TRANSLATION SERVICES IN THE DIGITAL WORLD
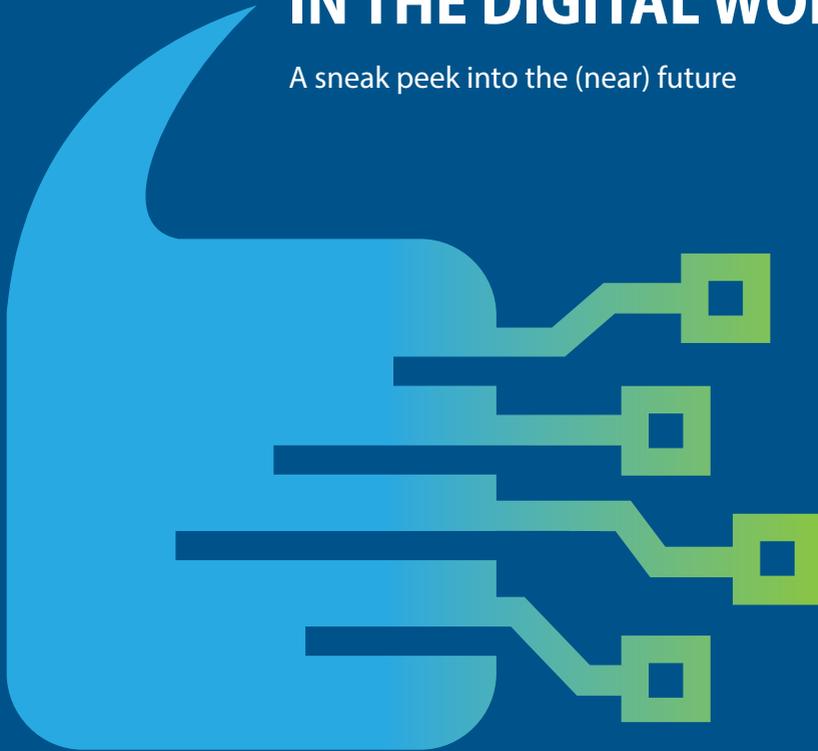
A sneak peek into the (near) future

DG TRAD Conference
16-17 October 2017

CONTENT

FOREWORD

This compilation contains a selection of articles written by the speakers of the conference 'Translation services in the digital world', hosted by the translation service of the European Parliament in October 2017.

This extremely enriching and thought-provoking conference brought together different stakeholders in the language industry; from academics, institutional practitioners and freelance translators, to those running translation companies.

The European Union has always seen its great diversity of cultures and languages as an asset. Enshrined in the European treaties, multilingualism is the reflection of this cultural and linguistic diversity. In the European Parliament, all official languages are equally important: all parliamentary documents are published in all the official languages of the European Union and all Members of the European Parliament have the right to speak in the official language of their choice. Multilingualism also ensures that the public is able to follow and access the Parliament's work, which is essential for the success of the EU's democratic system.

The Directorate-General for Translation (DG TRAD) provides the European Parliament with translation services for its written or electronic communication in all official languages of the European Union. Translating into and out of 24 languages is no mean feat. To respond to the challenges of multilingualism, the European Parliament has highly skilled, highly trained translators and expert support staff who are constantly upgrading their skills and learning new languages to keep up with the changing environment. DG TRAD has around 1 140 staff in total, including support staff, and is one of the biggest and most multilingual employers of its kind in the world. With 24 official languages, translations are provided in a possible 552 language combinations. Staff work with modern reliable tools, including computer aided translation and machine translation tools, ensure consistent terminology across the languages and coordinate closely with national lawmakers to guarantee an impeccable and efficient service.

For the two days of the conference, we had a unique opportunity to hear about the latest developments and trends in the translation industry from top experts from academia, private companies and public institutions. All speakers, in one way or another, demonstrated that our jobs are changing at an unprecedented rate, and that technology instigates a large proportion of these changes.

 While the translation profession is undergoing change, there are certainly no signs of it disappearing. In this uncharted digital territory, translation services must seamlessly

integrate people and machines, while simultaneously harnessing the technological disruption into an array of invaluable tools for translators.

As recognised by the Vice-President and the Secretary General of the European Parliament, Ioan Mircea Pașcu and Klaus Welle, DG TRAD has always embraced change and is regarded as a change-leader. I believe this conference was the perfect opportunity to reflect on the path that lies ahead and the challenges to be overcome.

To conclude, the world is certainly changing! The rapid pace of change and its accompanying uncertainty can be daunting at times. However, it seems we closed the conference feeling somewhat reassured. High quality human translation has a clear place: quality has never been higher on the agenda and we continue to look for the best solutions to guarantee that. Our creativity, intuition and intercultural competence remain vital skills for the future.

Valter Mavrič,

Director-General for Translation,

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QUALITY AND OUTSOURCING - DOES IT WORK?

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, we will discuss the challenges of outsourcing language services with regard to translation quality. During the past decades, outsourcing services – particularly to cheap-labour countries – has been a trend in almost every industry. Along with the technological progress in the digital age, this trend has also spread to the language industry. The key question, however, has always been the same for all industries: How can a company maintain a high level of quality when outsourcing services?

There are several points to take into consideration before deciding whether to outsource language services simply

to reduce costs. Among these factors, quality is quite likely the most important. In order to answer the central question described above, the extensive experience of Christine Kamer Diehl as a certified translator/reviser and ISO quality manager, as well as different aspects regulated in the ISO 17100 Standard such as project and vendor management, selection, qualification, assessment and revision, will be analysed and discussed here.

The findings of this article show that according to Christine Kamer Diehl, it is possible to obtain high-quality translations with an outsourcing solution, but only under certain circumstances and with specific prerequisites. Firstly, outsourcing has to be limited to a controllable extent; uncontrolled growth must be avoided. Secondly, translation processes and the translation management system need to be ISO-compliant in order to guarantee quality-improving workflows. Thirdly, a professional in-house revision team needs to be in place, and translators should embrace revision as an integral and enriching part of the translation process and not see it as a necessary remedy against bad quality. If all these requirements are fulfilled, a strong foundation is created to establish and maintain a high level of quality for outsourced translation services.

1. Introduction

At the 2017 IT conference in the European Parliament (Directorate-General for Translation) in Luxembourg, Christine Kamer Diehl, Head of Quality Management at SwissGlobal Language Services, was invited to speak about the balancing act between quality and outsourcing in a market segment where language excellence and service quality are at a premium. In this article, we will discuss features and challenges of outsourcing language services with regard to translation quality.

2. Quality and outsourcing: first-hand experience

Quality is not limited to a product or service (Ramu 2008), but has many facets. Service quality, security and confidentiality features and state-of-the-art technologies are just three examples of essential key factors in order to obtain bespoke quality products and to reach maximum client satisfaction, which is a main long-term goal for every language service provider (LSP).

Outsourcing is the provision of services with resources other than in-house employees. As an experienced ISO quality manager and certified translator/reviser, Christine Kamer Diehl has been faced with various outsourcing projects from all perspectives during her career: being outsourced herself as well as insourcing and outsourcing teams and processes.

Before joining SwissGlobal, Christine Kamer Diehl first worked for a Swiss bank and then for a major LSP, which had 45 employees and around 350 freelancers back in 1999. By 2015, this same LSP had already grown to 600 employees and worked with over 3,000 freelancers. After a major organisational change in 2016, the numbers skyrocketed to more than 6,000 employees and approximately 100,000 freelancers.

In October 2016, Christine Kamer Diehl joined SwissGlobal Language Services

AG. This was a significant change in company size, similar to going back to her roots, as SwissGlobal is a start-up LSP with just seven employees and around 200 freelance partners. Founded in 2016 by a group of experienced professionals, SwissGlobal offers full-service multilingual communication solutions for clients from the financial, legal, pharmaceutical and public sectors. The crucial challenge, however, remains the same: delivering the level of quality required by clients at reasonable prices in a harsh market environment.

3. SwissGlobal and the EU: common ground, common challenges

Despite the major differences in size, reach and importance, we assume that the challenge mentioned above is the same for both SwissGlobal and the European Union.

It is just experienced from a different point of view. The EU is a client and a producer at the same time, with more than 1,100 employees working in its language

CHALLENGES AND TRENDS FOR THE COMPANY
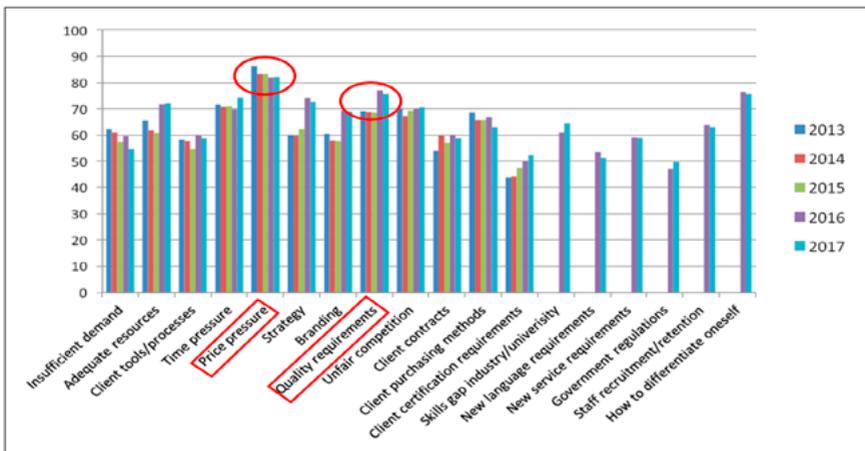
Price pressure remains challenge number one, as it has always been since the start of the survey in 2013.

Figure 1: Price and quality as crucial criteria for LSPs (European Commission 2017: 23)

department and more than 80 per cent of them translating. Apart from the difficulties in the translation market, e.g. the price pressure and offshoring trend to cheap-labour countries, SwissGlobal and the EU share even more common ground. Both have a commitment to high quality, answer to demanding clients, and attach great value to professionalism and experience. In the following section, we will have a closer look at the roles of price and quality in the language industry.

4. Price vs. quality

One reason for the current harsh climate in the language industry is the fact that more and more LSPs are outsourcing language services to cheap-labour countries. The increasing price pressure shrinks profits and threatens quality standards. This is where the two crucial factors in question, quality and outsourcing, meet. Figure 1 shows the main challenges for European LSPs.

As can be seen in Figure 1, "price pressure remains challenge number one, as it has always been" (European Commission 2017: 23). This does not come as a surprise, as it is one of the main problems in most sectors. Quality, however, is also an important factor. Clients may put pressure on the price, but they still demand high-quality translations. Of course, the probability of finding such a constellation is vanishingly small, yet clients still expect to find it. Consequently, LSPs try everything in their power to lower production costs, including outsourcing language services.

5. Outsourcing: trends

As mentioned above, outsourcing has been a trending topic over the last decades. In the language industry, however, the situation is escalating. Linguistic as well as non-linguistic tasks are being outsourced more and more frequently (European Commission 2017: 11). In Figure 2, the graphs show the expected growth of the different practices, not the actual usage.

The graph on the left, referring to the outsourcing of linguistic tasks, indicates major growth, despite declining from 35 to 27 percent between 2014 and 2017.

This growth rate is still remarkable, and the "fact that growth slows down can be considered as expected, given that outsourcing is already the dominant operational model" (European Commission 2017: 11). This even adds to the relevance of the question mentioned above: Can LSPs maintain the same level of quality when outsourcing linguistic services? In order to find a reasonable answer, it is necessary to take a closer look at the characteristics of outsourcing. In the following, we will discuss the advantages and challenges of outsourcing solutions.
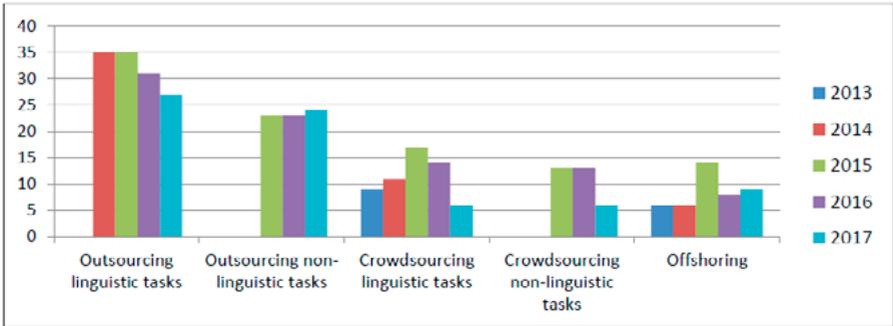
Figure 2: Outsourcing linguistic tasks (European Commission 2017: 11)

6. Outsourcing: pros and cons

Aside from being cheaper than in the base country, there are some other advantages of having translations done by external providers (XPs). Infrastructure is one of them. Ideally, an XP will have the necessary software tools already in place and the expertise to use them efficiently. Another important aspect is that providing linguistic services is the core competence of an XP, whereas the outsourcing company or organisation usually has a different core competence. Furthermore, XPs typically offer a variety of additional language services that the outsourcing company does not necessarily have at its disposal from in-house employees. Yet another important criterion for outsourcing is specialised knowledge, e.g. patented processes or products which could provide an important competitive advantage.

In addition to these advantages, outsourcing also entails a number of challenges, the most significant undoubtedly being bespoke quality. When outsourcing a multilevel translation process, a comprehensive and timely knowledge transfer as well as communication are likely to be common sources of problems. Such issues can be crucial for the progress and success of translation projects. In the case of outsourcing linguistic services to a cheap-labour country, additional potential problems, such as cultural differences or different time zones, can seriously compromise communication effectiveness. Further possible problem sources in such cases are the lack of linguistic competence, technology gaps, and, last but not least, the quality assurance process.

Of course, there are more challenges when outsourcing language services, such as security issues, the loss of managerial control or hidden costs, but discussing them in more detail would go beyond the scope of this contribution. Therefore, in the following, we will concentrate on feasible solutions for meeting quality-related challenges.

7. Quality and outsourcing: prerequisites

At first glance, high quality and outsourcing seem to be contradictory concepts. However, this is not necessarily the case, if – and only if – the right conditions and circumstances exist. It must be determined whether there is an outsourcing solution that does not damage either the language service quality or client or employee satisfaction. In order to find such a solution, we orient ourselves on the following Standards: ISO 9001 (2015a) for quality management systems and ISO 17100 (2015b) for translation services.

ISO 9001 states that the "organization shall ensure that externally provided processes, products and services conform to requirements" (2015a: 13).

Furthermore, the "organization shall determine the controls to be applied to externally provided processes, products and services when:

a) products and services from external providers are intended for incorporation into the organization's own products and services;

b) products and services are provided directly to the customer(s) by external providers on behalf of the organization;

c) a process, or part of a process, is provided by an external provider as a result of a decision by the organization" (ISO 2015a: 13).

When it comes to outsourcing language services, ISO 17100 (2015b) is equally important as ISO 9001 (2015a) and of course much more specific. In section 8, we will discuss its relevant factors regarding outsourcing and quality.

In summary, as part of a sector where quality and security are indispensable criteria, external providers must be compliant at all times with both ISO 9001 and ISO 17100 if they are potential candidates for the outsourcing of linguistic services. Non-compliance, particularly with ISO 17100, would constitute a serious threat to language service quality.

8. Translation quality according to ISO 17100:2015

While ISO 9001 (2015a) helps LSPs build a quality management system that aims for maximum client satisfaction, ISO 17100 (2015b) defines the specific requirements for translation services. In order to reach an excellent quality level, quality management must extend beyond the client perspective alone. Quality starts from within the company and works its way outward to XPs and business partners. All these elements together form a quality system that is the foundation for ideal collaboration between all the stakeholders involved and the prerequisite for a sound outsourcing

solution. In the following, we will look more closely at the most important of these factors.

8.1. First prerequisite: Controllable outsourcing

According to Christine Kamer Diehl, "choosing the right person for the right job is half the battle in delivering quality". This applies to LSPs when recruiting their project and vendor managers as well as to the latter when selecting and assigning freelancers. In addition, Christine advocates that outsourcing has to be limited to a controllable extent, i.e. uncontrolled growth of the number of XPs must be avoided. This means that each vendor manager needs to have a manageable number of XPs for whom he or she is personally responsible.

8.1.1. Dedicated vendor and project management

Usually, an LSP's vendor management is responsible for selecting and onboarding XPs, i.e. its task is comparable to procurement in an outsourcing department. Consequently, a professional vendor management holds a key position with a decisive influence on XP and translation quality and should thus ensure that the following points are taken into consideration:

•   Disciplined and controlled selection of the best XPs (cf. section 8.1.2)

•   Careful and thorough verification of XPs' qualifications and competences (cf. section 8.1.3)

•   Ongoing and effective XP assessment process and management of XP pool (cf. section 8.1.4)

Typically, project and/or vendor management assign translations and other language services to XPs. Therefore, it is important that both project and vendor managers are familiar with the XPs and their qualifications and competences. In addition, they make decisions regarding quality and price by selecting the appropriate XPs at the suitable price level. Their main tasks include:

•   Assignment of language services to the most suitable XPs

•   Fair and varied use of XPs

•   Selection of XPs according to the client's price and quality requirements

These tasks exemplify the crucial influence of vendor and project management on translation quality and explain why the regulation of a project manager's competence is an important part in the revision of the Standard (ISO 2015b: 7f.).

In the following, we will have a closer look at the processes of recruiting, i.e. selecting and testing translators, as well as at the continuous assessment and re-evaluation of their competences once they are recruited.

8.1.2. Recruiting of XPs

Recruiting, i.e. selecting and testing of resources, is an important process within the context of quality. Unfortunately, LSPs often neglect or even omit these steps when it comes to XPs because the expenses and time involved are considered too high. This, however, means ignoring the hidden follow-up costs of increased revision and repair work which result from an inadequate recruitment process.

Even if ISO 17100 does not provide a concrete recruitment process for in-house or freelance translators, the Standard is, however, a practicable guideline for best practice: "The TSP [Translation Service Provider] shall have a documented process in place to ensure that the people selected to perform translation tasks have the required competences and qualifications" (ISO 2015b: 5). Furthermore, the Standard stipulates that the "TSP shall keep a record of the evidence upon which the professional competences of translators, revisers, reviewers, and other professionals have been demonstrated" (ISO 2015b: 5).

In our opinion, it is the task of every LSP to develop and define an efficient and stringent selection and testing process and therefore to strive to deliver best practice.

8.1.3. Qualifications and competences

The Standard (ISO 2015b) may not define a ready-to-use recruitment process, but it clearly regulates the required qualifications and competences of translators and revisers:

a)   A recognized graduate qualification in translation from an institution of higher education;

b)   A recognized graduate qualification in any other field from an institution of higher education plus two years of full-time professional experience in translating;

c)   Five years of full-time professional experience in translating. [...] The TSP shall ensure that revisers have all the translator competences defined in 3.1.3, the qualification defined in 3.1.4, and translation and/or revision experience in the domain under consideration" (ISO 2015b: 6).

These qualification requirements help an LSP develop and define a transparent and

efficient recruitment process. Furthermore, the Standard (ISO 2015b: 6) defines what specific competences translators and revisers need, apart from translating:

- Linguistic and textual competence in the source language and the target language

- Competence in research, information acquisition, and processing

> "THE TSP SHALL DETERMINATE THE TRANSLATOR'S QUALIFICATIONS TO PROVIDE A SERVICE CONFORMING TO THIS INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BY OBTAINING DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE THAT THE TRANSLATOR CAN MEET AT LEAST ONE OF THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:

Nevertheless, a successful recruitment process by itself is not enough. What about the assessment or re-evaluation of competences and tasks already delivered? In fact, ISO 17100 (2015b: 11) only regulates assessments in connection with client feedback and client satisfaction (punctuality, friendliness, responsiveness, etc.). Christine Kamer Diehl firmly advocates, however, that ongoing assessments and re-evaluations conducted between language professionals are equally essential for an efficient translation process and sustainable quality. This means that once a translator's work is done, the reviser assesses the translator by evaluating his or her work regarding specific aspects, such as orthography, terminology, grammar, etc. Unfortunately, just as in the case of selection and testing, assessments and re-evaluations are also often neglected or omitted for the same economic reasons.

- Cultural competence (e.g. terminology, value systems)

- Technical competence (tools and IT systems)

- Domain competence (appropriate style and terminology)

These competences are the foundation for quality in language services, and it is crucial to document, foster and maintain them in the long term.

8.1.4. Continuous assessment and re-evaluation process

In addition to the revisers' assessments, project managers should also assess translators and other language specialists in terms of various service criteria, such as punctuality or adherence to reference material. After a certain number of assessments or a specific time interval, an overall re-evaluation for translators and revisers is worthwhile and recommended. With these assessment and re-evaluation practices, an LSP will ensure that problems are identified in good time in order to take the necessary corrective measures and to keep quality at a steady level.

In summary, we can state that the careful recruitment of resources, the ongoing monitoring of their competences, and the assignment of training when necessary build the most important foundation for quality.

8.2. Second prerequisite: ISO 17100-compliant translation management system

When it comes to a translation management system, Christine Kamer Diehl strongly recommends working with an ISO 17100-compliant solution. This allows the seamless implementation of ISO 17100 requirements and not only simplifies the translation process, but also helps LSPs improve quality.

8.2.1. Features of a compliant translation management system

A compliant system not only includes the above-mentioned steps (selection, testing, competence evidence, assessment and re-evaluation), but also other helpful features. Among these are client feedback and complaint management as well as a transparent database for client and vendor information and documentation (e.g. quotes, agreements, CVs).

Apart from these features relating to ISO 9001 and ISO 17100, security and confidentiality are two other very important criteria in the collaboration between LSPs and security-sensitive clients, especially those from regulated sectors such as banking or pharma. A secure and monitored virtual workplace, ideally provided by an ISO 27001-certifed IT partner, is a welcome addition to the system because it ensures that every step taken in a specific work process is tracked in order to identify errors and problems. When outsourcing linguistic services, this is a crucial point that needs to be taken into very careful consideration.

8.2.2. Constructive monitoring

The best systems, features and processes, however, are useless if not applied properly and continuously. Constructive monitoring and continuous improvement are therefore crucial.

The Standard requires that ISO-certified organizations or companies "provide the resources needed to ensure valid and reliable results when monitoring or measuring is used to verify the conformity of products and services to requirements" (ISO 2015a: 7). Russegger (2015) lists a number of possible monitoring and measurement resources (people, checklists, infrastructure) and methods of choosing, maintaining (e.g. training, adapting, repairing), and documenting the resources and the measured results.

A dedicated in-house quality manager can assume responsibility for continuous constructive monitoring. Christine Kamer Diehl strongly favours the assignment of a quality manager to ensure that the LSP complies with the ISO Standards 9001and

17100 at all times while reporting directly to top management. In addition, quarterly management reviews make sure that everything is ISO-compliant on a strategic level. Finally, the certifications are renewed following annual surveillance audits and triennial recertification audits by the corresponding review companies.

These activities eventually result in an integral and important part of the continuous improvement process, which is a prerequisite to maintain a high level of quality in the long term: "Top management shall establish, implement and maintain a quality policy that […] includes a commitment to continual improvement of the quality management system" (ISO 2015a: 14).

The most immediate and real-time control mechanism in the translation process is, of course, revision. In the following, we will examine more closely the role of revision in the outsourcing of language services.

8.3. Third prerequisite: Revision

Revision is the "bilingual examination of target language content […] against source language content […] for its suitability for the agreed purpose" (ISO 2015b: 8). However, this step is not merely supposed to avoid non-conformities and errors in a translation or to improve text quality on a linguistic level. Christine Kamer Diehl considers revision to be a creative and educational activity and value-adding teamwork. She points out that a professional in-house revision team needs to be in place and that translators should embrace revision as an integral and enriching part of the translation process and not a necessary remedy against bad quality.

Sometimes, XPs deliver poor-quality translations. To err is human, but it should still be an exception. If it is not – predominantly due to insufficient or non-compliant processes or unmanageable volume – this leads to a vicious circle: the more unprofessional outsourcing there is, the poorer the quality becomes, the more revision is needed, and the more frustration and risk of errors exist.

9. Conclusion

In summary and in reference to the central question "*Quality and outsourcing – does it work?*", we can state that there is a way to maintain a high level of quality when outsourcing linguistic services. As mentioned above, there are, however, some important prerequisites. Firstly, outsourcing must be limited to a controllable extent, i.e. not everything can always be outsourced. Secondly, translation quality according to ISO 17100 has to be ensured. This includes having a dedicated

vendor and project management, a compliant selection and testing process, a continuous assessment and re-evaluation process, an ISO 17100-compliant translation management software, and suitable monitoring and control processes. Thirdly, revision has to be an integral and enriching part of the translation process.

If all of these conditions are fulfilled, it is possible to constantly deliver high-quality translations while implementing an outsourcing solution. Of course, all related processes must be improved on a continual basis in order to keep quality at a high level in the long term.

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