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## **TRANSLATION PROJECT MANAGEMENT – AN ULTIMATE SKILL FOR TRANSLATORS?**

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### **Abstract**

The existing standards in the translation market rather vaguely define translation project manager's competences and how they can be interpreted, acquired and developed. There is also a lack of detailed research in the translation field that would focus on defining the particular skills necessary for successful translation project management. This paper aims to discuss and describe the skills necessary for translation project managers in the translation market by presenting an overview of the Lithuanian translation market and providing significant insights of translation service providers and university translation students about translation project management. The study is based on surveys carried out to determine translation service providers' and students' attitudes and experiences in translation project management, with the emphasis on the set of skills needed in the field. The main questions analysed are

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related to the importance of particular skills for translation project managers, the ways of acquiring and developing the skills, and the benefits of the use of translation project management software for freelance translators. Studying these issues may provide helpful theoretical, practical and pedagogical implications as to the training of translators and translation project managers.

Keywords: translation project management, communicative skills, IT skills, translation service providers/agencies, freelance translators.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Project management in the context of translation seems to be an important but rather unexplored, underrated and overlooked area in research. Nevertheless, it should be investigated as it is intrinsically bound with the rapid advancement in translation and related technologies. The last few decades have brought a change in the understanding of what a professional translator should know and what skills they should have.

Scholars have acknowledged the need for research to assess the importance of project management and define new sets of skills in the translation profession (Dunne and Dunne, 2011; Rico Perez, 2002) as well as the need for research in the development of project management software (Alonso, 2016). This

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paper focuses on the skills necessary for translation project managers in the translation market. An overview of the Lithuanian translation market is presented providing insights of translation service providers/agencies and university translation students about translation project management and skills required in the field. The research questions are as follows: What is the importance of particular skills for translation project managers? What are the best ways of acquiring and developing the skills? What are the benefits of the use of translation project management software for freelance translators as seen by translation service providers/agencies?

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK**

The existing standards in the translation market rather obscurely define translation project manager's competences and how they can be interpreted, acquired and developed. The main document regulating the provision of translation services at the European level, EN ISO17100 Translation Services – requirements for translation services, stipulates that project managers should have the competence in documentation in order to deliver high-quality translation services (2015). The

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document provides that translation project management competence and knowledge of the translation process may be developed by way of formal or informal training (ISO17100: 2015). In many European countries, the translator profession is a deregulated activity. Although in Belgium, Poland, Norway, and other European countries, translator certification procedures for sworn translators have to be followed, they mostly apply to legal translation and interpreting. Meanwhile, in Lithuania, the existing standards in the translation industry include only general guidelines and recommendations for the translation quality or ethics set by national translation associations or translation service providers without any mention of translation project managers' skills. There is also a lack of detailed research in the translation field, although project management has been recognised as a rapidly advancing and growing activity (Gouadec, 2007).

Scholars who have researched translation project management acknowledge the benefits of translation project management software and/or virtual space for translation service providers and their clients. Yahaya (2008) who reported on a case study of translation project management benefits in virtual environment indicated that virtual spaces and

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computer-mediated communication bring the benefit for a translation service provider in terms of more efficient translation asset management, improved client relationship management, higher quality of translation, etc. Alonso (2016: 25) who performed a focus group-based study on digital management of professional translation projects pointed out that computer-mediated translation project management had a great advantage of fast, direct and cheap communication, thus eliminating a time-consuming issue but retaining possible conflicts ‘due to information asymmetries and unfulfilled expectations’.

Gray and Ulbrich (2017) in a review of the project management literature propose a four-type categorisation of project managers in terms of ambiguity tolerance and translation skills necessary for successful project management. According to the researchers, ambiguity tolerance covers five factors of flexibility, leadership, investigation, ingenuity, and character. Meanwhile, translation skills<sup>1</sup>, i.e., the ability to understand the needs of customers and communicate them to all agents within a project, cover four factors: communication,

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with translation skills in their direct sense as the translator’s competence of rendering the text from the source to the target language. For the purposes of this study, the four factors entailed in Gray and Ulbrich’s concept of translation skills will be altogether referred to as communicative skills.

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tools of communication, understanding, and power, control and respect. According to the authors, project managers are key for project success, i.e., high achievers have high communicative skills and are rather comfortable with ambiguity, while poor performers in project management are uncomfortable with ambiguity and have low communicative skills (Gray and Ulbrich, 2017).

According to ISO17100, project management in translation service includes the following tasks: identification of requirements and project specifications in the pre-production stage and follow-up; supervision of the project preparation; selecting competent revisers; disseminating information about the project to all parties involved; monitoring compliance with deadlines, informing about any changes in project specifications; monitoring conformity to the agreement; answering queries; managing feedback; verifying compliance of the target language content with client's specifications; and service delivery. Project managers may also need to deal with tasks as choosing a reviewer, implementing corrections, monitoring the budget, issuing invoices, etc. (ISO17100: 2015). All these tasks require a number of different skills for a translation project manager to develop. In compliance with this standard,

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colleges and universities should include subjects developing skills for accomplishment of all the above-mentioned tasks when implementing curricula in translation.

Many scholars also agree that a translation curriculum should include the study of management, e.g., project analysis, project management and quality control (Erwen and Wenming, 2013; Biel, 2011; Olohan and Davitti, 2015). According to Biel (2011), trainers should cover not only those translation service provision phases that are ‘included in the translation process itself (translation, checking, revision, review), but also those related to translation project management (project registration and documentation, pre-translation processing, ST analysis, consistency monitoring, financial settlements)’.

## **2.1. Teaching translation project management**

In reality, translation project managers often feel uncertainty about IT skills that they may lack because the technological competence is nowadays an indispensable attribute in translation industry (Sakamoto, 2019). Currently, a translation curriculum cannot be imagined as the one where no CAT (computer-aided translation) tools and/or other

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related software are used and taught. However, teaching how to use translation project management software may not always be considered as a subject of first priority in a curriculum.

The important role of communication in translation project management has been increasingly acknowledged in a number of studies (Olohan and Davitti, 2015). Translation project managers have to excel in communication in order to manage risks occurring in project-based companies like translation agencies (Zaveckaite and Ulbinaite, 2017). Communicative skills, although nowadays desired by employers in almost all professions and spheres, are crucial for project managers whatever company they work for.

Olohan and Davitti (2015) emphasise the importance for project managers to confer and instil trust in order to achieve success in a company. According to the researchers, trust entails positive expectations in relation to all involved parties, readiness to be open when vulnerable, willingness to suspend doubts and uncertainties, etc. (Olohan and Davitti, 2015). Thus, personal characteristics are not of the least importance. Translation curricula emphasising intellectual and personal development and enriched with specific attributes developing IT

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and communicative skills may help to prepare professional future translators with universal expertise.

The process of learning in a group in a simulated translation project enriches the translation training and promotes many skills necessary for a project manager, i.e., IT skills, communicative skills and personal traits, like confidence, trust, creativity, flexibility, leadership, self-command, risk management, etc. The skills acquired in a translation project management course play the key role in translators' development and their successful future employment. Consequently, the development of such skills is mutually beneficial for translators and translation and/or language service providers.

However, the academia sometimes rather cautiously react towards new trends and still linger on teacher-centred education, immediate tasks of text transfer from one language to another, and repetition rather than the process. Following new trends in teaching translation, students in classes may be exposed to different roles: revisers, reviewers, proofreaders, terminologists, documentalists, DTP publishers, graphic designers, translation project managers, etc. (Biel, 2011; Clavijo and Marin, 2013). Simulated translation project management brings students as

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close to the authentic translation practice as possible. However, it is one of the least often used approaches in class and relatively often seen even by students themselves as an unimportant activity as researched by Clavijo and Marin (2013). The authors report that as many as 40% of students ranked the activity of simulated project management lowest among other techniques employed in a translation class, such as total or partial translation of a text, summary translation, or translation proofreading (Clavijo and Marin, 2013).

Only those translators who have universal skills may create added value for the company or the translation service provider and be indispensable in the market. To the best of our knowledge, this study is one of the first contributions to explore the skills necessary for translation project managers from the perspective of the employers in the translation market and students in a translation study programme. We believe that the focus in training translators who have the translation project management competence should be placed on developing the set of IT skills, communicative skills, and specific personal traits.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS**

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For the purposes of this particular study, two different questionnaires on the set of skills needed for translation project managers were designed, namely one for translation service providers/agencies and the other for undergraduate students in a translation study programme. In order to determine translation service providers' and students' attitudes and experiences in translation project management, closed type questions with given options to choose from and a possibility to add the respondents' own answers (as 'other') were designed. The questionnaires included demographic questions as well as benefits- and skills-related questions. The questions seeking answers about the skills necessary for translation project managers were designed on the basis of Gray and Ulbrich's categories of translation project managers modified for the purposes of this study.

The response rate for the questionnaire for translation service agencies was 55% (n = 21). The questionnaire was distributed to the heads of translation service agencies. By the heads of translation agencies, we mean owners or directors of translation agencies. The majority of the translation agencies (71%) were indicated to be based in the capital city of the country. Less than half of translation agencies (43%) employed more than 100

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freelancers, with the maximum of 1,500 and the minimum of 20.

The response rate for the questionnaire for students was 72% (n = 41). Only part of the students (n = 16) who participated in the survey had knowledge and skills in translation project management because a course on translation project management was recently introduced into the curriculum in the programme. Other students (n = 25) did not have the possibility to get familiar with translation project management or related software at a university but they might have had opportunities to get acquainted with it outside the university. A comparison in the responses obtained was made between the students who have had a course in translation project management (TPM), the students who have not had a course in TPM and the heads of translation agencies.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

More than half of the heads of translation agencies (n = 12, 57.1%) who gave responses to the questionnaire indicated that there was a separate translation project manager's position in their agencies. A little more than one-third of the translation agencies (38.1%) did not use any

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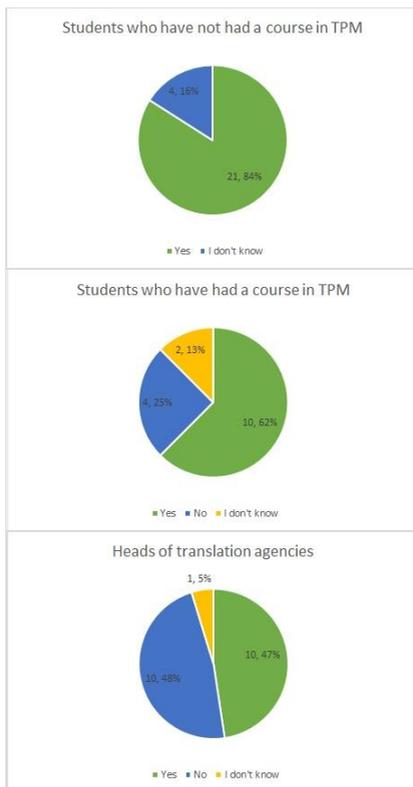
translation project management software. The heads of other translation agencies indicated that they used either a commercial programme (14.3%), a special programme developed for the translation agency (38.1%) or accounting software additionally adjusted for translation project management purposes (5%).

#### **4.1. Should translators have knowledge and skills of translation project management**

The responses to the question whether translators should have knowledge and skills of translation project management demonstrated a difference in the attitudes of the students and the heads of translation agencies (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of the answers to the question whether translators should have knowledge and skills of translation project management.

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The majority of the students (84%) who have not had a course in TPM saw the need for translators to have translation project management skills. However, fewer students (62%) who have had a course in TPM indicated the importance of having translation project management skills for

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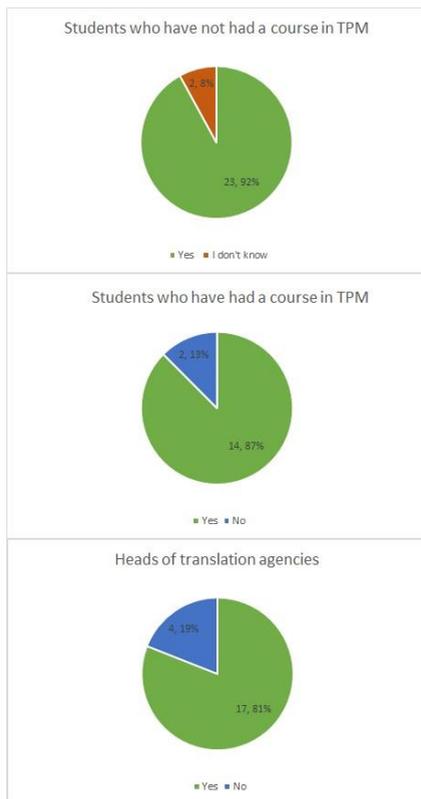
translators. Less than half (47%) of the heads of translation agencies thought that translation project management skills were important for translators to have. It might be implied that translation project management is attractive to students who have never heard about it. Meanwhile, those who already have some experience with translation project management may consider that the two activities – translation and project management – are not necessarily related and intertwined.

#### **4.2. Should translation project managers have skills of translation**

The responses to the question whether translation project managers should have skills of translation were more or less similar between all three groups (see Fig. 2). The majority of the students who have not had a course in TPM (92%), the students who have had a course in TPM (87%) and the heads of translation agencies (81%) thought that translation project managers should have knowledge, competence and/or experience in translation.

Figure 2. Distribution of the answers to the question whether translation project managers should have skills of translation.

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Only a few students who have had a course in TPM (13%) and the heads of translation agencies (19%) considered translation skills unnecessary for translation project managers, and some students who have not had a course in TPM indicated that they did not have an opinion (8%). The distribution

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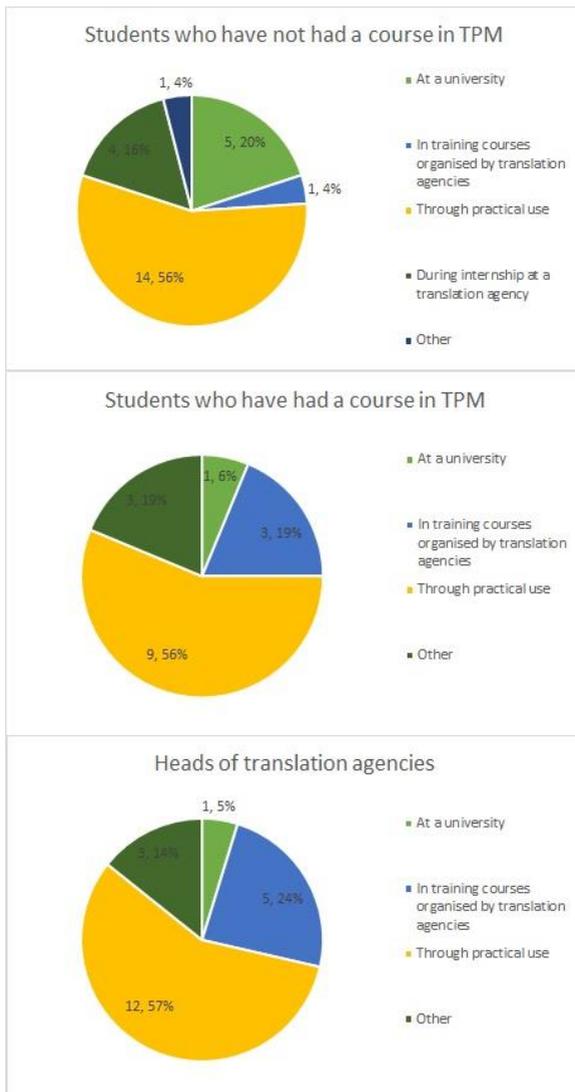
of the results is in line with the requirements of ISO17100 stating that translation project managers should have a thorough knowledge of the translation process.

### **4.3. How might translation project management skills be acquired**

Another question in the survey was related to how translation project management skills might be acquired. More than half of the respondents in all three groups (56% of the students in each group and 57% of the heads of translations agencies) indicated that translation project management skills could be acquired through practical use of particular software (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Distribution of the answers to the question of how translation project management skills might be acquired.

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Of note is the fact that acquisition of translation project management skills by way of formal training at a university was seen by the minority of respondents in the groups of the students who have had a course and the heads of translation agencies. As many as 20% of the students who have not had a course in TPM thought that they could acquire the skill at a university. The low rate of students who have had a course in TPM might be explained by the fact that the course was only 3 ECTS where students could get only the fundamental understanding of the process and did not have too many contact hours to pick up the skill in the particular software. Besides, this might be related to the high rate of all the respondents' answers about the practical acquisition. It is obvious that the best way to learn the skill is through its practical use because each agency may have different software and learning it might require additional effort every time the freelancer changes the employer. Some respondents in all the groups (16% of the students who have not had a course in TPM, 19% of the students who have had a course in TPM and 14% of the heads of translation agencies) pointed out that all the options of achieving the skills given in the survey were possible.

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#### **4.4. What are the benefits of project management software for translators and translation agencies**

The respondents were given several options to indicate the benefits of having project management software for translators: data security, possibility to monitor, store and manage documents, easy sharing large files, effective communication, everything in one place, e-mails do not go to spam and other (an option to write their own answer). The students who have had a course in TPM indicated data security, possibility to monitor, store and manage documents and everything in one place as the most important benefits of using translation project management software for a translator. The students who have not had a course in TPM pointed out everything in one place, possibility to monitor, store and manage documents and effective communication as valuable assets. The heads of translation agencies selected effective communication, possibility to monitor, store and manage documents, data security and everything in one place as advantages of TPM software for freelance translators. The answers revealed that data security, possibility to monitor, store and manage documents and everything in one place were chosen as the most significant attributes in all three groups of the respondents. One of the

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most surprising findings was the difference in selecting effective communication as an asset: the heads of translation agencies marked it as number one benefit; meanwhile, both groups of the students indicated effective communication as one of the least important benefits.

#### **4.5. What attributes are important for translation project managers to develop**

A number of attributes possibly important for translation project managers to develop were given for the respondents to select, i.e., flexibility, adaptability, leadership, analytical thinking, problem solving, creativity, self-command, self-confidence, communicative skills, cooperation and respect, emotional intelligence, and IT skills. As in the previous question, there was a possibility for the respondents to write in their own answer. The students who have not had a course in TPM indicated problem solving and IT skills to be the most important followed by cooperation and respect, communicative skills and analytical thinking. The students who have had a course in TPM selected problem solving, communicative skills, cooperation and respect, IT skills and leadership. The heads of translation agencies indicated problem solving as the most important

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feature to develop followed by communicative skills, IT skills, analytical thinking and flexibility. The ability to multitask and the ability not to get lost in a stressful situation were mentioned by the heads of translation agencies as the essential features for translation project managers to develop. The features at the bottom in the responses of all three groups were adaptability, creativity, self-command, self-confidence and emotional intelligence. The analysis demonstrates that problem solving is a must have for translation project managers; meanwhile, such personal characteristics as adaptability, creativity, self-command, self-confidence and emotional intelligence were not considered relevant for the translation manager's job.

The findings of this research are only partially in agreement with those obtained through an overview of literature sources of project management by Gray and Ulbrich. Only one group of the respondents in our study – the heads of translation agencies – indicated communicative skills (in Gray and Ulbrich's terminology, translation skills) to be most important, which is in line with Gray and Ulbrich's conclusion that successful project managers have high translation skills (i.e., communicative skills). This finding might possibly be explained by the fact that the heads of translation agencies have a lot of

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experience and a good understanding of managing projects on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the students did not see communicative skills as important to develop, which might result from their hypothetic understanding of what it means to manage a project. Although the classes in a translation project management course involve analysis of examples and real-life situations, students still lack professional first-hand experience. On the other hand, Gray and Ulbrich found out that high achievers should also exhibit flexibility, leadership, self-command and self-confidence. In contrast to these findings, the latter features were not seen as necessary to develop by any group in our study.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This study based on the surveys of three groups of respondents (students who have had a course in TPM, students who have not had a course in TPM and heads of translation agencies) revealed a number of significant findings. All three groups agreed that translation project managers should have knowledge, competence and skills of translation, which is in agreement with the requirements laid down in ISO17100 stating that translation project managers should have a thorough knowledge of the translation process. However, in contrast to these

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findings, fewer respondents in all three groups thought that translation project management skills were necessary for translators to have, which confirms that the two activities – translation and TPM – are not necessarily seen as related and intertwined.

Regarding the acquisition of translation project management skills, the majority of the respondents in all three groups indicated the practical way of skill pick-up as best. Formal or non-formal training were seen as options only by the minority of the respondents, which to a certain extent does not comply with ISO17100 standard, stating that translation project management skills may be developed by way of formal and informal training.

As to the benefits of using a translation project management system in translation agencies for freelance translators, features like data security, possibility to monitor, store and manage documents and everything in one place were chosen as the most significant attributes in all three groups of the respondents. This is one of the questions the answers to which coincided between the students who have had a course in TPM, the students who have not had a course in TPM and the heads of translation agencies. This is quite evident as

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technological solutions are nowadays seen as an inevitable necessity both in business and daily life.

It may also be concluded that problem solving and IT skills are critical and indispensable assets to develop for translation project managers. Unexpectedly, personal traits like adaptability, creativity, self-command, self-confidence and emotional intelligence are not considered most relevant for the translation manager's job, which is in disagreement with the research on the profiles of project managers as overviewed by Gray and Ulbrich (2017), or with the studies like Olohan and Davitti's (2015).

Studying these issues may provide helpful theoretical, practical and pedagogical implications as to the training of translators and translation project managers. All these findings are particularly important for the curricula development in translation study programmes as to the subjects and volume devoted to the introduction and improvement of knowledge and skills of translation project management. Translation service providers/agencies should also contribute to the development of these skills by cooperating with universities and bringing to classes real-life

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examples and case studies for students – future translators – to analyse and practice.

This particular study has its limitations due to a relatively low number of representatives from translation agencies who indicated to have and use a translation management system and to have a separate translation project manager's position in their agency. Therefore, more extensive and larger research is needed to investigate the set of skills needed for translation project manager's job; when, where and how the skills may be acquired and improved; the integration of activities that may help to develop the necessary skills into curricula; the skills defining high achievers and poor performers in translation project management; advantages and disadvantages of using translation project management software for freelance translators, agencies and customers; etc.

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### **APPENDIX 1. Survey on translation project management for heads of translation agencies**

Dear Respondent,

Researchers at Kaunas University of Technology are conducting research on translation project management aspects in Lithuania. We kindly ask you to answer the following questions. All information will be used for research purposes only. Personal information is not collected and will not be disclosed anywhere. The questionnaire is anonymous. It will take 5–10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Thank you for the answers. The obligatory questions have been marked by \*

1. You are (choose all that apply): \*

- Owner of translation agency
- Director / head of translation agency
- Translation project manager (office)
- Translator
- Other

2. How many translators do you have in your translation agency?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

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3. How many of them are freelancers?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

4. Does your translation agency have a separate position of a translation project manager? \*

- Yes
- No
- Other

5. Where is your translation agency located? (choose all that apply) \*

- Vilnius
- Kaunas
- Klaipėda
- Other

6. What translation project management software does your office use? \*

- A commercial programme
- A programme developed for the translation agency
- Do not use any
- Other

7. Do translators need project management skills?\*

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

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8. Does the translation project manager need to have translation knowledge and skills? \*

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

9. How may translation project management skills be acquired?\*

- While studying at university
- Training and refresher courses organised by a translation agency
- Through practical use of translation project management software
- Other

10. What are the benefits of using translation project management software for a translation agency? (choose all that apply) \*

- Data security
- Possibility to monitor, store and manage documents
- Easy sharing large files
- Effective communication
- Everything in one place
- Ability to send and download high volume documents without risk
- Emails do not go to spam
- Other

11. What are the benefits of using translation project management software for a freelance translator? (choose all that apply) \*

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- Data security
- Possibility to monitor, store and manage documents
- Easy sharing large files
- Effective communication
- Everything in one place
- Ability to send and download high volume documents without risk
- Emails do not go to spam
- Other

12. What qualities are important to a translation project manager? (choose 5 most important features) \*

- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Leadership
- Analytical thinking
- Problem solving
- Creativity
- Self-command
- Self-confidence
- Communicative skills
- Cooperation and respect
- Emotional intelligence
- IT skills
- Other

## **APPENDIX 2. Survey on translation project management for students**

Dear Respondent,  
Researchers at Kaunas University of Technology are conducting research on translation project management

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aspects in Lithuania. We kindly ask you to answer the following questions. All information will be used for research purposes only. Personal information is not collected and will not be disclosed anywhere. The questionnaire is anonymous. It will take 5–10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Thank you for the answers. The obligatory questions have been marked by \*

1. Do you have work experience in a translation agency? \*

- Yes
- No
- Only during practice
- Other

2. If you have work experience in a translation agency, was translation project management software used in it?

- Yes
- No

3. Do you have skills in translation project management software? \*

- Yes
- No
- Other

4. Do translators need project management skills? \*

- Yes
- No

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- I don't know

5. Does the translation project manager need to have translation knowledge and skills? \*

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

6. How to acquire translation project management skills?\*

- While studying at university
- Training and refresher courses organized by the translation agency
- Practically using translation project management software
- Other

7. What are the benefits of using translation project management software for a freelance translator? (choose all that apply) \*

- Data security
- Possibility to monitor, store and manage documents
- Easy sharing large files
- Effective communication
- Everything in one place
- Ability to send and download high volume documents without risk
- Emails do not go to spam
- Other

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8. What qualities are important to a translation project manager? (choose 5 most important features) \*

- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Leadership
- Analytical thinking
- Problem solving
- Creativity
- Self-command
- Self-confidence
- Communicative skills
- Cooperation and respect
- Emotional intelligence
- IT skills
- Other