

# Avoid Agencies

There are only a few situations where it may make sense to turn to an agency for translation work. One such is where a text, especially a short one, needs to be translated into a dozen languages. Ensuring that this is done well, whether for the agency or the company commissioning the translations, may be more tricky than meets the eye. For example, the originating firm may be well advised to involve additionally its representatives in the various countries where the languages are spoken since there is sometimes a need for what is termed *localisation*, which is adapting the wording to fit the cultural or legal requirements of the target nation or region.

Another situation where a company may intelligently devolve recruitment and coordination work to an agency is where a massive amount of documentation is to be translated in a short time. This is the case with EU work, for instance.

In both cases, however, enquiries need to be made about how the agency operates. The most transparent procedure is to commission the agency to organise the work and negotiate terms & conditions, to pay it a fee for this service, and then to pay the invoices of the translators directly. If this is considered too onerous, the

company should demand the option of auditing the invoices submitted to the agency (for example, on a sample basis) in order to ensure that the agency is not taking an exorbitant or hidden commission. What happens mostly in practice is that agencies try to cream off a maximum (they aim at getting 50% of the fee, and complain when they only take 30%). Obviously, this is likely to be to the detriment of the end product, since the people doing the expert work are then underpaid and receive no personal recognition for their efforts. Indeed, the best qualified translators will probably never even be asked let alone hired. A novel feature is agencies soliciting CVs from properly qualified linguists (e.g. with affiliation to professional bodies), using these CVs to insinuate that these are the competencies they can offer (e.g. in the framework of EU tenders), and then hiring completely different individuals, unqualified of course, to do the work on the cheap.

In particular it should be noted that agencies are likely to prevent direct communication between translator and the originator of the source text, with the result that misunderstandings are pre-programmed. Even if an agency, as the better ones do, takes upon itself the task of obtaining background information, there is little guarantee that it will do this as well as – let alone better – than the actual translator. It may be nicer to work with, but at the expense of the end product and successful communication in the interests of the real users.

Hence caution is recommended before hiring any translation company. If this policy is pursued nonetheless, one question that should be posed is whether the agency has a number of translators working in-house, and with its own extensive technical and reference resources. In this case, and only in this case, may it be properly described as a translation company. Check out that whatever is claimed is in fact true.

Other firms in the business are overwhelming middlemen, taking their cut, wheeling & dealing, and subtracting from overall value rather than providing any added value.

Beware of the use of the word *team*: ask for evidence that the members of any so-called team know each other and can communicate with each other. If this is not the case, then the use of the word *team* is dishonest and devious. Another word that is often used to convey false impressions is *professional*. Professionalism means rather more than being business-like and business-wise, and it is more than mere expertise.

Do not be blinded by talk of technology. Most translators in the commercial sector will use database software to support efficiency and quality, but there is great variation in the software deployed and the ability to handle it competently. Uncritical use of databases abounds.

Many translation agencies have taken to splitting up assignments, for reasons of time constraints and in order to cut costs by recycling translation segments (which are taken out of context and, when pasted together, make for fragmented style and logic). Substantial ancillary benefits otherwise generated by obtaining each translation from a single professional are lost. See on this subject the separate article on the individual nature of translation.

### **How to avoid agencies**

There are well-established translators' associations in many countries which only admit suitably qualified persons, provide information about best practice, and guard over matters of professional integrity. These associations have directories of their members, published both on paper and on their websites.

The author is a member of two professional associations in Germany:

ADÜ-Nord (Assoziierte Dolmetscher und Übersetzer in Norddeutschland e.V.)

<http://www.adue-nord.de>

and

the Berlin-Brandenburg chapter of the BDÜ (Bundesverband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer e.V.)

<http://www.bdue.de>

<http://www.bdue-berlin.de>