

Reprinted from June 6, 2005

HACKENSACK

Found in Translation

This company profits by creating understanding

By Varghese Joseph

SINCE SEPTEMBER 11 the demand for translation and interpretation services has been rising. This reflects the federal government's need for help in dealing with so-called national security languages, tongues like Arabic, Korean and Chinese that are associated with a perceived threat. While there are plenty of players vying for a slice of this market—including new entrants like defense contractors—at least one firm, Hackensack's Translation Plus, has found growth while working with its traditional customers.

Founded in 1991 with a specialty in Portuguese, Translation Plus today provides translation and live and phone interpretation in more than 180 languages. Its clients include labor unions and companies in health care, pharmaceuticals and manufacturing. In addition, the company provides cross-cultural consulting and training.

It's not that Translation Plus is unwilling to do national security work, says President Elisabete Miranda. It's the difficulty in securing government contracts and the necessary clearances. "So, for the present," she says, "although we continue to look for government contract opportunities, Translation Plus is content with serving the traditional markets." Of course, it helps that "there is a shortage of good translators and as a result there is enough work for all."

The shortage of qualified practitioners is the most important issue facing the industry, says Kevin Hendzel, a spokesman for the American Translators Association (ATA) in Virginia. "By 'qualified,' I mean they not only speak two

or three languages, but also have technical knowledge and skills in translation and interpretation. It is not a matter of speaking more than one language; it is a matter of having subject knowledge, ability to write well and being properly trained."

Translation Plus was founded by Edna Ditaranto, who currently serves as the company's vice president. A former translator for a bank in Brazil, Ditaranto says she emigrated to the U.S. in 1981 to improve her English.

"That's what I wanted to do here," she says. Ditaranto completed a Master's degree in translation from City University of New York and joined a Brazilian bank in Manhattan. She began freelancing as a translator when she was pregnant with the first of her three children.

In 1991 she opened an office in Lodi and hired a cousin to help. The cousin's visa expired and Ditaranto worked solo until Miranda, her sister-in-law, arrived in 1994.

Miranda and her husband had run a restaurant and a pajama factory in Sao Paulo, Brazil. They came to the U.S. to escape their country's economic decline. Miranda's energy helped get the young translation firm going.

"In 1995 we started marketing our services directly to clients," says Miranda. "By 1997 we were one of the largest providers of Portuguese translation in the U.S., and by 1998 we started to progressively market other languages."

Miranda, who has a business degree in international marketing and management from Montclair State University, says the company acted as a "freelance kind of company" by working as a subcontractor until 2000. That year it developed a new business plan that targeted the types of companies Translation Plus now



After fleeing Brazil's weak economy, Miranda hopes to build a \$5 million interpreting business.

works with.

As the company started offering translation services in additional languages, its revenue started climbing. From \$55,000 in 1994, revenue rose to \$867,000 in 2004. Miranda expects Translation Plus to pull in more than \$1 million this year. "The first quarter has not been very encouraging," she says. "But we do expect a good year because of the projects we have in the pipeline."

Despite the heavy demand for translations, the business retains aspects of a cottage industry. Translation Plus has just five full-time employees and maintains a network of some 3,000 linguists.

“The nature of this industry is based on freelance work,” says Miranda. Citing a 2003 Dun & Bradstreet study, she says there are some 4,400 companies with total annual revenue of \$1.4 billion in the U.S. that provide translation services. Of these, 60% are one-person operations with annual revenue of less than \$100,000. There are only three publicly traded translation services companies in the U.S.: Bowne Global Solutions in New York City, Lionbridge Technologies in Massachusetts and SDL International in Texas

“Our industry is a lot like the practice of law in that you could be a law firm and have just one member or that you could be a law firm and have 50 or 100 partners,” says Hendzel of the Translators Association. “Each one is considered an independent firm, meaning that the translation industry has a lot of small practitioners. The last time we did a survey [in 2000] we found 20,000 people in the U.S. engaged in professional translation. Well over 80% of those 20,000 are one or two individuals. So it is very much fragmented.” Still, the ATA says the industry is worth \$11

billion if one includes all translation, interpreting and language instruction done on every level.

“It is not a matter of speaking more than one language; it is a matter of having subject knowledge, ability to write well and being properly trained.”

Kevin Hendzel

Spokesman, American Translators Assoc.

“It’s exploding as an industry. We are seeing huge increases in the number of organizations,” says Bob McLean, executive director of The Association of Language Companies. “Since 9/11, some of the large defense organizations are now

looking at getting into the translation business.”

Hendzel says the trick to translation is remembering how critical it is to do a good job. “Inaccurate translation is not only embarrassing but could prove to be costly and disastrous,” he says. “On top of that, there are issues of liability, particularly safety.”

Translation Plus appears to have satisfied customers that it knows what it’s doing. Its clients include two major pharmaceutical companies, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Cornell University, the State of Nevada and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center.

“One of our biggest clients is 1199 SEIU—the largest union for health care employees in the U.S.,” says Miranda. “The Mason Tenders Training Fund is also a big client. We provide translation of their training manual.”

Looking ahead, Miranda and Ditaranto want Translation Plus to become a \$5 million company in the next five years. “We want to differentiate ourselves from the crowd,” says Miranda. Now that’s *ambição*. ♦

E-mail to vjoseph@njbiz.com
