

Assessing “Translation Readiness”: A Maturity Model

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The importance of competent translation is becoming increasingly evident. Many companies are unsure of how to deal with the conflicts of high volume, fast turn-around and reasonable cost. We propose five levels of “translation readiness” or maturity: Reactionism, Quality Awareness, Consistency, Long-Term Solutions and Continuous Improvement. These levels indicate an organization’s ability to manage high volumes of translation more quickly while keeping costs under control. While recognizing the uniqueness of each organization, we propose that assessing the level of “readiness” can lead to improvements in quality, cost, and turn-around time.

Because of the limited availability of qualified translators and the increasingly technical nature of products, producing accurate translations is an important investment in both time and money. At the same time, the fast pace of today’s business environment demands that a high volume of translation be produced accurately and quickly with reduced budgets. These demands pinpoint the three main (and often conflicting) goals for every translation project:

- High Quality
- Low(er) Cost
- Short(er) Turnaround Time

Using traditional translation methods, tradeoffs in achieving these goals are the rule, especially when high volumes of translation are involved. Those responsible for translation have to decide which “two out of three” of these goals are most important and make concessions for the third. For example, if you want a high-quality, fast translation, you have to pay a premium for it. How do technical writers and managers involved in the translation of large volumes of documentation reconcile the demand to achieve all three goals?

The answer is not simple. As with many such issues, saving cost and time in the long run requires a commitment to establish ground-up solutions and to continually examine the status quo. This kind of commitment requires an investment in time and money before any real results are evident. In the area of translation, it is difficult to justify such investments to management because there is often very little understanding of the translation process or translation quality.

Our experiences in the field of translation, as well as those of our clients and colleagues, have taught us that the pressures and frustrations we face in this area are not completely unique; they are similar to the difficulties other professionals face in developing their products. Research and development of the Capability Maturity Model for Software (CMM) in the software field has sparked development of similar maturity models in other professional areas, including technical communication. JoAnn Hackos has developed a Five-Level Process Maturity Model for Publications Organizations, which has in turn been food for thought in developing our “Readiness Model” for translation.

We have defined five levels of “translation readiness,” and their corresponding characteristic attitudes, to describe the levels organizations fall into while attempting to reconcile the conflicting goals of quality, cost and turn-around time. We call them “readiness” levels because the level at which an organization falls is indicative of its ability to achieve an optimization of these quality, cost, and time goals. Because translation is not necessarily considered a formal part of the publications process, it should be evaluated separately.

THE “TRANSLATION READINESS” MODEL

The table on the following page lists the five levels of “translation readiness” and the characteristic organizational attitudes associated with each level.

Level I, Reactionism

One cannot necessarily assume that those responsible for coordinating and managing translation understand how to ensure basic quality. Many businesspeople think that translation is simply a “conversion” of each word into another language. And, the person who “gets stuck” coordinating translations is often someone with a number of other responsibilities. Translation is perhaps the least interesting to them, because they understand the least about it. They then regard translation as a “necessary evil,” underestimate its importance, and deal with it by reacting rather than with a planned approach. Because there is little or no understanding of what translation quality is, organizations often compromise quality to keep cost and turnaround times lower.

Readiness Level		Characteristic Attitudes
I	Reactionism	<p>Translation is a “necessary evil,” which is expensive and impossible to control.</p> <p>The only reason for translating is because the Sales Department (or someone else) requires it.</p> <p>Translation is impossible to control because nobody within the organization can read it.</p> <p>Documents are translated one at a time, as individual, unconnected projects.</p> <p>No system is in place to ensure the quality of foreign language documents.</p>
II	Quality Awareness	<p>Basic quality checkpoints are in place for the translation process, including proofreading, editing, or in-house reviews.</p> <p>There is an effort to consistently use the same translation provider to ensure a basic level of consistency.</p> <p>Costs are evaluated per project to ensure that charges are similar for similar projects.</p> <p>There is an interest in achieving relatively accurate, error-free, and readable text in the translation copy.</p>
III	Consistency	<p>English and foreign language glossaries are in place.</p> <p>There is an attempt to re-use blocks of text to ensure consistency and to reduce time and cost.</p> <p>When mistakes in the original documentation are discovered during translation, corrections are made.</p> <p>It is evident that the quality of the original documentation has an effect on the company’s ability to save cost and time without sacrificing quality.</p>
IV	Long-Term Solutions	<p>There is an interest in implementing the technology available, either to the company itself, or to the translation provider, to improve the translation process (e.g. terminology management, translation memory, machine translation).</p> <p>There is an effort to build a long-term relationship with translation providers, regarding them as “team members” who are part of the process for producing high-quality documentation.</p>
V	Continuous Improvement	<p>Translation is a standard part of the documentation process.</p> <p>A plan is in place for continually updating reference materials (e.g. glossaries, translation memory, etc.) and using available technology.</p> <p>Translation costs and processes are reviewed periodically.</p>

Moving Toward Level II, Quality Awareness

As with any change within an organization, the process of improving your translation readiness requires buy-in from many people. Leaving Level I behind is perhaps the most difficult change in this process, because it requires raising awareness.

If the responsibility for translations is centralized, the job is a bit easier because there is one source of information for the organization. If each department is responsible for its own translations, inconsistency is a bigger factor, and politics may be an issue.

As a person responsible for translations, you are a key player in raising awareness (but understand that it will take time!).

You must assess your internal resources and determine if you have enough time and manpower to devote to the process of managing translations. This is often an issue of money, since the time spent on translation management will take away from other responsibilities. The issues to consider include:

- Will the amount of time spent internally on management of projects be an efficient use of time and money?
- Will internal control add any value to the process?
- Do we have someone in-house with enough language expertise to effectively manage (but not “over-manage”) the translation process?

Some suggestions:

- Talk to your translation provider(s) about the quality, cost and time factors. Allow them to share their experience through seminars and presentations. If they cannot offer suggestions for improvement, you may want to investigate other providers who can.
- Talk to your peers. If there are others in your organization or on the outside, schedule lunch or a meeting to discuss common issues. Caution: Could be politically difficult internally, especially if others aren’t interested in examining the status quo.
- Conduct a needs assessment for your department’s translation work, including an assessment of internal resources and a cost-analysis of previous jobs.
- Evaluate the quality of past translations by talking to distributors or peers in the target language markets.
- Talk to your immediate superiors. Explain the basics of translation quality. Explain the problems. Offer concrete solutions and ideas to improve the current situation.
- Offer to speak about translation at an employee meeting, explaining its importance and how to ensure basic quality. This allows others to understand why translation is important, and how “manageable” it can be.
- If you coordinate translations for others, establish a standard process for submitting documents for translation and require specific information up-front, which will allow others who are involved in translation to understand the translator’s needs. This can lead, in turn, to a greater appreciation and more active participation in the translation process.

Moving Toward Level III, Consistency

If your organization is aware of basic translation quality and committed to it, you are probably wondering how you can continue to improve. Consistency is the focus at this level. By improving consistency, quality will improve, although cost and turnaround time may remain high.

Some suggestions:

- Work with your translation provider to establish a glossary of industry-specific terms for your organization. If you have in-house expertise, you may decide to control it internally. Otherwise, you may choose to pay your translation provider to maintain it for you.
- Establish a process for completing translations and ensure that it is repeatable for every project.
- Pinpoint paragraphs or sections of your documentation that are repeated in more than one document. Establish a database or markup system (depending upon your company’s software standards) to catalog these blocks.
- When translators point out errors or ambiguities in the original documentation, establish a system to correct those items.

Moving Toward Level IV, Long-Term Solutions

Once a glossary and a repeatable process are in place, you are on the road to high quality translation all the time. The next step is to begin implementing long-term solutions to maximize your translation dollars. The good news is: We have the technology! There are excellent tools like translation memory, machine translation, and others that can make translating more consistent and efficient.

Beware! the technology alone is not the panacea. If implemented improperly, technology can be dangerous. For example, an automatic conversion formula (that was wrong) caused the wrong amount of fuel to be filled into an airplane. The plane ran out of fuel during flight and had to land in a remote area with no power. Similarly, a translation program used without the expertise of an experienced translator can have amusing but embarrassing results. In a technical installation manual, for example, such a program directly translated the German word “Schraubloch” to the rather vulgar-sounding “screw hole” instead of the more correct “sink hole” or “drill hole.”

Use technology if it makes sense in your situation, not only because it is available or because “everyone is doing it.” Always remember the cardinal rule: Don’t get seduced by the technology, but use it as a tool to achieve the desired results.

Some suggestions:

- Investigate and implement technology available to help you keep track of and re-use translated text (e.g. translation memory, machine translation) and evaluate the extent of its relevance for your organization.
- Prepare a feasibility study for your organization or department, which compares different methods for achieving your goals.
- Consult with your translation providers, peers, and other professionals to exchange experiences.

Moving Toward Level V, Continuous Improvement

You have established a system to ensure high quality and found ways to maximize your time and cost. You now need to maintain your systems.

Some suggestions:

- Periodically evaluate the translation process in conjunction with the documentation process. Establish a “feedback loop” so problems are recognized and solutions implemented.
- Establish processes to continually update tools such as glossaries and translation memory and to share these resources with others in the organization.

The Relationship Between Source Language and Foreign Language

Although it may seem obvious, many organizations seem to miss the link between their source language documentation and their foreign language documentation: The quality and consistency of your source language documentation directly affects the quality and consistency of your translated documentation! If reviewers are criticizing your translated documentation, do not immediately assume your translator did a bad job. First, look at the source language documentation for similar problems. For example, if the tone of the translated document is in question, review the tone of the original. The same applies to ambiguities and inconsistencies. The maturity level of an organization’s process for publication in its native language will always affect that same organization’s ability to achieve a higher level of “translation readiness.”

“Reality Check”

Of course, some of our suggestions may be difficult to implement, depending upon politics or other barriers in your organization. This is the “reality check” that must occur at every level. The dynamics of each organization are different. However, we are proposing that, regardless of those factors, each organization can assess a basic “readiness level” when attempting to reconcile their quality, cost and time goals for their translation projects.

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