

Selecting the Right Translation Vendor

A Guide to Conducting a Successful RFP Process for Translation Services



Not Just Language. Knowledge.

Selecting the Right Translation Vendor

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globalization forces increasingly affect departments and organizations in both the public and private sectors. Departments ranging from marketing and operations to legal and compliance require their documents to be translated into one or more languages.

Organizations are faced with the challenge of precisely defining their translation requirements and finding the best value in the marketplace. They need to answer questions such as:

This whitepaper is intended for corporate and government buyers of translation services

- Should you pay the same rates for translation of all types of documents?
- Do legal contracts or HR forms need to be translated using the same quality assurance processes as do patents or operating manuals?
- How should you formulate the technical requirements and quality standards for your solicitation?
- What are quality standards for translation, anyway?
- What are the risks of failure of a translation project?
- How could erroneous translation or late delivery affect my company?

This paper describes a common-sense, risk-management approach to preparing an RFP for translation services. It also shows how to align the standards of quality and reliability for translation projects with the risk inherent in these projects. By better understanding the risks involved in translation projects, buyers are better prepared to define their actual requirements and assess the relevant strengths and weaknesses of vendor proposals.

Most importantly, risk analysis enables organizations to get the quality and reliability they actually need without paying for the bells and whistles they don't. It helps determine which translation projects may require higher quality standards and larger budgets, and which can be completed less expensively.

Better understanding of why specific documents need to be translated and for whom can help organizations write more effective RFP solicitations and get the best value for their money.

Finally, this paper offers practical advice to buyers of translation services regarding:

- Identifying and prioritizing your organization's translation requirements
- Writing an effective solicitation (RFP) for translation services
- Selecting the vendor offering the best cost/technical trade-off
- Ways to reduce costs without affecting—possibly even improving—translation quality

IDENTIFYING YOUR TRANSLATION REQUIREMENTS

When outsourcing business processes to outside vendors, organizations expect to get good quality, reliable service for the lowest price. For document translation, price is a clearly defined parameter. Typically, translation services are bought on a firm fixed-price basis: the price of translating technical documentation is generally based on the number of words that need to be

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translated and the number of graphic elements in the source files.

These are easily measured objective variables, but what about translation quality? How much quality do you really need?

For example, do office memos for your 8-person Bangkok branch need to be translated into Thai with the same precision as the maintenance manuals for nuclear submarines? How do you specify the right level of quality in the contract with a translation vendor?

How do you select among the vendors all claiming to offer the highest quality solutions? How do you measure the quality of deliverables so that you can hold your vendor accountable for their promises?

Not all documents require the same level of translation quality. An HR manual for your 8-person Bangkok branch may not need the same precision as do maintenance manuals for nuclear-powered submarines.

Unlike tolerance of mechanical components or the mean time between failure (MTBF) of hard drives, translation quality is not an easily quantifiable variable. Two perfectly qualified translators will almost never translate the same paragraph the same way, and linguists can argue for hours about which translation is better.

However, you don't need to be a linguist to select the optimal combination of cost and quality you need. Not all documents require the same checks-and-balances processes to assure quality—because the risks and liabilities your company is exposed to in case of errors are not all the same.

By categorizing your corporate documents and understanding the function their translations may serve—and the risk your company may be exposed to in case of mistranslation—you can create a more cost-effective, robust process for buying translation services.

Specify only the level of quality your organization requires for each type of document.

RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES OF MISTRANSLATION

My daughter had a bicycle made by a respected foreign manufacturer. It was a very nice, well made bike. One evening I was helping her take the bike apart to replace some worn out parts and opened up the “Assembly and Maintenance Manual” for some help. The instructions read:

1. Move out the old wheel.
2. Put bearing and spacer each one into the new wheel.
3. Put other bearing and tightly screw up.
4. Put back in the rear rack.
5. Screw up in a bolt.

A study showed 8 out of 10 global businesses are suffering due to translation errors, causing lost revenue, delayed product launches or even fines for non-compliance.

The rest of the instructions were equally incomprehensible.

Written in a language superficially resembling technical English, the manual was a major puzzle that I didn't manage to solve. I threw the bike away. After all, my daughter's safety was at stake.

It was only a bicycle, but I couldn't help thinking about the brand name foreign company that marketed the bike. That company not only produces consumer goods, they sell multi-million dollar industrial machinery, medical instruments and precision tools used in manufacturing high-tech weapons and nuclear reactors. What would the consequences be of mistranslating operating and maintenance manuals for those products?

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It may be easy to laugh at incompetently handled English translations of foreign documents, but many American companies take even less care translating their own documentation into Chinese or Spanish or Arabic than foreign manufacturers do translating into English.

Liability for Industrial Accidents: If an overseas mechanic servicing or calibrating American-made machines relies on incorrectly translated documentation and makes a serious error resulting in an industrial accident, the US manufacturer might be held responsible. The harm to the company resulting from lawsuits, damage to the brand and loss of good will in the country where the incident occurred may be substantial. Worse, the company may not even know of the problem and the liability until it's too late.

For each document type, determine the possible consequences of translation errors and how serious the impact could be if there are major errors in translation.

Time-to-market Delays: Incorrect translation does not need to result in an accident that is damaging to your company. If even just a few patient records from a new drug trial in Europe are misinterpreted by the US pharmaceutical company because of translation errors, the outcomes data might be skewed just enough to make the difference between getting an "Approvable" vs. "Non-Approvable" letter from the FDA. Incorrect translations may also result in increased scrutiny by the FDA that is much larger in scope.

40% of companies claim that translation errors have caused delayed product launches.

Even if translation errors are caught by the company, finding and correcting them may cause delays in the completion of a clinical trial or a new product launch. It has been calculated that delays in getting a new drug to market can cost up to a million dollars per day.

Bankruptcy: Probably the most costly known mistranslation took place in 1994 in the US banking industry. A crucial mistake in the translation of a financial document resulted in investor loss of confidence and consequent collapse of Continental Illinois, a large US bank. The federal government had to intervene, and the incident cost American taxpayers \$1.7 billion (yes, "billion" with a "b")! It just might have been more cost effective to have spent a few hundred dollars extra to use a vendor with a more robust translation process.

A mistranslated financial document in 1994 resulted in investor panic and subsequent bankruptcy.

Often, damage to the company or the government is hard to precisely calculate. This is especially true for translation of marketing collateral and websites. When the customer reads a poorly crafted translation containing errors, imprecise or awkward phrasing, she does not think, "This is just a bad translation." Instead, she may subconsciously view the company as unreliable, incompetent or amateurish.

Therefore, before writing specifications for a translation RFP, you should determine:

1. Who is the target audience for the translated documents?
2. How will the documents be used after they are translated?
3. What could be the consequences of translation errors and how serious could the impact on the company be if the translations have major mistakes?
4. What is the impact on the organization of a project delay?

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5. What is the organization's capacity for performing internal quality control of translation? If the translation is flawed, how soon can the organization reasonably expect to catch the problem and make the vendor rectify it?

TRANSLATION QUALITY—WHAT IS IT AND HOW IT IS MEASURED

Quality of translation is measured along 6 parameters: precision, accuracy, faithfulness, consistency, clarity and fluency.

Determine which components of quality are most important for your specific documents, and set up solicitation specs accordingly. If you specify more than you need, you will pay more.

- Translation is **precise** if the content of the target document (the translation) is semantically equivalent to the content of the source document and the technical terminology is translated correctly—i.e. the technical concepts are translated using terminology that is actually used by technical experts in the target country. For example, suppose a biomedical research document translated from Japanese to English used the term “forerunner mRNA” instead of “precursor mRNA” and the term “full-fledged mRNA” instead of “mature mRNA”. The audience could, arguably, understand what the translator meant, but they may start to question the reliability and correctness of the rest of the translation.
- Translation is **accurate** if it does not add or omit any content.
- Translation is **faithful** to the source document if it preserves the style and register of the source text. For example, if a medical document such as the Informed Consent Form is intended for patients rather than physicians and uses terms such as “tube” instead of “catheter” or “starting point” instead of “baseline”, the translation of the document should also omit jargon and use corresponding choice of terminology in the target culture. However, if the document is intended for doctors, it can—and should—use the standard medical jargon physicians are accustomed to.
- Translation of a document is **consistent** if the same concepts and technical terms are translated identically throughout the document and across the related series of documents for the same client.
- Translation is **clear** if it is at least as easy to understand for the target audience as the source document is for its target audience. Naturally, if the source document is unclear, one cannot expect the translation to be clear, either.
- Finally, translation is **fluent** if the translated text reads as if it was originally written in the target language. (i.e., someone reading the translation should not suspect it is a translation).

If the lowest-cost vendor is chosen for a mission critical translation, your company could lose more than a few pennies!

Even if the translation is mission critical, not all quality parameters are equally important. For example, for technical manuals, precision, accuracy and clarity may be more important than fluency and style. On the other hand, for marketing collateral, fluency is very important—the translation should read “without an accent.”

When creating translation RFP specifications, analyze which components of translation quality are most important, and set up the bid accordingly.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION YOU NEED FROM VENDORS

After analyzing the quality requirements for the files your organization needs translated and deciding which components of quality you require and which you are willing to save money on, it is time to translate (so to speak) this analysis into solicitation requirements and evaluation criteria.

Depending on your analysis, there are several submittal requirements you should consider including in the RFP solicitation:

Test translation is less of a “selection tool” and more of a “weeding out” process.

REQUIRE VENDORS TO SUBMIT A TEST TRANSLATION

Consider including a test translation requirement in the RFP. Select a couple of paragraphs of representative text and require vendors to translate it into several languages. Then ask colleagues in your company's overseas offices or your trusted distributors to rate the vendors' translations as “Good”, “Possible” and “Bad”. It is essential that the reviewers be native speakers of the target language (the language the document is translated into) and be knowledgeable of the subject matter.

Test translation is a “weeding out” tool. The test doesn't necessarily say much about the vendors that get a passing score—after all, doing well on a 2-page test job once doesn't guarantee that the vendor has robust systems in place to deliver consistent quality every time. However, vendors that don't do a good job even on a test translation when they are trying to put their best foot forward are likely to be worse than disappointing after they get the contract.

Vendors that don't do a good job on a test translation when they are trying to put their best foot forward are likely to be disappointing after they get the contract.

You may be surprised at how many vendors will flunk even such an easy test. Getting technical translation right is difficult!

REQUIRE SPECIFIC INFORMATION ABOUT PAST EXPERIENCE

Vendor experience with projects in the same subject area, language combinations and document volume as yours is vital if they are going to be able to meet your project risk parameters.

For example, if the majority of a vendor's experience is with the translation of marketing documents from English to Spanish and Portuguese for Latin America, while your project requires clinical study data to be translated from 12 Eastern European languages to English with up to 6 medical translators working in parallel at any one time, the vendor would have to prove to you that they can reliably handle your projects with the quality and turnaround speed you require.

Consider asking potential vendors to include specific information about contracts they choose to disclose in their Past Performance section:

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- Breakdown of the types of documents translated by language pair, subject matter, number of words per document and document type (e.g. patents, marketing collateral, datasheets, SOPs, regulatory submittals, manufacturing documentation, operating manuals, etc.)
- Average turnaround time for each document delivered to clients by size:
 - below 2,000 words
 - between 2,000 and 10,000 words
 - between 10,000 and 100,000 words
 - above 100,000 words
- Percent of deliverables delivered late
- Dollar value and length of the contract

Information about a vendor's experience with translation projects in the same subject area, language combinations, and volume is vital if they are going to be able to meet your project risk parameters.

The best measure of a vendor's reliability is their performance over a multi-year contract. Ask references:

- What percentage of deliverables had deficiencies?
- How well and how quickly did the vendor rectify any deficiencies?
- How responsive was the vendor to reasonable changes in requirements and tight deadlines?

REQUIRE VENDORS TO SUBMIT QA PROCEDURES FOR TECHNICAL TRANSLATION

If you require reliable delivery of services at a high quality level, your vendors must have redundant capacity and bulletproof procedures for handling the unexpected. In the translation business, handling the unexpected should be expected—it is the norm:

- Documents invariably turn out to be longer than anticipated
- Source files can't be found to send to the translation vendor on time
- Source documents the vendor needs to start working on may take longer to finalize than planned

To deliver reliable quality, vendor processes must be controlled and repeatable. They can't be in a "black box"—you should have visibility into these processes and ensure that the vendor doesn't cut corners after the contract is signed.

If you require reliable delivery of high quality translation services, your vendors must have redundant capacity and bulletproof procedures for handling the unexpected.

Specific points to look for in Quality Assurance Plans are discussed in the next section.

EVALUATING VENDOR PROPOSALS

When reviewing translation vendors' proposals, several points deserve special attention:

- **Technical competence of the translation teams:** What technical qualifications do the translators have and how well do they match the requirements of your project?

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- **Flexibility and scalability of vendor systems:** Does the vendor have the ability to scale up quickly if the volume of work suddenly changes—which it almost invariably will?
- **Vendor's Quality Assurance processes:**
 - How many pairs of qualified eyes look at each translation segment?
 - How well do vendor procedures address the quality parameters that are most critical to the success of your project?
 - How does the vendor ensure that terminology is used consistently by all translators working in parallel?

In the translation business, handling the unexpected should be expected—it is the norm.

Let's look at some of these points in detail.

TECHNICAL COMPETENCE OF THE TRANSLATION TEAMS

The vast majority of translators who work in technical translation do not have any technical or scientific background at all. So when vendors claim they specialize in technical translation, they generally mean that their translators have experience translating technical documents. This does not imply that those translators have ever taken any math or science classes or actually understand what they are translating.

If your documents are intended to be read and used by people with particular educational and/or professional qualifications, they also need to be translated by linguists with the same qualifications. **If a translator doesn't fully understand the meaning of every word and paragraph they are translating, they are liable to make critical mistakes.**

The technical background and education of translators must match the background of the people who will be reading the translation.

Without understanding the content of source documents, reliable translation is not possible. Language works by obscuring as much as it works by revealing. What sentences state overtly is only a portion of the message they communicate. For example, the sentence "John quit smoking," informs the audience not only that John no longer smokes (the overt message of the sentence), but also that he used to be a smoker. It also conveys other information about John—that John is not an infant, for example, or that he was not in a coma, etc. None of that implicit information about John would be understood by a visitor from Mars who did not have the background in Earthling affairs to extract that information. Rightly so—the sentence was not intended for Martians, but for an audience that shares with the speaker a whole body of common knowledge that does not need to be—and cannot be in any practical sense—restated in every sentence.

A non-scientist translating science is akin to the Martian. The technical literature he translates was never intended for him. An article in the Journal of High Energy Physics is intended to provide new information to the audience that knows the basic theories of Quantum Field Theory, Differential Geometry and String Theory. The translator might correctly render every word of a paper in that journal right in the target language by looking the words up in the dictionary (unlikely, but possible). However, because the background information presupposed by the texts is not accessible to him, the translator may get the meaning of some paragraphs completely wrong. Worse, the translator is not likely to realize there is problem because he doesn't have the subject knowledge that may allow a scientist to notice that there is something wrong with the translated paragraph.

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The authors writing scientific papers or patent applications, and the audience for which these are written, have spent years studying their subjects. All that background, that rich layer of knowledge, is presupposed in everything the science papers try to communicate. If that knowledge were to be made explicit, the papers would be thousands of pages long. Nobody would have the patience to read them—or to write them. Is it realistic to assume that the translator can “pick up” the knowledge presupposed in the Journal of High Energy Physics if he never even took a course in basic quantum mechanics?

If translators don't fully understand the subject matter they are translating, they are liable to make critical mistakes and not even realize it.

If your documents are written for a technical audience, and precision and accuracy are important, it is vital to the success of your project that the academic and professional backgrounds of the translators and editors working on these documents match the background of the target audience for these documents.

VENDOR QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

Robust translation processes should include, at a minimum, the following procedures:

- **Translator accreditation procedure:** The vendor should have a process of accrediting translators for translation in specific subject areas, such as cardiology, environmental assessment, radar technologies, etc. You don't want the vendor finding out in the middle of your project that a given translator who claimed to be a cardiologist does not, in fact, know the relevant Italian terminology and can't tell a drug eluting stent to save his life.
- **Project staffing procedures:** Long, complex documents often touch on a number of different specialized areas. A manual for overhauling ships, for example, will have sections on electrical subsystems, cooling subsystems, etc. Generally, a single translator will not be competent in all these areas. Therefore, the vendor should have a procedure for matching each document's subject matter with the best qualified accredited translator for that area.

In addition, a very important quality principle is that translators should only translate into their native language. For example, only a native German speaker should be allowed to translate documents from English into German, and only a native English speaker should translate from German to English. The vendor's project staffing procedures should include the “native language” principle.

Quality-focused translation companies require 3 pairs of qualified eyes for each text segment: translator, editor, proofreader.

- **Quality control procedures:** How many cross-checking procedures does the vendor use? Quality-focused translation companies generally require 3 pairs of qualified eyes for each text segment: translator, editor and proofreader. Moreover, if the document is to be delivered in any format other than Microsoft Word (i.e. if the customer needs Desktop Publishing in Adobe InDesign, QuarkXpress, MS Publisher, etc.), an additional post-DTP check should be performed.

CAPACITY TO SCALE UP IN SPECIFIC AREAS

In the vast majority of translation projects, no matter how well the customer has planned things, there are going to be problems and surprises that require the translation vendor to suddenly speed up a portion of the project and/or scale up their work in a particular language pair. It is a fact of life that documents invariably turn out to be longer than anticipated, customers can't locate source files and authors often make changes past their deadlines.

A good rule of thumb is that for each translator accredited in a particular field there should be at least two other freelance translators accredited in the same field available to the vendor.

In order for the vendor to meet deadlines in such an environment, they need to be able to scale up various segments of their translation process quickly. A good rule of thumb is that for each translator accredited in a particular field (e.g. English to Korean translator specializing in radar technology) there should be at least 2 other freelance translators accredited in the same field available to the vendor.

VENDOR SCOPE OF SERVICES

Getting technical content right is the cornerstone of technical translation, but usability of translated material also depends on presentation. If your documents are created in a desktop publishing (DTP) application such as Adobe InDesign, FrameMaker, or QuarkXPress or with a CAD/CAM application such as AutoCAD, SolidWorks, Pro/ENGINEER or NX, you probably want your translations delivered to you in the same format. Therefore your translation vendor should have strong DTP capabilities—they should be able to work in multilingual versions of these tools, often both in PC and Mac environments.

VENDOR USE OF LINGUISTIC TECHNOLOGIES

Vendors should incorporate Translation Memory systems in their workflow. Translation Memory (TM) is technology that monitors the progress of translation in real time and memorizes each translated passage. Then, when a paragraph or sentence is encountered that has been previously translated by the same translator—or a different translator working on the same project—the TM tool notifies the translator and allows them to insert or modify the pre-translated text.

Buyer beware: Translation is no different than other industry—you get what you pay for.

These tools both increase the productivity of translators and enhance the quality of their translation. Using TM tools leads to greater consistency as the same phrases are translated identically and the terminology is used consistently even if different translators work on different portions of the document. TM tools also significantly decrease the time spent translating.

TM tools double the benefit by lowering translation costs and shortening delivery time.

ABOUT LANGUAGE SCIENTIFIC

Language Scientific, Inc.[®] is a US-based globalization company. We specialize in providing medical, engineering and technical translation services in all the major European, Asian and American languages.

Our specialization, focus, industry-leading quality management standards and customer-centered attitude have earned us the trust of many of the world's best technology, bio-medical and pharmaceutical companies.

*Language Scientific provides
Localization, Linguistic Validation,
Natural Language Processing,
Technical Consulting,
Translation and Interpreting
services.*

Specifically, what sets Language Scientific apart and permeates our whole corporate culture are the following principles:

- An exclusive focus on scientific and technical subjects
- Precise matching of Knowledge Experts with subject areas
- Scientifically rigorous Quality Management systems
- Customer-focused corporate culture
- Cost savings and fast project turnaround

PRECISE GLOBAL COMMUNICATION