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How to become a professional translator

If you are keen to be a full-time, professional translator, here is Cicero's advice. We hope you find it helpful.

Step 1: 'Think business'

In setting up as a translator you are setting up in business, so you will want to be clear about some fundamental business questions:

- What markets are you planning to address (translation companies, direct clients, both)?
- What can you offer them which they do not already have (speed, accuracy, specialist knowledge, competitive prices, persuasive writing)?
- How are you going to persuade them to do business with you?
- How much are you going to charge?
- How are you going to run your business – what balance of marketing, financial control, administration, and actual work on translation?

You probably do not know the answer to any of these questions. Do not worry – they will become clearer as your preparations advance. But keep them in mind and revisit them regularly. They are questions you will eventually need to answer if you are going to succeed.

Step 2: Prepare yourself

To be successful you have to be able to offer a consistently good service which people are willing to pay for. To do this, you will need:

(i) Qualifications

Cicero Translations only engages the services of translators who are members of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting in the UK or the equivalent organisation in other countries; or come highly recommended from a reputable source. Many translation companies have a similar policy.

Nowadays, new translators often have a university degree, diploma or postgraduate qualification specifically in translation and in translation techniques. You may need to gain similar qualifications to compete in the market unless you have something else to offer (e.g. you are a former chemist at a pharmaceutical company and are completely familiar with drug trial vocabulary in both English and another language).

(ii) Equipment

You need a good quality PC or Mac, and the most commonly used software:

Essential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MS Outlook or similar email program • Word • Excel • PowerPoint • Adobe Reader
Desirable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trados Studio or other well-known translation memory software (Déjà-vu, MemoQ). These are known as 'computer aided translation' or 'CAT' tools. It is tough to compete without them.
Could be useful in winning more work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AutoCAD (if you do engineering) • Articulate (PowerPoint plug-in) • Commonly-used web development tools (Dreamweaver, Wordpress) • Quark and InDesign if you are offering DTP or typesetting services

Being fully conversant with this software is a great selling point. Time spent studying and practising will not be wasted. Our experience is that translators who understand, for example, how to use tables, styles and outline numbering in MS Word are rare; and they are the ones who get the jobs where that knowledge is required.

(iii) Expertise

You will need to be fully conversant in at least two languages in the fields in which you plan to offer translation.

Once it was enough just to speak two or more languages fluently. Since the IT revolution, however, the volume of translation has grown, with the result that more and more specialist translators have established niche markets. This has made it harder for even talented generalists to compete.

So consider what specialisms you can genuinely offer (and which businesses need) and work hard to develop them by reading and studying.

Fields in which translation is most in demand are those where international trade is at its most intense, for example, engineering, financial services, law and pharmaceuticals. But there are many niche markets where translators may prosper. We know of one translation business which survives almost entirely on translating texts to do with domestic and industrial heating systems. Over the years, the people who run this business have come to know more about heating systems than most of their clients. They are well known in the heating systems industry.

Step 3: Sell yourself

Most business start-ups go through a tough initial stage where they struggle to find work. But as your business becomes established you will – if you are good – get more and more clients through referral and recommendation. You just need to hold steady and it will come.

(i) References

No selling message is more powerful than client testimonials. But it is a 'Catch-22': you cannot get work without a portfolio of success stories, but you cannot get such a portfolio unless clients take you on. It may be tough, but consider doing some work free of charge in exchange for written testimonials. Then create a website for your services and emblazon the testimonials prominently upon it.

(ii) Send mailings to your target clients explaining what you can do for them. Remember:

- sell them benefits, not features
- always write your selling message from the clients' point of view; give them reasons why they should do business with *you*.
- offer to do some small pieces for them free of charge. Seeing the quality of your work for themselves will have a greater impact than just being told about it.

Step 4: Keep up the momentum

Once you start getting paid work, you may be tempted to relax. This is fine, but remember:

- (i) Getting work is crucial, but being paid for it is equally crucial. Make sure you agree clear and explicit credit terms with your clients, and chase for payment hard if you do not get paid on time. Do not be afraid of offending your clients. On the contrary, they will respect you because your actions show that you are a professional and you require to be treated with respect. Fail to chase, and you may be regarded as a soft touch whose credit can probably be extended by an additional 10 days. Cicero Translations always pays its translators promptly at the end of the month following the date of their invoices.
- (ii) Clients come and go. You may have plenty of work today, but the translator's lot is typically a matter of feast or famine. You need to keep up a steady marketing effort and diversify into new fields if you are to replace those clients who will, inevitably, fall by the wayside.

Step 5: Enjoy the work

Few people in the world are able to earn a living exercising a skill which they enjoy. It is a privilege. You have worked hard to get to this point, and you deserve a pat on the back.

We wish you success!

Tips for getting started

- Talk to anyone you know who is already a full-time professional translator, preferably someone who is not going to be in competition with you (different language combinations or different market sectors) and who will speak freely.
- Spend some time looking around the Proz.com website. It is a translators' community site and is an invaluable source of information about the profession.
- Assuming you are still keen to become a professional translator, look again at Step 2 and check whether you have the qualifications, equipment and expertise to do so; if not, get them.
- Once you are ready to start, start selling yourself – see step 3.
- Do not neglect steps 4 and 5!