

Localization Gets a Little Less Local

AN INTERVIEW WITH
LISA DIRECTOR MICHAEL ANOBILE

With rapid concentration in the localization industry worldwide and growing awareness in the business community that product and service globalization require a specialized skillset, industry trade group LISA (Localisation Industry Standards Association) is poised for growth. Director Michael Anobile talks about how his organization is bracing for the changes ahead.

Language International: Originally set up to provide a business and technology forum for the software-localization industry, LISA is now in its eighth year. How do you see its role today, and what can it offer potential new members?

Michael Anobile: LISA's fundamental role has always been to educate the market to the need for localization and to promote the best interests of the localization industry as a whole. Over the past seven years, we have set up a viable synergistic platform for the information-technology sector through our various forums, special-interest groups, standards initiatives, and publications. We are now ready to focus on the business and development side of what product localization means to *any* global company. In accordance with our mandate, we are extending our membership beyond the core software-publishing industry by attracting firms from other vertical markets. We see needs for sharing localization expertise in sectors ranging from the automotive, pharmaceutical, and medical to financial, airline, and telecommunications industries. Each of these is now confronted by the same fundamental issue of making its products and services available in local languages on a global scale through some kind of user interface.

Our software-localization experience can provide businesses new to the localization market with an unrivaled knowledge base of our members' trials, errors, and triumphs. We are looking forward to expanding our membership because we can offer new industries an easier learning curve to the localization mindset.

L: Where do you see the association going in providing value to existing and potential members?

Michael Anobile: Unlike single-focus associations, LISA is unique in trying to bring together both supply and demand within the localization industry. Our aim has always been to provide the conditions that enable each side to learn from the other, and in the process improve the quality and effectiveness of their tools, process, and business methods. We have amassed a significant body of information and documentation on preferred practice in localization. This is reflected in member-driven initiatives such as the LISA Quality Assurance Model, the Web Localization SIG, and our Standard Bidding Platform, all of which provide guidelines for outsourcing localization services. To help new and old members boost their awareness, we will be publishing all this material on the LISA Web site. We are developing a sort of "LISA intranet," to help everyone involved make better use of the information we have collectively generated.

Second, we are expanding our ongoing workshop training program. As all localization-industry focus groups realize, the workshop format has proved one of the most effective ways of transferring skills in such areas as tools awareness and project management. As the market develops, there will be an ever-greater need to enhance localization skillsets. We see our role as "facilitator," calling on expert companies to supply such training and add value to our core activity.

For example, we have chosen structured-project-management supplier ETP to handle training in that area, Alan Melby's TTT terminology-resource group at Brigham Young University to help drive forward a number of technology standards and run several workshops, and Fry & Bontrone to edit the *LISA Newsletter*. We contract with other members for value-added services and expertise: Trados, Star, and Netscape have been providing support for our Web site, and the University of Geneva has been hosting our extensive email activities. In the area of language-processing technology, we have found that workshops focusing on implementation

and user-satisfaction issues allow everyone to benefit through an open and mutual exchange of experiences and requirements.

Third, we will pursue our regular Forum program, but will extend it in interesting new ways. As a key feature of future Forums, we plan on leveraging the Executive Round Table format that we premiered in Geneva in December 1997 and will run it this year in Tokyo (May) and Madrid (August). When you bring together senior managers from the supply, demand, and development sides of the business in an off-the-record environment, you set a meaningful dynamic in motion. What this means is that suppliers are forced to evaluate their own resources and skills more closely, while at the same time learning exactly what their potential customers will be looking for over the next 12 months. In turn, the publishers can assess available capabilities and appreciate the kind of localization investments they will need to ensure product globalization at the required quality level. Likewise, language-tools development and infrastructure issues are central to both supply and demand. In a real sense, these Executive Round Tables represent the quintessence of LISA's core mission: bringing all the players together within a client-partner business model of the localization industry.

***LI:** Good business coverage of the localization industry has suffered from a dearth of hard statistical data about the sector. Will LISA be in a position to supply the business community at large with a more focused source of financial, market, and other information on the industry?*

Michael Anobile: Let me talk figures a moment. It is generally accepted that we are looking at an outsourcing spend of US\$2 to 2.5 billion in the localization industry as a whole, most of it in the information-technology sector. What is really interesting about this figure is not what it shows, but how it relates to international business in a broader sense. Those 2.5 billion are actually leveraging a US\$50-billion revenue stream in international product sales. Now, just think how powerful these figures become if you look beyond the traditional localization sector of IT and start mapping them onto the market potential for other industries once they start localizing on a truly global scale. We are looking at serious revenues here.

LISA's mandate is to help all industries debunk the myth that "English is enough." We want to demonstrate how these kinds of figures relate to global business. This will help newcomers understand the kinds of brakes and accelerators that control the process of global localization.

As is natural in a maturing business like localization, our members are not ready to publicly divulge sensitive financial information on pricing, localization revenues, total outspend, internal costs, etc. No one has access to validated facts about specific market trends apart from baseline data on factors such as languages, emerging markets, and global size. This year we are investigating setting up

instruments with a major market analyst that will solidify our general perception of what is going on in this market and provide hard business data for the first time.

***LI:** Fifteen percent of your members are university departments, many of them involved with tool development and analysis. Does LISA see any benefits in trying to promote localization management as a distinct subject at, for example, business schools?*

Michael Anobile: Everyone agrees there is a severe shortage of skills in the localization industry. Indeed, critical success factors in the years ahead will be skills training, and laying the groundwork for attracting new people to this business. One criticism that could justifiably be leveled against LISA is that we haven't done enough to promote education and skills transmission in the field of localization. The real problem in setting up any kind of formal training is not generating ideas, but finding the funds and channeling them effectively into the educational system.

As we have seen, LISA has so far benefited from the neutral, precompetitive status of university research in the development of tool and technology standards. Alan Melby's role in helping develop the Oscar standard for translation memory exchange has of course been exemplary here, as has that of Maghi King at the University of Geneva, Khurshid Ahmad at the University of Surrey, and Sue Ellen Wright at Kent State University. Many other eminent experts have been involved in Oscar and in individual workshops and other activities.

The logical next step would be to help lay the foundations for a comprehensive localization career path, starting with specially tailored courses at university level. In this respect, the Irish-government-sponsored Localization Resource Centre in Dublin exemplifies the application of public funds to developing the localization industry. As an industry body, however, LISA believes that the private sector should also be persuaded to make the necessary gestures and set up an appropriate fund for such educational programs. Hopefully when the majors in other vertical industries realize how vital it is to ensure durable, properly trained human resources for this business, they will follow suit. By establishing a comprehensive training infrastructure for the whole industry, they will be able to leverage their own entry into the "global products community" over the long term.

***LI:** One of LISA's key missions is to establish standards that help avoid wastage of resources and costs, and promote interoperability between supply and demand partners. How do you evaluate your progress in this area and where might it lead?*

Michael Anobile: Standards in our industry emerge through the need to cooperate; they should not create entry barriers in terms of cost and time by forcing market players to buy into the protocols set

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Mike Anobile

On the broader needs for localization technology: We see needs for sharing localization expertise in sectors ranging from the automotive, pharmaceutical, and medical to financial, airline, and telecommunications industries.

up by a single industry pace-setter or national body. LISA has proceeded by getting all its members to forge rules of best practice based on their experience working together. When establishing best practice in quality assurance or translation-memory interchange, we used this tiered "bottom-up" approach because it means that everyone who wants to has a voice in a consensus-driven process. As a result, all sides win, from tool developers and users to service vendors and service customers.


Standards and best practices will naturally emerge as the industry matures. One area we are supporting, for example, is project management, so that we can enable localization project managers to have a universally recognized skill level. LISA doesn't need to reinvent the wheel—we see ourselves as a conduit,

directing people towards appropriate training and certification associations which are already in place.

The key here is to understand that the localization industry is changing its business model. With the advent of much greater external investment and management expertise, we are moving from one based on software development to one predicated on virtual manufacturing. In the future, the process of developing products for global distribution, from product conception and information creation to delivery, will increasingly take place via the Web. That means collaboration between all players on both the supply and demand side is crucial. Each link in the chain is another customer.

In a business context, one of the most exciting features of the Web as a medium for virtual manufacturing is that it offers the potential for being a great equalizer.

The small niche player with specialist localization skills in, for example, quality assurance, beta testing, or financial-products translation, will be able to enter the localization process in the same way as the global service supplier. As everyone becomes increasingly networked into distributed production teams, the role of bottom-up standards for best practice will become more evident.

At LISA, our job is to provide a forum for everyone to come to grips with these issues and ensure that the whole industry benefits from them. This means partnerships, strategic alliances, and shared ground rules. A better understanding of internal issues will become the rule and not the exception. 

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