



SOLE TRADER TO DYNAMIC COMPANY

Amanda Conrad and Helen Robertson

**ITI 21st Anniversary Conference
London
21-22 April 2007**

I am Amanda Conrad of Amanda Conrad Translations Ltd.

First of all can we get an idea how many of you are freelance translators. Can you put your hand up if you are a freelancer?

Helen and I are going to introduce ourselves by explaining why we decided to make the transition from single freelancers to directors of translation companies. We will each talk about the rewards and challenges we have faced in areas such as personnel, marketing, project management and business in general. You will have the opportunity to ask questions right at the end.

I didn't start out with a business plan whereby I would float my company on the stock exchange for 60 million within 5 years, like the translation company owner who appeared on Dragon's Den. Did you see him? I'm following a process of slow organic growth as a reaction to market demand.

Organic growth

- Freelancer
- Administrative help
- Office premises
- Translation staff
- Project Coordinator



As you may know, I worked happily from home as a freelancer for many years, but I often found myself in the situation - which Michael Benis has discussed in the latest issue of the 'bulletin' - of having too much work. I thought I could solve the problem by taking on some help with the admin. but the volume of work continued to increase, so I found some office premises and recruited translation staff. Soon there were five of us – doing most of the work in-house. Then, a couple of years ago I took on a project coordinator to manage the workflow and outsource jobs that we couldn't do in-house. And so it goes on.

Running a company



 **amanda conrad**
TRANSLATIONS

For me, running a translation company is like having a baby. It takes over your life but you love it. At the beginning it needs feeding and nurturing – investment in capital and people. As the child grows you have to anticipate its problems, its strengths and weaknesses, and guide it along. And when it becomes an adolescent, you have to learn to let go and let it make its own decisions, even if it's not what you want. You have to let it make mistakes and learn from them. Over to Helen

Targeted development

- Established 1992
- 5 employees including myself
- Translation in-house into English
- Less than 10% agency work
- Wide range of clients



I am Helen Robertson of Helen E. Robertson Translations Ltd.

After taking my diploma in translation I worked in industry in Germany for ten years. I was very happy doing that – after all, there is always something new to learn and do in this profession, as I am sure you will agree. However, after about seven or eight years I started to miss the element of career development. I then took some time to plan a change and returned to the UK to do a business degree, graduating in 1991 in the middle of a recession. Although I had not originally intended to go back into translation, I decided to start my own small business. I intended from the start to build it beyond being an individual translator, in order to combine the two strands of my studies and experience.

Like Amanda, I find running a translation company does take over your life. Mine is firmly in adolescence now, as it had its 15th birthday on 13 April – I am waiting for the office walls to start throwing out spots. I also agree that more independence is needed as the business develops, but I see it more in terms of allowing the individual people more freedom and accepting mistakes - though like Amanda I think the business itself seems to have its own character.

The mention of “people” brings me to the meat of my part of the presentation, as we agreed that I would talk mainly about personnel, and marketing if I have time, and Amanda would cover workflow and finance.

I think most people would agree that one of the main things that differentiates our kind of business from that of the single freelancer is the employment of staff.

Recruitment

- PG programmes in translation
- Regional newspapers
- National newspapers
- Personal acquaintance
- Job centre (more for admin staff)



The first step is, of course, to get them on board - known in the trade as recruitment, selection and hiring.

I have tried a variety of ways: my first hire actually approached me “cold”, and since the time was right for expansion – I was working all hours - I hired her. The next two came from contacting the university where I did my own PG course, as I knew they taught Dutch, which is one of my languages.

Later on we tried various other methods: contacting several universities rather than just one, including newspaper advertising and personal acquaintance. Newspaper advertising brought a very mixed bag, including a dance teacher who had worked in Holland and a commis chef who had put the wrong box number on his application. However, it also brought one very talented translator who had just finished her MA in translation.

I have found recruiting through the universities has worked very well for me. You know what their qualifications mean, and if it is their first job they may find it easier to fit in with the company.

For administrative staff I have cast the net wider. My first secretary was a student in my beginners' German class, she is still with me today as our part-time book-keeper. Others came from newspaper advertisements but also from the Job Centre. I think most people would agree that a good administrator is worth his or her weight in gold, but nevertheless the basic skills are less rare than those of a translator and it makes sense to hire locally, whereas the chances of finding the right employable translator in York, say, are pretty small.

Amanda, on the other hand, has recruited three local acquaintances, who proved to be excellent translators. Another outstanding translator joined her from an MA course. However, other recruits from the Universities turned out to be less suitable. That may be due to the difficulties associated with interviewing and testing candidates. Like me, she found that advertising for translators brought a real mixed bag.

Management

- First task to help transition from student to professional
- Enthusiastic/gifted hires
- Career-oriented/content-oriented?
- Service mentality sometimes lacking
- Chemistry is key



Managing highly intelligent, highly trained, highly individualistic people can be a joy or a nightmare. They come to you with enormous intelligence and "book learning", it is then up to you to help them make the transition from student to professional. The boss needs to win a lot of credibility here as the perception in the market can be that small translation companies are sweatshops.

The idea of translation as an art where you should take as much time as you need is wide-spread, for example, but there are norms on which your turnover forecasts and salary offers are based. Eventually the mantra "We need to bill translations in order to pay your salary" does get through.

Even gifted translators can also be absent-minded and impractical – and if you as the employer are already established as a freelancer you will normally have already learned to take a practical attitude to deadlines. You can communicate that best by reminding employees that clients also have homes to go to – but ultimately you have to allow staff to make their own mistakes and learn from clients' reactions. Client handling generally and diplomacy about queries is also sometimes a problem initially. Young translators have to be encouraged to listen to queries and take them seriously, and not to stick to their guns too much with regard to their own version of a text because "they are the native speaker" or "they are the translator". Especially with new languages, they have to be open to revisions and the possibility that they may have made mistakes, or that there may be a better choice of words.

Naturally, not all training needs apply to all employees, and not to an equal extent. But these are issues the employer has to be aware of.

The above comments on people management apply to the individual. The situation becomes much more complicated with team interaction. I currently have a team that has worked together for years and know and (mostly) accept how other members will react to certain situations. But working styles are very different: the effervescent type who has to air every problem does not combine with the withdrawn person who needs quiet and concentration to get anything done. All styles are equally valid, but the wrong combination can be explosive, and we have suffered from that in the past. At one time I believed that equally qualified people should learn to get on, now I would hesitate to employ someone who rubbed up against me or an existing staff member the wrong way at the interview.

As the employer, you have to learn where to give people freedom to learn and where to put your foot down. And the realisation that you are "the boss" and that people will not necessarily confide in you and might want to hide problems from you does not come easy.

Amanda is also interested to see how different people can be, with their individual strengths and weaknesses. As every translation assignment involves five members of her team, each one has to consider how he or she impacts on the others.

Training

- Small business – training on the job
- Learning new languages
- Reading the proof read version
- Becoming client orientated



This section will be quite short. Training in my company is mostly on-the-job. In a small company, you have to earn at least your salary quite early on. I am normally available for questions at any time - except in the periods when I have had difficult teams, when I find myself packing the work in myself so as to have enough turnover to pay them. I have learned not to do that, so in many ways the company's most important trainee is me.

That said, I have given all my translation staff and one proof reader the chance of formal external training in an additional foreign language - in most cases Dutch, in one case Spanish. I have used both one-week executive intensive courses and more relaxed two-week university-based programmes. I hasten to add that this short time works best with people who already have a related language, e.g. Dutch on the back of German.

All our work is proof read by a colleague before it is delivered. However, we do not have time to sit down with the first translator and discuss every point. The translator gets a chance to see the corrections later. That is possibly a weakness in the system due to the available and affordable capacity.

Amanda has a similar checking and correcting procedure. She finds it rewarding to see her staff developing their skills.

Formal processes

- Timesheets to measure output
- Bonuses for high output, bringing new clients, (annually) for excellent quality
- Promotion structure



Finally, even though the company is small I have put organisational structures and procedures in place. We have monthly timesheets which are analysed to show how well translators have been meeting targets. There are bonuses for performance over the target, based on a reward per 100 words per day on average over the month above the target level. There are also bonuses for bringing in new clients, which continue for a year after the first job is placed. And there is an annual “excellence” bonus.

I also have a two-tier structure of “translators” and “senior translators”, promotion depends partly on tenure and partly on quality of work.

Amanda doesn't have formal targets, but does monitor each person's output. All the staff are loyal and work hard, so they receive a discretionary bonus at Christmas.

Amanda feels that the career structure of each translator has to be geared to his particular strengths. Many translators don't like the idea of managing other, possibly older, colleagues. They don't want to deal with clients. They just want to translate. Amanda's senior translator does find it fulfilling to train the new staff.

What do you need to work with an extended team?

- Sociability
- Trust; ability to delegate
- Sense of proportion
- Toughness!



No further comment on these points.

Marketing

- Make yourself known
 - Use existing contacts
 - Join professional associations
 - Advertise (though word-of-mouth works better)
- Deliver quality
 - Content
 - Timing



Finally, if time permits, a few words on marketing.

To my mind, this does not differ markedly from the marketing needed by an individual freelancer. However, you do have to amplify your marketing presence, simply because you need more work. I doubt whether the freelancer's free entry in Yellow Pages will be enough to feed several mouths.

You have to make your name known and deliver a professional service.

Marketing II

- Build acceptance of extended team
- Existing clients
- New clients



Initially, it takes time to persuade your existing clients that they can also work with your new staff – but that can be established with a bit of patience

I have found the traditional 80:20 rule to be true: your existing clients are crucial. I have found that word of mouth and getting more work from large long-standing clients have worked very well for me. One of our key direct clients has referred us to several other subsidiaries; another puts us in touch with its alumni, who come back to them asking for recommendations on translation resources.

After you have had the extended team for a while, whether you do all the work yourself or even check it is no longer an issue – though I still get offers through the ITI website from people who are unaware of the setup. If you get clients like this, it is crucial to tell them that you may not do the work yourself, so that they have the choice of withdrawing from the job if they want to.

We are also getting more and more enquiries from people who find us in Yellow Pages or various Internet sites. They contact us as an agency, and they do not have any issues with who does the actual work. This has taken some years to build up, though. Generally speaking, I feel you have to nurture your long-standing clients but also be ready to welcome new ones on board. Chemistry is important here too, sometimes promising clients only offer one job, others form good relationships.

Marketing III

- Define your product
- All things to all men?
- Specialist?
- Match marketing to what you want to do



Naturally, your marketing needs also depend on what you want your business to be – specialising in a narrow range of subjects and languages, or spreading broadly into an agency. The extended team has in any case a wider spread of specialist subjects and languages to offer, and that needs to be made clear to clients.

Amanda agrees that satisfied clients make the best ambassadors. Her website is not optimized for acquiring new business, as she prefers to meet clients and potential clients through networking.

I will hand over to her now to talk about workflow, where the extended team also demands a different mode of operation.

Workflow

One-stop shop

- Negotiation
- All language combinations
- High volume
- Project management



Freelancers and translation companies are similar in that they have to be able to manage their workflow. They will get involved in working out how long a job will take, giving quotations, negotiating, doing a good translation and checking it, getting it back on time and invoicing it. However, freelancers are likely to be working for agencies.

When you have a translation company, on the other hand, you are more likely to be working for direct clients. I believe that you need a greater commercial awareness for this. Your clients don't want to spend time ringing around to see which translator happens to be available. In fact, our regular clients rarely phone us before sending a job, even if it is wanted urgently. They want a one-stop shop which will handle all their translation requirements – whatever the language.

As a translation company you are likely to receive large projects that need to be split between several translators. The overall volume of work will also be greater. As a sole freelancer, you probably know exactly what jobs are pending and have all the information that you need in your head or in a diary. When I was freelance, I used to keep all the jobs in this drawer, in chronological order of due date.

When you're working in a team there are more jobs coming in and more people working on each job, so we have to monitor the progress of each project and **communicate**.

I know that there is some interesting project management software out there, such as the LTC Organiser, but it's very expensive. We opted to use a simple Excel spreadsheet to record the workflow. Initially it was me who logged in all our new assignments. Having worked as a translator myself, I have a good idea what we are capable of. I decided who would translate, who would type and who would check each job, bearing in mind the nature of the job and the ability of the staff. Each person would mark up the worksheet as they did their bit. It felt a bit like piecing together a jigsaw.

Project management

Communication

- Allocation and research
- Liaising with freelancers
- Monitoring progress
- Remembering client preferences
- Awareness of what is feasible



As we expanded, this task became more time-consuming for me, and I realized that we needed a dedicated project coordinator. She or he could also search out the necessary background material for each job, while the in-house translators (the “fee earners”) concentrated on actual translation.

Having a project coordinator meant that we could accept jobs in an array of languages. Our project coordinator, Berni, has the task of finding freelance translators and revisers who meet our high standards. She needs a good knowledge of languages and culture in general. If the document doesn't use the Roman alphabet, she may need to do some detective work to establish what the language is. She needs a good memory and to be able to think laterally using all our contacts. For example, when we were asked to translate something from Lithuanian, she phoned a lecturer we know at the University of Westminster. We like to build a relationship with our freelancers and give feedback so we can win their loyalty, and they ours. We have confidence in them, and realize that people are important.

The project coordinator ensures that all work is sent to the client on time, in the necessary format and with all the necessary attachments. She has to be well organized and able to prioritise in order to cope with requests for 30 pages into Italian for tomorrow in the lead up to Christmas (which we have managed). And still be charming and flexible. What would you do if a freelancer working on an important project is rushed into hospital and had to abandon the translation? As I said, direct clients can be demanding and it's very hard to say no to regular clients. By the same token, we have to know what is possible and not make promises we can't keep.

Helen's team works with a handwritten ledger for work in and out, where each individual ticks off their work when they have completed it. At the moment she tells me they do not have an administrator, so the translators take week about in answering emails, scheduling work etc. This was the suggestion of a team member and it has worked well so far.

Running a company

- Business plan
- Cashflow
- Budgets
- Employment law
- Equipment
- Marketing



As a freelancer you learn all about the nitty gritty of business and finance – keeping financial records, tax and possibly VAT. But when you start employing people, you feel responsible for them. You need to be sure that you will have enough money to pay the salaries at the end of the month! Cashflow forecasts and budgets take on a whole new meaning. We've been lucky, as our clients pay promptly. Often you will find yourself in a situation where you need to pay your supplier before you've been paid by your client. If you need to borrow money from the bank, you will have to show your bank manager a convincing business plan. And what about PAYE and national insurance? If you've ever seen a payroll manual, which is this thick, you will understand why I chose to outsource the payroll. However there are some compensations – it's a great feeling when the profit and loss account shows a good month.

Helen has a part-time book-keeper to prepare the accounts and the VAT returns and to analyse the staff timesheets. She farms out payroll to the accountant who also does her taxes.

When you have a company you have to familiarize yourself with employment law, which covers things like employment contracts, employers' liability insurance, and health and safety. Do you know the latest regulations on paternity pay? We all know how careful you have to be if you need to dismiss someone.

You can get a lot of **free** advice on these matters from your local Business Link, the tax man, your bank and ACAS.

In a company there are more decisions to be made on equipment, and you will definitely need a reliable IT expert to hand, to sort out your networking problems. Like me, Helen has a good relationship with the supplier of her computers, who offers a very good and very prompt service in taking care of them if anything goes wrong.

Our next decision is how to upgrade our phone system. Helen says that since her office is physically very small, an ordinary phone with three handsets has been adequate so far, especially with so much of the work coming from abroad so that clients communicate more by e-mail for cost-efficiency.

Vision for the future

- SWOT analysis
- Take risks
- Team dynamics
- Staff development
- Personal development



It's all very well having a business plan, or a vision for the future. But you have to be prepared to go off at tangents when you hit a problem or see an opportunity. It's a good idea to do a regular SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). You must seize the moment and take some risks. Go for it!

All in all, I love the variety that my job brings. The combination of languages and business gives me a buzz. It's also rewarding to see individuals develop, and the team dynamics are constantly changing. I'm lucky to have excellent staff, who I can rely on to keep things running smoothly at all times.

So, what happens when the baby grows up into a mature, independent adult?



Thank you!