



Translation Standards: Which One?

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ABSTRACT

Quality is a confusing term because it has so many different interpretations, depending on the method which is used for measurement. This chapter takes a very practical approach to explaining how to determine an appropriate quality standard to follow based on an initial assessment of the real context and needs.

Keywords: quality management system, translation standard, translation quality, strategy, goals, objectives

RESUM (*Estàndards de traducció: Quin escollir?*)

La qualitat és un terme confús ja que té moltes interpretacions diferents, depenent del mètode que s'utilitza per al seu mesurament. Aquest article té un enfocament molt pràctic amb l'objectiu d'explicar com determinar quin estàndard de qualitat és més apropiat basant-se en una valoració inicial del context i de les necessitats reals.

Paraules clau: sistema de gestió de qualitat, estàndard de traducció, qualitat de la traducció, estratègia, metes, objectius

RESUMEN (*Estándares de traducción: ¿Cuál elegir?*)

La calidad es un concepto confuso dado que tiene muchas interpretaciones diferentes en función del método utilizado para medirla. Este artículo adopta un acercamiento muy práctico que permite explicar cómo determinar qué estándar de calidad es apropiado seguir basándose en una valoración inicial del contexto y las necesidades reales.

Palabras clave: sistema de gestión de calidad, estándar de traducción, calidad de la traducción, estrategia, metas, objetivos

Introduction

This article focuses on describing the reasons for adopting and following any of many translation standards which are currently available on the market today. The decision to follow a translation standard, or any other type of standard, can often be a fairly misunderstood cycle. The majority of real questions asked by institutions seeking advice on translation standards usually focus on the best tool, or the best process, or the best approach, and not always on the detail of linguistic content. For this reason, this chapter focuses on providing practical guidance on translation standards based on a dozen years of constant experience and involvement in guiding, coaching and auditing various project teams, divisions and institutions through many different translation and non-translation-related international standards for their business processes and their certification requirements.



Main body of the article

1. The Dilemma of the Plethora of Standards

How many of us actually enjoy going to a restaurant for the first time which displays a menu with 10-20 different choices? It is even more challenging when the restaurant focuses on a different style of international cuisine than the one(s) which we are used to eating. This leads to looking around at the dishes which other people are taking, and asking the waitress about the one that they recommend. This is a very similar experience with enquiries made by novice requesters in a motorcycle or guitar owners club. The newbies in the quality standards arena also ask the same sets of questions.

Below is a set of navigational based questions which I often provide to people who seek out advice on getting started with any type of translation standard, or any process standard in general:

- Why does our institution want to be compliant with a standard and/or obtain certification?
- What are the benefits, at various levels, to being certified?
- Who in the institution will benefit from compliance and certification?
- Who will suffer from pursuing compliance and certification?
- How much time and how many resources are we willing to allocate to the preparation and audit cycles?
- How much does our management and the teams really support the initiative to obtain certification? Are there internal factions which will resist resource investment in a certification project?
- What are we willing to sacrifice in order to ensure a successful completion of compliance and/or certification for a return on investment?
- What do we mean by quality?
- How do we interpret the term quality?
- What do we want to measure through the audit exercise?
- How well prepared is our institution currently for the preparation and audit cycles?

One of the key points in the decision to pursue any type of conformity-driven standard is to first know why you need/want to follow the standard. One common misunderstanding is the assumption that the system is going to dictate a limited amount of rules which will immediately provide the magic pill to swallow. And by taking the pill, then this will forever address all possible issues of quality and eliminate the problems. This unfounded belief is the worst risk in itself. It is essential to comprehend that quality management is not a magic wand or a miracle pill but is rather a cycle of continuous improvement which will provide objective, measurable, incremental growth toward a goal. It is usually preferable for this passage of growth to be observed by independent, external auditors who are unbiased with regard to the personal survival and success goals of the given team, division, and/or organization.

Below is a short definitions which I frequently use to simply describe quality management for various teams across many companies:

- know where you want to go
- know what you want to do and deliver



- plan ahead
- follow the path and principles that you planned to follow and use
- check that you did follow what you previous said that you would follow
- document when you made changes to the plan

Through the process of coaching and auditing a few dozen teams in several companies over the past decade on several different quality management systems and standards, the kick-off meetings and ongoing coaching session always revert back to these general principles. Everything needed for audit preparation and audit execution is covered by these general principles which constitute the Deming cycle, known more commonly as Plan-Do-Act-Check (PCDA), for the lifecycle of a product or service.

2. Know the Reason for your Certification Pursuit

There is often the temptation, and a great risk, to fall into a never-ending self-convincing cycle of the importance of quality by using the term quality to define the reason for needing it. Yet, we need to remember that one of the important aspects of a reputable and recognized quality management system is to provide objective, measurable information to others in order that they can conduct evaluation audits on the progress of the path that we choose to follow. My personal opinion is that the manner in which most (or many) believe in and use quality on a daily basis in their personal lives within a framework of subjective-relevant topics can easily lead to a significant gap with the need to execute on objectively qualitative items. Thus, it is thus not surprising that many colleagues and customers struggle with, and remain in a constant state of confusion about, the definition of quality and the reason why they need to really uphold the belief in the Quality Faith.

Last year at a conference in Gdansk Poland, I issued a challenge to a large group translation and interpretation students and their professors with a statement that they should not spend significant amounts of time and energy focused on talking about quality. This could be misunderstood as a decree to avoid talking about quality, yet this is not the intention and could get me banned from the bar of quality auditors. The word quality has been overused, and even abused, in all sectors. The concept of quality should actually be an assumed inherent and innate goal. I told the group that translation service providers should instead follow Nike's famous slogan (i.e., Just Do It !) and let the customers talk about their quality of work via customer testimonies. Rather than constantly tooting the quality horn in public fora, the time and energy could be better used to focus on marketing and selling their skills to generate sales of their services. Following my statements at that conference in Gdansk, several months later a colleague in a related field, Kevin Dickey, shared his perspective of quality with me. For him, the word quality is associated with a troubleshooting and resolution process, so that even though it is a positive word, it makes a negative association, with the inevitable problems that necessitate that process. Professional translators should be selling themselves as high-value rather than as high-quality. A high-value translator would of course submit few errors, but would also be competitively priced, subject matter-aware, fast, and easy for collaborating and conducting business. Quality is but a subset of value, and alludes to the most painful part of the engagement. Any negative association between value and "bargain" is more than compensated by the obsession across the corporate world with cutting costs. It is better, in today's world, to need to argue the meaning of what constitutes high-



value with your customers than give the first impression that you are the “quality” (i.e., expensive) choice. This perspective also coincides with the view take by translation solution provider Safaba in their webinars and presentations since August 2014 about the business value of translation quality.

These various references in business and industry point to an essential foundational element about the underlying motivations for pursuing quality certification. If the purpose and reason is not clear to the team or project that is undergoing the process check, then the path itself can be filled with many attempts of rationalization and justification, and even cloudy and foggy explanations. Based on advising and coaching sessions I have had with various institutions and their teams, here are a few underlying reasons which tend to cover the majority of cases in helping them to acknowledge and admit the real reasons for their decision to promote quality:

- Unique selling point for increasing sales growth
- Internal continuous process improvement
- Imposed business compliance

The first of these three reasons is a sales-driven focus which allows a company to set itself apart from the competition. Sales people who are motivated to position their offer, by showing the value of compliance with federal and international standards, can help bring a driving force within the company to raise the level of awareness about quality as a positive selling point. In most companies, and even non-profit institutions, the sales people and the fund-raisers have the most influence in practical decision-making for the institution. If they can market, promote, and sell the concept of quality, or high-value, then it is often in the general interest of the entire institution to support them in that endeavor.

The second option usually arises from project management geeks, sometimes among process-driven people, who are looking to prove the worth of their tasks for the institution. This point is very important to consider because the purpose of mobilizing several projects or teams for an audit cycle might actually be stemming from someone who needs to justify their process-related work. It is not my intention to say that this is negative, because we all indeed fulfill the objectives of someone in management. It is simply important to know if the resource investment is trying to achieve such needs. In these contexts, the word quality jumps on the bandwagon of the buzz word labelled as continuous process improvement. In these situations, it is best when the leaders of such quality initiatives are good communicators and make the quality topic sound interesting. Experience has shown and confirmed that the stereotypes of governance-formatted, compliance-driven people are more often than not at the root of these activities. My recommendation for these contexts is to find a good communicator to work alongside the process guru in order to build positive reinforcement and inspiring ideas into the information sessions and mentoring activities related to quality management.

The third reason is the heaviest level of negative reinforcement, especially when the quality level has fallen to a point that a customer or partner institution flags the project and provides an externally imposed condition through which the project must demonstrate excellent survival skills to get everything back on track. The words compliance, conformity,



governance and other very harsh sounding terms become used on a nearly daily basis until the set of Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) actions are completed. The main purpose for pointing out these reasons is for the project team and institution to appropriately understand and pursue the expectations established for their quality improvement adventure.

3. Beware of Difference between Compliance and Certification

One common example of confusion is the difference between compliance and certification. Compliance simply implies the result of conforming to a given standard. Certification is a significant additional step which involves an audit cycle by an approved auditing organization. Certification has the highest value, because it confirms that the institution has gone through a full, official auditing cycle and has been certified by an auditor. However, I have also see other cases in which my other employers did not wish to become certified. We were able to put into place a number of good and best practices, including an internal auditing cycle, and demonstrated evidence of these good practices to partner institutions and customers. This approach can fully follow an auditing cycle, and reflect any or all of these elements of a full auditing cycle, yet one can only claim to be compliant with a recognized standard and auditing processes. It is possible to use and following a compliance-only approach to the standard without being officially certified on it.

4. Which Standard should We Pursue?

Once you have understood the purpose of your pursuit of quality management, and that you know the reasons for embarking on a resource-hungry project that will take much more than waving the magic wand, we can now look at key concepts of various quality standards related to the translation industry. Once that these strategy-based topics are addressed, we can now proceed toward the choice of a specific standard.

The chapter does not aim at dissecting the details each of the many different types of quality standards and quality management systems. There is not a best standard as most of them are simply an inward zoom (micro) or an outward zoom (macro) of different parts of an entire lifecycle of tasks. The most appropriate standard for you depends on your overall purpose for pursuing the certification cycle, and specific needs which need to be addressed.

All standards do promote the idea of improving and maintaining quality in some way and must be based on measuring data which allows to demonstrate qualitative aspects in quantitative ways. Not all of the translation industry standards aim at measuring the same types of data. In fact, they often focus on proving quality at different stages of the overall translation process, and even at different levels. Below is one possible way to summarize these different standards and the benefits that they can bring to the organization.

4.1 Recruitment

Some quality standards focus on showing that the recruitment process for hiring the translation workforce can enforce quality. There are certainly advantages to ensuring that the educational background, subject matter expertise certification, professional training, linguistic living environment, and other factors should be taken into consideration for hiring people



involved in different aspects of the overall translation cycle. However, one of the disadvantages to this approach is the assumption that an ample number of educational and professional training bodies exist in this industry. We do know that there are still significant gaps with regard to degrees and certifications in translation, applied linguistics, and other related fields across public and private educational institutions on many continents. Many professional translators whom I have personally known over the past 3 decades do not have college or university degrees specifically related to language or translation fields. Many of them, living in bilingual or multilingual settings, have decided to use their previously obtained formal degrees in subject matter areas to become a bread-earning ticket via the means of content translation, and/or they pursue professional training certificates to add specialized areas to their sheath of arrows. The most important factor for these types of standards depends on rigidity or flexibility of human resource personnel in applying the education and experience clauses of such standards.

The European EN 15038 standard (from 2006) fell within this category. This has been enlarged to become ISO 17100:2015 (Translation services -- Requirements for translation services) with a goal to issue a standard on the highest international level, and avoid duplication between European and international standards. Translation service providers currently certified under EN 15038 will likely not need significant adjustments in their quality management systems to also comply with 17100.

4.2 General Process Governance

Another set of quality standards focus on simply covering the overall cycle of requirements, design, production, delivery and feedback. The most commonly sought standard for this is ISO9001 which is currently in its third revision in 2015.

4.3 Linguistic Accuracy

A third type of quality standards usually promoted in the translation field relates to attempt to prove the linguistic accuracy and precision of a given set of translated content. There are numerous quality standards which attempt to tackle this topic. Some of these standards are internationally recognized and fall with regulated industries, such as ISO 13485:2003 and ISO 14971:2000. Translation suppliers which follow such standards are often involved in niche-specific areas of work that do would not apply to the majority of suppliers and their translation jobs. Otherwise, there are many other quality standards which aim to evaluate the quality of translated content. One of the well-promoted standards, originally created for the automotive industry as SAE J2450, provides a deep-dive analysis of each sentence based on a set of very specific categories. This standard has been applied to other sectors, such as the financial domain. One of the disadvantages of this specific standard was the high investment in terms of time and resources to apply it. The result has led to a variety of other lighter models which try to maximum the linguistic evaluation with the minimal amount of time investment by human participants. The TAUS Dynamic Quality Framework tries to address these needs. And finally, there are specific automated metrics which are most often associated with analyzing the quality of content produced by automatic translation engines. BLEU, METEOR and TER are such metrics. It is quite common for large translation suppliers to create their own standards, apply these to their enterprise-level customers, and then claim



that they are following this standard. The most important factor to consider in looking at all such metrics and standards related to linguistic quality is the extent to which it can be managed and audited by independent auditors.

5. Conclusion

There are so many different translation metrics and standards which can be followed. Which one is best? The best approach to deciding on a given metric or standard is to avoid over-complicating and over-engineering the need. My advice is for you to apply the same procedure used for qualifying a new translation job request by analyzing the requirements and seeking to fulfill the underlying real needs. The main issue is determining if those real needs are known. During the preparation of team members for quality management audit cycles, always use analogies from everyday life for the people to understand the needs, to see the true personal and institutional benefits, and to have fun applying it in their daily work. The principles explained in this chapter have been applied in several companies across a few dozen teams over a period of a dozen years. The result has been recognition by management and by participating auditors that these teams have actually adopted and live and breathe the spirit of quality management.

6. Bibliography, if other authors or works are quoted