Your localization strategy should evolve with your needs

With low overhead and relatively small startup costs, software companies are mushrooming in the U.S. to provide thousands of applications to niche markets. Once successful at home, investments are made to quickly expand globally to gain market share and increase revenues.

This is when the need to localize first arises, requiring a localization strategy. The challenge at hand is to be able to provide a localized product, while maintaining a stronghold on continuing to improve and evolve the product.

Depending on the importance of the localization task, quality control, time-to-market and the availability of funds, different strategies may better fit the requirements. Following are the different options available to executives in software companies.

A. Over-the-wall
The "Over-the-wall" strategy is when a company does not want to deal with the localization efforts or incur its direct costs. It delegates to its international value added resellers (VARs) or distributors to take care of the localization of its products.

In turn, the VAR will either do the localization effort internally, or out-sources to a local company. In most cases, the VAR assumes the costs of localization as part of the added value that it brings to its clients.

The main advantages for using this strategy are that it:
- Shields development from the localization effort,
- Eliminates any direct costs for localization, and
- Enables the availability of a localized version of the product.

The disadvantages are however numerous:

- No direct control over the quality of the end localized product,
- No control over time-to-market,
- No strategic coordination of multi-language releases, and
- No ownership of the localized material.

Yet even with the numerous disadvantages, many smaller companies with limited funds find this option attractive since it enables them to compete with other vendors on the international arena, or meet international regulations, or customer demands.

B. Coupled
As their international business matures in key geographies and becomes strategically important, companies opt to hold tighter controls over quality, schedules and ownership of their localized products.

At this point a loosely coupled integration between the software company development group and the localization staff will become required. In which case, the company either hires localization staff or works directly with a localization vendor, or both.

The localization staff coordinates with the development team and localization efforts are planned in conjunction with product release schedules. The localization effort will usually begin shortly after the product is stable enough for localization. This could be at the beta or pre-release stage of the product.

The disadvantages of this strategy are the following:

- The software company will have to budget and incur the costs of localization, and
- The localized products may require to undergo their own beta or pre-release testing after the English version beta or pre-release testing is finalized.

The key advantages of the Coupled strategy are however many:

- Control over the quality of the localized product,
- Control over the time schedules, and
- Ownership of the localized material.

If you are a marketing executive, these advantages will enable you to plan worldwide rollouts of your product while maintaining the quality image that you seek for both your company and product. It also buys you leverage over VARs or distributors worldwide. Often you have to rely on more than one distributor in key geographies and by owning the localized product you will remain in control.

C. Integrated
Simultaneous releases of English and localized products are becoming a requirement for some software companies. Worldwide users want to buy a localized version of the software as soon, or shortly after, the English version is available. Also, to gain the world's attention as well as effectively promote their products worldwide, marketing executives while doing worldwide rollouts of their products, have discovered the necessity of simultaneous localized releases.

Simultaneous releases require larger software companies, with non-standard, complex or numerous applications, to localize their user interfaces (UI) in parallel to software development. This will require the adoption of the Integrated localization strategy.
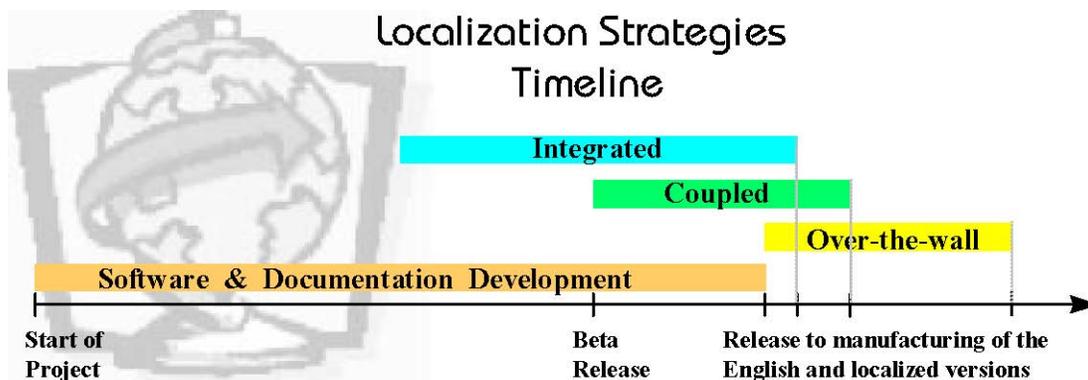
This strategy enables the release of beta or pre-release software in multiple languages at once. Beta testing can therefore take place simultaneously in all the necessary geographies. This permits feedback on all localized products to be provided, in a timely fashion, to make any necessary modifications to the source code before the English version is fully released.

Manuals, online help files, release notes and other documents can still be finalized after the English source is stable. These files do not have an impact on the source code.

The fully integrated strategy will require the localization staff to have continuous access to UI files. Often localization staffs working on the UI files in an integrated environment work onsite where they have access to RCS or the repository file vault used by the software developers.

Also, frequent updates to the UI files will be necessary to keep up with the development effort and to permit frequent builds of the localized software, for the localized products to be ready for beta or pre-release with the English version.

The main disadvantage of the Integrated strategy is that it will add to the costs of localization and make it unjustifiably high for smaller companies.

Localization Strategies Timeline

Integrated

Coupled

Over-the-wall

Software & Documentation Development

Start of Project

Beta Release

Release to manufacturing of the English and localized versions

Process is king

Luckily, with advances in computer aided translation tools and software standards, the Integrated strategy is overkill for most companies. With the advent of software standards, many localization tasks can be separated from the development effort. Also, UI parsing and leveraging tools, translation reuse, translation databases and terminology banks have directly contributed to considerably shrink localization costs and schedules, making the Coupled localization strategy approach the most logical one to adopt.

If your company has a global vision, the localization process it needs to enable an efficient and effective Coupled localization strategy remains to be of paramount importance.
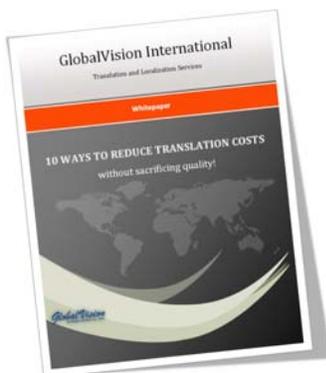
10 Ways to Reduce Localization and Translation Costs
This white paper will give you 10 tangible methods to reduce your localization costs without sacrificing quality. Guaranteed to save you money and a must read for every translation localization manager