

Freelancer on the line

Nélida E. Depiante

Freelance translator, London, UK

In the past I have heard stories of success from people using word processors and from translators who have left employment and now work for their ex-employers on a freelance basis, making twice as much money as they earned before. In such a context, my story is more of 'postponed success', a hopeful misnomer for failure. So let me give you the background.

I had been thinking of going freelance some time in the future, but the opportunity came prematurely when Shell reorganised its Foreign Language Services department. I am a fastidious translator (in the English and Spanish senses of the word!) and I try to translate into a type of Spanish which should be acceptable in a variety of countries at a variety of levels. Often my work is reproduced by photocopying methods and bound into manuals or distributed as periodical bulletins. Soon what I produce will not have to be input again by a typesetter when it is meant for quality printing, but will be used direct from my disk or screen.

This should help explain why I thought I needed the modern technology to mask my shortcomings as a typist and as a translator. I want a word-processing system that is easy and quick to use, and does not require a lot of skill to operate. I want an easy way of dealing with accents, upside-down question and exclamation marks, various typefaces, indentations, mathematical formulae and chemical structures and I want to see everything on screen as I am going to get it on paper. I want all that from equipment which is small enough, smart enough and silent enough to fit comfortably in the flat which constitutes my home and to allow work to be carried out late at night without disturbing the neighbours; equipment that will make communications by modern methods possible. I want it all

at an affordable price. I also have the temerity to demand an amber screen against the proven benefits and wide acceptance of a green one in Britain.

Well, I want ... rather I 'wanted' all that. What I have got or am likely to get is another matter.

In January 1984, when I started thinking about the equipment I should get, my experience of modern equipment was limited to two systems and a lot of hearsay; one of the two systems was the IBM electronic typewriter with magnetic cards, which the Foreign Language typists used in Shell, but I had never typed on it myself.

The other system was a dedicated word processor, the Logica VTS 2200, which I had been using for a number of months in Shell Centre (it is the system currently being used in the Foreign Language Services department and it was carefully picked for them). It is terrifically user-friendly: what can be done on this system is enough to set very high standards for any list of requirements. And its keyboard is excellent. However the system is hardware driven, so it works its own software. It only 'talks' to a Ricoh daisy-wheel printer. Stop codes and changes of daisy wheel cannot be used in the same job, which rules out the use of different typefaces. Because it is obsolete, by January 1985 its price had nearly halved; this almost tempted me to buy it. However, in Shell, any job that the word processor cannot handle is handed to the typist to be produced on the IBM machine — a facility I would not have at home.

In February 1984 I heard a most enlightening talk by Commodore Croft and added, among other things, a dot-matrix printer to my list of points to consider. Since then I have seen many systems. My lists of requirements have been all over London, or indeed England; I went for demonstrations and salesmen came to see me at home. Some colleagues kindly showed me their equipment. The story would take days to tell. I ended up not seeing the wood for the trees and getting lost in my own requirements. The main problem was the fact that I was a small customer, trying to buy equipment for foreign languages in Britain. Apparently the choice would be much easier on the Continent.

At first, I intended to follow a gradual progression from a Brother CE70 (to bridge the first gap), through a more powerful electronic typewriter to a word processor when the market was right, probably in 1986. But then I persuaded myself that it would be better to go for a word-processing system in one leap.

However when I went to exhibitions or for *ad hoc* demonstrations, I found that I could not try the things I needed to see, because the machine was not loaded with the Spanish program or was not connected to the right printer, or had just broken down or whatever. Computer salesmen used to tell me, at the time of making the appointment: 'You will be very *impressed* with what we have to offer.' (Are they drilled in that expression?)

Personally, I was getting more and more *depressed*.

The salespersons and programmers seem to have no idea of the fact that foreign languages do not always function like English and that it is no solution to try to take over the foreign language and impose the *pax britannica* (or indeed *pax americana*) on it in order to bring its primitive and unruly structures into the twentieth century.

The printing stage is another difficult issue. And one that computer people tend to dismiss as unimportant. It is possible to find a very good system, on the screen, to which no suitable, affordable printer can be attached. Consider a page which has something on it like Figure 1 (and these are very simple examples).

If the system allows for the use of different printwheels, how many changes of printwheels would be needed each time the user wanted a print-out? The formulae may be done by hand, of course, but then ... so much for modern technology!

I started by assigning up to £7,500 for the purchase of the complete system. But at that level, many of my requirements were not met. (Recently I saw a handy typesetting machine, ideal for journalists, for example, for as little as £1,500. However, I was told I could not have anything for Spanish for under £50,000, or it may have been £15,000 and I misheard it. In any case both figures are equally out of reach for me.)

$$A = (V_f + V_p - V_1) / W \quad \text{or}$$

$$P_p = (\gamma d_c^2 N_\gamma + c d_c N_c) (f - 0.363 [f - s]) \quad \text{or}$$

The growth curves presented here for *D. rotundata* were similar to those obtained for *D. alata* by Campbell *et al* (1962).

Figure 1.

The state of the market in 1984 seemed to make it possible to go for far less, but new equipment was not being launched as promised. A chunk of my budget went on research and loss of earnings. So I had to lower the maximum sum. The government has tampered with allowances for depreciation, so people can no longer recover the whole of the income tax allowance for their outlay in one year. And it may be relevant to say that while I was getting a computer to work more quickly, my old customers were getting computers to pay more slowly.

I considered the possibility of renting a Logica VTS 2200 for a time; the hiring of equipment is not as easy for a person working on his/her own as it is for a big organisation. Besides, it may be expensive in comparison with the purchase price. I decided that the best thing was to buy something ... anything ... and then see what I could do with it. At best, I might be lucky; at worst, I would be throwing my money away ... on experience. As you know, experience is what you have when you've got nothing else left.

For flexibility, a microcomputer appeared to be the answer. And I went for an Apricot PC and the Vuwriter software. Vuwriter was developed in conjunction with the University of Manchester and it is a very good scientific program, used by universities and technical colleges. A new version, called Arts, has just been released, which handles more languages and uses the equipment more efficiently.

In October 1984, when I was about to send a firm order to a very helpful dealer, Shell told me they wanted to carry out an experiment in having translators working at home, electronically linked to the Shell offices. I was the obvious person to take part in the experiment and this would bridge the gap for me until better things were on the market. I would have liked to have done the experiment on the equipment I would finally have. One of the reasons is that work is kept on disk for future updating and disks from one system do not work in others. But after careful consideration, I agreed to Shell's proposal that I should have at home one of their rented Logicas (for which I would pay a small percentage of the rental) with communications facilities.

It is easy to make machines talk in plain English. But transmitting oddities is another matter. Some people use codes for foreign characters so that the sender indicates in some form that a certain character is 'a' with tilde, for instance. Then the recipient looks for these codes and edits the document accordingly. This seemed laborious. We wanted to transmit everything as it was to be printed. So big heads were put together to try to work this out. I was given a heavy flat box which was a Racal Milgo 'modem'; this was plugged into both the telephone socket and a power socket. Once we could not achieve communications and it was when I was cleaning the following day that I found a socket tucked at the end of a cable glaring at me from a tangle of cables on the floor. I had missed one

connection! I had found that the equipment had to be unplugged completely when I went out; otherwise the telephone-answering machine would switch itself on and run all the tape, disabling itself. Experts could not find a reason for this, but it happened.

The working out of the instructions to transmit and to receive took some time and at the beginning it was found that two steps were transposed in the instructions and we failed to communicate. The learning was a bit stressful and tiring. It would take half an hour or an hour at a time, and could not be done as often as we would have liked. The actual transmission of the document was quick. All the other operations were time-consuming. The connection could be lost through delays, or the telephone lines were engaged, or there was a lot of 'noise' in them and funny characters were produced. As to the time to communicate: near close of business in the evening was easier and there was less noise. Or we had to do it at lunchtime, when the users of the equipment in the office were enjoying their scrumptious meals in Shell Centre and made no claims on the particular machine prepared for communications. But finally we got the idea. We could transmit diacritics in their place, upside-down question/exclamation marks, underlining, text in its right place if it was going to be printed on preprinted company stationery etc.; we lost the discretionary hyphen and the emboldening, for example.

Shell did not send text to me over the phone, because it was not convenient to input it by keying it and they did not have an optical character reader. For the work we tested, it was sufficient if they put the text in the post the previous day (maybe a special messenger could have been used if necessary — or telex, but then document layout would have been a problem).

Before or after the communication we could 'chat' on the screen if we wanted and tell each other how things were going. For some reason, our chatting on the screen was hilarious normally, because of the many mistakes we typed and because if we had started with wrong margins or something, we could have just one letter per line. Or, as happens in conversation, one side would start to type before the other side had finished.

The advantages of having the same equipment were clear in other areas: if I went to the office to check a draft, I could take my disk and do the editing there or leave the work for a staff translator to edit and print. Or I could incorporate work done by somebody else into my work for updating, or I could send disks by post. However, as I have already mentioned, I was not prepared to make the Logica word processor my choice.

In February/March 1985 I went out to look for equipment again, so that I could have it when the experiment ended in May or June. I have already

mentioned how frustrating it is to deal with computer people and this is no time to go into a tale of woe. IBM, for instance, were very dismissive because I said I wanted to retain the pound sign and have the dollar sign as well.

Finally, an order was placed at the beginning of July for delivery at the beginning of August. On the day of the delivery, in the morning I was told everything was fine and in the afternoon I found out the dealer could not deliver. Now I had no equipment of any sort. After some more days of frantic searching during which I even condescended to see an IBM Personal Computer, I took an old magazine and rang an Apricot dealer in London, made enquiries and ordered the same equipment I was about to buy in October 1984. It was August 1985. Luckily, this particular dealer turned out to be more efficient and I now have an Apricot PC with 256K RAM, two disk drives ... and an amber screen, a Vuwriter word-processing system and a Toshiba P1351 dot-matrix printer ... and a string of minor teething troubles!

Now the main issue is communications. There would be no problem in communicating all the Greek characters, diacritics, scientific symbols, boldening etc., between equipment running Vuwriter or between Apricot machines. Communications use seven bits and keep the eighth bit for parity checking. But Vuwriter uses the eighth bit for the strange characters. There was concern about the loss of this parity checking. In fact, Vuwriter is used at the College of Technology in Canterbury and they have communicated successfully between Wales and Canterbury and they intend to have workstations in different parts of the country. Contrary to what I have heard at lectures, Canterbury say that it is cheaper for them to use the public telephone line than to use electronic mail. My main problem however is for my work to be received by the Logica machine in Shell. Translation tables must be devised. This is not impossible, but it is expensive. I am told that it may be two weeks' work and the cost would be several thousand pounds. So I have come this far, now I have to stop and look which way to go.

I am finding it more difficult than I expected to get used to the new system, mainly the operating system of the machine, rather than the software. If something goes wrong, the hardware people tend to blame the software and vice versa. A word-processing system on a microcomputer is much slower than a dedicated word processor. I did not know that not all the memory can be used for storing the document. I almost died of a heart attack when, for my first document, the machine told me I had used up all the memory after two pages. Scientific and foreign characters and heavy editing take a great deal of memory. I intend to buy more memory.

With a microcomputer, I cannot see how you can get to the paperless office of the advertisements. Long documents have to be split. Going back

to see what you said previously means getting in and out of documents. This takes time and you only have a bit of the text on the screen at any one time. There is no comparison with having the hard copy in front of you. But then, I am used to paper!

There is a lot being said about computers not being good for the health. I do not believe anybody will die of 'computeritis' but I have experienced a few problems. One is stress, mainly due to not knowing how to operate the system or what to expect of it. I decided to pay for a day's tuition and my trainer was a charming young lady from Manchester University who has given me further on-going support out of her own kindness.

Something funny and annoying happened to me: I found that I could not control certain fingers when using electronic keypads. The harder I tried the worse it was. The medical verdict was that I have an extra rib. I thought I had proved the Bible right. But I am told that men can get it as well. What apparently happens is that some people have some additional 'rib fibres' in the neck region, which can cause pain and slight problems with finger control, shown up by sensitive keypads.

I am very grateful for the new machine aids which allow me to be at home, in slippers when my feet ache, warm when Londoners are out in the cold, the wind and the rain, travelling in dirty trains or stranded in dismal stations. I will be much happier when the machine allows me to make sufficient money to have more free time to go out and enjoy myself ... in the cold, the wind and the rain.

AUTHOR

Nélida E. Depiante, Freelance translator, 3 Coombe Lodge, London SE7
7PE, UK.