

# **ATA at 50: Challenges and opportunities**

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The American Translators Association (ATA) will hold its 50th annual conference October 28-31, 2009. This milestone represents a useful opportunity to summarize what the Association has achieved, and present some ideas about its future.

## **The first 50 years**

ATA was established in 1959 in New York City, a circumstance commemorated by the site selected for this year's conference. The Association's founders were a small group of professional translators, many of them operators of what were then known as translation bureaus, and all of them located in the eastern United States. Their purpose was to exchange information, provide mutual benefit, and promote their nascent profession.

ATA has grown and changed in many ways since that first core of professionals came together, perhaps most strikingly in its internal governance. In its infancy, the Association was personally managed and administered by its members on a strictly volunteer basis. As membership grew, those volunteers gave way first to a single paid administrator and a few part-time assistants still located in the vicinity of New York City, and then to an office near Washington, DC staffed by full-time employees. Our present executive director is a professional in his own right, certified by the American Society of Association Executives, who supervises almost a dozen staffers responsible for information technology, Certification, chapter and division relations, member benefits, conference and seminar planning, and the Association's publications. ATA's office is located in Alexandria, Virginia, which is home to thousands of other U.S. associations and offers easy access to decision-makers at the highest levels of government.

This evolution in governance has been accompanied, and largely driven, by a steady increase in size. ATA's membership recently exceeded the 10,000 mark, and may reach 11,000 by the end of this calendar year. With this increase in size has come a commensurate growth in scope and reach. The Association now has members in all 50 states of the U.S. and in almost 90 other countries, and ATA's professional breadth and coverage is now equally wide: Certification exams are offered in almost 30 language combinations, there is

now much greater emphasis on meeting the needs of interpreters as well as translators, conference presentations address hundreds of different subject specialties, and programs and services have been developed to meet the needs of independent contractors, in-house translators and interpreters, translation company owners and project managers, academics, and students.

Despite all these changes, ATA's purpose remains the same: to serve its members and promote their interests, and give them value for the dues money they pay each year. Some of the pivotal areas in which the Association works to achieve this are communication, the Certification program, and effective governance. It is also in these areas that ATA may face its greatest challenges and opportunities.

## **The next 50 years**

### **The translator**

Like all translators and interpreters, ATA's members will face many challenges both in the near future and over the next 50 years. The two most fundamental of these are "globalization"—the rapid elimination of physical distance as a governing factor in human relationships around the world—and recent explosive growth in information-processing power and communication capabilities. These two developments, and the complex ways in which they interact with and reinforce one another, are creating a new world in which people can interact more easily and more rapidly than ever before.

This revolution in global communication represents a double-edged sword as far as translators are concerned. We all benefit from these developments in many ways: clients are easier to acquire and contact and cultivate, and translations can be delivered with the touch of a button. With the advent of e-mail and now of networking sites, contact among professional colleagues has become even more immediate and extensive, with mutual advantages that are just beginning to be understood. Last but not least, the volume of reference information now available through Internet search engines is quickly making the translator's physical library obsolete.

But progress in this area, as everywhere, also creates difficulties that must be overcome. The ability to communicate so much more quickly, and to be accessible almost everywhere, creates a corresponding expectation of instant response, constant availability, and sometimes unreasonable turnaround. A subtler but perhaps greater risk is that of sheer information overload: we can now find out so much, so quickly, from so many sources, about everything, that information itself may become devalued.

### **The organization**

Even beyond the significant issues of globalization and electronic communication that each individual practitioner must deal with, every voluntary association faces challenges of a different nature and magnitude. One important challenge is that of maintaining relevance, in other words, staying useful to its members. This requires constant self-examination, and an attitude of exploration and flexibility. New programs and services must always be under development so that the members' attention can be retained in today's increasingly distracting information-rich society. A sharp eye must always be kept on the money, especially during economic downturns such as the present one, and ways must always be found to work as efficiently as possible. None of this can be achieved without the right people, and perhaps the greatest organizational challenge is therefore to identify, cultivate, motivate, and retain the volunteers who make all good associations function, and to coordinate their efforts with those of an expert and permanent professional staff.

Another issue that ATA, in particular, must consider over the longer term—and it is a very good problem to have—is membership growth. Having broken the 10,000 barrier only two years ago, the Association already has twice as many members as it did only 15 years ago, and while constant efforts are made to change and adapt, some procedures and structures will always lag behind. By one estimate dating back to 2006, there are approximately 30,000 “professional” translators and interpreters in the United States. If ATA convinced all of them to join, our membership would be three times what it was in 2008. This possibility raises two questions: How would the Association need to change in order to provide that many people with the same level of service and benefit presently enjoyed by only 11,000 members? And would an ATA of that size really be desirable? Arriving at plausible answers to these questions, and taking concrete action on that basis, is essential.

### **ATA and the future**

The author of this paper begins a two-year term as ATA President in October, 2009, on the occasion of the Association's 50th-anniversary Conference. Two years is not much time to accomplish anything, especially when translation customers and real life must also be accommodated; but there are three broad areas in which one can hope to make at least some impact. Those areas are governance and especially the role of specialty groups within the Association, the Certification program, and communication.

#### *Governance*

Significant progress has already been made in optimizing the Association's governing documents (policies, procedures, and especially Bylaws), mostly in order to ensure that the documents represent useful tools rather than procedural dead weight. This process will continue, with greater emphasis on regu-

lar and transparent reviews and updates as an integral part of ATA's governance.

A second aspect requiring close attention is the relationship between volunteers and the professional staff. The Headquarters staff already include specialists in Certification, education and professional development, publications, member services, and information technology. Every one of those functions was once handled by a volunteer, until it became obvious that the job had become too complex and important to be entrusted to an overworked amateur; in every case, adding the professional has not only relieved the load on volunteers, but also improved the service provided to members. This process of transition to professional staff will continue; in a few months, for example, a person responsible for public relations, marketing, and other external communications will join the staff. Increasing professionalization of member services and programs also changes the nature of the work done by volunteers: committee chairs, working group members, Directors, and Officers can increasingly devote their time and energy to thinking and strategizing and creating policy, supported by professionals whose job is to implement those ideas.

The other side of this coin is, of course, the volunteers themselves. Headquarters staffers can be hired, but volunteers must... volunteer. It is literally essential to ensure that as ATA continues to grow and adapt, it remains an association that its members care about enough to work on its behalf. The Association's ingrained culture of collegiality and service helps to keep the pool of future leaders topped up, but specific actions are also being taken in this direction, including a shift in the role of the Nominating Committee toward long-term leadership development and cultivation.

### *Divisions*

ATA's first Division was created in 1978, and there are now more than two dozen such interest groups. Their broadest purpose is to provide an individual and more intimate "home," within what is becoming a rather large Association, for translators and interpreters who work in a particular language pair or subject specialty. The Divisions constitute a source of strength for ATA, attracting members with specific interests and contributing specialized expertise especially in the context of the annual Conference. There has, however, always been the potential for separatism, a risk that Divisions may lose sight of their status as sub-groups within the larger Association that supports and funds them. A delicate balance must be maintained, in which financial and procedural discretion is distinguished from autonomy, and collegiality and support are not allowed to degenerate into arbitrary central control. This is another area in which success is critical: an ATA that, with regard to its Divisions, is not quite federal but less than imperial, will be strong and diverse and beneficial to all its member. Action is already underway, in the form of By-

laws revisions to redefine the financial situation, but a great deal is left to be done.

### *Certification*

The Certification program, initiated in 1973, is one of ATA's crown jewels, a credential of increasing prestige with a constant demand for examination sittings. The program gives translators an opportunity to acquire an objective qualification that demonstrates competence in a particular language pair (from or into English). Applicants must meet educational and other requirements before taking the test, and those who are successful can add the designation "CT" (Certified Translator) after their name. A lot has been accomplished in the last few years: a tremendous effort to develop a keyboard-based test adaptable to every language combination is about to come to fruition, and the number of such combinations is constantly being expanded. Originated and, for many years, administered entirely by volunteers, the program is now run by a hybrid group of dedicated volunteers and headquarters staff members. An important area consideration here is whether, and if so how, to professionalize this particular program even further, once again in the interest of better service to candidates.

A major issue with regard to Certification for the next few years will be external validation. The Certification program was devised exclusively within ATA and has been developed and expanded largely on an in-house basis. That is likely to change in the near future. Extensive research over almost half a decade has indicated that while the program in general, and the examination in particular, do meet many of the criteria applied by experts in testing and evaluation, certain steps still need to be taken. Fortunately those steps are relatively simple and can be taken fairly quickly. One option would then be to submit the program for external review and eventual accreditation by a standards organization. Another route that could be taken would be simply to establish the program on a firm footing in accordance with accepted practices, and begin to promote its value more assertively than has been done in the past.

This drive toward validation has already produced some very useful side-effects, mostly with regard to better understanding of the program among those who work with it every day. The benefits of a robust and well-founded program are becoming apparent, and as this initiative progresses it is likely to further enhance communication and commitment. If the option of true external validation is selected, and if the laborious (and expensive) process of seeking accreditation culminates in actual approval by a standards organization, there will be even further benefits: greater prestige internationally for the credential; a leadership role for ATA among translators' association, since it would be the first such association to gain this type of accreditation; and the possibility of international reciprocity with other organizations in terms of

credentials, creating greater mobility for professional translators and interpreters.

A final decision on the particular approach to validation has yet to be made, but a definite commitment exists to proceeding along whichever route is felt to be the most effective one with the greatest benefit.

### *Communication*

Translators and interpreters are in the communication business, so the way in which ATA itself communicates is of course a concern. Particular attention will be devoted to refining and optimizing communication both internally (within the Association and among its members) and externally (between ATA and the outside world).

#### Internal communication

This category embraces all the educational and other information distributed by the Association to its members, much of which in fact consists of communication among members themselves. ATA's internal communication media include its award-winning monthly magazine (The ATA Chronicle), along with weekly and monthly e-mail bulletins. The Association also provides on-line connectivity via networking systems such as LinkedIn and Twitter, and supports individual e-mail lists for each of the twenty-odd language- and subject-specific Divisions, through which members can communicate with one another. The annual Conference is ATA's principal educational offering and the high point of each year. Attendance now routinely exceeds 1,500, and over 2,000 are expected for the upcoming 50th-anniversary event in New York City. Each Conference represents an extraordinary opportunity for information exchange among members, with other professionals, and between ATA leaders and the membership. In addition ATA holds professional development seminars throughout the rest of the year on a variety of topics, often coordinated with a particular location (energy and petroleum development in Houston, Texas; entertainment in Los Angeles, etc.) All of these opportunities to acquire and exchange information will continue to be supported and enhanced.

#### External communication

The purpose of ATA's highly successful public-relations effort is to create greater awareness and positive opinions of the Association, the translating and interpreting professions, and the language industry in general. The present strategy is based not on advertising but on unpaid media exposure, supported by a corps of virtuoso volunteers who put in long hours to achieve these goals. A consistent message has been established and refined, and the circle of expert spokespersons is being expanded. A headquarters staff person responsible solely for external communication should come on board early in 2010. A number of other programs are also devoted to external communication: a school outreach project has rewarded and publicized efforts by individual

translators to talk about what they do to young people, and an analogous client outreach program is just being finalized, based on a standardized presentation that members can use when speaking to local chambers of commerce or other groups of potential customers. This is felt to be an extremely useful member benefit especially in today's difficult economic circumstances. Lastly, the searchable online services database represents another valuable tool for individual members, providing external communication to potential customers in a context, and on a scale, that would not otherwise be feasible.

All of these efforts are directed toward creating value and benefit for translators and interpreters. Ideally, the results will be cumulative and mutually reinforcing: Translators and interpreters who avail themselves of the many educational opportunities offered by ATA become better translators. The Certification program gives each of them a way to demonstrate his or her expertise, and thereby to enhance his or her professional status. The interest groups within the Association foster specialized capabilities that in turn let each practitioner concentrate in a particular subject area in which he or she excels. Lastly, a properly targeted program of public relations, marketing, and other external communication tells the outside world, including translators' customers, about all the specialized, certified, quality-conscious members of ATA, establishing translation and interpreting as a specialized business service that is worth paying for, rather than a commodity to be procured solely on the basis of price.

## **Summary**

Each of these major aspects of the Association's future—governance with particular attention to interest groups, Certification, and communication—deserves individual attention in the immediate future and for years to come. Even greater benefit to the Association and its members, and to translators and interpreters everywhere, will come if they can be addressed synergistically rather than in isolation. For example, the manner in which ATA governs itself will influence how effectively its volunteer leaders and professional staff can function in all of the other areas. A balance between individuality and unity with regard to Divisions will encourage more members, from a greater diversity of backgrounds, to contribute their time and expertise as volunteers. A validated Certification program can be presented to the world very differently, creating new opportunities for marketing the Association as a whole. These and many other interrelated possibilities and correlations are the real challenge for the next 50 years and beyond, requiring constant effort and attention, assiduous training of leaders, an awareness of how external developments affect the profession and the Association, and most all, an understanding that the purpose of ATA is to give value to its members.