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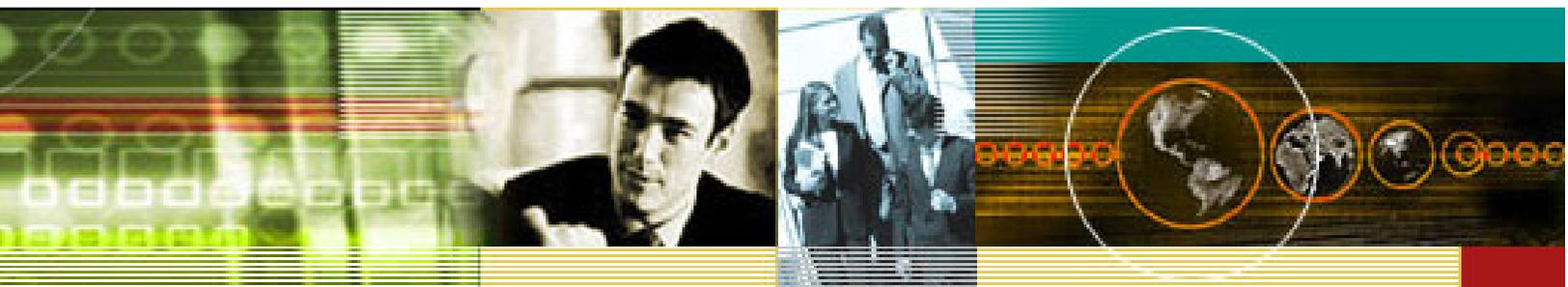# Going Global Without Going Broke

Budgeting for Your Translation Projects

By

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- How much does it cost to translate a document or Web site?
- What will I get for my money?
- Can I do some of the work myself to save money?

Introduction

"How much will it cost to translate our Web site?"

We hear this question a lot from our clients. We also know that people enter this and similar questions to search engines all the time, and that it continues to be a hot topic.

It is our second-favorite question, right after "Does this dress make me look fat?" We know there is no good answer, and that we'll manage to be wrong no matter how we reply. We also realize there is no durable answer, because prices fluctuate over time.

Nevertheless, we'll try to address the issue in this article, hoping to point out some of the main considerations in pricing translation services.

Quick Answers

To get to the heart of the matter:

- translation services are usually quoted per word
- document formatting is usually quoted per page or per hour
- engineering services (Web site plumbing, software builds) are usually quoted per hour
- functional testing (QA) is usually quoted per hour
- project management is usually quoted as a percentage of all other services combined

Here is a sample estimate to translate software and Web-based help into Japanese and Spanish:

Description	Quantity	Unit	Price	Extended	
Software Resource File Translation - Japanese	4565	words	0.35	1,597.75	
Software Engineering and QA - Japanese	20	hours	85.00	1,700.00	
Web Help File Translation - Japanese	25384	words	0.33	8,376.72	
Web Help Engineering and QA - Japanese	124	pages	18.00	2,232.00	
Subtotal, Japanese					13,906.47
Software Resource File Translation - Spanish (Mexico)	4565	words	0.27	1,232.55	
Software Engineering and QA - Spanish (Mexico)	20	hours	75.00	1,500.00	
Web Help File Translation - Spanish (Mexico)	25384	words	0.25	6,346.00	
Web Help Engineering and QA - Spanish (Mexico)	124	pages	16.00	1,984.00	
Subtotal, Spanish (Mexico)					11,062.55
Project Subtotal					24,969.02
Project Management			10%		2,496.90
Project Total					27,465.92

Although this represents a fictitious project, the figures are not completely random and are reasonable by current standards.

How does the translation company arrive at these figures? Wordcount is not that difficult; there are plenty of utilities that count words in files, although they rarely match one another to the word because of different algorithms. Page count is also simple; it could be the number of HTML pages in a help system or the total number of pages in a printed document. Engineering is more a matter of experience, based on previous, similar projects, or perhaps on a ratio (hours per file, words per hour).

Project Management is not always itemized specifically, but on a project of any size, it is almost certainly a cost item. Somebody needs to work with multiple translators, editors and testers; act as the single point of contact with the client; drive the schedule; and keep the project moving from one team to the next.

A much simpler translation job might look like this:

Document Translation (text file) - Traditional Chinese	1988 words	0.19	377.72
Project Total			377.72

A text file – or even a simple word processing document – might not require any formatting, engineering or project management. However, the wise client would have such a translation reviewed by an in-country resource, preferably the one who will have to show the translated document to a prospective customer and keep a straight face.

Translation Basics

Here are a few notes on the translation industry. It's not necessary to know all of them to get a couple of documents or a small Web site translated, but they're helpful for longer-term, larger-scale translation efforts.

Translation

Translation is not an expense; it is an investment in the relationship with a customer who wants to buy and use and perhaps recommend a company's product in a different language from the one in which the company created it.

Turning English software and documentation into Russian, for instance, involves a great deal more work than mere translation. For that matter, creating the English software and documentation involved many different talents and disciplines in the first place; it just didn't seem like it. So, translation is only a subset – albeit an important subset – of the work that goes into delivering worldwide products.

Translators

Most translators are freelancers. They accept work from individuals, agencies and corporate clients all over the world. A Japanese translator, for example, may live in Kyoto (or Paris or Buenos Aires) and receive work from several time zones away.

Translators have specialties, and this is important for clients to understand. The translator versed in the terminology of gas turbines may not be the right one to translate an agribusiness Web site. So, while almost any translator can handle a small project like a birth certificate or a business card, clients should assure themselves of the translator's domain expertise for projects like patent applications and technical manuals.

Many translators make connections and find work in Web forums and directories such as http://www.proz.com/. Freelancers often work in teams, so in a long-term relationship with a client, translators will occasionally have a buddy step in. This can insulate clients against vacations, illness or spikes in activity, for almost no inconvenience.

Many companies with ongoing translation needs contract with translators. In the long run, quality is better served when the function of translation management is treated as a full-time endeavor, rather than as a function heaped onto the already full desk of a webmaster or technical writer.

Depending on the language, the subject matter and the urgency, freelance translators may charge US$.10-.30 (ten to thirty cents) per word. Sometimes they calculate on the number of words in the source material, sometimes on the number of words in their final translation (target). Working directly with a translator can help keep costs down on very simple projects.

Translation Agencies

Translation agencies provide one-stop shopping for translation, editing, QA, engineering and project management. Most new or one-time clients benefit from the completeness of the agency approach, even if it is more expensive than contracting with individual translators.

Some translators work as employees of agencies, often as editors, proofreaders, testers and project managers.

As noted in the first example, costs vary by language and function, because complex translation projects draw on several types of expertise. Their benchmark rates for translation are in the range of $.20-$.40 (twenty to forty cents) per word.

Translation Memory (TM) and Computer-Aided Translation (CAT) Tools

Computers simplify the work of translation through re-use of previously translated terms, phrases and sentences ("translation segments"). These tools benefit not only the translator, but also the client, whose costs drop significantly when previously translated text is re-used.

As time goes by and a client's TM database grows, the translator generally enjoys more and more leverage from previous translation work. At the beginning of a project, CAT tools analyze the project, looking for exact matches, fuzzy matches and completely new text. This provides the wordcount on which the cost estimate will be based, and on

which the time and effort required to finish the project can be evaluated. Here is a sample log from such an analysis:

```
              Match Types    Words
              Repetitions    2,335
              100%           3,873
              95% - 99%      2,290
              85% - 94%        992
              75% - 84%        991
              50% - 74%        460
              No Match       7,864
              Total         18,805
```

- "Repetitions" are words in phrases that appear more than once in the file, and which need be translated once only, then propagated throughout the file.
- "100%" matches are words in phrases that have been translated before.
- "95% - 99%"..."50% - 74%" refer to fuzzy-matched phrases, in which the words are more or less similar to those in previously translated phrases.
- "No Match" words reside in phrases that are completely new, or which have changed so much since prior translation that there's no real leverage into the current version.

Because less translation effort is needed for repetitions and fuzzy matches, most translators and agencies charge less for words in these categories. Therefore, these tools are indispensible not only to the translation function, but also to the translation budget.

Web-Based Translation

It's very tempting to entrust the translation function to a Web site that prompts for the source text and language, returns something which appears to be target text, and doesn't even charge for it. This may suffice for getting the gist of a news story or a letter from a relative, but it's not (yet) worth betting a customer relationship on it, let alone a career.

Context

Context is an important concept in translation. In the same way that it's hard to give a child a definition for an isolated word like "Revolution" (a planet's trip around the sun? an episode of social upheaval? a song by the Beatles?), it's hard to convey in just a word or two the semantic value a translator craves to do his/her job properly.

This is why translating software is often more time-consuming and expensive than translating a page of text. Translatable text or strings appear more or less comprehensible in the full context of running a software application such as this one:
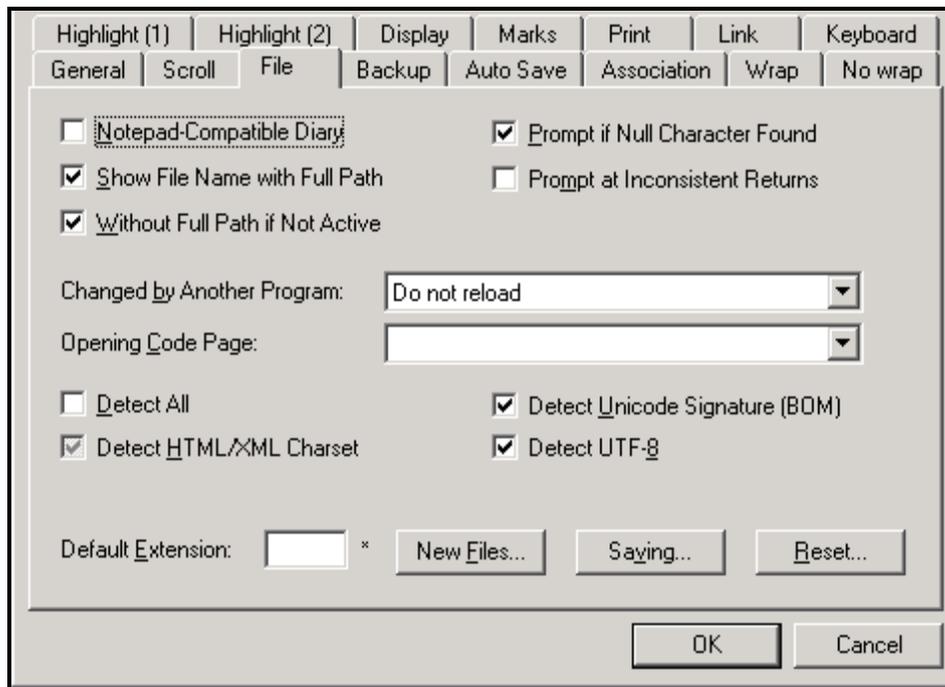
However, most translators will not see this screen. It's more likely that they'll see a simple list of text strings, such as this:

English	German
&Notepad Compatible Diary	
&Detect All	
&Detect &Unicode Signature (BOM)	
New &Files	
Pro&mpt at Inconsistent Returns	
Opening &Code Page:	

Even translators with expertise in this area appreciate context in the form of explanations, product literature, screenshots or previous translations. It makes their job simpler and assures the client of a more accurate translation.

Summary – How to Make it Cost Less

Everybody wants translation to cost less. It's a natural reaction in the face of receiving an invoice for something that seems as though it should be an inexpensive afterthought. Here are five simple ways in which translation veterans and neophytes alike can lower translation costs by doing a bit more of the work themselves:

1. Hand the project off correctly (or nearly correctly) the first time, including everything translators, project managers, engineers and the Web team will need to deliver the product in a way that meets expectations and budget.

2. Make as few midstream changes as possible, because these usually involve stopping work across a long supply chain, evaluating the amount of already done work that can be salvaged, substituting the new work and restarting the project.
3. Provide as many additional materials (explanation of key terms in the product, previously acceptable translations) as possible, so that translators, who are by nature quite interested in quality, can understand the product and context with minimal delay.
4. Answer translators' questions *quickly* to keep the project from getting bogged down.
5. Last but not least, conduct a training session (onsite meeting, conference call, webinar) for translators, wherever in the world they may be, to guide them through the basics of the product and its application.

Next Steps

You've learned something from this paper, haven't you? You'd like a strong process, plan and player for your localization project, wouldn't you?

To give your localization effort every chance of succeeding:

1. Help yourself to other resources on our Web site.
2. Become as conversant in localization terminology as you can.
3. Contact us for a **free assessment** of your project, before you paint yourself into any corners.

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