

# CHOOSING AND BUILDING A SPECIALIZATION

**Specializing is a reliable way to build a more fulfilling and better paying language career, but starting from scratch can seem daunting.**

**By Karen Tkaczyk and Ben Karl**

“I’m a generalist,” she said, “and I’m doing better than ever.” When did you last hear that? A long time ago, we surmise. Neither of us can remember the last time.

Practitioners know we work in an ever-changing industry. Today, these changes feel faster than ever, and we need look no further than the pandemic-related overnight shift to remote simultaneous interpreting for a recent example. Translation technology abounds, and neural machine translation (NMT) is increasingly common—and accurate. But even as tools like machine translation become more widespread, in our experience, the best way to ensure quality and a sustainable business practice is to specialize.

The larger your language pair, the more this matters. If you work in a language of limited diffusion, our premise may not apply. But in all of the world’s major languages and most of the medium-sized ones, we suggest that the most economically successful freelancers producing the best quality are experts who specialize.

And what do we mean by expert? *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition* says “having, involving, or displaying special skill or knowledge derived from training or experience.” In practice, here are two measures we often observe:

- Expert language professionals are comfortable hobnobbing with end clients at their events, talking to them as

peers in their language of choice.

- Expert translators frequently know the answers to term queries posed in translation groups off the top of their head, or have a sixth sense for how a sentence or phrase should be worded to sound right.

## Choosing a Specialization

No two career paths are the same. That said, most language professionals come to the industry in one of two ways.

### Fortifying an Existing

**Specialization:** A fair number of translators and interpreters come to the industry after an initial career in a different field. They study for years to become a doctor, lawyer, chemist, or banker, and then, due to a change in interest or personal circumstances, decide to leverage that knowledge and love or affinity for languages into a new career in the language professions. Industry transplants often have advanced degrees or many years of concrete experience under their belts and a lifelong interest in languages, but might need time to perfect their translation or interpreting skills.

### Building a Specialization

**from Scratch:** Conversely, many less-experienced language lovers gravitate toward a career in the language industry without a prior career. They might graduate from a translation or interpreting program with a solid foundation but without the subject-matter expertise of a career expert.

As these professionals build their careers and their practice, they might identify in-demand fields that complement their skills and interests, then jump headfirst into becoming an expert in those fields.

## Clients are crying out for subject matter experts.

To identify those fields, consider your market. What industries are strong? Mining? Viticulture? And how broad are those fields? Medical and financial are giants where you may need to narrow down further into a sub-specialty, like orthopedics or regulated banking. On top of focusing on a specialization that could be considered in demand (i.e., producing a steady stream of work), we recommend picking an area you truly enjoy. If you despise reading contracts even when you have to sign them, legal will likely not be for you. If you spend hours browsing museums' websites, watching all the virtual tours, and devouring the descriptions of every work in an exhibition, perhaps museum texts would be a great target market.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of how they choose their specialization, all language professionals must work to build, maintain, and transform their areas of expertise to attract great clients and earn top dollar.

## Building a Specialization

Specialized translators live and work in the habit

of immersing themselves in their specializations. Some of these habits are easy and inexpensive to cultivate, while others take more dedication, effort, or investment. To take the first step, try one of these approaches. Experts combine all of these, year after year.

### Reading Industry

**Publications:** Every specialized translator should have an array of subscriptions to trade journals, magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and other industry publications that track and analyze the extralinguistic aspects of the field in both their source and target languages. Financial translators working to or from English read the *Financial Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, while legal translators subscribe to the many law reviews of the world's most prestigious law schools. Extralinguistic aspects might include technological advancements and discoveries, legal or regulatory changes, and more, and staying abreast of evolving terminology and key issues and trends is a must.

**Taking Courses:** Whether for credit or not, online or in person, many specialized translators pursue opportunities to beef up their specialization and expertise through formal courses, while others arrive in the industry with advanced education and credentials. The acceleration of virtual workspaces and classrooms means that there are now thousands of online classes, massive open online courses (MOOCs)<sup>3</sup>, and even full

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INSIDE

# SPECIALIZATION

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## Check Out ATA's Inside Specialization Podcast!

*Inside Specialization* is a new feature of *The ATA Podcast* that focuses on specialization. Each episode tackles the “what, why, and how” of a particular field with a seasoned expert. Listeners learn about typical work translators and interpreters in that field do and the skills they need, plus the pros and cons of the job and the types of clients those experts work with. There are loads of personal stories and recommendations for getting started. Join us for monthly episodes—it’s an adventure you won’t want to miss! Check out these episodes!

Episode 61: Inside Specialization—Technical Translation  
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In addition to *Inside Specialization*, make sure to peruse the many excellent episodes available from *The ATA Podcast* at [www.atanet.org/news/the-ata-podcast](http://www.atanet.org/news/the-ata-podcast)!

degree programs that language professionals can take advantage of to keep their skills current and earn official recognition of their specializations.

### Joining Industry Associations and Attending Events:

Specialized translators typically belong to one or more non-translation industry associations or groups. In addition to industry publications, associations are an amazing forum for keeping up to date on industry trends, networking with other specialists, and passively marketing your services. Very often, you might be the only language professional at a conference of 1,000 biochemists, accountants, or chief financial officers, putting you in a unique position to talk about what you do and show genuine interest in what your peers are doing, too.

### Creating a Specialist Network:

Your specialized peers are also an invaluable resource for maintaining and growing your specialization. When you have a network of colleagues who are all reading, learning, and growing in your field, you can leverage their expertise and knowledge and work together to make your projects even better—and delight your clients.

## The Benefits of Specialization

Specializing produces many benefits. For starters, a 2020 survey by Inbox Translations found that specialized translators are

able to charge rates that are on average 25% higher than their unspecialized peers.<sup>4</sup> However, the benefits aren’t merely monetary. Here are some that we’ve experienced.

## Your specialized peers are also an invaluable resource for maintaining and growing your specialization.

**Efficiency:** Specialists work smarter, not harder. They have enough familiarity with the subject matter, document types, terminology, and current trends in their fields that they spend less time looking up unfamiliar words or concepts and can instead focus on putting words to paper (or, in most of our cases, words to screen). This can result in higher margins, either due to higher rates, being able to fit more work into a typical workday, or both.

**Quality:** Specialists have the expertise they need to talk to the authors of the documents they translate as peers. This means they not only know how the text should sound in the target language, but they can also help document authors pick out inconsistencies, term issues, misspelled words, logical flaws, and more. Specialists have the credentials to work more like partners than providers, which results in higher quality in both the source and target languages.

It's this level of service that the clients who hire specialists come to expect and appreciate.

**Respect:** Specialists build a reputation among their clients and peers as reliable experts in certain fields. Your peers seek your advice, ask questions about your industry and your professional practice, and think of you immediately when someone is looking for a particular kind of translator. This professional respect, backed by the quality of your work, can lead to more of it.

**Referrals:** Referrals are a specialist's best friend. When you deliver high-caliber work, people talk, and many specialists report meeting new clients thanks to word of mouth, both from their existing clients and their colleagues.

## What It Means to Be a Specialist

Whether you come to the industry with a specialization or are working to build one, you'll find it's a marathon, not a sprint. Specialists build their careers and client bases over years, not months, and their practices do not always look like those of their generalist peers.

**You Only Need Enough Work for You:** A lot of translators wonder, *Do I need more than one specialization? Is my specialization too narrow? Does anyone even need translations about underwater basket weaving?* There's no single answer to these questions, but it's

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worth keeping in mind that you only need enough work for you, and positioning yourself as an expert in a certain niche is never bad. If you're the go-to person in your field, chances are you'll have plenty of work without necessarily having to specialize too broadly. That said, if you're afraid your field is too narrow, you can broaden your expertise over time in complementary fields and add new specializations over time based on your clients' needs.


**Specialists Refuse a Lot of Work (and Refer a Different Specialist Instead):** When you find a client who loves and comes to trust what you do, they may ask you to translate content that you have no expertise in. In fact, it happens all the time. In cases like these, specialists loop in other specialists to work on these projects with them to be able to deliver the same high-quality work their client has come to expect. This makes your network of specialized colleagues all the more valuable.

## The Future Belongs to Experts

We all see the increasing adoption of NMT, which often reads well but can be full of subtle mistakes. Specialists are perfectly positioned to educate clients when NMT may do more harm than good and take on the role of editors who spot the glaring errors that only experts can identify.

Clients are crying out for subject matter experts, not only to post-edit machine translation, but for human translation as well. End clients see mistakes

that highlight lack of understanding straight away and will red-flag work that was clearly done by someone lacking specialist knowledge. Language services companies take a hit to their quality assurance key performance indicators when their clients complain, which means that they also have an interest in working with specialists.

We suggest that only translators who translate like machines will be replaced by machines. Those of us who add value are treasured by our clients, and our clients are willing to pay for the peace of mind that provides. 

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition (Kindle Locations 147580-147581). (Merriam-Webster, Inc. Kindle Edition, 2009), <https://bit.ly/Merriam-Webster-kindle>.
- <sup>2</sup> Balemans, Percy. "Translation Is an Art: How to Get Your Work in a Museum," *The ATA Chronicle* (January/February 2021), 22, <https://bit.ly/Balemans-museum>.
- <sup>3</sup> Check out [www.mooc.org](http://www.mooc.org).
- <sup>4</sup> Freelance translator survey 2020 (Inbox Translation), <https://bit.ly/Inbox-survey>.



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