

You Can't Fix What

You Can't Measure

By Hans Fenstermacher

In the localization business, we live and die by metrics. Every step of our work is carefully measured, whether it's price, word counts, engineering hours, number of pages, or percentages of leverage from translation memory. Costs and resources are allocated precisely to match those metrics, and we are regularly challenged to substantiate the business case for localization services through objective and verifiable metrics.

Whether they know it or not, technical writers and content authors are in the same boat. The fewer metrics technical writers have, the leakier the boat will be—and no amount of vigorous rowing or protesting against offshoring will keep the boat from sinking.

Only by playing the game according to the financial rules can writers expect to win any of the daily battles over budgets. Corporate financial decision makers know little (and care nothing) about usability, user experience, and other “intangibles”; their thumbs-up or thumbs-down is based on things they can measure, like money. Therefore, writers must adopt content metrics that objectively measure content on a more granular level, so they can make smarter decisions about content globalization (optimizing content for the most cost-efficient localization).

LOCALIZATION'S MOST MEANINGFUL METRIC

As noted earlier, in contrast to the content authors, we in localization collect lots of metrics. Most are static, like cost, time, and volume (word count, page count, graphics count). Also there are comparative metrics, like translation memory leverage from project to project, and normative metrics, like budget and turnaround time. But the value that localization business cases typically must establish rests mostly on the ratio between two sets of well-known metrics: costs versus benefits. To optimize value, we can either reduce costs or increase benefits, or both.

No other metrics have proven so influential. While the benefits of improved, fully globalized content are obvious to those of us who produce it, it's tough to come up with hard metrics on usability, user experience, and the effects of having localized content (versus unlocalized). Even if we manage to assemble metrics in these areas, they likely fall on the deaf ears of corporate decision-makers. Let's face it, the most convincing metric we have at our disposal is cost—and the less of it the better.

As a result, in the localization services business, cost reduction is a non-stop objective and usually the top priority. Strategies to reduce multilingual costs abound, and they always represent a tradeoff between the cost reduction



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