



Sharing knowledge, sharing words

S. Berner

sberner@ecognus.com

Translators might tell you that they know of knowledge management (KM) as a term they translate – but many of them are doing precisely that on any of the kudos boards, e-cafes or blogging spaces, not just occasionally, but almost on a daily basis. Yet just over 50% of translators polled on the question are consciously aware that they are engaging in KM, and over 30% of those polled did not know what 'knowledge management' meant.

Knowledge is 'information with guidance for action' while 'management' includes supervision and leadership. Looking at both, we clearly see that there is a significant social aspect to it: guidance, supervision and leadership are all aspects of mentoring. Mentoring, in turn, is the act of passing on one's expertise and knowledge to others – a cyclic process. Mentoring is as old as the *Odyssey* – Odysseus leaves his son Telemachus in the care of Mentor, who for the next 10 years teaches the lad all he knows, to good end, too. If it were not for Mentor's mentoring, Penelope would have been someone else's wife pretty early in the story.

No profession can exist without some form of knowledge sharing among its practitioners if it is to survive the information explosion provided by ICT and manage the fast-paced change under which it functions. Translators work with language, and language is a living organism that changes rapidly. Translators living abroad can attest to the fact that when they go 'back home' after five or six years, they are immediately picked on by taxi drivers and other tourist-related service providers as someone who has lived overseas because of the way their spoken language has become 'stilted' in the time they left their countries of origin. English is very quickly overtaking the other languages and English words creep into them at extraordinary speed. New technologies and inventions create new terminology, making any dictionary obsolete before it is even published. No single translator, no matter how experienced, will have full mastery of his or her language for long. Being information literate, having the tools to acquire new knowledge and grow it, is as essential to any translator as is his or her ability to construct correct sentences and have an eye for detail.

Beside the increase in terminology-related information, translators also need to become more than just conversant with the increasing number of CAT (computer-assisted translation) and other software tools: from word and character counting, to localization software, to DTP specific, to one's languages, to electronic dictionaries and bookkeeping programs. The most expensive and comprehensive CAT tool, Trados, is also one that can cause the most problems to translators inexperienced in its use, and the availability of mentors and communities of practice becomes crucial where deadlines are tight and googling is just not the right solution.

One of the most successful Web sites for the translator and interpreter community is Proz (www.proz.com). Proz meets a multiplicity of needs within the translator community, some of which, although important, are not related to sharing information or mentoring. Proz started as a 'jobs board' – somewhere online where freelance translators and their clients could meet, post jobs and offer bids. Once translators join Proz, they can create a Web page that comprehensively covers all aspects of their trade: the languages they translate, their fields of experience, their qualifications and years of experience, their professional affiliations, links to their private Web sites, and the opportunity to send other translators an e-mail (which Proz staff filters for spam). It shows how many Kudoz points the translator was awarded, and how much they charge per word/page/hour of their work. It also allows translators to upload their own résumé and provide a portfolio of their work for viewing.

Translation agencies and outsourcers can also become members in Proz, and their pages allow for a spiel of the company, the languages they translate and a link to their corporate Web site and to the Blue Board (see below). Once a member of Proz, agencies can post translation assignments and wait for translators to confidentially propose bids. Proz also provides a very comprehensive directory of translators that can be searched by name, languages, specialization and country of residence.

In those aspects Proz is not unique, for there were quite a number of such online boards prior to Proz, and many more followed: Aquarius, Translatorbase, Translator Café, Go Translators, etc. – most of them differing very little from one another, and only a few being anywhere as comprehensive as Proz in what they offer.

Proz, however, differs in a number of ways:

1. Its Kudoz system allows anyone, not just Proz members, to ask professional translators for the meaning of any word in any of the languages represented in Proz. More than one response can be provided and the asker can choose the one that is most correct/useful to their needs. Other translators who do not want to participate by providing answers themselves can contribute to the discussion by either agreeing or disagreeing with the provided answers. The answer with most 'agree' contributions gets to the top of the answers and is often chosen. The translator who provided the chosen answer is then awarded points, which show on their personal Web page. The asker has the option of adding the chosen term to the general Kudoz glossary, which can be searched by term, part thereof, language direction and specialization field. Kudoz is a moderated environment, and a moderator can quash any answers or comments that do not fit with the rules of the site. The most fascinating part of the Kudoz process is often not in finding the term, but the linguistic discussion that ensues between various translators as to the use of the term. This advice is much more valuable than the term.
2. The Glosspost feature allows translators to share with their colleagues URLs of online-based glossaries. The Glosspost is searchable by subject, part of the URL and language.
3. An important knowledge-sharing tool on Proz is the Blue Board, where the paying members evaluate their experience of any particular client they worked for, thus providing an early warning system to other translators in case an agency is phony or has poor payment practices. Agencies have the right to respond to these postings. However, if an agency consistently scores low on the Blue Board, it is 'banned' from posting any further jobs.
4. Proz has extensive fora, their subjects ranging from translation-related software to literary translation, and from chasing up non-paying clients to conferences and events pertaining to languages. All Proz members, paying and non-paying, can access and participate in these fora. A search for a particular term can be done across all the fora or just a chosen number of them. The fora are moderated by a group of volunteers from all over the world. Their task is not easy, as their membership is extremely culturally and socially varied. Frictions occur occasionally, but unlike many other CoP fora and mailing lists, Proz is almost devoid of 'flaming'. This is mostly because of the very strict professional guidelines.
5. Translator members of Proz can create teams, and can bid for larger jobs as a team. Paying members in Proz can access 'community rates', which is an average fee their colleagues in a particular language pair charge. This helps them determine if their charges are too high or too low.
6. Members of Proz can upload articles they have authored relating to the various aspects of the translating industry. It furthers the sharing of knowledge among translators, provides resources for professional development that members can use outside of Proz and provides the authors with an additional marketing tool.
7. Members of Proz are in no way restricted to cyberspace for their interactions with others. Proz organizes real-world conferences that are well attended, as well as various POWWOWS, which are smaller informal gatherings of Proz members held at a city or town level. These CoP gatherings encourage networking and facilitate discussions of local issues pertaining to the profession. Lately, a number of European based translators have also been organizing a Stammtisch – an even more relaxed but more regular event than POWWOWS, usually in a pub.
8. The Translators Exchange is an online 'flea market' where translators can offer or request services and goods from their colleagues. Offers vary from language classes to second-hand dictionaries, CAT tools and advice on travel to certain destinations. This is, in my opinion, an underutilized

feature of Proz, and would benefit from a bit of advertising. In addition, Proz has an online store, mostly for new books and software.

It must be noted that the staff at Proz are very aware that rewards facilitate knowledge sharing. There are two main awards systems on Proz: the 'brownies' and 'points'. Brownies are granted for accepted glossaries, articles, contributions to fora, polls, entering terms into glossaries and either answering questions on Kudoz or agreeing/disagreeing with them. Brownies can be exchanged for money towards the payment of one's membership fees. Points are only obtained when one's answer to a Kudoz question is chosen and the asker awards anywhere between one and four points per answer. These points are shown prominently on the answering translator's page, and a tab leads to a Web page where all the answers of that translator that were chosen are presented. Clients looking for translators often take care to choose those who show their mastery of the language or specialization by accruing a high number of points. Points are also used to move the translator's position up in the directory – the more points, the higher the position.

Has Proz been a successful tool? The testimonials on the Web site stress the value of the shared information and expertise gained, as well as the increase in productivity and client base:

- *'Peers have often helped me with difficult terms where all dictionaries failed.'*
- *'What I like most at ProZ.com is the relationship between the ProZ.com staff and the members. I felt that you really care about us and about the way you can help us.'*
- *'Every year, our membership generates new business contacts which result in tangible job opportunities.'*
- *'I am much better informed about translating issues in general.'*
- *'I understand ProZ.com as the meeting place for translators, a place where we can exchange ideas, help each other, broaden our horizons, improve our networks...'*
- *'I can always count on it for useful information and interesting linguistic and cultural tidbits, as well as insights into my colleagues' backgrounds and thought processes.'*
- *'This is simply the best, most comprehensive support network and best moderated Web site I could wish for as a translator.'*

There are, of course, other cyberspaces where translators share their knowledge with each other and the wider community. Proz seems to be, however, an excellent example of what a portal for translators, or any other community of practice, should be like.

In our next issue, we will tackle blogging and how it promotes information sharing.

About the author

Sam Berner (B.Ed., Dipl. LIS, Postgraduate Diploma in Information Management) is a principal of the company ECognus (Brisbane, Australia). She is a knowledge management consultant, assisting small to medium enterprises to benefit the most from their intellectual assets. ECognus also provides services in the area of tailored software applications and the digitization of business processes.

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