Home-Based Translation: A Goldmine for Bilingual People

by Staffan Johansson, M.Sc.

Staffan Johansson summarizes his years of experience in the freelance translation business. The book is filled with practical easy-to-use information on how to become an efficient and well-paid translator.

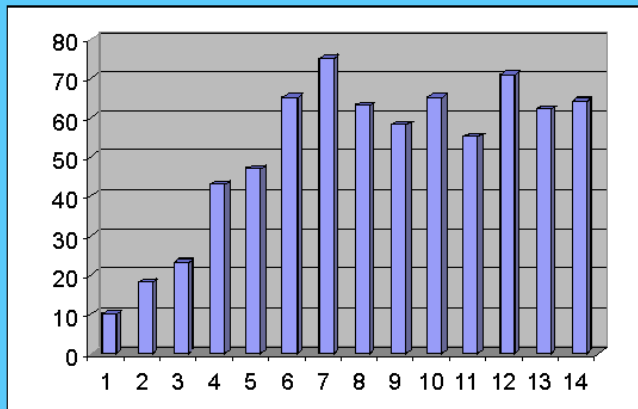**Home-Based Translation: A Goldmine for Bilingual People**

Dedicated to Mervi, Björn and Dag, who have helped me a lot

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Preface

Welcome to the world of translations! Not many people are aware of the excellent income opportunities that exist in this business. Opportunities that are there for just about anybody that can write well in any language, that knows a second language fairly well, and has access to a computer, a phone line, and an Internet connection from home or an office.

A basic estimate in the translation business is that an in-house employee shall be able to translate 2,500 words per day. Multiply that with, say, 200 days a year, and you get a total of 500,000 words for the year. Well, even at this "slow" rate of work, you as a home-based freelance translator can earn USD 35,000 per year, with the price per word at USD 0.07. This, given that you find the customers to keep you busy. This is the key, finding good customers that pay you well.

There are also some things that you can do to make more money, or lessen the amount of work hours you put in for the same money, and the established translation companies also do this. You can raise the prices by working directly for "regular" companies, instead of for specialized translation companies. Or, as a freelancer, you can specialize in a specific language pair, translation direction (i.e. only from one language into another), and/or subject field, and thus you might get real fast.

Personally, I've specialized in English into Swedish translation, in the subject field of computer technology. And in that translation direction and subject field, I can now do more than double the "standard translation speed" (which is 2,500 words per day), when working in large documents. I've also chosen to work mostly for translation companies and specialized so called "software localization" companies (i.e. companies that translate and nationally adapt software products), since this might give more freedom, and less hassles, than when working for "regular" companies. I'll show you how to get fast and efficient. And, the translation business functions the same way for most big language pairs.

I had no professional linguistic or writing experience (except for my Master Thesis) when I first started out as a freelance translator, and I had no translator "accreditation" or education in the linguistic area. Also, I had no experience of PCs and PC word processing, or PC desktop publishing (DTP), software. I had my M.Sc. degree in Computer Science, but I had worked mostly with the old cumbersome so called "minicomputers." Although, I enjoyed writing in Swedish, and I knew English fairly well. One day I saw an ad for a job as a translator at a local company. I applied, and beside my regular job I got started as a freelance translator, translating a book about programming in Turbo Pascal (a computer programming language). The rest is a matter of experience. There's no schooling required (even if an education in translation is a plus), it's just a matter of getting started.

So, if I could do it, you might be able to do it, if you know how to write well in one language and know a second language fairly well. The business works the same for most big languages. Whatever your language skills are, the market is there. There are a lot of specialized translation companies out there, looking for people with skills in all languages, and in all subject areas. There are excellent income opportunities when you find good customers.

Apart from the financial aspects of things, there are other benefits in working as a home-based, freelance translator. As long as you meet your deadlines, you have total freedom in choosing your work hours and dress code, etc. When I lived in Los Angeles (LA), I often spent my days hanging out in cafes or by the pool, doing my proofreading, reading newspapers and doing what probably a lot of people do in LA,

namely being on the lookout for new movie ideas. In the afternoon and into the night, I then did my actual translation work. No bosses around.

Also, you learn a lot of new things when you do translations, earning well while you learn. If you translate 700 pages about desktop publishing (DTP), or 100,000 words of a help system for a graphic design software product, you learn a lot about those topics. If you translate a booklet covering the rules which govern the game of soccer, you'll pretty much know how to become a professional soccer player. Well, let's not get drastic here, I guess there's some jogging to be done as well. Sigh! But, jokes aside, the build-up of knowledge is there, when you do translations. Knowledge that you can use in other areas.

I've mostly translated technical stuff, but at one stage I did a detour into legislative translation, and then translated some 90,000 words of legislative texts from the EEC (which later became the European Union, EU). And then I learnt the legislative lingo and how to write EEC directives/laws in Swedish. I might thus have become a politician… Scary! Among the texts that I translated, was a directive/law regulating the transportation conditions for animals in the EEC area. Even if I eventually got out of that subject field, I take a certain pride in knowing that the pigs in Sweden now travel in greater comfort thanks to me…

Again, jokes aside, but I guess you get the picture. In this guidebook, I've focused quite a lot on translation of technical material and software localization. This since software translation is one of the most difficult in the translation field, where the translator actually becomes a part of the product development team, and to a certain degree, creates a new product. In other areas, such as medical or legislative translation, the translator has to have a good grasp of the subject matter and know the terminology very well, but no "development work" is done. Even if you settle for medical, financial or legislative translation, which, by the way, might be even better paid than technical translation, you'll hopefully benefit greatly from reading this guidebook.
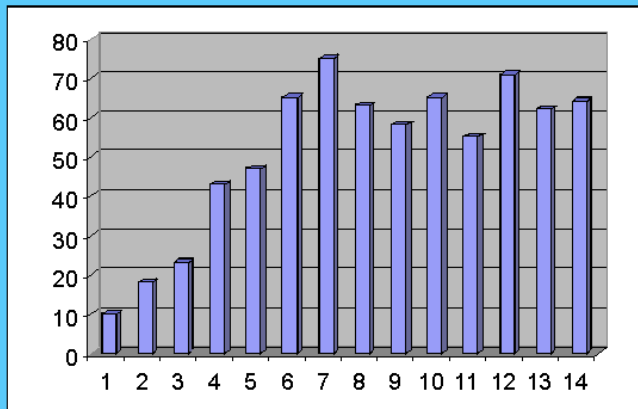
A lot of the information about the translation business that I supply in this guidebook is general, and to my knowledge, common to most translation fields.

And don't worry too much about engineering skills, etc., in the field of technical translation and software localization. As a translator, you're only supposed to translate those lengthy documents into your target language, and there will be other people handling the engineering stuff. Although, if you learn how to handle texts that are formatted for software manuals and help systems, a very lucrative field might open up to you. Those manuals and software help systems might be very big, and the terminology is somewhat constrained, so it might become fairly easy to earn a lot of money when you work in such projects.

So, as said, you'll hopefully benefit greatly from reading this guidebook, even if you eventually want to settle for some other field of translation than technical translation and/or software localization. Here, I'll just give you one example; A woman living in the USA read an earlier version of this guidebook. She emailed me, and we then communicated a bit via email. She wanted to settle for translation of films for the movie industry (i.e. translation of the so called "subtitles" for films), and thus concentrated her marketing efforts in that direction (if you read this guidebook, I'll show you how to market your translation services). Well, that lady had after some time completed at least one assignment, where she had translated a film (i.e. the subtitles of the film) from English into Swedish. And, it's of course my hope that she was helped a lot in her efforts by reading this guidebook. Also, it's my belief that the same principles that she followed, also applies to other language pairs than English and Swedish.

Lastly then; In this guidebook I've also included some information for the absolute beginner, if you think that you belong to that group. I've included some advice on how to better your writing, how to freshen up on a foreign language, and how to learn more about computers and computer software.

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Cover text:

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