

The history of a translation business management system

In this article, we will tell you how Protemos came about, the bumps in the road on the way to success, and the common myths we debunked for ourselves.

Myth No.1

It is easy to develop a management system

The idea for Protemos, like many other systems for the translation market, originated in a translation agency.

Back in 2014, Technolex Translation Studio was surprised to discover that there was no translation business and project management system on the market that suited its requirements, and decided to develop its own. The agency's management team made a list of the technical requirements and set the developers to work.

The first problem we encountered was that we underestimated the volume of work on the part of the customer — the translation agency.

Initially, it was thought the system could be developed with one programmer and that it would take 4-5 months. But during the development process, it became clear that it would take much more time to successfully implement the project to meet the requirements of the agency. So we hired another programmer. The pace of work was stepped up.

In the first year and a half we developed the skeleton of the system as the foundation for its functionality.

In other words, during this time there was no interface for the Technolex project managers to view and test, and all they could do was wait and hope that the system would be user-friendly and effective.

The first working version of the system went online a full year later, in September 2015. Of course, it was full of bugs, which had to be fixed on the fly. The managers tested the system. The system was still "raw" and offered only basic features. For example, there was no feature to prepare financial reports, and a number of other important features were lacking. But it worked!

However, translation project managers — its most active users — were unhappy with the system. It took nearly six months to fix the critical bugs and add the necessary features. As a result, a full two years later, Technolex took charge of a business management system that suited it to the tee.

Myth No. 2

If the management system is suitable for one agency, then it will be suitable for them all

As the system improved, we asked ourselves the question: if the system has been a success in one translation agency, perhaps it should be offered to others? And we decided to launch it on the market as a commercial product. So the system, which was created at the request of a specific translation agency, was introduced to the wider world.

We were sure that a system that could manage the business processes in one agency would be easy to implement in any other with the same level of success. After all, they are similar to each other, with business processes essentially the same in all agencies. That is what we thought anyway. But we were mistaken.

In April 2016, a year after the incorporation of the system at Technolex, we set up a website and officially introduced Protemos to the world as a business management system for translation agencies and freelance translators.

For the first year, the system was completely free for everyone: we wanted to collect user reviews (and attract users). But during the first demonstrations, we quickly realized how shortsighted we had been. The first agency needed a separate line in its invoices for VAT, and they would not consider using the system until this feature was added. The second wanted the option of creating commercial offers directly in the system. The third did not like the document templates. The fourth required integration with CAT-systems, etc. And it was impossible to predict the needs of the next potential user.

The more demonstrations we conducted, the worse it got: Every single translation company is unique. Each one requested something special, something different and unpredictable that Technolex did not require.

It quickly became clear why Technolex found it so hard to source a suitable management system: we thought that the business processes applied in the agency were obvious to everyone. In practice, they were unique to the agency, and the developers of other systems had no way of knowing what they were. We began to document all the requests of real and potential users in order to implement them in the future if possible. Over time, it became clear which functions needed to be implemented first of all, and which could be added later. A user request ranking system was set up, and based on this we worked out which functions to add.

In four years, we turned the system, which was akin to a naughty child, into a highly-trained athlete. Its functionality was expanded tremendously. Now we look back with a smile at the system as it was at the beginning.

But even today, we are sometimes taken aback by the requests we receive and the extent to which business processes in agencies vary so much. As we move forward we fully expect to be constantly caught off guard, and that the improvement process will never stop.

Myth No. 3

If the system is good, it will immediately attract users

When we launched our system on the market, we were sure that the functionality of the management system was the most important thing to gain commercial success; we simply needed to stuff it full of great features, and translation agencies will line up to buy it.

The reality was very different.

At one of the first demonstrations in 2016, we were asked: “Where did you come from? We have never heard of you.” We have been asked this question more than once, and it quickly became clear that until we became well-known, few agencies would use our system, no matter how good it is. It turned out that for a product to be popular, it is more important that the manufacturer is well-known than the product has great functionality.

We initiated a marketing campaign, and posted targeted online ads. Our team began to attend translation conferences on a regular basis. GALA, LocWorld, ELIA, ATC, Tekom — we went everywhere.

And when talking to companies we realized that the driver of sales is not functionality, but a recognizable brand. Here are some snippets of conversations confirming this:

“I like Protomos, but my management team wants to buy a system from a well-known company.” (What, you still haven’t heard of us? — we were surprised.)

“I have chosen a different system. I got the impression that for the translation industry its developer was equivalent to BMW in the automotive industry. Expensive, but reliable. (Why? Protomos has all of these features and is much more user-friendly. You’re a small agency!)

“Five months ago, I bought another system, because back then I hadn’t heard of you.” (How is that possible, we have been on the market for a year and a half!)

So, no one mentioned the functionality of the system or the testing results. Time is money: it is easier for translation companies to choose a well-known project and business management system than to spend time testing three or four unknown systems, even if they have better functionality. A system chosen in this way is bound to be less than optimal. But if it has already been incorporated, the probability of the agency replacing it is practically zero.

Today we are no longer the newcomers that we were back in 2016. We no longer have to explain where we come from. But we are still continuing to invest money to make our brand more recognizable. In addition to conferences and advertising campaigns, we have found another way to boost our brand by creating interesting content for anyone interested in managing translation projects.

Work to enhance the image of the brand is comparable to the work done during the development process. But it is paying off. After all, you are reading this article.

Conclusion

The conclusion is as follows:

- Developing your own translation business management system is expensive and time consuming. In fact it is significantly more expensive and time consuming than it first seems. The minimum realistic budget is 250,000 euros, with a minimum development time of about 2 years (and this is only for basic functionality). Any attempts to keep within a smaller budget or a shorter implementation time would have a negative effect on the final result.
- What suits your agency is unlikely to suit others. If you want other agencies to use the system you will need to expand its functionality. If you plan to sell your system on the market, its development and promotion will require much more effort and money than if you simply developed it for yourself.
- It is really tough to create a high-quality translation project management system, but this is only half the battle. You also need to create a brand and make it recognizable among potential buyers. If not, the product will not get beyond the “for my own needs” category.



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