Project management - the key to successful localisation

By Françoise Henderson   19 May 2014

The Empire State Building was built at the rate of a floor a day - an astounding achievement given the scale, complexity and logistical challenges of ensuring materials availability in New York traffic. And it was planned on paper. By contrast, many projects fail at huge cost today, across all industries, despite the availability of project management software, client portals and the like. The difference is sound project management, and its essence of planning, communication and experience is as vital to the success of translation projects as in any other big or complex undertaking.

Companies that enter new geographies often localise their offering to acknowledge local realities. Translation is a key component of that.

A two-part question now presents itself:

1. Should you build an ad hoc in-house translation capability or outsource to a language service provider (LSP)?

2. When outsourcing, should you oversee project elements including deliverables, quality, testing and re-integration, or should you leave it to a value-added LSP with proven project management (PM) expertise?

There are no easy answers, but making the correct decision for your company will be fundamental to the success of your localisation project.

Risky business

A desire to control translation outcomes prompts many companies to bring localisation in-house. Sometimes, handing over any aspect of a complex software project seems inconceivable.

Conversely, some companies underestimate the complexity of a translation project to such a degree that they decide to bring it in-house.
Others may concede defeat and outsource to an LSP, but then fail to check up on PM credentials.

None of these decisions is wrong in and of itself, but oftentimes a decision is made for the wrong reason or executed incorrectly.

Expensive lessons

Companies that tackle their first translation projects on their own will get there in the end, but only with a lot of stress, unnecessary cost and in all likelihood, inferior quality. Subsequent projects may go better, or the company might decide to stick to its knitting.

When clients engage an LSP that does not offer project management, it is as good as doing it themselves. They are left to do everything but the actual translation - or worse, to try to salvage a botched project.

An experienced LSP anticipates all contingencies and communicates constantly. Its processes are efficient and industrialised, and adapt to prevailing client conditions. And it has the technological nous to integrate outcomes into client business processes.

Translation project myths

The risks of not subjecting translation projects to rigorous PM are best illustrated at the hand of a number of misconceptions we've encountered over the years.

We're organised

PM as a recognised discipline is relatively new. Its principles demystify project success, empowering more people to bring more projects to fruition.

Sadly, many language companies still disregard it, commonly recruiting translators purely on the strength of good linguistic ability or being "reasonably organised". As a result, time and money is wasted and the client risks poor quality outcomes or failure.

We have the software

There are excellent project management suites today that can make a project manager's task easier, but they have no bearing on the success of a project when sound PM principles are not followed. The Empire State Building was built at the rate of a floor a day, a staggering achievement considering the scale and complexity of the project. It was planned on paper.

We're engineers

Software projects can benefit immensely from good PM, but developers are frequently poor project managers, tending to work in isolation and not communicating well.

Admittedly, software projects are difficult to project-manage, as they're frequently the brainchild of one person. The more team members are added, the less their individual productivity. Like heritage buildings that have been added to, core software with add-ons can look 'kludgy' and the pieces tend not to work well together.

But big software projects, like mass translation projects, need to compromise by bringing in more team members. In both cases, quality and speed of execution is assured by getting everybody on the same page (e.g. with style guides, glossaries and good communication in translation).

Translation is easy

Another common mistake companies make is to put one person in charge of managing translation of both the technological and marketing components of software. Just as you don't expect a developer to write marketing copy, you don't expect him to manage translation of those elements.

Our provider has a portal

Like project management software, portals neatly box things in, but their mere use does not guarantee project success. Clients should use whatever technology works for them to exchange files and communicate, and insist on good communication as the basis of good PM.

It's too hard to hand over

Some clients find it hard to hand over a complex software project for translation. But an experienced, tech-savvy translation provider that offers PM will not only overcome complexity but also impart valuable lessons in business process re-engineering.

Picking a provider

What should one look for in an external provider to ensure they adhere to project principles? If they don't charge for PM or recruit for PM skills, they probably don't provide it.

Do they bend over backwards? Getting things done at all costs risks poor quality work and can leave clients in the lurch. Good communication alerts clients to problems and allows them to re-prioritise or offer better support.

Are they technically competent? Software skills allow a provider to automate certain tasks in the interests of speed and repeatable quality, and integrate well with complex client business processes.

Most likely to succeed

In the end, the main thing for clients is to be serious about PM themselves. Understand the need for it and you will be more likely to sniff out good providers from bad, and collaborate to give translation projects a better chance to succeed.

ABOUT FRANÇOISE HENDERSON

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