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Can translation services be certified? – The LICS[®] approach on certification of the EN 15038

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to discuss important issues with regards to the European Standard EN 15038:2006 and to present the LICS EN 15038 certification process. The Language Industry Certification System LICS[®] a new brand for certification in the language service industry will be presented. It will be shown how a translation service provider can achieve certification and what steps are to be taken towards a LICS EN 15038 certificate.

Key Words: Certification; Standard; EN 15038, Quality, LICS[®]

1. THE EUROPEAN STANDARD EN 15038

The European Standard EN 15038 "Translation services – Service requirements" published in 2006 by the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) is the first regional standard to set out requirements for the provision of quality services by translation service providers (TSPs).

The standard specifies requirements for the TSP with regard to human and technical resources, quality and project management. An important part of the standard is dedicated to the TSP/client relationship which requests the TSP to actively communicate with the client in order to acquire knowledge on the needs of the client, the actual parameters of the translations project (like purpose and target audience of the translation, delivery dates and details etc). The TSP shall have an agreement with the client including the commercial terms and conditions of the project. Clause 5 "Procedures in translation services" specifies the procedures to be followed by the TSP carrying out a translation job. A major issue in this clause is the requirement that translations must be revised (i.e. be examined for its suitability for the agreed purpose by a second translator comparing the source and the target text).

When EN 15038 is implemented, CEN hopes that its work will help TSPs differentiate themselves on the basis of formal processes and quality and thus help buyers of their services make better purchase decisions.

The standard is applicable for all kinds of TSPs independent of their structure and/or size. It is important to emphasise from the very beginning that EN 15038 can also be applied by individual translators. Thus certification is –under specific circumstances– feasible also for free lance

individual translators. Meeting the standard, and establishing the system that does so, is not affected by the fact that the TSP is an individual.

2. WHY CERTIFICATION?

Certification of translation service providers is of increasing importance for businesses and consumers throughout the world. Clients increasingly ask for certification in order to be sure that the service they purchase meets minimum standards. This applies in particular for cross-boarder transactions.

TSPs see certification as an extra marketing tool but also as a tool for defending claims should they be requested to provide proof that their service is provided in accordance with recognised specifications. For example in court cases they might need to prove that their services meet the "state-of-the-art".

EN 15308 explicitly encourages conformity assessment and certification as means to enhance market transparency and client satisfaction in the translation sector. Since the publication of EN 15038 the market of certifying TSPs is constantly developing. Austrian Standards plus Certification Ltd., (www.as-plus.at) the certification subsidiary of the Austrian Standards Institute has –as the first Certification Body in Europe– introduced a certification scheme and is successfully certifying TSPs in Austria and worldwide.

3. LANGUAGE INDUSTRY CERTIFICATION SYSTEM LICS®

EN 15038 was initiated with the objective to ensure high level translation services, fair competition, improved transparency and quality for the end user. The publication of the European Standard has led to various certification approaches of TSPs throughout Europe and the world.

In order not to diminish the above mentioned targets by certificates issued by various certification bodies, each certification body having applied different assessment procedures and criteria, it needs a harmonised approach in order to ensure that certification bodies follow compatible procedures. Harmonized assessment procedures are a prerequisite for mutual recognition of certificates. A proliferation of different assessment systems and certification marks leads to an undesirable competition among certification bodies thus lowering the quality level of such certifications.

In order to provide the translation industry with a unique tool of reliable proof of the quality of their services the Austrian Standards Institute, established together with International Network for Terminology (TermNet, www.termnet.org), the "Language Industry Certification System®" LICS®, www.lics-certification.org.

LICS® provides TSPs worldwide a tool to obtain a globally uniform and recognisable certificate about the EN 15038 conformity of their translation services.

LICS® works with a growing network of local partners in Europe and internationally. It offers third party certification for the EN 15038 which are affordable in particular for small enterprises. LICS® meanwhile has partners and/or clients in the Belgium, UK, Germany, Canada, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovakia and the Arabian market. There are ongoing talks with future partners in Spain, Ireland and China etc.

4. HOW DOES LICS® WORK?

LICS® is a registered trade mark owned by Austrian Standards plus Ltd. LICS® provides the

market with a certification label for TSPs, a globally recognized brand name of reliable quality services, a certification scheme for EN 15038, "accredited" local certification partners who conduct certification in a specified area, a set of documentation required for the operation of the system, training programmes for auditors including training material, a website including a comprehensive register of certified service providers (e.g. TSPs), www.lics-certification.org.

LICS® collaborates with local partners who will carry out the actual work of certification in a specified area. These partners will be accredited for their work by LICS® and will be subject to regular surveillance. The local partners will report to LICS® about the results of individual certification procedures enabling to maintain a centralized register of certified service providers. Such local partners may be located everywhere all over the world.

There are 3 categories of local partners:

Certification Bodies: Entities who have shown evidence that they meet internationally accepted requirements of certification bodies. Certification Bodies will be responsible for the certification process including the issue of certificates bearing the LICS® mark. They obtain a licence to use the LICS® certification scheme and the LICS® label.

Local distribution partners: These are entities who do not meet the requirements for certification bodies. Local distribution partners will organise certification procedures for clients with their a local pool of auditors and will contract clients. The Austrian Standards plus Certification Ltd. will be the certification body for these kinds of certificates.

Individual auditors: Qualified auditors who meet the competence requirements of the applicable certification scheme may directly work for the Austrian Standards Institute, who will act in such cases as the certification body. The auditors will be responsible to serve the client and organise all necessary conformity assessment steps. Clients are contracted directly by the Austrian Standards plus Certification Ltd.

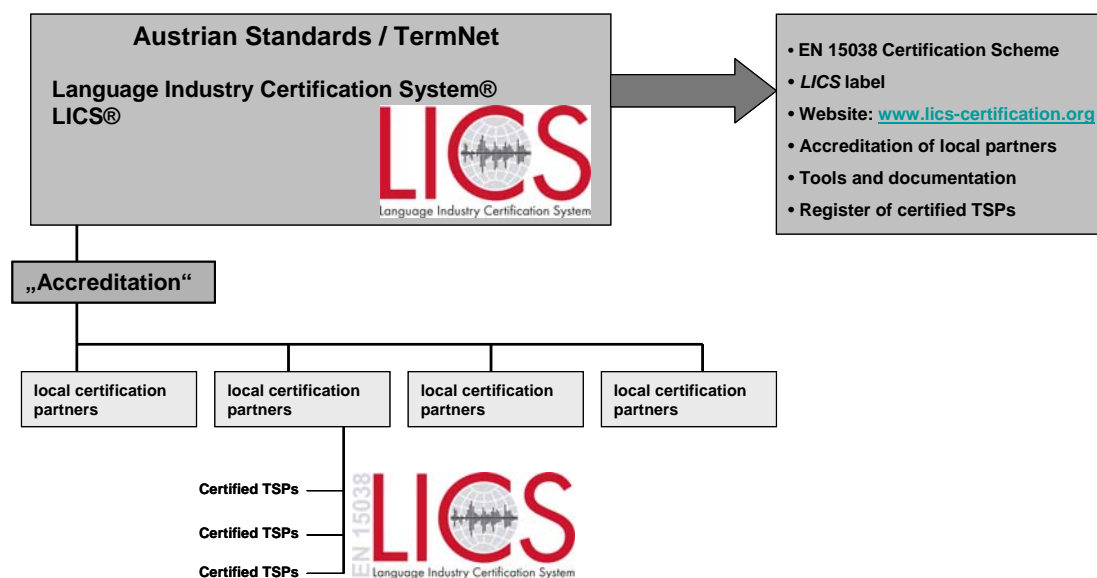


Figure 1: The LICS® Structure

5. THE LICS EN 15038 CERTIFICATION PROCESS

5.1 The Certification Scheme

One of the major objectives of LICS[®] is to harmonize the approach how TSPs are being certified by various certification bodies. One tool for harmonisation is the certification scheme, i.e. test procedures for auditing and certifying TSPs according to EN 15038. This certification scheme specifies the process to audit a translation service provider, it specifies how the TSP is supposed to document its activities for the audit and it specifies the competence of the auditors who will carry out the inspection and it specifies the period of regular re-audits.

In order to make the judgement of the auditor as objective as possible, the certification scheme specifies so called "compliance criteria", which determine conformity in accordance with the individual requirements of the EN 15038.

5.2 Step 1: Application

All TSPs, independent of their size and/or structure, may apply for LICS[®] EN 15038 certification. One of the key elements of the LICS[®] system is that it is tailored in particular to SMEs, so that it is affordable also to small entities and one-man-band companies.

In order to apply for the certification process the Applicant must file an application using the form provided according to the terms and conditions of LICS[®].

5.3 Step 2: Documentation

Before the actual audit is carried out, the TSP must provide documentation on the service to be certified. This documentation shall contain basic information on the TSP, such as the name of the company, including addresses for all business sites, company profile, any specializations, etc. Further to that basic information, the TSP must provide a declaration on the fulfillment of each single requirement of the standard. The LICS[®] EN 15038 certification scheme assists the TSP in elaborating this documentation. The documentation forms the basis for the audit.

5.4 Step 3: The Audit

The core of the certification process is the audit, the purpose of which is to collect evidences that the TSP meets the requirements of the standard.

Such evidences are interviews with the management of the TSP, interviews with project managers and translators (in case the TSP works with in-house translators) and other personell involved in translation services client related activities. A further source of evidence are records of all kinds, like records on current and past translation jobs, all kinds of client/TSP communication, databases on free-lance translators used for translation jobs etc.

The audit will be carried out by a Lead Auditor. The Lead Auditor is a formally qualified auditor who has received training on auditing and who has in-depth knowledge of EN 15038 and experience with translation services. He/she will use a check list including the compliance criteria which are the basis for the auditor's assessment on the conformity of the TSPs service.

Should the audit findings result in any issues to be resolved by the TSP, the Lead Auditor will endeavour to establish consensus with the applicant on the measures to be taken by the TSP in order to achieve compliance.

At the end of the audit, the auditor will draw up his/her report with his/her final assessment and proposal to the certification body whether to issue a certificate.

5.5 Step 4: Issuing the Certificate

After the audit, the auditor will send his report to the certification body in charge, which will have the final responsibility to decide on the issue of the certificate. The positive assessment of the audit is the prerequisite for the issuing of the certificate. The certificate is valid for a period of 6 years.

The certificate entitles the TSP to use the LICS[®] EN 15038 conformity mark (see figure 1).



Figure 2: The LICS[®] EN 15038 Conformity Mark

5.6 Maintaining the Certificate

Though the period of validity of the certificate is 6 years, in order to maintain the license to bear the issued certificate, intermediate audits must be carried out on a 2-years cycle.

6. SUCCESS STORY

Certification according to a standard for any business is an investment for future business. So the costs of certification must –at the end of the day– be out-weighted by increased income due to an increased number of clients. There is profound evidence that LICS[®] EN 15038 certificates almost immediately pay off for the certified translation service provider.

Figure 2 and 3 show –as an example– the development of the turnover of the first EN 15038 certified TSP in Austria before certification (turnover figures from the year 2006) and after the issue of the EN 15038 certificate (turnover figure from the year 2007).

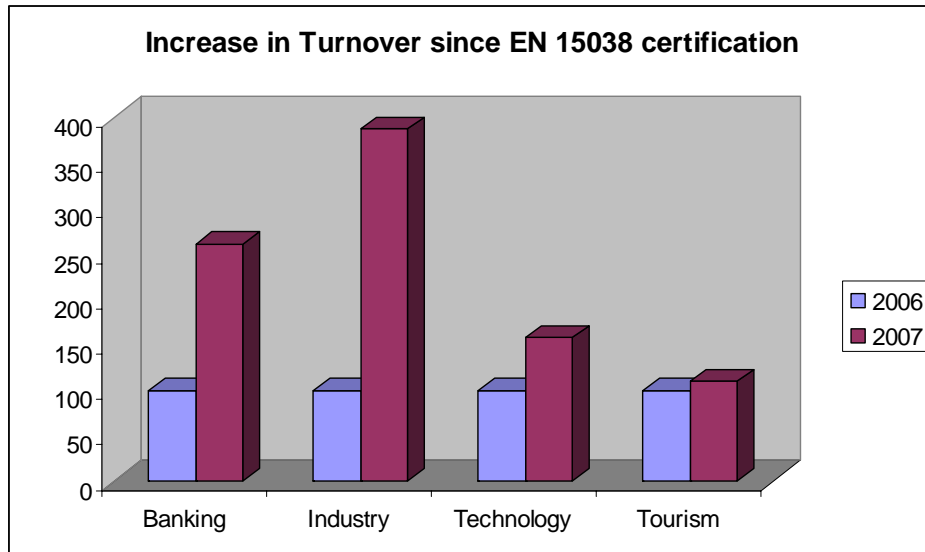


Figure 2: Increase in Turnover [Source: Interlingua, www.interlingua.at]

Figure 2 shows that in particular in the segment of industry clients, EN 15038 certification has helped the TSP to increase the number of its clients.



Figure 3: Increase in Foreign Clients [Source: Interlingua, www.interlingua.at]

Figure 3 clearly shows that the portion of foreign clients (as compared to the Austrian clients of the company) has distinctly increased after certification. This proves that the EN 15038 works as a global tool finding reliable business partners in the translation field. Clients do not ask for TSPs being located in a specific country rather than they seek assurance of service quality which is achieved by means of an EN 15038 certificate.

7. Summary

The European Standard EN 15038 has –more than any other standard in the service sector before– impacted the relevant industry. Both translation services providers as well as their clients are increasingly aware of the standard and use it as a tool for quality assurance in their business transactions.

Although EN 15038 is not a standard to certify individual translators according to their personal competences, certification of EN 15038 is possible for any kind of service provider independent of their size and structure.

The LICS[®] approach to certify translation service providers according to EN 15038 has turned out to be a reasonable approach in terms of robustness and feasibility not only for big translations agencies, but also for small and medium sized TSPs including individuals.