Overview of the Global Translation Industry by David Bijl

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When you have a text that needs to be translated, where do you go? Forget google translate or other machine translation solutions, because these do not give you the high quality translation you need. Then you type "translation agency" into google and you get 3.5 million results. You may start to wonder: how many translation companies are there anyway? Are these real "language service providers", or are most of them actually freelance translators posing as translation agencies? Let's take a peek at the structure of the global translation industry.

At first glance, the translation sector looks like spaghetti soup: you know there is some structure, but you can't see most of it and it constantly changes. The fact that the translation scene has rapidly globalized since the advent of the internet doesn't make it any easier. However, a closer inspection will reveal several modes of organizing the translation work: freelance translators, small translation agencies, larger agencies with in-house translators, language service providers offering a lot more than just text translation, and global translation agencies built on outsourcing to freelancers.

Freelance translators often work from home. Professional freelancers have an office in a separate room dedicated to translation work. They find clients through their personal and professional network, and devote a considerable amount of their time to networking activities. End users are the best clients of course, but larger translation agencies are a good source of translation projects to fill up the gaps.

Some freelance translators may form a husband-and-wife team or a small partnership with other translators. Leverage your many years of translation experience by hiring a junior translator to do some of the work, and suddenly the freelancer has become a translation agency. Small translation agencies can combine the personal touch of the owner or senior translator with the better work-flow, infrastructure, and financing that benefit larger translation companies.

Larger translation agencies combine in-house translators with outsourcing, but can do this efficiently by using standard procedures and translation project management software. Because of their size, these agencies can take on much larger translation projects and convince corporations to become their customers. A large translation agency can provide high quality, speed, and volume at the same time, in multiple languages. Some have even branched out to interpreting, audio transcription, subtitling, voice-overs, etc. to become broad language service providers. However, all of this is also reflected in the price tags on their translation services.

The largest of translation agencies work with thousands of freelancers and no in-house translators. Ideally, their project managers are distributed all over the world in order to provide 24/7 translation services. These companies leverage the power of cloud computing and crowd sourcing, often managed with proprietary translation software. The goal is to offer dozens of languages and specializations, while at the same time lowering operating expenses so the rate per word can come down.

The latest innovation in this sector is the WrdEx translation exchange, that has fully automated the selection process and enables anyone to get their text translated with just a few clicks. The account managers and project managers are no longer necessary, only the translators. And so we have come full circle: for a quality translation you still need skilled human translators, who often work as freelancers.

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