Organization: A Last Mile Solution!

By David Santori

Tuesday morning… six projects to start, four others to quote, various phone messages to check, 57 e-mails to read, countless translator questions, and an apple to eat still sitting on your desk. Welcome to the life of a project manager! It's only Tuesday morning, you think; and not even 8:00 a.m. yet. Clients will start calling soon for their latest project updates. The pressure is on, the crowd is cheering. On your marks! Get set! Hold your breath! Go!

Whether you love'em or hate'em, project managers hold a key position in the translation industry. They live and breathe to make their translation projects bloom with a bit of magic, while dedicating their time to making their clients' lives easier. As a project manager, you're expected to know the status of the project at each and every stage: Who's translating this document? Which proofreader is taking care of the Spanish file on that 18-language manual project? Where are the Arabic translated files, and did you already send them to be reviewed?

When you're dealing with hundreds of files, countless languages, and more than 20 projects on your desk, organization is imperative. A project manager needs to have an efficient workspace, a methodical working approach, and an organized mind. But what does "being organized" mean? Why is organization so sought after, and why is it so important in our industry? Included in this article are ideas and suggestions to help you become a super-powerful organized project manager who will utilize all the most effective approaches to execute translation projects in a timely fashion, offer the best customer service, and cross the finish line like a champion.

First, let me begin by telling you that there's no magic potion to drink to make you wake up one morning and suddenly be a very organized person. If perfection existed, we would have found it already and it would be sold in a bottle next to the energy drinks at your local supermarket. Unfortunately, nothing is perfect by nature, so we have to create perfection with the most efficient systems possible. The keys to organization are self-discipline, logic, and a willingness to get things done.

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All the magic happens in your workspace, so begin by ensuring that everything has its own place and is clearly separated and labeled: your desk, your inbox, your filing cabinet, your computer, and so forth. For example, make sure you have only the bare minimum amount of paper and office supplies on your desk. The less clutter you have around you, the faster you'll be able to find something in a time of crisis. Your drawers should be free for you to use and shouldn't be filled with old projects, which should be archived instead in a separate, easily accessible area. File your resources in binders and keep them nearby. Create a client, a translator, and a special language binder where you can keep articles and examples of specific linguistic rules for each language you work with. Your translation magazines should also be filed away chronologically, not saved indefinitely on your desk. Reserve your inbox for incoming mail or messages and avoid using it as a deposit area for miscellaneous items and project folders without a home. A clean workspace will help keep your mind clear and allow you to focus on your projects much easier. Remember that we spend a big part of our life at work, and if it's disorganized we are less likely to want to come to the office and perform well. A project manager should not be tripping over boxes to get into his or her cubicle/office or, and most importantly, digging through folders to find the phone. Clients should never have to wait! If your space is clean and orderly, you can rest assured that you won't have to worry about a translation you forgot to send out, especially while you're sitting at home enjoying an evening away from work.

Another element to remember is to keep your contacts updated. Don't put it off until next week when this huge project will finally be delivered or the next time you think you might have a free moment. As soon as you receive a change from a client or a translator regarding their e-mail or phone number, update it! If you wait, you'll forget, or it will never get done. Don't wait until the day an outgoing e-mail bounces back to you because you didn't update your favorite French translator's contact information. It will always take more time to search through old e-mails for the new address, and chances are the returned e-mail will get to you two days too late.

Make sure your e-mail inbox is as clean as your desk. Project managers can easily get overwhelmed with thousands of e-mails in their inbox. Keep in mind that if a problem is solved, if a project is done and billed, if a question has been answered, there is no need to keep those e-mails in your inbox. Let go of past issues you already dealt with and delete all messages you don't need

anymore (even the one offering you a trip to Cancún for $89). Keep all-important messages with the project itself or as part of the client information for possible future use. With fewer messages in your inbox, you'll spend your time being more **proactive** than **reactive**. Keep any ongoing questions and issues in your inbox, or anything that is not yet solved. If a client calls hoping you have an answer as to why this word was left in English in the Japanese letter you delivered two days ago, it will be much easier to find the translator's answer in your inbox.

Project managers have different methods for tracking their projects. Many use white boards, others write down lists, a few set up an electronic schedule in their e-mail system, others use complex project management software, while some simply don't keep track at all. Whatever you feel most comfortable with, it's important to have a daily system that shows you where you are and what you need to remember to do each morning. A simple, yet cost-effective dry-erase board is the easiest solution to implement and reduces time lost to paper shuffling. Since we are always being asked to arrange, prepare, and sort things out, we don't need more paper on our desk. A board quickly offers a panoramic view of what needs to be done. Erasing is fast, adding projects to the board is easy,

and using a color code helps the eye focus on what's most important. When you're out of the office, the board is also a good tool for other project managers to see quickly what's happening and set up an emergency committee to handle any crises.

Time management also plays a big part in being organized. When you're swamped, take care of smaller or rush tasks first. Decide which task will take the least amount of time to complete and do it first, so you can cross it quickly off your list. Once it's done, it's off of your desk and out of your mind. With a shorter list, your mind can be a bit more at ease and you'll be able to concentrate on what will require the most out of you.

With these tips, one can understand why organization is such a crucial part of a project manager's daily routine. The translation industry requires us to be fast and very adaptable, due to the wide variety of existing documents we have to work with, not to mention the fact that there are more languages than one could possibly know in a single lifetime. If a project manager is disorganized, clients will stop sending projects, translators will stop accepting jobs, and a project from 2003 will still be on your desk awaiting final delivery and billing. A highly organized person is one of the main requirements to look for when hiring a new project manager. Before scientists

invent a machine capable of checking someone's organizational skills, you can always put new project managers to the test by employing different catastrophic translation project scenarios in order to see how they would prevent the ship from sinking. Translation agencies seek organized project managers because they will get the job done and also because they will succeed in the "translation arena" instead of being instantly devoured, never to be seen or heard from again. Without a logical system of organization, projects will be hard to manage and clients will leave one right after another.

Being organized is truly a skill. It is an ability that a select few possess, usually without realizing it. However, it is also a skill that most people can master and learn how to utilize. In any case, being organized is a key factor to working as a project manager in the translation industry. Our clients assume we have this skill, and our translators rely on it in order to keep receiving projects. While project management is not an Olympic sport yet, I like to think that one day, maybe, we will receive a gold medal for our skills and sense of organization. In the meantime, don't panic and enjoy that apple still sitting on your desk. Don't hold your breath for too long, keep running fast, and you'll see that the finish line is not far off.

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