GLTaC

Lives depend on our translations.

Extreme Project Management: Success Where Others Failed

Introduction

Customer satisfaction is always our number one goal, but some customers are easier to satisfy than others. The project referenced in this paper went well beyond translation and pushed the limits of current technology, change control and human ability.

GLTaC received an urgent request to correct work done improperly by another translation agency. Over 15,000 sentences in over 40 languages that MUST comply with specific regulations. Complexity after complexity kept appearing throughout the project which resulted in over 400 source text changes while guidance from the customer changed frequently. The end result took the work from an error rate of approximately 60% down to under 0.5%.

With this in mind, would you feel confident knowing your SDS and labels were translated using a free online translation engine? Or a translator who has never heard of the GHS? We put together this short guide to explain some of the issues we've come across in our (20+) years of experience serving chemical companies, manufacturers, consultants and SDS authoring platforms. We hope it will give you food for thought and help your decision-making process.

Business Challenge

The task presented to GLTaC was for a review of over 15,000 phrases, identifying the issue with a phrase and coding it appropriately, correcting the issue, finding the most current applicable regulation and following strict guidance from the customer in terms of formatting, punctuation and embedded software codes. Originally this task was for 36 languages, but expanded to over 40 by the completion of the project. The project had a great sense of urgency due to the negative impact of the original poor quality work on the customer.

As our translators worked on the files numerous questions arose about the source text. After less than two weeks, the project was generating over 120 emails per day between the customer, the project manager and the translators.

Two weeks prior to the delivery date, our translators discovered enough errors in the source text to prompt a complete review of the source text by the customer resulting in roughly 420 changes. When multiplied by the number of languages, the total number of changes to keep track of became greater than 15,000. Additionally, the project was in XML and included several right-to-left languages.

Other requirements that made this more challenging were that the file had to be delivered as one complete XML file. This requirement alone increased the challenge enormously due to the sheer size of the final file, which became over 600,000 lines.

Solution

Technology was as much a part of the solution as tremendous organization skills and dogged perseverance. GLTaC uses a proprietary Translation Management System to manage the tracking of translation projects, and MemoQ from Kilgray in Hungary as our Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) tool. Excel spreadsheets became the tool of choice for keeping track of all the changes, and MS Outlook handled the email barrage.

One of the most significant challenges of this project became file manipulation. Over the course of the work, changes would go out to translators and finished work would come back, but not necessarily as complete files. In some cases only a few phrases would be updated. So how to split, merge and combine all those separate language files back into a single XML file for final QC and delivery was a seemingly impossible task.

As it turned out, Oxygen XML Author and Notepad++ became the tools of choice for manipulating the XML file and doing much of the Search and Replace operations for the QC checks. Some tasks were better done in MS Excel which required careful handling when switching between various software packages so as not to introduce corruption in the right-to-left languages (such as Hebrew and Arabic).

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In spite of our attempts to clarify instructions from the customer at the beginning, guidance changed during the course of the project and "scope-creep" occurred almost immediately. As changes came from the customer, we were asked to help keep track of them. In many cases, changes would come in from the customer and contradict previous guidance. In one extreme instance, the guidance for one formatting issue changed five times, alternating between two different styles before finally settling on one preferred style.

Combining all the various portions of translated material into a single, cohesive XML file was an enormous task. Reviewing that file of over 600,000 lines was an even larger task. The Oxygen XML Author software tool became critical for doing the splits and merges of the XML file. Normally editors would rely on automated tools to do some of the proofing tasks, and mistakes that carry over between languages would find a search-and-replace function working well as a correc-tion mechanism.

Certainly a smaller file would have been easier to work with, but the real complicating factor in this effort was the guidance we operated under for handling codes and punctuation. The rule-of-thumb for this project was to have no ending punctuation on a sentence. At first glance, no ending punctuation would be a simple item to comply with because there are ways to isolate the end of a line and remove whatever punctuation symbol exists, whether it be a period, ques-tion mark or exclamation point. However, the file was full of exceptions to this requirement, such as if the sentence ended with "etc." or "no.", then those punctuations had to remain.

Again, a search-and-replace approach would not work very well because the equivalent of "etc." is not the same in all the languages. This type of situation existed for many different items. Codes within a phrase had to have a space before and after them, so you had to search on all the combinations of codes and spaces that could exist, where spaces were in the wrong place or not at all. Quite quickly we found ourselves doing close to 100 search-and-replace passes through the file looking for various conditions. In the end, we found nothing to be faster or better than the naked eye for spotting irregularities or inconsistencies simply because no automated tool could be set up to identify every possible error condition.

Summary

In summary, the final file we sent to the customer was well received and has instilled a tremendous confidence in their staff that the information they are selling is the absolute best it can be in terms of technical accuracy and regulatory compliance.

The project generated over 5,000 emails and ended up with over 720,000 lines of XML and took almost 5 months to complete from start to finish. Over 60 people worked on the project and interacted with the project manager on an almost daily basis.

As a result of the file sizes and software used on the project, GLTaC redefined our standard workstation specification and adjusted our future technology plans to handle extreme memory and processing requirements. Smaller capacity computers simply would abruptly abort lengthy processes, or hang and never complete tasks, often causing data corruption.

GLTaC modified or created improved QC methods and also developed new service offerings as a result of this project. We also learned more about the capabilities of our translators, including a greater sense of teamwork to assist each other and the project managers in finding reference documentation and resolving conflicts between references.

Comments, questions, and suggestions are welcome and appreciated. Reach us at info@gltac.com.