

Growth of the translation market



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On 30 September, the language industry commemorates International Translation Day, celebrating its successes and examining issues in the industry.

Looking at the development of the South African language services sector, there's a tremendous opportunity for local players to increase their slice of the global pie - worth USD 33.523 billion in 2012 with a 12.17% annual growth according to Common Sense Advisory.

Currently, the whole of Africa is getting less than 1% of the world's total translation revenue, according to another [Common Sense Advisory report](#). Aside from South Africa, Translators without Borders said in [an interview](#), sub-Saharan Africa doesn't have much of a translation industry.

Future growth

This puts South Africa in an excellent position to capitalise on future growth as Africa's economic spending power increases.

South Africa's language industry has a good body of translation skills. Local agencies are very adept at serving the market with small and once-off jobs into vernaculars, given their direct contact with individual translators. A local selling point for global clients is also the reassurance that they are important customers, whereas often just being a number with big international agencies.

However, local agencies are still only getting access to small pieces of translation while the bigger international Language Service Providers (LSPs) get to do the really interesting work. International companies are not contracting local agencies for the more complex jobs. Instead, they work through Multi-Language LSPs who then subcontract local agencies as Single-Language vendors.

To get bigger pieces of business, local agencies have to address the gap in project management skills and general technical expertise.

Other components

While the local industry is very focused on translation, there are many other components to language services projects. Agencies currently outsource jobs to multiple agents, resulting in many different pieces. Due to a relative lack of project management ability to coordinate multi-faceted jobs in the local industry, this task sits with the client. This presents a missed opportunity for local agencies.

Local agencies need to broaden their offering. Instead of only providing translation, they should also look at typesetting and technical skills and get these value added services into Africa.

To develop these skills, get more resources on board and build up problem solving expertise to deal with unknown situations, more translation volumes need to come through South Africa. Big international vendors don't want the burden of teaching a local agency to solve basic problems.

Macro challenges in South Africa include the ability to expand economic growth so more translation volumes come through the local market, as well as affordable access to quality bandwidth. As the industry increasingly leverages cloud-based translation tools, it's vital that translators can access the Internet, or that agencies have their own infrastructure and technical expertise in place for workaround.

Unlocking new markets

Some growth opportunities are also being lost with local companies not prizing exports enough as a way to unlock new markets through product and website adaptation. South African companies are very price-conscious, regarding translation as a cost rather than a strategic business opportunity.

Where local companies do eye international markets, there's often an incorrect perception that foreign language translation in South Africa isn't ideal. Local agencies can handle translations in Portuguese and hundreds of other languages very effectively, produce work that is on par and even better than international agencies. There's also the benefit of having a local contact person.

Until local agencies demonstrate the required skills, taking some risk in building out their service offerings, the bigger business won't come. The growth of the South African translation industry relies on forward-innovation to grow the pie.

Africa is home to roughly 10% of the world's population although it represents only 2.36% of world GDP. But, the African economy is growing. According to a UN report, 10 of the world's 15 fastest-growing economies in 2010 were African.

The international poster created for the worldwide day can be viewed [here](#).

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