

The Translation of Large-volume Projects in Portugal

Case study: Qualification of Contractors for the Vasco da Gama Bridge Construction

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Some Background

The Lisbon Metro area has developed rapidly on the south bank of the Tejo River. Until recently, a single suspension bridge built by U.S. Steel and opened in 1966 afforded the only means of crossing the river in town. With increases in cargo and passenger traffic, maximum capacity for the bridge was reached in the late eighties and the crossing became a challenge to both human patience and automotive engineering.

In 1991, the Portuguese Government decided to add a new bridge using a Build-Operate-Transfer (or BOT) financing scheme, and in 1994 an international Request For Proposals was posted in an effort to select the company or group to take charge of design, construction and operation.

As is typical with jobs of this size, the bidding attracted the very cream of Europe's construction companies, which - after squaring off into various groups and consortia - advanced to the qualifying stage of the selection process. At this juncture, the Portuguese Government had to gather information on the makeup of the various companies, their technical capacity and equipment, experience with similar projects, financial strength and other data relevant to the undertaking. With estimates running to well over a billion dollars, this was clearly no job for some fly-by-night operator.

A Marshalling of Forces

My employer, a mid-size but well established Lisbon-based contractor, organized a bidding group made up of heavyweight European contracting firms: Denmark's leading contractor (also our parent company), a leading British concern, a Dutch company specializing in marine works, one leading Swedish corporation and two more Portuguese companies all tossed their hats into the ring. Working closely with us behind the scenes was a syndicate of investment banks that would provide the financial advice and raise the capital necessary for the entire project. These banks, incidentally, produced some of the most challenging documents the translators had to deal with. The BOT approach was a fairly new concept in the field of financial engineering, and many of its neologisms have yet to be coined in Portuguese.

A Portuguese government agency was set up specifically for the project and, with the help of an international consulting firm, placed in charge of the evaluation. Now, triplicate copies of all documents had to be produced in Portuguese plus duplicate copies in English. The ball was now rolling and I was soon placed in charge of seeing to it that all documents were produced and transmitted in a timely manner to the lead company (my employer), properly translated (on schedule) and made available to the project manager in charge of drawing up the bid. What kind of documents? The whole nine yards, really: for each company there were articles of incorporation, financial reports, company profiles, project summaries, letters of recommendation, preliminary contracts among members comprising the group, technical specifications, technician's résumés, equipment lists, financial projections, environmental impact assessments, and so forth. All documents originally in English were to be translated into Portuguese and all documents in Portuguese translated into English. Estimated volume was 1000 pages - some 300,000 words - in assorted subject areas, ranging from heavily technical to condensed legalese copy, and we had ten weeks in which to do it all. Now, the ball was definitely rolling and the clock ticking...

Mobilization and Deployment



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D-day minus 90 days: On the phone to Clotilde Mesquita, good friend and fellow ATA member who at the time was Director of a translation company in Lisbon I had but one question: "I need you to translate 300 thousand words on a variety of subjects, mainly technical and legal. Can you help us out?" Her answer, as I hoped and expected, was: "Sure I can! Tell me how you need it and when." Clotilde quickly contacted the translators and reviewers (civil engineers, economists and biologists were enlisted as specialist consultants in several fields) and put them on "yellow alert" some 2 weeks before I sent her the first copy. That gave the translators a chance to clear their desks of ongoing projects and to allocate time for the upcoming work.

I then contacted Isabel Monteiro, another good friend and another fellow ATA member: "You're in for the ride of your life; can you handle it?" Isabel agreed to work in-house three weeks at our offices, translating an assortment of loose and smaller documents that came pouring in thick and fast. Sure enough, she had the ride of her life: 12 hours a day translating document after document, ranging from CVs for Dutch or Swedish engineers to project summaries of bridges built in Sweden or Scotland. To smooth the process, every file sent out for translation (whether hardcopy or electronic) was named in advance. Word 6 and Excel were the selected formats, although in a few cases I sent out and accepted files in WordPerfect 5.1 (remember that wonderful workhorse?).

Clotilde was also given a ream of letterhead stationery, so printing for the joint venture could begin immediately. Naturally, most of the legal translations had to be certified, stamped and notarized, and anyone familiar with Portuguese notaries' practices and paperwork can picture the nightmare... Meanwhile, my phone nearly rang off the wall: contracting and translation companies from Paris, France, to Milan, Italy, were calling for translations related to the same project. These I had to turn down, since I was working with one of the bidders.



The Battle of the Bulge

With all forces deployed and battle orders issued, the brave warriors took up positions and dug in. Paragraph by paragraph, page after page, the monster was brought to heel as a stream of files was diverted to reviewers and editors for the final touch. All combatants were given my work and home numbers with one comment: if you run into something funny or unclear, it is never too late or too early to give me a call. As a translator myself, having been in the trenches for similar projects, I knew just how they felt: the dry subject matter, the seemingly endless procession of pages (will this thing ever end?), the hands of the clock hanging like Swords of Damocles over our heads, that turgidly obscure term that robs the entire sentence of meaning (I'll just mark it for now...), the next document oozing out of the fax (already?) and, of course, the incessant ticking of the clocks in three different time zones...

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In large-volume projects like this one, with all the in-country first-string translators busy in their foxholes (some local agencies had to send work abroad), one has to cast the net further and bring in the so-called second-string. Albeit just as dedicated as their first-string colleagues, these warriors are less experienced, not as well equipped and require some extra editing to produce the desired results. Managing these crucial second-string translators on large-scale projects is no small task in itself, and the out-of-country translators nearly burned up the phone lines to the Portuguese Roads Directorate's in-house translator. Given the nature of the project, she was bombarded with questions like: how do you say girder beam or slip-forming in Portuguese? Do we have a Portuguese translation for BOT? What in Hades is this jack-knifing thing they go on and on about? How do you say cala de navegação in English?

D-day minus 3 Days

By now, the ticking had sped up noticeably. As the deadline for submitting the bid loomed nearer, the torrent began pouring onto my desk. E-mail was not as familiar back then, and I was receiving documents in all sorts of media and formats: printer-ready Word and Excel files on floppies, WordPerfect files that had to be converted before printing, stacks and stacks of neatly-printed paper, inevitable last-minute changes to some "finished" document and documents blithely discarded only to be replaced by others, new and different. Engineers and technical writers have a special knack for driving translators to the point of despair...

D-day minus 2 Days

All translation and printing operations were wrapped up two days shy of the deadline and tactical copying machines rolled out as the troops fell back: there were 5000 pages to be sorted, checked, copied, punched and bound. Labels and front covers (you want to look your best...) had meanwhile been designed and printed.

D-day minus 1 Day

With the beachhead stormed and the area secured, the top brass came filing out in all their resplendent glory: Presidents and CEO's of Europe's largest contractors swooped down on golden parachutes just in time for the last act. Unsheathing everything from 18-carat Mont Blanc fountain pens to 50-cent ballpoints, they begin signing the stacks of documents. From dawn to dusk they sign and sign, as the sky turns from blue to purple. Needless to say, there is always just one more document to be translated, retranslated or amended - Clotilde kept the translators on red alert and Isabel stuck by us through V-day - one last page to copy, one more set of holes to punch...

D-day, or is it V-day?

Some ninety, 4-inch ring binders now stood by with hungry open jaws. The whole thing weighed about 380 pounds, all stacked, measured and packed to pass through 10th floor elevator doors (details, details...). With delivery made to the government agency and receipt in hand, it was all over but the shouting. Some weeks later, we learned there had been eight separate groups bidding on the project (some 65 companies in all, based everywhere from Finland to the USA). Our group took 3rd place based on technical and financial capabilities duly demonstrated by the documents submitted. As for the bridge itself, did we ever built it? Unfortunately not. After the first engagement, the top brass decided to sit this one out, but that's another story altogether.

Aftermath

The Vasco da Gama Bridge stands tall and proud for all to see: a beautiful 11-mile, 6-lane concrete deck, cable-stayed bridge, supported by two 450-foot, inverted Y concrete pylons and 81 caisson columns.

On opening day, 15,000 people were invited for an open-air inauguration luncheon. A table 3- miles long was set on the bridge deck to seat the entire crowd at once. The event was officially recorded and now graces the pages of the Guinness Book of World Records. It seems a shame, but to my knowledge there is no translation event recorded in the Guinness Book.

Translators are of course the real heroes in our industry, for they enable folks in Portugal to operate US-made machinery, just as they allow an English-speaking German auditor to understand translated balance sheets for a Portuguese corporation before a bridge can be built. It helps, of course, to have capable project managers at the translation agency who understand the clients' needs but in the end everything boils down to the individual Translator's ability to make sense of it all, whether as part of an organized team or working alone for the client.



Ponte Vasco da Gama – Lisbon, Portugal



First published at the ATA Chronicle, August 1999 issue.