17 Attributes that Make a Good Translator

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By: Carolyn Knees
Published on: September 23, 2014
Revised on: February 8, 2016

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Introduction

Your company is about to expand its operations into other countries and you have a localization project in the pipeline to go along with the expansion.

You are now ready to build your localization project team. Project managers, translators, proofreaders, editors and desktop publishing specialists are just some of the key people that may be included on the team.

Working with a language service company would ease the burden of putting such a team together, since the company will handle most of the sourcing.

However, there may be a time where you need to work directly with a professional freelance translator.

Finding a good freelance translator can be just as hard as finding a quality employee. Maybe even harder, because the interviewing and vetting portion is modified at best, and eliminated at worst.

Here are the 17 attributes you should look for when recruiting a new freelance translator for your localization project.

1. Native Speaker

This is perhaps the most important thing to look for in a translator. The translator must be a native speaker of the target language. This ensures a thorough knowledge of the language's culture.

The art of translation is not limited to linguistics. It also requires cultural adaptation that only a native speaker can provide.

A translation should never sound like a translation – it should sound like it was originally written in the language in which the audience is reading it. A fluent, non-native speaker may be able to produce a "good" translation, but a native speaker will be capable of producing a natural translation every time.

2. English Skills

Assuming English is the source language, it is equally important that the translator have a near-native command of the English language.

Without near-flawless English, a translator may miss some of the nuances in the source text, and thus will leave them out of the translation.

3. Pricing & Rates

You must always be mindful of the project budget. A translator should be mindful of the going rate for their language combination and expertise, otherwise they may price themselves out of work that is suited for them.

It is also important for the translator not to under-value themselves, as a too-low price should make you question the quality of work that the translator might deliver.

4. Experience

A translator's experience is a factor in deciding if the translator is qualified, and determining a reasonable rate for services. Both years of experience and type of experience are important for you to consider.

Education and work experience related to linguistics, language teaching, and translation are all desirable. Years of experience doing translation work are also desirable, but too many years can sometimes be something to take an extra look at.

Here's why…

If the translator has been living in the United States and working as a translator for 30 years, for example, they clearly have a desirable amount of experience. But it is important to consider whether they have been able to keep up their language skills after being away from their home country for so long.

If a translator has many years of experience, but have lived away from their home country, they may consider adding a section to their resume or profile outlining how they keep current in their native language.

5. Certifications

Your project may require a certified translator. Collecting certifications from organizations with national or state recognition is a good idea in order to expand the number of projects a translator is eligible to work on.

If there are no specific requirements for certifications for a certain project, a translator with good experience can be considered.

Oftentimes, a more qualified translator can be overlooked in favor of a certified translator simply because of the credentials.

You should be careful to balance the weight of a certification against the actual quality the translator can provide.

6. Flexibility

Once the terms are negotiated, it is important for a translator to be open-minded to a flexible pay-scale for special scenarios. Special scenarios can include high-volume projects and other unique situations.

Don't be afraid to negotiate with the translator since you're in a contractor relationship.

7. Location

Although a translator's location is most likely a factor that can't be changed, it is something that you may consider when looking for a new freelancer. This can be a logistics issue.

For example, you may have specific requirements for where the translator is located, or you prefer a translator in the same time-zone because of tight deadlines and a need for easy communication.

Location can also be important for the quality of the translations – the translator should be a native speaker of the target language and an expert in the target culture, and familiar with colloquialisms and linguistic standards for the target audience.

For this reason, a Spanish speaker who has never lived in the United States may not be a good fit for Spanish translations for a U.S.-based audience.

8. Knowledge of CAT Tools

If you are working with a language service company, that company will almost surely be working with one or more CAT tools on a regular basis, funneling all their projects through them.

Depending on the size of your organization, you may also have in-house CAT tools, such as memoQ Translation Memory, and have translators logging into it for project work.

For this reason, you should consider a translator's experience using CAT tools when deciding whether they are a good fit.

As a translator, it can be helpful to have experience with all of the major CAT tools so as not to be eliminated from consideration right off the bat.

9. Specialization

It's important to have a pool of translators for everyday projects. But many projects require specialized knowledge that a general translator cannot provide.

You should focus on recruiting translators that specialize in your particular field. Having qualified translators is the only way to guarantee high-quality translations.

10. Honesty

A translator shows that they are credible and professional when they only accept assignments that they are truly a good fit for. It is always better for a translator to decline a project if they are uncomfortable with it or do not have time for it than to accept when the circumstances aren't right.

A project that is rushed due to a translator's overloaded schedule, or a project that is done by a translator who is not familiar with the topic, will inevitably be of low quality.

11. Responsiveness

After reviewing the content to be translated, it is also important for a translator to promptly respond to you. Your job is fast-paced, and translators who can keep up may be favored over those who must be contacted multiple times.

You may have different expectations for a reasonable response time depending on the project – but faster is always better. A translator should check their email several times a day and should respond immediately to decline or accept a project once they have made their decision.

12. Availability

A translator who is always available moves to the top of the list very quickly. Turning down projects due to heavy workload or not being familiar with a topic is a good thing, but rejecting too many projects may lead you to believe that the translator is uninterested in working with you.

If you are always sending projects for topics the translator is uncomfortable with, the translator should remind you of their areas of expertise.

13. Communication

Translators who communicate well are significantly easier to work with. Communication about availability, such as travel plans, is just as important as project-related communication. Project-related communication should be timely and clear.

If a translator has doubts about your expectations, they should never guess, but instead should ask questions about the project. This type of communication will reassure you that the project is going smoothly.

14. Manners

It may sound like common sense, but it is important to have good manners. If a translator is unpleasant to work with, you may stop sending them projects all together, even if they produce very high-quality translations.

It is particularly important to be polite when communicating about contract terms. This topic can be sensitive and uncomfortable for both parties.

It is important for a translator to stand up for themselves and not settle for less than they are worth, but there is a way to do that which will not end a relationship with you.

15. Attention to Detail

Attention to detail is one of the main components of a solid quality assurance process. Things like numbers, formatting and punctuation are paid close attention.

Translators who make mistakes in these areas stand out – in a bad way – and may be excluded from future projects if the mistakes are too frequent.

On the other hand, translators who catch inconsistencies in the source files (such as misspellings & mismatched dates) stand out in a very positive way. These types of details should be brought to your attention.

16. Meeting Deadlines

Perhaps the most important thing a translator can do well to stand out is to *meet deadlines*. You should always provide a deadline when a project is assigned.

If a translator accepts the deadline, they are expected to meet it.

No excuses.

That being said, if a translator needs extra time, it is always better to ask sooner rather than later.

Best case scenario, a deadline can be negotiated before the translator even accepts the project.

17. Response to Feedback

You may have an internal reviewer check through the completed translations and provide feedback. When this happens, a translator is expected to review the feedback and provide their professional recommendations as to how to proceed.

A translator should be professional and open-minded, but also do their best to persuade you to choose the best option by providing a clear explanation for their recommendations so you can make an informed decision about the final version.

To wrap up, you can now feel more confident in recruiting new translators for your project.