

Time for translation

Is it time to move to calculating the rate for a project on the basis of how much time it'll take? Emma Gledhill suggests nine reasons why this is a good idea

Although the translation profession has traditionally applied piece rates when pricing our work, the case for moving away from words and lines and towards time as a charging (calculation) basis is compelling. This is a period when the very existence of our profession as a sustainable way of making a living could be at stake. Whether it's in terms of hourly or daily rates, I believe the arguments in favour of the principle of using time as our charging basis are overwhelming. It's time to take matters into our own hands, and here's why.

1. Time rates are already the norm for many other trades and professions

Do lawyers charge by the number of words in their depositions? Do accountants charge by the volume of numbers in their Excel sheets? Of course not. They charge by time – including, notoriously, for writing emails and making phone calls. So too do skilled tradespeople (as anyone who's ever called out a plumber will know).

Translators spend inordinate amounts of time trying to educate clients that translation is more than a mere mechanical process of substituting a word in one language for a word in another. If we want to be regarded as professionals, we need to charge for our skills. We're not selling manufactured units – we are humans, who add value to anything a machine can do. Our work should not be commoditised, and we shouldn't undermine our own argument with our pricing model.

2. Time rates do already exist in our field

Time rates are already gaining ground with agencies. I have worked with at least two agencies here in Switzerland, both as client and as supplier, that charge their clients by the hour even if they pay their translators by the word or line. In other words, there is precedent. A general shift to time-based pricing would not blaze an untrodden trail.

Equally importantly, our interpreter colleagues work this way already. They don't have a 'deliverable' to which unit rates can be applied. Are translators less professional than interpreters? I don't think any of us would argue that, but traditional pricing methods could imply that they are.

3. Time rates acknowledge the demands of complex and difficult tasks

Difficult work takes longer, plain and simple. So if you can do an easy job in one hour, but a difficult job of the same volume takes two hours, the difficult job – requiring greater skills, experience, thought – effectively pays half the rate of the easy job. Piece rates therefore reverse the general principle that greater skills and experience should command higher rates.

Charging piece rates creates an incentive to 'stack 'em high, sell 'em cheap'. That creates a situation where, if you want to earn a living, let alone a decent one, you may need to focus more on the quantity of translations you churn out than their quality. Piece rates create a situation where, for financial reasons, 'just good enough' (however it's achieved) will do; 'just good enough' being, at best, good enough to pass muster without going the extra mile to deliver your best work, and at worst only good enough for the client not to notice or complain.


4. Time rates are client-centric

End clients are used to time rates with most of their other service providers. Charging by the word or – worse still – line (with varying numbers of keystrokes, with or without spaces) is a very opaque method for direct or end clients to grasp. Charging by time gives clients a point of reference instead of a complex formula and enables them to compare our rates with those of other professions. And making life easy for clients makes us look more professional and increases our chances of winning work.

'We've been charging by the hour for years. It's a unit that direct clients understand well.'

5. Time rates are a transparent indicator of our worth

The ability for clients to compare our profession with others gives us a great opportunity to reset our charging level to bring it more into line with those of other professions. And the comparison with other professions also provides some undeniable evidence for countering downward pressure on rates. The CIOL's Insights report on its 2019-2020 survey of the languages professions showed that the highest average hourly rate that translators were charging to direct clients was £38 per hour; the equivalent figure for UK-based respondents only was £31. Some of these translators are



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working for lawyers charging £500 per hour. Need I say more?

'Outside the translation industry, few people know the time it takes to write or translate. Billing per hour or day is a way to hint what a fair rate is.'

6. Time rates cover the entire task

Our time is worth the same whether we are crafting sentences in our heads, doing research into exact job titles, document names and so on, or putting the results of those activities on (electronic) paper. Piece rates effectively only pay for the time that we spend typing or dictating – which, with no disrespect to them, any modern schoolchild could do. Everything else – precisely the activities that add value to create quality – is effectively unpaid.

Or to put it another way, with piece rates we are only paid for secretarial skills that don't require the five plus years of training that most of us have invested time and money in. Our skills and experience, and above all our creativity – that wonderful thing that, going forward, sets us apart from the machines – are unpaid. Just think about that for a minute.

7. Time rates support better translation – and hence better translators

Good translators have a drive to craft excellent writing and deliver top quality. That takes time and, as I've already pointed out, piece rates are the enemy of quality and making a decent living.

Translation is not a regulated profession in most parts of the world, and where it is, it is usually only in very narrow areas such as court work. Piece rates can create unfair competition from the less qualified, less skilled and less scrupulous – for what translator of whatever level of experience, and what language service provider of whatever reputation or scale, doesn't cite 'quality' as a 'unique' selling point to clients who are, by definition, usually unqualified to judge?

As a result, the best translators – of which membership of our institute is a mark – are financially disadvantaged precisely because of their diligence and desire to create the very best translations they can.

8. Time rates make for better machine translations

If piece rates create a situation where 'just good enough will do' in order to generate output volume, then ultimately humans are not going to be able to compete with machine translation. Neural machine translation is getting so good that it's already almost the perfect solution for 'just good enough will do'. Human translators will never be able to generate the volume of translation that MT can, no matter how or to what extent we accelerate our work in order to increase volume and offset depressed rates.

Where humans do triumph is in post-editing of machine translation; which is almost certainly going to feature more and more in translators' lives and careers. Neural machine translation provides a foundation for our creative work, it can save your fingers and voice from the strain caused by typing or dictating and it can literally 'buy' time for editing and rewriting. But this does not mean it's quicker: quite the reverse. Neural machine translation makes post-editing (or rather, multilingual editing and rewriting) *more* difficult and time-consuming not less, precisely because the output sounds so plausible and requires so much more concentration and an even keener eye for detail. However, some agencies are putting a lot of downward pressure on rates for post-editing machine translation, selling it to their clients (against their own interests, I would argue) as the 'cheap' option, as if they (and

their clients) were only paying for our typing skills in the first place. Long term, that is not sustainable.

9. Time rates are up to us to decide and determine


As many translators start their careers working mostly for agencies, at a stage when they are by definition inexperienced, often young, and almost always isolated, the practice of adopting the piece rates agencies conventionally pay tends to be ingrained during formative professional years. However, it's worth restating the obvious fact that freelance translators are independent professionals running businesses, not pseudo-employees who have to accept whatever model is imposed on them by someone else. Clearly it's far easier with direct clients, especially if you are aiming for transparency, but it is not up to agencies to dictate how we should charge. The pricing model in translation is merely a convention, and conventions can be changed.

'Charging by time makes more sense than by word/line, but requires agencies to restructure their pricing models.'

The quotes in this article are from a Twitter thread and from direct messages from translators while I was researching this article. Many other respondents said they always quote a project price rather than piece rates or time rates; this is, of course, a perfectly valid approach and worthy of an article in itself. I

certainly acknowledge that those who charge a project price (which is also very client-centric) will most likely include more factors in that calculation than just their hourly or daily rate. Many of us – me included – are best at estimating how long an assignment will take based on the word count: we know what our 'average' capacity is, and we need to be good at estimating this so as to strike that balance between maximising our revenue without jeopardising deadlines. I would still argue that, even with the extra factors (not least that elusive concept of 'value'), the estimated time required for the entire task is a better basic foundation for project pricing than merely the number of words.

Given the other pressures on our industry, I think it's quite possible that piece rates may make it impossible to subsist financially and hence threaten the future of the profession: highly skilled professionals could be driven out of translation, with only the retired and hobbyists able to afford the luxury of crafting quality work.

Will a shift to time-based charging be an uphill struggle? Yes, of course it will. Any major change like this would be a paradigm shift. But the key is not to let anyone be a lone voice; that, after all, is why we are members of an institute that represents our interests. The more of us who start to quote hourly rates – capped at a maximum price for an assignment if appropriate – the more we can make them the norm, make the (literal) value of what we do transparent, and safeguard the future of our profession as a viable career. So who's with me? 

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