

LCC - The Language Consulting Centre Language Consulting in Cyber Space

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MLIS

In 1996/97 the MLIS programme was launched by the EU Commission. MLIS' overall political objective is to break down language barriers between the countries of the Union at the while safeguarding linguistic infrastructures within the respective countries.

The MLIS programme supports projects that are oriented towards developing and implementing customised technology based solutions. The main target group being small and medium sized enterprises (SME's) the EU Commission tries to meet the core needs of the industries that have the greatest difficulties in meeting the demands of technological development and globalisation.

The OLCC project.

Language barriers are a severe threat to the global competitiveness of SME's. This is especially true for SME's whose business and products are "information intensive". This means that for the documentation of products and communication with foreign partners on the global market, considerable volumes of text need to be produced and translated. Moreover shorter product development cycles and increased competition require that this increased volume of text is produced in a shorter period of time and often under severe cost pressure, entailing higher demands on the productivity and efficiency of the employees. The necessity to produce for more media and formats and to be aware of product liability issues adds further complexity to the documentation and translation/localisation processes.

Although truly SME-customised multilingual document production and management environments are not available today, most of the requirements relating to volumes, costs, flexibility, timely provision and quality can be solved using currently available multilingual production technologies, tools and methods. But the lack of people who are trained and provided with an appropriate budget in terms of both time and money to access and select those technologies, tools and methods, keeps SME's from making effective and efficient use of them.

Documentation and language strategy

In the field of language documentation, development currently goes towards a constantly shorter time of production. Shorter product life cycles, faster launch of products, simship and frequent content changes are all factors which contribute to this. Elements such as QA procedures and other quality standards give rise to increased quality expectations and, moreover, the total number

Also, the total volume of information is growing, as products get more sophisticated and thus more information intensive, as legal requirements increase and as publishing in several different media and formats is needed simultaneously. Information must be accessible to everybody and be used for different purposes such as customised documentation for certain clients or target groups.

The demands of the market concerning the quality of the documentation are increasing. It is often expected that the challenges be met without any effects on costs or even involving cost reductions. At the same time, legislative requirements to environmental declarations and declarations of contents become ever stricter because of environmental and consumer policies, while technological developments entail requirements in respect of technical documentation, product descriptions and user manuals. All this results in further demands on companies. The companies thus need to plan and manage their mother-tongue communications as well as their foreign-language communications.

What is important to companies is to remain competitive and ensure earnings. They face requirements in the language field with which many of them have no direct experience. Consequently they lack the knowledge and the answers to how they can meet those requirements. This necessitates a dialogue between management and language professionals in companies.

Society makes great demands on the companies' ability to communicate both internally and externally. Internal communications are necessary to keep all employees up to date on the objectives and strategies of the company, while communications with the outside focus on selling the company - image care - through interaction and dialogue with both domestic and foreign customers and suppliers. The demands on professional communications will not diminish in the future. Rather the contrary. That is why it is necessary for companies to design a language strategy.

A language strategy provides a company with a tool that enables it to achieve uniform quality in its communications and to determine the level of quality. Uniform quality contributes to a trustworthy company image. An overall and uniform terminology will save time and thus be financially attractive. It is vital that the quality standards are laid down in a language strategy encompassing that covers both mother-tongue and foreign-language communications of the company.

On a practical level a language strategy is divided into:

- language policies for internal communications in the mother tongue as well as foreign languages
- language policies for external communications in the mother tongue as well as foreign languages.

These policies may cover:

- product documentation,
- sales and marketing material,
- oral and written communications,

- business letters,
- faxes,
- e-mails,
- design manuals,
- writer's guidelines,
- communications guidelines,
- establishment of term databases,
- information on the acquisition and use of language tools
- or procedures for quality assurance.

If the company aims at communicating professionally with its customers abroad, it may choose a policy requiring all documents in foreign languages to go through a language professional. If the company wishes a uniform terminology, it should formulate a policy for terminology management including the establishment of a term database. If the company wishes professional communications on the Internet, it will draft a policy for Internet communications.

Perspectives

Language strategy work and language policy work should be seen in a long-term perspective, as visible results take time. Therefore it is important that sufficient resources in terms of time and money are available to develop and incorporate the language strategy. It is especially important to realise that a prerequisite for implementing a language policy is to involve Management.

The idea of language policy work has to be generally accepted in the company to gain practical impact. Otherwise employees, not in direct and daily contact with language issues, may take up the attitude that language policies are none of their business, and the language policy may become an administrative guideline observed by nobody. Therefore language professionals should offer their assistance in connection with the language assignments of their colleagues.

Moreover, it is important that the definitions of language and communications are not too narrow. The target groups are not only translation and documentation departments, but everybody who contributes to the company's written communication whether in the mother-tongue or in foreign languages. Contacts and acceptance across existing job demarcations are important, just as visibility is crucial for the implementation.

There are very few statements showing what language work actually costs. Therefore it would be valuable to establish the economics of language-processing in the company. What is the cost per page for in-house translations as opposed to out-sourcing? How large is the volume of work being out-sourced every year and what does the total cost amount to? Would the introduction of improved planning or the implementation of language soft-ware result in savings? Many other relevant questions could deepen the analysis, and involving the finance department in this could be one giant step ahead towards visibility and interest.

When a company realises that it actually has to communicate with different target groups in several foreign languages as well as the mother tongue an immediate reaction (at least in a Danish environment) is that everybody will have to communicate in English. Experience shows

however that this is not a viable solution. Business partners and customers prefer communicating in their own languages, and legislation may require communications in one particular language. It is the responsibility of the language professionals to ensure sufficient resources for professional communications in as many languages as required. Nobody else will do so.

Above all good arguments for introducing a language strategy are financial arguments which is why it is important to make language work visible in company budgets and why language professionals must learn to look at their work in a financial context. Another important basis for getting a dialogue started with Management, controllers, engineers and computer professionals is the technological development within the language field.

The OLCC project

One way of supporting the SMEs is to provide company-specific, problem-focused, reasonably priced, external help to the employees who are in charge of those issues in SMEs. The objective of the OLCC is thus to support SMEs in optimising their production and managing multilingual information. The OLCC project is partly funded by the European Commission within the framework of the MLIS (MultiLingual Information Society) programme, and the participating organisations are the Center for Sprogteknologi (Danish Research and Development Institution for Language Technology), Erhvervsprogligt Forbund (Danish Association of Business Language Graduates), te-kom (German professional association for technical communication) Teleport Sachsen-Anhalt (German telecommunications services provider to technology-oriented companies) and Wordnet (German language consulting and service company).

Based on their expertise in translation, technical writing, information technology and terminology and language management consulting, these partners are establishing a SME Language Consulting Centre (SME-LCC) which focuses on the multilingual production needs of SMEs and will offer two consulting services:

- "The On-line Language Consulting Centre (OLCC)"
- "The Language Strategy Seminars".

The OLCC will:

- offer language consulting
- offer information services,
- be accessible via electronic marketplaces (e.g. SMARTS, <http://www.smarts.org>),
- be able to communicate with people in different European languages (starting with Danish, English, French and German)
- provide "one-stop-shopping" to solve SMEs' language technology and management problems with a company-specific view.

SMEs needing advice in language provision, tool selection and introduction, terminology database modelling, and many other language topics can consult the SME-LCC knowledge base, a collection of frequently asked questions/answers and links to other web-sites, or turn their questions directly to the OLCC consulting staff for specific advice.

Conclusion

The OLCC project is one way of supporting the SME's in meeting the multilingual demands of the market within the framework of the MLIS programme. But it is not only the responsibility of the European Union, national strategies and initiatives have to be evolved as well. To our knowledge initiatives have been made on a major scale e.g. The UK initiative: The National Languages for Export Campaign (1993-1997). In Denmark the CST is active in furthering the use of language technology and a new Danish Centre for Terminology has just been started with major enterprises as contributing partners. We are sure the SME's will follow.

Meet the OLCC:

<http://www.lcc-online.com>

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