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Working Your Workflow: by The Language Technology Centre

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Working Your Workflow

It is no secret that optimal processes mean optimal productivity, which in turn means hugely increased competitiveness. Given that we all agree on this, it is surprising to see how many language service providers (LSP's) out there are not getting the most out of their processes. Let's look at a few simple things you can do to make sure that your processes are - and crucially - stay the best they can be.

At LTC we have been consulting on the optimization of language related workflows for over fifteen years. We have seen the processes of operations of all sizes - from small start-ups to large language service providers (LSP's) and corporate language departments - and for many different types of service from translation, localization, and interpreting to subtitling and publishing.

We found that no matter how big or small, how specialized, or multifaceted an operation is, each has its very own approach to managing the complex projects we face in the

**By Tobias Rinsche,
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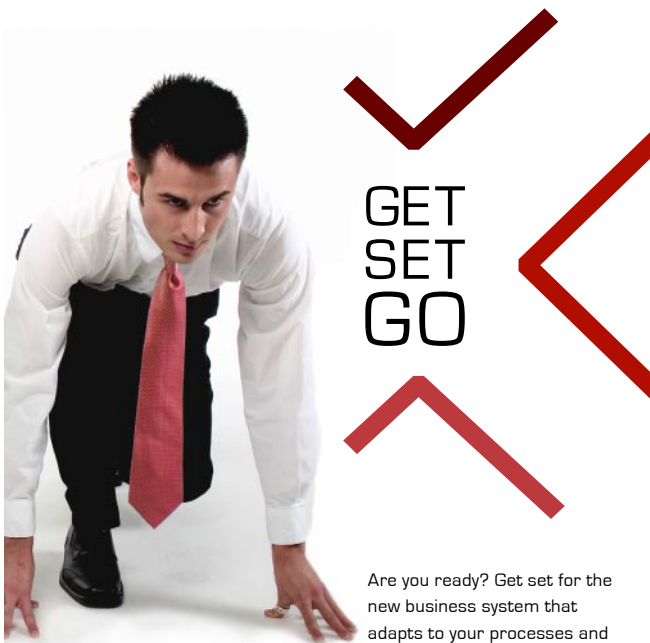
language industry. Many of these processes grow organically. As a start up company grows and takes on more jobs and employees, others are designed at some point in time to represent perfect use of resources and software tools available to an organization. As these workflows are used, they become second nature to everyone involved. These work flows are 'the way things are done' and rarely questioned or reviewed unless there is an acute need to. Why fix what isn't broken?

It is true. Why think about changing processes that work for you? Many companies only consider their processes or bring in consultants to do so when absolutely necessary. When a large contract is won suddenly, for example, or when processes have become so glaringly inefficient that something simply has to be done.

It is no secret that our industry is changing rapidly. For one it is growing. We all know that the percentage of non-English speaking internet users is growing, that markets are opening up for a host of industries in non-English speaking countries. We know that the amount of information that needs to be translated and localized and the need for other language services such as interpretation will inevitably grow. Are you ready to claim your piece of this ever growing cake?

The way we work is changing rapidly too. Translation memory technology dramatically changed the way most of us operated in the nineties and development is ongoing. Are you aware what is being developed? Are you ready? But that's not all. We see 'per word' prices plummeting as communication technologies make it possible for companies in low cost countries to set up huge project management operations using the same high quality freelance translators we do. Western LSP's will only be able to keep up in the price war by significantly improving their efficiency.

So, what next? The good news is that you can be ready for the challenges ahead. Just keeping a close eye on your processes and taking a little time regularly to examine them has many of benefits. You don't have to change a thing - reminding yourself of what you do, why, and how, will help you not only to see which parts of your process



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can be optimized and where extra training will improve productivity very quickly, but you will also be able to respond to change, growth, or new challenges more easily. There is a lot of technology out there that can help you, both on the linguistic and business management side. Being aware of your workflow means that you will be able to make very quick decisions on which technology will actually benefit you.

Knowing your processes can have even more advantages. It might help you identify your unique selling proposition - the factors that you can promote as unique for your operation sales and marketing purposes.

Let's get started then! I suggest you get a pencil and paper ready:

The first step is to draw what we call your 'company workflow'. It describes the process and players involved in every step that takes you from a quote request to a paid invoice. Just draw a box for each step in your workflow and write the person responsible next to it. The example is just a quotation workflow - you can obviously have more, less or different steps and yours will go all the way to the invoice. In this process 'project management' is just one step of many.

The second step is to draw your project workflows in the same way. Some companies that offer only one service in one way may only have one workflow, the more services you offer, the more workflows you will be able to draw. When we talk about offering multiple services, we do not only mean offering translation and interpretation. For example, do you offer an express service? Or do you work with clients that have certain special requirements such as special QA or approval steps? How do you deal with such services? Is your 'express' service the same as your normal service with tighter deadlines or do you have a special workflow to maximize efficiency?

After visualising these processes you may already see some room for improvement. Or maybe get that warm glow from the inside as you've just proven to yourself that you are currently working in the best way possible. Keep this diagram safe. It will help you whenever you consider introducing new software tools or different processes.

Next you should review which tools you use to optimize these workflows. At LTC we believe that companies should be able to choose a 'toolbox' of linguistic and business tools that supports their unique workflow and their customers' requirements optimally. There are so many developers of tools for the language industry out there - are you sure you're using the right software for your operation? We suggest that every company should plan regular re-evaluation of tools they use. Many smaller companies, for example, quickly outgrow integrated solutions that cover both the business and linguistic side of their work. Often, innovations come to market that savvy quick adopters can use to

gain an important head start. Have you, for example, ever considered the impact of using controlled language tools or machine translation in your authoring, translation or localization process?

We have discussed your processes and have thought about the tools you use in your bid to be as efficient and thus as competitive as possible. All of our effort has centred on being aware of and optimizing your specific company and project workflows for the services you offer. We believe that there is even more to be gained from being aware of your processes and choosing your tools carefully. Let's end this article with a few ideas that may be food for thought.

I have browsed many websites and found a bit of a theme among small to medium sized LSP's. Most of you advertise your services with two messages: the length of time your company or the company's founder has been in the industry and your most important clients. In a market with many competitors offering similar services you rely on the languages you offer, your experience and your previous clients as the only unique selling proposition to your potential clients. What a waste! Recently I worked with an LSP that had a number of sales people who would be in contact with clients and create quotes that were then always checked by the company owner personally. To him this was the natural way things should be, and many of us can see where he was coming from. After all, a well-calculated quote can make or break a sale and is crucial for the profitability of a company. However, he did not see that his approach was one that set him apart from many other companies. Had he been aware of this, he could have created a marketing campaign centred on his offering 'a most personal service', for example. So why not take another look at the diagram you just made of your processes? Can you see anything in there that you should shout about? That sets you apart from the rest? You never know, it might just be the point that convinces your potential client to buy your services rather than choosing the competition.

There is another strong argument for spending a little time to optimize your processes and to shop around for the perfect 'toolbox' of software for your services. The more unique your company, the more thought has gone into creating processes and methods to offer your services, the more valuable it becomes. Anyone who has some entrepreneurial spirit, is computer savvy, and has some contacts, can buy an integrated system and offer basic language services. If you can generate added value by creating something special, which should not only maximize efficiency and thus competitiveness, business and profit, it could also increase your company's overall value.

The Language Technology Centre is based in London and Washington DC. It develops business information systems for the language industry and offers consultancy to corporate language departments and LSP's on process optimization and software implementation.