Managing the Unmanageable?

An insider's story on the daily challenges and struggles of a localization project manager.

By Matthew Rickard

Localization Project Management is not a role without its challenges. It is not the intention to use this article as a sounding board for years of frustration at these issues, rather to act as a reminder for both localization vendors and their clients that by working together and making best use of the technology available to us, our localization services will improve by leaps and bounds.

The Localization Project Manager (LPM) role over recent years has proven to be a stressful yet highly skilled one. Throughout the industry we have seen attrition and people burnt out by the huge demands of the job.

The role of the LPM is an extremely challenging one yet with a simple premise—to deliver a localized product on time, within budget, and to the quality desired by the client:

- Quality
- Price
- Deadline

As the old PM adage says, "Choose any two of the above."

In this article, I will analyze these three main criteria in turn and conclude by looking at the future of Project Management in the localization industry:

Quality

Quality in localization is subjective. There is no escaping it. Sure, some components are easier to manage than others. For example, ensuring that a document is correctly formatted in line with the source material can be done fairly simply by means of thorough proofreading and QA processes by qualified experts. Likewise testing of links on a web page or online Help document.

Translation is traditionally the area where customer complaints are likely to originate from—incorrect terminology, mistranslation of the source material, misunderstanding of source concepts, material not truly localized for the target market—the list is endless. While a lot of complaints may be valid, there is more often than not a multitude of mitigating circumstances, many of which can be leveled squarely in the face of the publisher and the quality of their source material.

All reputable localization companies in the industry have taken huge steps to address the issue of quality and undoubtedly services have improved in an ever more competitive marketplace. Many localization vendors have recognized the need to become more involved in their publisher's development process and impress on them the need to consider localization as a major influence on their development decisions.

Localization vendors have been talking about the need for the following from publishers for a long time and have in many cases added this type of service to their solution portfolios

- Controlled authoring
- Robust source glossaries
- Terminology management
- Source freeze (less of those last-minute amendments)

The question needs to be asked though—how often do vendors see any of the above from publishers?

The answer unfortunately is still very rarely. In the vast majority of cases, the localization project manager has to deal with poorly written and inconsistent source material, and few or no guidelines from publishers. This may be due to source text being created from different areas of the publisher's organization, for example. Often source files are delivered later than

planned with very little flexibility in the final deadline. In many cases, vendors themselves are at fault in not pointing out many of these issues to their clients. The adrenaline rush of securing the contract and the need of the publishers to start a project post haste means that a lot of the important preparation work detailed above gets lost in the melee.

The extra time and effort spent up front on all of these tasks will, without a shadow of a doubt, improve the quality of the final product and reduce the need for any expensive rework at a later date. If, as part of the selling process, vendors can stress the importance of planning and pre-work and get client buy in on this—we will see vast improvements in the quality of localized material and reduce rework.

Deadline

"It's all in the planning"—how very true. Given sufficient warning, most LPMs are able to schedule and deliver a project within an amazingly fast turnaround time. However, there is a Catch 22 situation here—the more advanced warning received, the less likely source materials will be delivered on the scheduled date. Unfortunately being so far down the chain in a product's lifecycle, the LPM has to juggle many resources and keep them available despite delays from the publisher (who in turn is reliant on and may be let down by other people within the own organization). The unpredictability of this timing, of course, makes the scheduling task extremely complex.

Again, many of the items which we mentioned earlier are key factors here—for example the countless hours vendor localization engineers spend deciphering complex directory structures or build environments, and wading through hundreds of files only to find out that they do not need to do anything with them. Often this material has been quoted on and these issues not brought up, making it difficult for the LPM to extend a deadline as a result. Clear instructions and a file list from the publisher would shorten the project set up time considerably, as would a willingness to raise intelligent questions as part of the quoting process on the vendor side.

Perhaps one of the biggest issues facing the LPM is the constant updates to source material during a project. Often changes are received up until the last minute before delivery of localized files is due. Here dates and costs can be pushed back to the publisher but the pressures are usually such that either insufficient time is allowed and

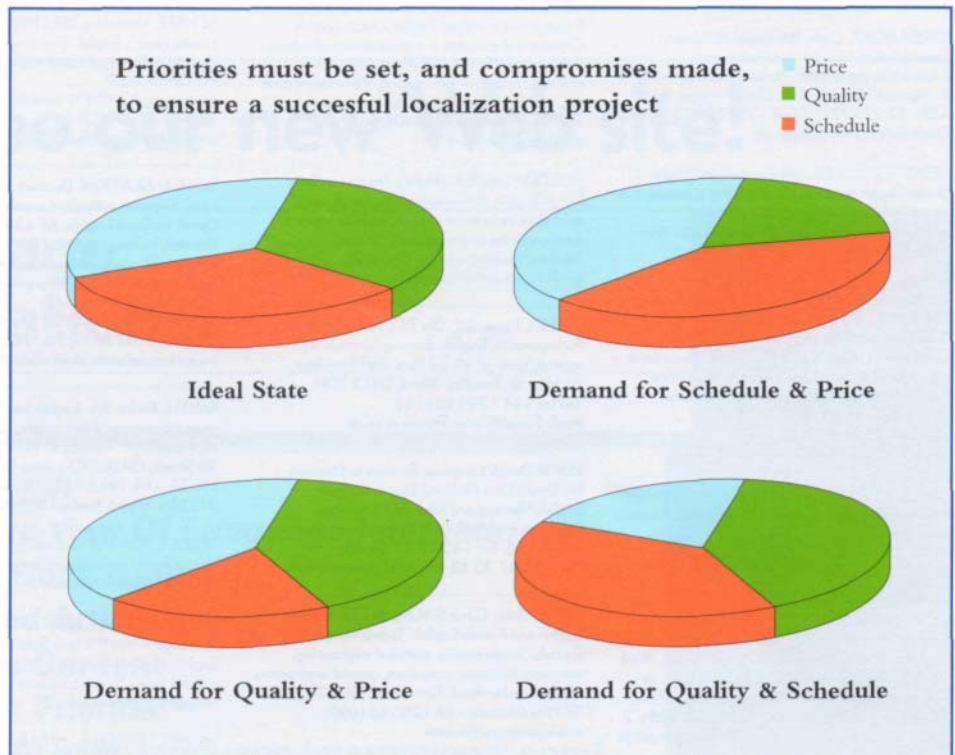(revised) deadlines are missed or quality is compromised.

Time to Market is a buzzword we hear constantly from publishers as one of their major priorities. The pressures on publishers to get their products into stores and onto the web are huge and market driven—this will not change and in the Internet world these pressures are increasing dramatically. It is imperative for publishers to recognize the important part localization plays in getting their products to market and liaise early on with regard to scheduling issues and likely sticking points.

Price

I have purposely left this hot potato until last. Price pressures from publishers and an ever more competitive marketplace make the LPM's challenge in meeting profit margins a difficult one. From a publisher perspective, most localization companies are selling exactly the same services—the end product (be it localized software, a multilingual Web site, etc) from each of them will be extremely similar. While publishers may have differing priorities, price is always going to be a key consideration.

quality rests on the shoulders of the publisher and their preparation. Well, the same could be said for the LPM's ability to deliver a project within budget and maintaining his company's target profit margins. Additionally, there are many internal factors affecting the budget.

On the publisher side, a lot of the issues we already mentioned apply. For example, a poorly written source document will lead to slower productivity metrics from translators as they struggle to understand the source text. They will turn to the vendor LPM for assistance who must spend additional time (and consequently money) resolving these queries. The same thing applies to desktop publishers and localization engineers if the quality of the document format or software is likewise inadequate. This type of exercise is very difficult to 'push back' and charge the publisher for the extra time. Some of the changes may be minimal when taken at face value but it is very easy to spend an hour or two resolving even the tiniest of queries, the cost of which is usually borne by the vendor. However, don't forget that answering queries also costs the publisher money that will add to their own project cost budget.

Priorities must be set, and compromises made, to ensure a succesful localization project

Price
Quality
Schedule

Ideal State

Demand for Schedule & Price

Demand for Quality & Price

Demand for Quality & Schedule

Leaving aside the pressures on vendor Sales staff for the time being, the LPM will always receive a project to work on which has been keenly priced (and occasionally undersold). We have already seen how much of a project's success in terms of

Internal vendor costs may increase due to incorrect or 'best case' cost assumption on behalf of the Sales teams. Understandably, the vendor Sales teams need to go in with their best price possible to secure a contract. Their cost assumptions may be based

The Many Hats of the Localization Project Manager

Resource Manager

Problem solver

Client Manager

Scheduler

Software Engineer

Salesperson

Team leader

Accountant

Trouble-shooter

on old data or best-case scenarios. Often when the LPM has little or no planning information, these assumptions bear little resemblance to actual costs. For example an average freelance translation rate may not take into account specialist subject matter or unavailability of key freelancers. This is no fault of the publisher but internal profit margins on the vendor side can take a significant hit as a result.

The Future

In conclusion, the LPM faces daily mountains to climb and in comparison with his wealthy cousins in the Internet and Systems worlds appears to receive less recognition and reward.

So where do we go from here? I have only touched very briefly on some of the challenges facing localization project managers to produce results. What actions can we all take as localization professionals to facilitate the management of our projects?

I cannot stress enough the importance of involving the localization team as early as possible in product development phases. Many of the issues discussed in this article could be alleviated early on by making a

decision on localization vendor during product development and inviting them to assist and advise in the product launch where appropriate.

Communication and collaboration are unsurprisingly the key elements here—the onus is on both the publisher and the localization vendor to fully communicate the goals, priorities, and possible pitfalls to each other from day one. This information and knowledge sharing should come from everybody involved in both organizations. A lot of the work put upon the shoulders of the LPM is unnecessary and by eliminating it, vendors will not only motivate and retain their key people, but also raise productivity and increase bandwidth. For the publisher, this means improving quality and turn around times, and driving down costs.

The major players in the industry are now realizing that these are important issues that can be improved upon by investment in technology. Over the past year or two, we have seen the focus of technology investments shift from Translation Tools to integrated workflow software to facilitate Project Management. Technology can help in many of the areas mentioned in this ar-

ticle. Workflow tools cut down on the administration and file handling on behalf of the LPM. Portals allow clients to see project status and information at the touch of a button. Integrate these with the Translation Tools already available and the picture improves dramatically.

As the localization industry matures and technology improves, the life of the Localization Project Manager will become more manageable and less stressful and with more streamlined management processes. There is most definitely light at the end of the tunnel.

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