

Innovation in the International Organizations: Can We Do Better?

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Abstract

The modern economy is all about innovation, disruption, shifting paradigms, accelerating the pace of change. International Organizations may be perceived as not following this trend. Is this true? How do they react to changes in their environment? This presentation will give some insights, based on experience in two such organizations, one very large and another of medium size.

1 Introduction

One of the most watched films in Swiss theatres in 2017 was a movie in German Swiss called *die göttliche Ordnung* (The divine order), which tells the story of a village in a rural canton of Switzerland in the days before the popular vote that finally gave voting rights to women in 1971. The film starts with an epileptic succession of images of demonstrations around the world: young people rebelling against war, marching for peace and love, for new intergenerational relations, for personal and sexual freedom and so on. Then the camera changes perspective and shows the placid image of a Swiss village on top of a knoll and enveloped by the morning mist. The stage has been set.

This poignant image came back to me when I was thinking about the subject which brings us here today. Are International Organizations like the sleepy Swiss village, basking in its beauty, with no contact with the outside world?

To tell the truth, the answer must be said in German: *Jein*, which means both yes and no (*Ja/Nein*). This image of IOs probably suits many people, but it is only partially true. Many changes can be observed in the institutional world, but the rhythm and depth of such changes are uneven. As the great William Gibson wrote, ‘The future is already here – it’s just not evenly distributed’. The same happens with IOs.

In this presentation I’ll try to discuss the main hurdles that need to be overcome to do better. I am afraid that no solutions will be proposed, because it all boils down to a single trait: courage. Courage to recognise the situation, courage to go forward, courage to innovate. The rest is a matter of how good we are at innovating, at doing new things to improve our processes and get better results. This can be learned, but lucidity and risk acceptance can only come from deep within.

2 Innovation, disruption, change

Most IOs were created in the wake of WWII. There are a handful of exceptions, like the Universal Postal Union, established in 1878, or ILO, founded in 1919 at the end of WWI. But most of the others were born in the aftermath of the horrible war that showed the devastating capacity of conflicts to destroy the world. The European system was born only some years later, with the first Community coming into being in 1952.

Those organizations were created with structures and MOs of their times and they have not always undergone profound changes. In other spheres, things have moved enormously in the

meantime. There has been a third industrial revolution that has changed the industrial landscape, of which translation is part and parcel. Some authors talk about a fourth industrial revolution around the unstoppable rise of artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, 3D printing, etc.

Institutional translation has adapted to change, but typically in a very reactive way, by not leading the process, but preferring to bring up the rear. While disruptive revolutions were shifting paradigms, many of us were happy in our world of excellence that had demonstrated its value for the client. Obviously, not all shared this approach and groups of people here and there were trying to move in line with the new times. But a reply I received in the early 2010s when I raised the issue of machine translation in a meeting of specialists working on translation technology still resonates in my ears. Even though Google Translate was already the talk of the day in informal circles, I was told that machine translation was NOT translation. Now this perception has changed, but slowly and late.

Let's analyse, as promised, some of the elements that have contributed, and still do, to slowing down innovation in the world of institutional translation.

3 What's the opposite of too much month at the end of the money?

There is still in IOs an abundance of resources available for translation. I don't mean to say that translation departments are well off. For a number of years, the powers that be have been limiting, reducing even, the funds assigned to translation. Everybody you talk to will report difficulties, zero-nominal-budget growth or even big budget cuts. But the truth is that those reductions tend to affect more or less evenly all departments and it is less usual that translation departments get affected the most in the axing operations. The resulting effect is that, in the worst-case-scenarios, nothing needs to change and, in many other not-so-bad-scenarios, small adjustments may suffice, like redefining what is translated and what not, allowing some backlog to build up, loosening revision rules and allowing some texts to be released unrevised, etc. But the tendency is to not change much the methods and technological solutions which had served in times of plenty.

This situation is facilitated by the general absence of knowledge of many decision-makers about the inner workings of the translation activity and the well-oiled self-reassuring messages that language services send each time that the subject of translation costs is raised. Nevertheless, it is highly risky to blindly accept that no fundamental change is needed and to be satisfied with doing nothing, because this same lack of knowledge can, when financial situations become more complicated, convert decision-makers into morticians of a whole service or big chunks of it.

On the other hand, when budgets become a real problem, innovation takes on greater prominence. As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. Let's recall the case of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the WHO regional office for the Americas. In the past century, PAHO was searching for real savings and decided in 1975 that translation costs could be cut down significantly by using machine translation. They embarked on the development of PAHOMTS. Since 1980, the system has been churning out translations of increasing quality, highly attuned to the public-health texts that the organization produces. PAHOMTS has remained for 40 years an example of successful implementation of rules-based machine translation and PAHO has adopted a different business model to the standard IOs.

4 The quest for excellence can be an obstacle

It seems counterintuitive, but it tends to be true. Excellence gives organizations comparative advantage and allows them to better reach their objectives, be they high quality, good service, low price or increased profit margins. IOs have been champions of excellence in translation,

choosing the best professionals and paying them good salaries. In a world where only important documents, i.e. treaties, agreements, legislation, jurisprudence, etc., were being translated, high quality was the only meaningful objective. This resulted in a certain numbness to the impending need for innovation and the fact of becoming überspecialised.

Let's look at a couple of recent examples that show us that excellence might not actually be beneficial and a lack thereof can actually be an incentive to embrace innovation and gain the competitive edge that others might lack.

In 1980 a new service was launched in France called Minitel. It was one of the videotex services that were to be implemented in the last decades of the 20th century. The Minitel was a great success. The range of services was great and varied. Each French home had a Minitel in its corridor. Its enormous success resulted in a very slow penetration of the Internet in France in the 1990s. The service was finally discontinued in 2012, after prolonged agony. Internet penetration in France was normalised in the 2000s.

Another more recent example is the credit card and modern consumer banking practices. When the cheap availability of smartphones equipped China with the biggest number of these phones in the world and web apps started dominating the globe, the Chinese banking system was poorly developed and credit card penetration was minimal. China leapfrogged the credit card and developed a couple of payment apps in constant competition: WeChat and Alipay. Chinese consumers all have smartphones with one app or the other, often both, and pay for most of the things they buy with them. Retailers don't even need to have a POS, since a QR for each app is enough. Thus, the lack of excellence in the retail banking system was instrumental in leading a deeply transformational change.

Translation departments need to realise that it is not enough to be excellent in your profession, you also need to use the best processes possible to obtain the desired results. This includes the realisation that, while the old kind of content remains important in their portfolio, new types of content, requiring different processes and quality levels, have appeared and what used to work for high-end types of content may not be suitable for general communication purposes.

5 Who drives my car?

This is a question which I have seen rarely asked in institutional settings. Certainly not as written, but not even when uttered in the more correct: Why are we translating? Who or what are we translating for? Who is our driver?

The fact is that this is, in my view, an important question and many things depend on the answer given to it. My views are very clear in this respect. I think that we translate for our clients – call them masters, if you prefer. This has a clear impact, because this answer permeates all actions we take. In my view, we work to satisfy the needs of the client, which doesn't mean that we do whatever is asked of us, but rather that we understand what is the need(s) that the client wants us to fulfil, thanks to an ongoing conversation with them, that we propose to them the best solution that we design and deliver it. Since needs change with time and become different from all needs, we have to invent and reinvent constantly, offer new products, new ways of packaging translations, old wine in new bottles and new wine in old bottles, whatever it takes. Thus, for example, some IOs are offering their clients multilingual subtitling of multimedia products. In other IOs this sounds like anathema.

If this is what I think, what do others think? In my view, many excellent professionals work for something much less material than clients. To start with, they reject the terms *client* or *customer*. They express open animosity towards those terms, saying that “we have no clients, we have colleagues”. And subsequently treat them as colleagues: *ergo* not very nicely. These

professionals work for an idealised concept that I translate into XXX language (replace XXX with the language of the professional). Nothing short of perfection is acceptable. Applying differential treatment to different kinds of documents is impossible, because “we can’t translate worse than normal”. The result is a factory – modern-day translation is an industrial process – producing a single product, high-quality human translation.

6 We are special

IOs tend to have the firm conviction that they are special and totally different to other similar IOs. This can be seen in the attitude of translators, who tend to think that one can only become proficient in the work done for the IO after long years of working with the same kind of documents, being revised by masters, called revisers, who underwent the same years of long and tedious training as themselves, just 20 years before. Somehow, when I look at this, the image of my conscription days comes to my mind: ignorant chaps that nine months ago were terrorised by other ignorant chaps were now terrorising the new recruits arriving at the barracks and who were waiting to terrorise new people nine months down the road.

This attitude already is not conducive to easy acceptance of translation memory technology, a kind of democratising gismo where knowledge is buried in corpora and re-used by the first chap on the scene. But this also has an impact on other technologies. While some large IOs possibly have more reasons to go their own way in developing fully-tailored technological solutions, smaller organisations would fare better from not trying to reinvent the wheel all the time.

This year Ford and Volkswagen announced that they’d build commercial vans and pickup trucks together in new partnership. They had already partnered in 1991 to produce a multi-purposed vehicle called Volkswagen Sharan, Seat Alhambra and Ford Galaxy, according to the final seller of the vehicle. This is just an example of how for-profit companies in strong competition among themselves can partner in joint ventures when convenient. This is not to mention the International Space Station with all competitors sharing expensive infrastructure while each one follows their own goals.

It took several years of political (and budgetary) pressure by the powers-that-be in the European Union for all its institutions to effectively share their homegrown language applications. But workflow (or document processing) systems clearly fall outside the scope of collaboration due to confidentiality reasons. While I understand such reasons, I consider that more could be done to use commercial components (platforms) or to develop common components. Such components can then be customised to each member’s needs and circumstances.

Just to avoid placing all the blame on the translation departments, I need to say that this special syndrome also extends to IT departments on which the translation ones depend very often, especially in SMIOs (small and medium international organisations).

If you think of the why of such attitudes, you’ll easily come back to what we have already said before. Accepting that an already developed solution, or one which has been agreed upon by several parties, might not do 100% of what we expect from the system is not easy. If you have the money to do it yourself and, moreover, you can’t compromise total excellence, we have the situations we describe here. And this when reality checks tell us that users, when faced with a solution which can’t do what they want it to do, have little difficulty in twisting the system and using it to their advantage, to the despair of the developers, who see their work of art misused for unacceptable purposes.

7 The cloud

Cloud computing has revolutionised computing in the 21st century. Since the release of Elastic Compute Cloud by Amazon in 2006, the rise of the cloud (no pun intended) has been unstoppable, especially in the 2010s (Amazon moved all retail operations to its cloud in 2010!). The advantages of this type of computation are so impressive and the costs of data centres so high, that a limited number of companies dominate the landscape of massive computing. From small to big corporations, almost everybody moves to the cloud, because of the better prices, highly-increased security, elasticity, services, etc. Even the public sector tends to move to the cloud and abandon the costly private data centres.

Unfortunately, many IOs are not fully tapping into the possibilities offered by the cloud, generally for reasons I consider to be sound. While a number of people disregard the cloud based on considerations of data ownership and protection, the main issue that others find is that the platforms that can really offer a service up to standards are tightly controlled by their respective governments in legal terms, by which I mean according to the laws of the respective countries.

This situation is impairing the functioning of IOs, preventing them from reaping the advantages of this technology. But solutions are not obvious, other than creating a strong public-sector cloud (for the EU or in Switzerland for the other IOs).

8 Conclusion

International organisations are generally known for their high-quality translation services that bring certainty to their members and help guarantee that the communities for which they work can operate in a safe environment. These translation services are generally role models when we look at the best texts humans can produce, especially when we think of legal texts. But they are not consistently efficient or innovative, and in fact, the contrary holds true on many occasions. We have tried to identify some reasons why this happens. They might be partially or totally wrong. There might be many other reasons I have never thought of, or that I didn't dare share with an open audience. But we can summarise most of the reasons in just one that can take many forms: lack of ambition, conservatism, the "we are the champions" syndrome, and lack of a sense of urgency. Each one should analyse their particular situation and reflect about the cost of not doing what is needed or doing it in an incorrect way. Inaction is rarely the answer. Picking the right battles is a good approach, but avoiding them will only bring certain misery.

We still haven't answered the question asked in the title. Can we in IOs do better? I think that, by now, the answer is obvious: Of course, we can. And we should. As the saying goes, the largest room in the world is the room for improvement. The good news is that many people are aware of this and are willing to fill this room.