare

Ever wondered if all of the details on job applicants’ résumés are the absolute truth? A survey conducted by CareerBuilder.com of 3,000 hiring managers revealed that some applicants lie, and 57% of managers said they have caught applicants in their lies. These were among the most astounding:

- Claimed to be a member of the Kennedy family
- Submitted a résumé with someone else’s photo inserted into the document
- Claimed to have worked for the hiring manager before, but never had
- Claimed to be the CEO of a company when the candidate was an hourly employee
- Listed military experience dating back to before he was born
- Included samples of work, which the interviewer actually did
- Claimed to have been a professional baseball player

One surprising fact that came out of the survey is that 6% of the hiring managers who reported catching an applicant in a lie still hired the applicant.

Does Concrete Float?

Indeed it does. The American Society of Civil Engineers conducted their 21st Annual National Concrete Canoe Competition in Montreal this June. Twenty colleges entered the contest and the top prize was taken by the University of Nevada, Reno. The winning canoe, 19.5 feet long and 160 pounds, was amazingly maneuverable in the water. ASCE president David Mongan marvels at the student’s success, “…these intrepid civil engineering students have shown that technical skills combined with an innate sense of creativity can turn a seemingly impossible task into a reality.”

Too Many Words

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where it was reused (or not). It also helps them generate reports to keep track of metrics and how well they did meeting them.

- Reduce volume. To break authors of the habit of spewing content into the all-absorbing web, companies need to train them to write shorter, more usable documents. DITA breaks information deliverables into small, self-contained topics that can be re-used, thus creating fewer new words. Methodologies like ABREVE reduce content quantity through a rigorous approach to training, best practices, and tools. Imagery like that employed by IKEA in place of words takes another route that limits words and eliminates translation costs.
- Write it once. The ultimate goal is single source, the free-form content analog of Java’s “write once, deploy many” mantra.

While this is a frequent conference topic, we have found few firms that have perfected single sourcing or DITA. But CMS suppliers are jumping onto this trend. Products like AuthorIT offer a cohesive environment for designing, writing, managing and deploying to a range of devices.

The bottom line is that technology and automation are important, but they’re not the be-all and end-all of content management. It is high time to exercise greater discipline rather than surrendering to the inexorable onslaught of more words.