GALA Operations Roundtable Report:
Constant Improvement on the Agenda

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Increased competition for market share continues to force language industry suppliers to prioritize their marketing strategies; however, business owners should not forget the importance of efficient operations. After all, operations will distinguish you from the competition, add the value that your clients buy, and constitute the ultimate reason for your client to select you as a vendor.

To examine the subject more closely, GALA ran an Operations Round Table during the Localization World San Francisco conference. I had the honor of moderating this event and the panelists included Michael Kidd (Trados), Terry Schneider (Symbio), and María Gabriela Morales (Rosario Traducciones y Servicios). Rose Lockwood and Renée Sztabelski were active discussion participants.

Our aim was to share ideas and discuss current operational bottlenecks. We naturally wanted our discussion to focus on real-life issues common to vendors and clients, so prior to the round table I collected some data by means of an online survey to highlight major problem areas for the discussion. Not surprisingly, the main survey and discussion topics orbited around managing the balance between in-house work and outsourcing, qualifying outsourcing partners (particularly freelance translators), measuring individual company performance against the industry average, and finding and deploying the best workflow system.

Round table participants were keen to see and discuss the results of Operations survey, which was carried out among 370 Localization World participants. The survey collected 63 responses, though the 17% response rate was too low to be representative of the industry (mainly due to low survey visibility and a short feedback time ahead of the conference). However, it served perfectly as food for thought during the discussion.

Some of the survey data proved to be revealing about outsourcing practices or the new trend towards global language directions contrasting with the traditional concept of localizing from English into foreign languages. The discussion also touched on metrics to measure productivity, word counts and rates, as well as other operational data. Rose Lockwood suggested collecting metrics data and most participants said they would be willing to share certain data to standardize the measurement process.

According to the survey results and subsequent discussion, the key facts and issues impacting operations, are:

- on-going client pressure for faster and cheaper services, with most vendors rejecting unrealistic demands.
- the unavoidable irregularity of workloads, together with pressure from fixed cost spending and time demands, all make outsourcing inevitable.
- uneven workload is a major production problems, and no workflow system can solve it.
- no single solution to the freelancer vs. in-house or in-house vs. outsourced balance.

The absence of any cast-iron rule determining «the right» operations that involve interaction between people and communication in general is a constant driver of change and operational improvement. It also opens up new business opportunities. For example, there is still no ultimate

procedure for deciding between in-house and outsourcing. Nor is a long track record any guarantee of quality, although it is clear that credibility has to be built up over many years. The session concluded that there is no one recipe for all cases: although in general outsourcing is thought to be less efficient though cheaper than in house, in many other cases outsourcing does let you achieve better quality results faster, on smaller budget and with fewer headaches.

This constant change in markets and methods is one of the key reasons for vendors to continue this and similar discussions, and explore opportunities for greater exposure and the growth of a broader ecosystem through networking with tool and technology suppliers, users and other members of the community. More discussion of operations and marketing issues is certainly needed. There should also be joint operational initiatives to help GALA members improve their own operations.

The outcome of this round table, then, was to raise awareness of the following potential operations action items for GALA members:

- Metrics management
- Freelance certification
- Standards-related initiatives
- Programs for cooperation with marketplaces
- On-going technology evaluation

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