

Your Mission, If You Choose to Accept It...

By Hélène Wimmerlin

“Your mission...the localization into all EU languages of an important document designated operator’s manual. You may select any team members for the operation. You have six days to provide a print-ready version.”

Such is the mission proposed to agent X, project manager in a translation agency. Mission impossible? As unreasonable as clients can get, it is rarely the case that they will make it so difficult that an agency will not be able to complete an assignment. True, translation projects can be obstacle courses full of pitfalls and traps. However, agencies are hubs for creative ideas and solutions, allowing them to conduct projects in a quality manner while respecting tight deadlines and serious budget constraints. The agency’s main weapon? Project managers.

So little is known about project managers. Clients sometimes think they translate the projects themselves. Or they wonder why the agency charges a project management fee, especially since the project *only* needs to be translated. Translators tend to have more of a mixed impression, where the assignment provider image gets entangled with that of a slave driver. So let’s bring some light to this misunderstood profession...

It might seem obvious, but project managers manage projects—translation or localization projects, that is. These projects have a translation component at their core, but many different tasks and services orbit around that core, including, among others, quality control, desktop publishing, software testing, translation memory maintenance, proposal writing, or billing. Project managers are in charge of coordinating all the

services on the project. To do so, they manage the whole team of contractors and internal staff and act as a liaison to the client.

Projects start with the project manager talking to the client and gathering as much information as possible to define the exact scope of the project and the client’s expectations. The client might not know much about the job to be performed, so some important details might be omitted unless the right questions are

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asked. After this initial interview, the project manager sits down with the production team and the files get analyzed and scrutinized, brainstorming takes place to determine the best course of action, a strategy plan is created, and a proposal gets sent to the client. If the plan was well thought out, the project manager simply implements it once the project starts and troubleshoots the minor problems that might arise. The project manager moves the project from translator to proofreader, from proofreader to quality controller, from quality controller to desktop publisher, etc.

It seems easy enough, but in practice it is a rather complicated exercise. The project manager is the buffer between clients and contractors. Translators will often complain that the project managers are not sensitive to their needs: they don’t provide enough reference material for the project, they don’t explain what needs to be done well enough, they don’t answer questions, or they don’t

understand the need for sleep. On the other hand, clients can get frustrated because project managers don’t seem to deliver fast enough, they keep on asking for clarification on terms, and they threaten to charge extra if parameters to the project change. Although such complaints have been heard, a good project manager will manage to educate and satisfy both parties, and will keep everybody in a happy and productive mood. That skill is not given to everybody. So what makes a good project manager? Many skills enter the mixture...

Project managers are musicians attuned to languages. Even if they are not all linguists themselves, they have a broad knowledge of translation implications that will allow them to guide their clients in their localization decisions and to understand their translators’ needs and requirements.

Project managers are clowns, juggling with time, money, and quality in search of the perfect balance. Their decisions are crucial to the good results of the project, but also to client and contractors and internal staff satisfaction. No project manager can afford a decision that will shift the balance to a poor translation, a late delivery of an over-budget project, or, even worse, all of the above altogether.

Project managers are warriors with an arsenal of tools at their disposal to get the job done. These tools range from specialists they recruit for the mission to software tools that allow them to work more efficiently, or even reference materials that allow them to proof the work.

Project managers are road-runners. They always work in a fast-paced environment where they keep on moving the project from one person to the next. Any time the project spends unattended on their desk

