

Product Review:

LTC Organiser

A tool for keeping track of complex translation and localization projects.

by Ted Assur

What if there were one off-the-shelf application that could handle your project management and financial status, client and vendor database, and generate reports in a user-friendly format that was also designed with the user in mind? Life would be grand, we'd all agree.

Alas, those days have not yet arrived. Most companies in the language industries have three options in solving their project-management and financial systems woes; each—you might have guessed—has its pluses and minuses.

Off-the-Shelf, Off-the-Cuff

The first is to use several off-the-shelf products and try to apply them (as best as one can) to your needs. One typical grab-bag might include MS Excel to handle financials, MS Access to store vendor databases or client databases, ACT! to keep track of new leads, and possible new client contacts, and MS Project to manage resources and capacity. The list could keep on growing. Whatever your need, there is an application out there that will fit it (perhaps square-peg/round-hole style—somehow, the fit never seems quite right).

For example, MS Project just refuses to handle widgets. It will handle time rather elegantly, but what if you work with 17 vendors, each of whom has a different rate of production? I know that some vendors can produce 100 widgets per day (replace widgets with words, for the language industry), and others can produce 150. Unfortunately, Project just wasn't designed with this sort of product-oriented project in mind.

Sucked in by the System

The second option is to bring in a programmer, sit down and tell her or him what you need, and then have the programmer design some grand behemoth of an application that handles everything. It manages the vendors, the clients, the projects, the languages, the finances—at least in theory. Unfortunately, these tend to be expensive to create and a nightmare to maintain.

The pitfalls of the first case are as numerous as the second. In the first, many different applications are being used by many different people, each with their own way of fitting the application to their

individual needs. This is usually the scenario at smaller language houses that can't afford to create their own in-house software or haven't yet been able to define their system to a developer. In the second, usually embraced by medium to large companies, the application all too frequently becomes a monument to the system used at the time it was developed. The application begins to define the system, rather than the other way around: "This is the way we work at Widget and Co., because the Widget System 2000 was programmed that way."

The advantages of both systems are as obvious as their disadvantages. The off-the-shelf application is quicker to implement, cheaper to obtain, and can be easily customized, to some degree, to the task at hand. In short, it is flexible, yet weak. The custom, or in-house, application is much more powerful and designed to suit the needs of the system a company has implemented. It has the strength, but lacks the flexibility to change with time or needs.

A Happy Medium?

What we therefore need is an off-the-shelf product designed for the language industry, for use from one translation agency to the next. Like many translation firms, The Language Technology Centre has taken a product developed internally, and is marketing and selling it to other agencies. The LTC Organiser is an off-the-shelf product developed and designed at LTC to incorporate project management, financial, and client and vendor databases into one application for use by translation houses.

In a single application, you can check your history with your client, analyze resource

availability, find appropriate vendors for a given job, and define project-specific tasks and delivery dates. You can also see which vendors are using what translation tools, and specifically keep track of what resources a vendor may have. You can also track your financials with client- and vendor-payment tracking. All information can be exported to XLS or XML format for import into almost any other application.

Sound too good to be true? It may be. Although it appears to work quite well in the few test scenarios I was able to execute, like many industry-specific applications, it could use some work on the user-interface. Any developers using the product will immediately notice the Borland or Delphi UI. The main area of the application does nothing but store the menu items, which appear to summon other subapplications (Figure 1). On a 200 MHz computer, it seemed rather slow while trying to load a new component of the application.

The version reviewed claimed to have a "Quick Wizard" that would help me speedily set up projects, jobs, and tasks. Alas, I was unable to find the Wizard. Hopefully, the full version is better documented to assist less brave users. More than half of the dialog windows that came up need to be resized every time they were opened (Figure 2).

Bottom line: If, as I've heard said, "It's all in the presentation," Organiser could use some help with its presentation. However, this application is the best I've seen out there for what it does, and it could well be better than what you're using now.

Ted Assur is a freelancer and interactive developer at Corey McPherson Nash. He can be reached at ted_assur@onebox.com

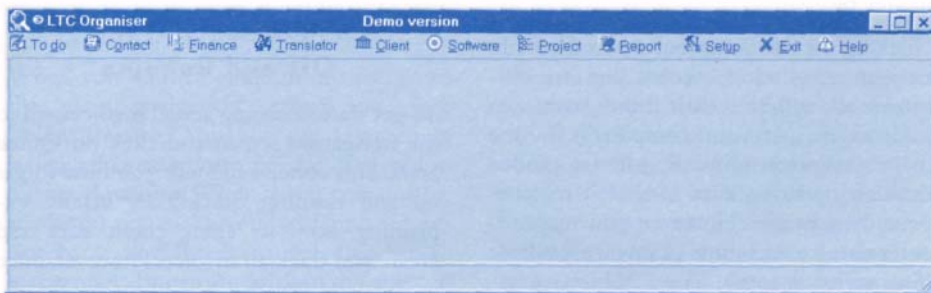


Figure 1: Why the large space?

Product:	LTC Organiser
Version:	2.80
Publisher:	Language Technology Centre
Contact:	www.langtech.co.uk
Cost:	US\$2,190 (single license, all modules)
Pros:	Best product in category
Cons:	Less-than-desirable interface
Scores:	(1 = worst; 10 = outstanding)
Stability:	9 (No crashes yet!)
Usability:	2 (Borderline user-unfriendly)
Criticality:	8 (Better than what you use now)
Speed:	2 (Time to get some coffee)
Overall Score:	6 (Above average, useful)

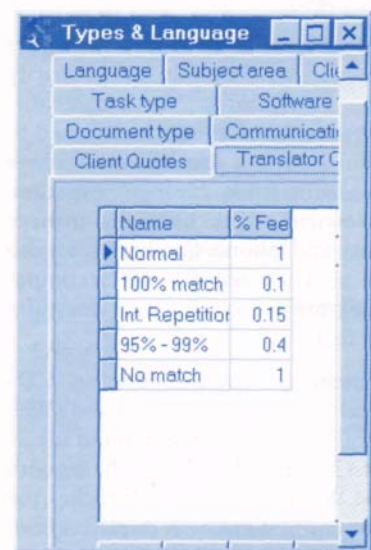


Figure 2: Resizing woes