

Enterprise Terminology Management: Common Terms = Common Knowledge

Position Paper

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Key Points

- **Terminology is core to communication and knowledge sharing.**
 - **Passive management of enterprise terms leads to downstream costs and missed opportunities.**
 - **Proactive management of terminology is gaining acceptance and generates positive returns in the areas of intellectual asset reuse and brand consistency.**
 - **Proprietary tools and methods available from L10N Technology are assisting clients in capturing, managing, and leveraging their terminology assets.**
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What Is Terminology?

Terminology: the vocabulary of technical terms used in a particular field, subject, science or art; nomenclature.



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The American Heritage dictionary defines terminology as “the vocabulary of technical terms used in a particular field, subject, science, or art; nomenclature.” That sounds fairly simple. Unfortunately, as with most things, things are not so simple in the real world.

For example, consider the word “beetle.” For most people this word conjures up images of a small, black bug and unless they are an entomologist or a six year old boy, they most likely have a negative reaction to the word. However, by asking people to consider the same word “beetle” in the context of automobiles their reaction suddenly changes. Now images of a quirky, pop-culture icon spring to mind evoking a positive association with the beloved and best-selling Volkswagen car by the same name. That is the power of terminology, the ability to ascribe dramatically different meanings and sensations to identical words based on their context.

Whether it was created deliberately or developed organically, every industry, every culture, every organization has a unique terminology that helps to ensure the efficient, accurate transfer of knowledge and information among its members. However, there are several factors impeding this exchange. The first is that people simultaneously belong to many different constituencies, which may influence their interpretation and reaction to a given term. Next, even within a clearly defined population, terminologies are situational (e.g. the word “chip” in a computer lab versus a restaurant). And lastly, the effect of these conditions is increased exponentially when terminology is deployed across multiple languages and is subjected to incorrect interpretations resulting from the local nuances and idiomatic expressions unique to each language and culture.



Consistent Terminologies and the Organizational Impact

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Terminology is literally at the core of an organization. Without a basic common language across the different functional areas productive work would be all but impossible. Yet while every organization possesses at least this base-level, internal terminology, those that aspire to and achieve a greater degree of consistency in their “language” are able to operate more efficiently, with less redundancy, and generate substantial cost savings and new revenue opportunities. The rationale is quite simple, the more common the language the more effective the organization.

As an analogy, consider two outstanding US sales representatives: one speaks fluent French, the other knows only a few simple phrases. Who will be more successful selling to clients in France? Obviously the fluent one, but consider why. First, he will be able to communicate effectively and efficiently in any media (e-mail, phone, fax, face-to-face), whereas the other will require frequent pauses and additional time to “look up” the proper words or phrases, impeding the volume of sales calls he can make. Second, the fluent one is confident that his message was delivered and understood by the clients while the other feels uncertain and hesitant in his deals. Finally, contracts are written faster and more accurately by the French-speaking rep while the other must seek out resources to clarify his language, resulting in multiple rewrites impacting both his performance and the performance of those he has had to interrupt for assistance.

While this is an extreme example, it serves to highlight the kinds of communications issues hindering the sharing of knowledge within companies today. Instead of French versus English, the opposing “languages” may be Marketing versus R&D, or Sales versus Finance. Instead of contracts, the documents may be user manuals or product sales sheets. Just like the American sales rep who was forced to frequently pause and ask “what do they mean by that?” employees in different functional areas, working together towards a common project or goal, are often challenged in the same way.

In the past, companies have made limited attempts at developing and utilizing standard terminologies, but as companies expand globally they are experiencing the negative effects of poor term control and are seeking a more direct, pro-active approach, hence the emergence of Enterprise Terminology Management or ETM.

The Past: Trademarks, Copyrights and Informality

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Until recently, and with very few exceptions, ETM was an undefined process, an unwritten series of terminological rules that were shared within organizations. Brand names, copyrights, trademarks, these were the foundations of formal corporate terminology, but around this well-documented core evolved an informal terminology: acronyms to identify a business unit or product, unique idioms to describe particular client scenarios, generally accepted phrases for market conditions etc. Very often it was this latter, undocumented terminology that facilitated the efficient



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sharing of information and ideas. These rules and constructs were anecdotally and arbitrarily passed down from company veterans to new employees who often felt like outsiders until they had gained a sufficient understanding of the corporate “lingo.” To understand this phenomenon you need only consider whether you have ever spoken the phrase “oh, we used to call that ‘XYZ’ at my last company” shortly after taking a job at a new firm.

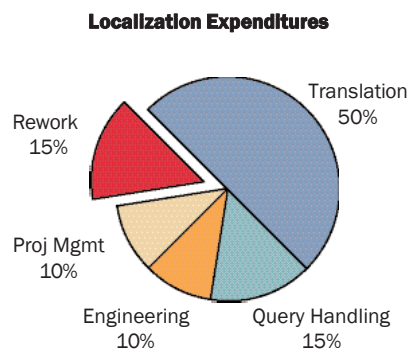
This traditional, unstructured approach to term consistency was inefficient and costly. It added to the learning curve of new employees who were forced to not only learn about a new organization and its products or services but to also learn its unique language before becoming fully productive members of the team. In the case of a merger or acquisition, undocumented terminologies became a major barrier to cultural and financial integration as aligned teams struggled to find common ground. Finally, it stalled product development and launch processes as different functions sought to reconcile their non-standard vocabularies.

Even with these inherent issues, ETM received little attention. However, two major industrial shifts over the last decade has changed this and brought an emphasis on ETM to the forefront of leading companies: globalization and knowledge management.

The Rise of Proactive Enterprise Terminology Management

As global markets stabilized, distribution costs dropped and vast new revenue opportunities emerged. With this evolution came the necessity of establishing operations in foreign locations, which most often included the hiring of local resources who knew both the language and customs of their country. This increase in diversity fueled demand for a common corporate language, an agreed-to terminology that would be consistently deployed and utilized to facilitate communications across borders.

From a more tangible perspective, the rise of globalization leads to increased expenditures in the areas of translation and localization. Given the negative compounding effect poor term management can have during the translation process, it became apparent that a better solution was needed.



In looking at the breakdown of localization expenditures, you can see that a substantial portion, 15%, is related to rework. This rework is a direct result of poor terminology management. By establishing and controlling a common terminology throughout the organization and across languages, the amount of rework can be reduced dramatically, lowering your overall localization expense.

Another byproduct of the drive to global-



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ize was increased pressure within companies to “share best practices,” essentially learning from the mistakes made in other operations and exporting only the most effective processes to the new locations. This in turn gave rise to the concept of Knowledge Management or KM. Though KM purists will argue the true definition of KM, at its core it is a facilitated sharing of information across organizations and geographic boundaries with the goal of creating a corporate collective, enabling any single practitioner to leverage the complete intellectual assets of the firm. Reaping the benefits of a KM system, however, was dependent on the ability of the end user to understand and employ the knowledge as effectively as its creator, hence the KM community’s cry for terminology standardization.

Unfortunately these cries went unanswered for many years as there was simply no one who could effectively respond with a true solution, until very recently. The pleas for help were most often directed at the localization and translation firms who had become trusted partners of these global entities. As experts in the field of language manipulation and adaptation, it seemed only logical that they offer the solution for this new linguistic challenge. These firms have since taken up the mantra of ETM and there now exists a growing variety of solutions and supporting technology to aid firms in their terminology mission.

ETM Solutions: More than just Databases

The success of an ETM effort is dependent more on modifying employee behavior than on the capabilities of the technology.

“Enterprise Terminology Management” is defined as the processes by which a company establishes, maintains and utilizes a set of standardized terms to describe common functions and products. As such, the success of an ETM effort is dependent more on modifying employee behavior than on the capabilities of the technology made available to them. Looking at the way the terminology support market has evolved however, may lead you to conclude just the opposite. A quick search for “terminology management” on a popular Internet engine now returns nearly 4,000 results. The fact that this phrase barely existed five years ago outside of small gatherings of localization specialists serves as a testament to the growing demand for an ETM solution. Unfortunately, as with most emerging industries, the first people to answer the call of a new market often do so by sacrificing quality and depth in their response.

The complexity of human language has baffled developers, who have tried for decades to develop accurate, automated translation systems. But still, today, a bilingual five-year-old is more adept at translation than the most sophisticated computer systems. Terminology management faces many of the same complexities as it seeks to capture, define and deploy a consistent term base to a highly diverse corporate population. To assume, therefore, that the issue of ETM can be addressed by deploying a simple database system is naïve.

Technology should serve only as a facilitator and enabler of a broader, culture-based response.

While it is true that any ETM solution will have a technology component, the technology should serve only as a facilitator and enabler of a broader, culture-based response. The financial pages are littered with the remains of failed knowledge man-



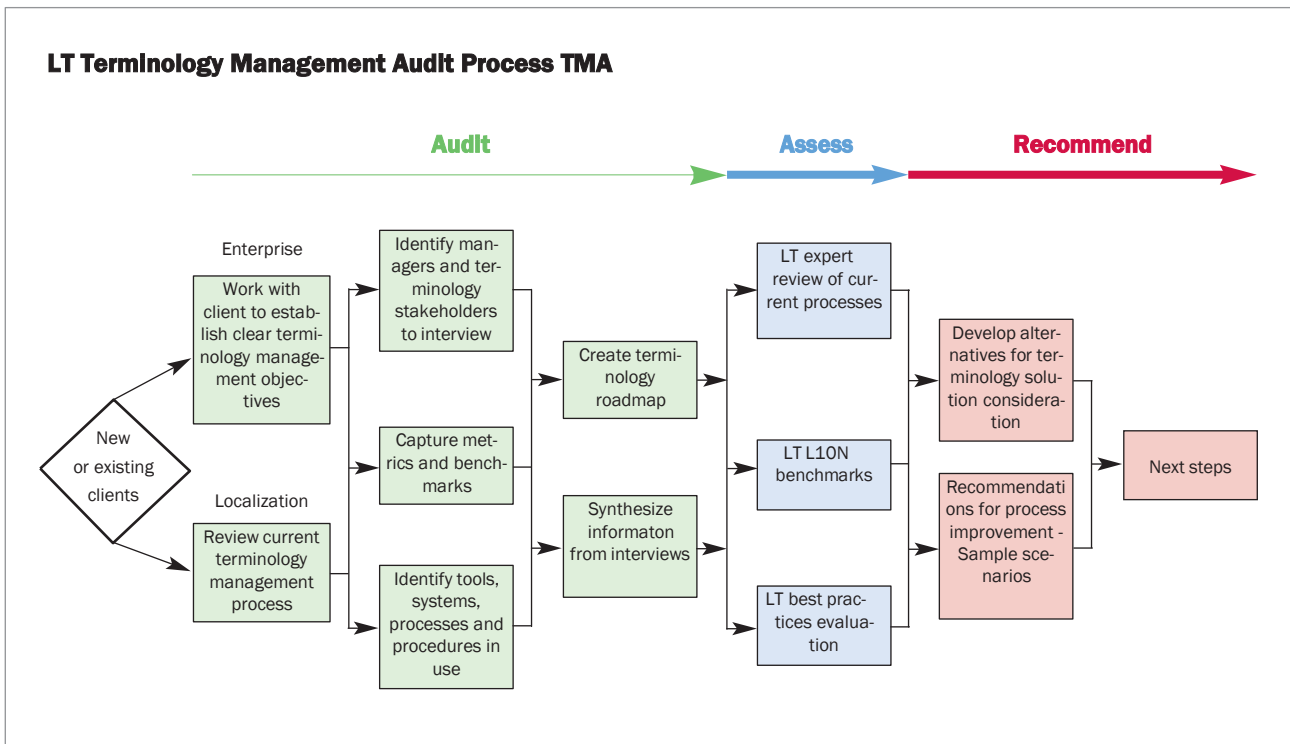
agement vendors who sought to address a predominantly cultural issue with a technical solution, and it is likely that a similar fate awaits most ETM system providers. The challenge for corporate management, therefore, is to identify a solution provider who has the experience to first assess and address the organizational barriers before the technical ones.

L10N Technology: A Holistic Approach to ETM

To reap the true benefits of ETM, companies would need to adopt a holistic approach to terminology management ...

As the world largest globalization services firm, L10N Technology (LT) was in a unique position to be one of the first to market with an enterprise terminology management system. However, our client experience had demonstrated to us that this was not an area that could be, or should be, addressed by launching an immature system. To reap the true benefits of ETM, companies would need to adopt a holistic approach to terminology management and in many instances be willing to change core processes and more importantly, core attitudes, across the organization. What was needed was not a better database, but a guide to lead management through this transformation.

To that end, we have developed what we consider to be the preeminent response to the ETM challenge. By combining our consulting expertise with leading-edge terminology management tools, we are able to offer our clients a true end-to-end methodology, which leverages existing assets while providing an integrated, efficient and flexible process for future term base expansion.



Our engagements begin with a brief audit of the present state of our client's terminology. From this analysis we are able to develop a comprehensive proposal to be implemented over several phases, each with a defined output and ROI. Lasting from four to ten weeks, the consulting phases of our project serve to plan and execute a controlled transformation of your organization and processes in order to maximize the applicability and utilization of the common term base. Use of the term base is facilitated through web-enabled technology in the form of TermGLOBAL, LT[®] proprietary terminology creation and maintenance system available exclusively to our ETM service clients. Offered as a low-cost, hosted system, TermGLOBAL offers clients an easy to navigate web interface with customized user access levels designed to deliver maximum flexibility while maintaining the integrity of your term data.

It is only by employing a comprehensive transformational approach that clients are able to realize the full potential of ETM.



About LT

L10N Technology (LT) is the leading provider of translation, localization, technical writing and interpretation services that enable businesses to deliver locally relevant and culturally connected products, services and communications anywhere in the world. Companies throughout the world use our solutions to help grow their businesses in the Americas, Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Our scalable end-to-end solutions can help accelerate a company's time to market while improving the quality and consistency of the company's products and services. Our wide range of clients include leading businesses in information technology, automotive, e-learning, life sciences, entertainment, telecommunications, aerospace and power and utilities industries.

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