

Title:

Freelance strategies in the translation business

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Article Body:

Freelance strategies in the translation business

Working for an agency or for private clients?

One of the main challenges for freelance translators is to find suitable clients, and once they have found them, one of their main concerns is how to retain them. As a freelancer you may well find that working for translation agencies rather than for private clients offers both peace of mind and a more reliable flow of orders.

As a professional freelancer you are doubtlessly well aware of the many benefits of freelance work. Most of these will be associated with themes such as independence, freedom and - if you are lucky - considerable revenues. However, you may also have discovered a number of serious downsides to this kind of work. The one cited perhaps the most frequently is the ongoing pressure to attract clients. Although we know of no research to verify it, there is a law in the translation business which states that a freelance translator who has no work, is not a good translator. The opposite is also true: a good translator will never be at a loss for work. Even so, your order portfolio as a freelancer will also depend, at least in part, on your commercial skills in attracting clients, offering your services to potential clients, and building up networks. Once you have found enough clients for a sustainable business, moreover, you may find it

difficult to balance your capacity with their needs.

In view of these considerations, it might be a good idea to offer your services to translation agencies as well. The rates they offer may not be as high as those of private clients (understandably, as the agency will need to safeguard its own profit margin and deduct a suitable amount from the client's payment before passing it on to you), but once you are well established in their files you may find their constant flow of orders a great relief compared with the situation in which you have to attract business yourself.

In fact, working for a translation agency offers a range of significant advantages. One has to do with capacity. When you work directly for a large private client, capacity is clearly a limiting factor, as you will not be able to take up all their translation requests - especially as you have other clients to tend to as well. Of course you would not have any more capacity when working for an agency, but the agency itself would. By spreading translation work over different translators, agencies can obviously absorb far more work from individual clients, which makes it possible to develop a more or less exclusive relationship with them and for you to gain specific experience of their organization and terminology without necessarily having to do all their translations. This suggests that, overall, not only your capacity but also your professionalism will benefit from working for agencies. Freelancers will usually not be able to benefit from the type of feedback supplied by colleagues and quality supervisors at an agency. There are also advantages for the client, as companies that hand out translation orders to different freelancers will not benefit from any coordinated effort to safeguard consistency in style and terminology that an agency can offer.

Another true advantage of translation agencies is that they will enable you to specialize in particular areas of preference. With private clients this is far more difficult to achieve, as the pool of clients to pick from would obviously be much smaller compared with those in a larger agency's files. For example, a successful translation agency that specializes in tax law will probably have all the major tax firms on its files, which means that by working for that agency you would be introduced to a broad spectrum of practitioners in your field of specialization.

If there is one disadvantage to working for translation agencies it must be the word rates that they offer, which are usually lower, considerably lower even, than those a trusted freelancer would receive in a direct relationship with a private client. This is obviously not unreasonable, as the agency has its own overhead, provides added value services that both the client and the freelancer will benefit from (terminology management, layout and editing tasks) and, most

importantly, provides you with work without any need on your part to attract clients. And don't forget that while the rate per word may be lower, the constant flow of orders that reliable freelancers tend to receive from the agencies they work for should more than make up for that in terms of sustained and sometimes even more or less predictable income levels.

One further drawback of working for an agency is that it will not be considered ethical for you to establish direct contact with their clients with the purpose of working for them directly. To the more entrepreneurial of freelancers, this means that the more they work for agencies, the smaller the number of interesting companies they would still be able to work for independently.

To sum up, as a freelancer you basically have two options when it comes to attracting orders: working for private companies directly and working for them indirectly through translation agencies. Either option brings benefits and disadvantages, especially as regards pay and professional development. Private clients tend to be more lucrative, but you will have to attract them, convince them of your qualities, and retain them while the chances are that your capacity will not be sufficient to fill all their orders. On the other hand, translation agencies usually offer lower rates, but they take all the marketing off your hands and will offer you as much work as you want once you have established yourself as a reliable supplier. In addition, you will be able to benefit from coordinated feedback from the client, the agency's experts and fellow freelancers alike. The preference for either option depends on your commercial appetite, and your need for security and feedback from peers.