Making the Whole Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts: Virtual Partnerships Between Freelance Translators

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Most freelance translators and interpreters truly enjoy their craft and the flexibility that comes with being in business for themselves. The creativity involved in working with languages, the sense of building bridges between different cultures, the exposure to a variety of topics, and setting one's own schedule all add to the satisfaction of our profession. We are our own bosses and we like it that way.

The flipside is that freelance work can get quite lonely at times when it is just you, your computer and the vast Internet, and when there is very little personal interaction other than project-related communication with clients. There is no friendly office banter, no language geek across the room who will appreciate a quick recitation of an exceptionally well-crafted translation, and no one who will empathize with you if a project does not progress as expected. Support can be hard to find, especially when you are dealing with an uncooperative computer or have a software issue with a deadline looming, all the while losing valuable time waiting for answers to questions posted on a faceless website portal. And what do you do if you are having a bad case of writer's block? You may be able to clear your head with a walk around the block (if your deadlines are generous enough), but that does not necessarily help with producing interesting alternatives to express a tricky

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phrase in the source document in the required target language. Or how do you work up the courage to go for the desired rate increase when you are presented with the opportunity to submit a bid to a new client? And who will care and be there to supply a much-needed pep talk if you are having a real downer of a day and feel like this whole freelance business is just overwhelming?

A good working partner can be the solution to all, or at least most, of these quandaries. Reflecting on four years of successful virtual partnerships, we would like to share our experiences, discuss the basis for a functioning professional relationship, and introduce valuable tools to help make working with a virtual partner an enjoyable and productive experience. It is our hope that more freelancers will feel encouraged to start breaking out of their individual shells to enjoy the rewards of working as part of a self-managed virtual team.

Benefits of Virtual Partnerships

The ideal virtual partnership is a win-win situation for everyone involved: the individual team members, the team as a whole, your language services providers (LSPs), and the end clients. Aside from being a cheerleader and sounding board via instant messaging or Skype, the right partner can be the source of continued professional development. For example, while one person spends extra time learning about new technologies or better ways to use current translation tools, another team member could concentrate on keeping an updated list of new glossaries, dictionaries, and helpful websites for particular areas of interest. The end results can then be freely shared and each party benefits from the other's research.

Maybe you are excited about new marketing opportunities, but do not have the bandwidth to take on additional projects on your own. Why not bid on those larger contracts and share them with your virtual business partner(s)? By swapping or merging translation memories and collaborating during the translation process, you will be able to grow professionally and experience the satisfaction of supportive teamwork.

There have been many times when one of us has been swamped but another team member was not. If one of us is busy, we refer the customer to another team member and everyone is happy. This puts us in the wonderful position of not having to say "No" to additional inquiries for our services. Peaks and valleys tend to even themselves out when customer requests can be distributed among several team members based on availability. In addition, we can now go on vacation and truly relax. Our individual automated e-mail reply directs potential new customers to our partners who are "on call." This way everything stays within the family.

If you can negotiate with your project manager to have your partner be your proofreader, you will have the rare opportunity to receive unbiased and friendly feedback on your work. This will give you a chance to reject changes with which you disagree and to identify recurring mistakes or errors of which you may have been previously unaware. Your teammate may also be able to give you a gentle but necessary nudge when you have worked yourself into a rut and translated on autopilot instead of giving your best. Your client will ultimately benefit from this cooperative, multi-layered review process by receiving a higher quality product, and you can complete the assignment and walk away with clean and proofread terminology to add to your translation memory (with the client's consent, of course). You will have also successfully avoided the risk of having your work proofread by an unknown editor who may feel the need to justify her existence by marking up more than what is truly warranted.

Identifying a Partner

Compatibility and a similar level of experience and adherence to translation standards between potential freelance partners are essential building blocks for a rewarding relationship. Having some overlap of common interests and a similar skill level is also important. It will get frustrating if one person is consistently doing the heavy lifting and the other is unable to provide professional support in return (unless you agree to have a mentoring relationship, which can be very rewarding for both parties, but this is a different concept and therefore a topic for another article).

It makes great sense to look for someone who complements your skill set. As a native German speaker working in the German→English language pair, it is incredibly helpful to me to have a teammate who is a native English speaker. This allows me to leverage her native speaker skills and perspective when I translate into English, and she can make sure she captures all of the nuances of the German source text with which she is working. Working with a partner who has different areas of specialization broadens your spectrum of what you can offer to customers. It also allows you to become familiar with topics that you would otherwise not choose to work with due to a lack of experience in a particular field.

Opportunities for Creating Virtual Partnerships

It takes time and effort to develop a trusting partnership. Before we started working together on a regular basis, my freelance partner Jeana and I had plenty of one-project relationships, or what we jokingly refer to as "one-night stands," most of which we gladly left behind when the last word of the project was written and reviewed. But occasionally you work with a person and it just clicks. If you are so fortunate to have this experience, make a connection with that person and try to develop a professional relationship with a purpose.

If you have the opportunity to find out who proofreads your work after you submit it to your trusted LSPs—take it! Even a casual introduction will be better than working "blind" on the same project. Let the proofreader know that you are open to constructive feedback. Ask if he or she is willing to discuss potential questions with you while you are still working with a particular text. You may be able to break down a roadblock faster and can avoid recurring issues that may otherwise take your proofreader a long time to polish after the translation has been completed. Make sure you take criticism graciously when it is offered and remain open to different perspectives. If the cooperation works well, stay in touch and see if you can identify other opportunities to work with that proofreader.

If an agency offers you a long-term collaborative assignment and introduces you to the other translators on the team (some LSPs are indeed progressive enough to see the benefit of direct collaboration between translators), put your best foot forward, try to be proactive in establishing professional ground rules and standards, and keep your eyes and ears open to see if there may be a match with one of your fellow translators that you could nurture into a productive working relationship. If so, keep in touch!

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On those occasions when you have more work than you can comfortably handle, try outsourcing a non-crucial piece to test the linguistic and communication skills of a potential freelance partner (only with the consent of the project manager or client, of course!). Be prepared to not always be pleased with the results. Rather than bringing about a happily ever after, one-night stands with strangers (more often than not) can turn into disappointment. If that is the case, do yourself and the other person a favor: let him or her down gently. Provide the person with a clean copy of what you feel meets your standards, thank him or her for the effort, and move on.

Technology

Technology is an important aspect of successful virtual partnerships. Here are just a few of the tools we have used:

- **Microsoft Instant Messenger (IM)** works great for day-to-day interaction with team members. We use it as a quick way to ask trusted colleagues to double-check troublesome sentences and to discuss terminology.
- **Skype** allows us to talk to each other if issues are too complex to be handled via IM or e-mail. A new feature for the upgraded version allows us to make our desktops visible on the Skype screen. We are able to look at screen shots together to figure out software issues.
- **Same-generation computer-assisted translation tools** make it easy to exchange files, merge translation memories, and share termbases.
- **Google docs** enables team members to share documents online so multiple people can access and edit a document simultaneously. This allows everyone to see the most current document in real time.

There are plenty of other tools readily available to support teamwork and the exchange of information between collaborating parties. It would be interesting to circulate a survey and develop a more comprehensive list of useful tools, but this is a topic for yet another article.

Challenges

When entering into an informal virtual partnership with another person, keep in mind that you are still operating as two separate entities. I need,

and want, to respect my partner's autonomy, her voice, and her individual style. She manages her own schedule, which she readily shares with me. We keep in touch so we know what is going on in each other's lives that may affect our availability or general state of mind. As stated previously, IM is a great way to do that. Brief status updates like "looking for work," "totally swamped," or "out from x to y" help to keep communication channels open.

Upholding the highest level of a voluntary honor system and making sure that you have each other's backs are key in establishing a trusting relationship. For us, that means we may have to jump in and rescue the other in an emergency without immediate benefit. What goes around comes around, or as one presenter at last year's ATA Annual Conference explained so nicely, this type of support system is like a bank account of goodwill that you deposit into and that you can draw on in time of need.

A final thought to keep in mind when thinking about collaborating is that different laws and regulations apply for different locations. Therefore, each team member must operate and manage his or her business accordingly. Make sure you have blanket nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) in place between all partners. Also, ask your client to issue NDAs to individual teammates so you are not liable for their actions if you take on the role of a project facilitator or project manager.

At the end of the day, we are still our own bosses, are responsible for our own billing, our own collections, and the deadlines to which we have personally agreed. But we can operate our businesses in a smarter and more powerful way. We freelancers tend to spend a lot of time by ourselves in front of our computers, but we do not have to feel alone and isolated. Working together with compatible and reliable freelance partners, we can be more flexible, have more brainpower, be better equipped to compete in the marketplace, and ultimately have more fun doing what we love!

Virtual Partnerships: Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Talk about your team
- Refer your teammates
- Collaborate
- Agree on general pricing
- Remember that transparency = trust
- Share information (e.g., customers, technology)
- Mentor the other in a new specialization or tool
- Keep in touch
- Build each other up

Don't

- Criticize a teammate in front of customers
- Complain without a solution
- Contact your teammates' customers directly without prior approval
- Undercut agreed pricing
- Forward irrelevant information or unpleasant customers to teammates
- Interrupt the other's workday constantly or disrespect their "busy" sign