

Checking prices for quality are in line with markets

This set of reminders is addressed primarily to procurement officers in companies that regularly need substantial translation work done. The considerations adduced here will certainly be relevant to many other areas of procurement, and especially for other services that cannot be standardised.

It hardly needs saying that proper procurement involves a high degree of sophistication, with serious knowledge of the service or product being purchased and understanding of the nature of markets, prices and costs. That is, wise procurement is not as straightforward as it may seem.

A fundamental distinction must be made between a **cost estimate** and a **fixed price**. The first is a guide to the order of magnitude of the fee that will eventually be charged, with one obvious function of such a guide being to avert unpleasant surprises. But a cost estimate also has the function of enabling a judgement to be made on whether an assignment is worth having done. If the benefits of obtaining a translation are minimal and seem to be outweighed by the expense, it may be worthwhile requesting a summary (either written or verbal) or otherwise tailoring the assignment to the presumed needs of the users. In other cases, where there is no doubt about the necessity of translation, a cost estimate must be just that: the sum invoiced may be somewhat higher or somewhat lower than was predicted. A translator –

especially an experienced one – will possibly overestimate the time and effort a job requires and will build in a safety margin in order to avoid from the outset the unpleasantness of subsequently asking more than was originally quoted. The lower price actually invoiced in such a case may be seen as a goodwill gesture, which it is hoped will be recognised in the form of repeat business. It may be a tacit recognition that the commissioning firm has been considerate in its handling of the relationship. Equally, an invoice may be higher than was estimated, and in this case some explanation will be appropriate. Parts of the text may have been illogical or ungrammatical, or have involved onerous terminological research; or there were delays in the arrival of source text, or the delivery date was pulled forward; or there were processing problems due to the source text containing hidden software coding; or there were significant communications problems for which the client is responsible. All of these eventualities occur frequently.

Whereas a cost estimate involves give and take, i.e. the use of discretion and consideration of a mutual interest in a possibly long-term relationship, a fixed price involves, logically, fixed terms & conditions. It is less flexible. Unwelcome changes to delivery schedules, for example, or major alterations to the scope of the task may not be tolerated without a significant adjustment to the agreed price.

There are two approaches to ensuring that the fees paid for translations are roughly in line with the market (itself a

more problematic concept than received wisdom would believe). In cases where the firm has a continuous and substantial requirement for translations, suitably qualified linguists should be hired and enabled to acquire expertise in the company specialisms. Their productivity can be measured and the costs incurred can be compared with those charged over an extended period of time by freelance translators.

The other approach is to invite bids from a select pool of translators for specific assignments. This would involve providing a detailed description of each assignment, including as much text as possible, with specific dates for the go-ahead and delivery. It would only be appropriate for lengthy texts. The pool of translators should be individuals with a proven track record of reliability in keeping to deadlines and maintaining adequate quality.

Furthermore, in principle, a retainer fee should be paid for the submission, on invitation, of an offer. Preparing a bid involves considerable work and risk, mostly at inconveniently short notice. The text needs to be perused for unexpected difficulties, and in other cases no text, or no complete and final text, is available, such that there is serious uncertainty about what work will be involved. If no fee is paid, or charged, for the quote, the cost of this work and risk must be integrated in the offer, or may be recovered by overcharging other (internal or external) clients who assign the work on trust without demanding a quotation.

From the perspective of the translator, when numerous offers fail to result in an assignment, this is not necessarily because the offers were too high but possibly because competitors have miscalculated their prices, or were simply better placed to do the work for fortuitous reasons. This asymmetry might at first sight seem to benefit clients, but one likely consequence of demanding too many (free) quotations and the suppliers booking too few orders is that eventually exorbitant offers will be issued, i.e. that suppliers will no longer undertake an exact examination of a potential assignment, but will simply ask the highest plausible price. Under some circumstances, this price will be paid, too. This is a different ethic to the judicious estimate of fairness in "market" terms or the estimate of skill & time etc. involved in performing a given task.

An alternative approach is for the client to state a price they plan to pay, canvass possible suppliers, and select the best (i.e. those who have performed best and most reliably in the past, or at least seem likely to do so). For this, the client must have a procurement officer (ideally a linguist) who has a proper understanding of the work and market involved and is therefore able to gauge a realistic price. If the price offered is too low, there is a danger of suppliers tailoring their service to the price, rather than tailoring their service to what the end-users require (these being quite distinct from those ordering and, initially, "paying" for the service).

Contrary to widespread assumptions, there is not a real issue with translation costs and therefore no issue with prices. Most texts received for translation in a business context are artificially lengthy, involving extensive repetition and statement of the obvious. Repackaging such redundancy in the target text without significant loss of comprehensibility is difficult and time-consuming. Generally (though not universally) concise texts would not only be much cheaper to have translated, they would also benefit the users. It should also be possible to cut costs by explicitly granting translators with expertise in the subject area concerned the discretion to leave out non-essential material and to summarise bloated passages.

Other texts, of course, are deliberately obscure, a feature which is at odds with some legislation on transparency. The translation of such wording involves many times the amount of skill and time spent on other texts, and requires correspondingly more than a modest percentage mark-up on invoices.

Not least, other time-honoured techniques for cutting costs are to plan such that deadlines are not tight and to avoid setting artificial deadlines. This is not only better for the translator and the quality of the work: it also improves your bargaining position as a client.