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#### Evolutionary Stages in Freelance Translator Career

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By Alex Eames

#### Stage 1: Hungry

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When you first start out as a full-time freelance you...

- \* accept all work at almost any offered price
- \* make a lot of mistakes (not necessarily in the work, but by not knowing what's expected of you)
- \* learn a lot of lessons the hard way
- \* are willing to work overnight and weekends if required - pretty much any time the client calls.
- \* have your mobile phone switched on the whole time and if you miss a call you get agitated
- \* do whatever you can to get work and to please the client
- \* accept low rates and silly deadlines and you get yourself stressed and in a mess
- \* don't understand why clients take a long time to pay and it's uncomfortable because you're getting hungry

You may be either fresh out of University, newly qualified, or you may be doing a bit of part-time translation work in addition to other work.

When you get a project, you're elated. When the phone rings during work hours and it's a member of your family, instead of possible work, you're disappointed because you're hoping it will be work. (I remember that well).

You want work to come in, and when you get it, you find it quite hard, but nevertheless rewarding once you get into it.

When you've got work, you don't have any trouble getting out of bed, and you can sit for long periods of time at your computer. You don't feel the need to pace yourself - like a cat feeding. You eat and eat and eat as much as you can as quickly as you can because you don't know when the next meal will be, or if someone will come and take away the bowl.

You have this fear, that if you don't accept this nasty job with a tight deadline, that the client may not come back to you next time - there may not be another job round the corner for the next couple of weeks. [The other side of this is that by filling your work schedule for the next week on a poorly paid job may prevent you from taking a more lucrative project.]

You're almost ashamed to charge your full minimum charge for 10 word jobs - despite the knowledge that you still have to make an invoice, chase the payment, store the files in case of queries etc.

For every business purchase you make, you're wondering whether it's going to be a good investment or not. Can you really afford that anti virus software or backup hardware? Can you really afford a decent computer, or should you proceed with a 2 inch black and white monitor? ;) Will translation memory software pay for itself within 5 years?

You spend time considering all these things when you're not actually working on a translation.

You ask fairly basic questions on online forums. In 5 years time you will ask the owners to delete them because you will later be embarrassed by them, and frustrated when the forum owners refuse to destroy the usefulness of their web sites to other translators who might have the same questions.

You're glad that people reply and care and give their honest opinions, even if some of them may be a bit sharp and not what you wanted to hear. Who hasn't been "bitten" in cyber-space?

You're not sure if your marketing is working and you're a bit insecure about the whole situation in general.

I think this is a stage that most of us can either remember or identify with. Some readers may well still be in this phase of freelance translator evolution.

Don't worry. It doesn't last forever. It can't last forever because if you don't get into stage 2 before you run short of funds, you'll be forced to find other work that pays more quickly.

Some people transition from stage 1 to stage 2 by translating part-time.

### Stage 2: Established

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You've got a pretty good idea what clients are willing to pay for your services and you are unwilling to give heavy discounts unless there's a very good reason. (Ex. guaranteed regular volume work).

You've figured out what type of work you like and what is most profitable for you (hopefully you've got a good match).

You've got a handful of regular repeat clients.

You feel more secure but still sometimes wonder if it's going to last.

You're still very keen.

You've had your work trashed a few times by malicious proof-readers who are trying to steal your work for themselves. It still hurts, but now you more fully understand the politics of how the translation business works.

You no longer do short deadline "tests" for unknown clients.

You've probably had at least one "non-payment experience" :(

You're waiting for some of the cheap equipment you originally bought to break, so you can justify upgrading to better stuff.  
(Don't wait too long. It took 7 years for our first fax machine to die before we could buy a plain paper fax).

You've probably got a filing cabinet and an ordered filing system by now - like in proper offices - to keep track of your previous work.

You still find it difficult to refuse work. Even if it's a little bit inconvenient, or not quite the right subject. That problem takes a long time to go away. Only when you become too busy or too ill do you learn how to refuse work.

### Stage 3: Busy

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Work is coming in like there's no tomorrow.  
You are in hot demand. You are happy that things are going well.  
Will it last?

It can be a struggle to get your invoices out in a timely manner and keep on top of other administrative work. Marketing? No time for that, too busy working.

You seem to be working all the time, but the bank balance is steadily improving, or that "black hole" debt is reducing. One day you'll have

time to think about what to do with some of your earnings, but not today, because there's a deadline to meet.

This is where "urgency addiction" can set in. Ever heard of that? It's when you're driven by urgency rather than importance. It also often means that unless something is urgent it won't get done. Or if there is something to do (that you don't enjoy doing) it will be left until the last possible moment before it is done.

#### Stage 4: Deadline Dazed

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Did I have a life before all this work? OK the money's seriously coming in now, but isn't there more to life than work?

In this phase you've been working pretty solidly for several weeks or months. Desperately trying to meet all deadlines, while not turning away any work.

"What day is it?" Is probably something you have to think quite hard about, because all the days are the same. You, your computer, your work, your clients.

You've probably had a go at sub-contracting work out to others and realised that there is no free lunch to be had in doing that because you end up checking all the work anyway and unless you have direct clients, there's not much profit margin for you, and it's often not worth the hassle.

Did I used to do some sport or have some hobbies. Forgotten all about that.

Busy busy busy. More more more. Work work work Until...

#### Stage 5: Imposed Slowdown

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Something (outside your control) happens that forces you to take a step back and re-evaluate. Either the birth of a child makes you refocus your priorities, or maybe some kind of breakdown, which could be physical or mental illness.

You realise that you've got to look after yourself. Of course you have to earn a living, but not kill yourself in the process.

After a period of adjustment, you may either go through stages 2-5 again or proceed straight to stage 6.

#### Stage 6: Comfort Level - Mature Business

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You still don't like turning away work, but if it's inconvenient, too stressful, or you just don't like the "feel" of a new client, you will be much more prepared to reject it.

You've probably made a big dent in your mortgage, or even paid it off - depending on how long you stayed in stages 3 & 4 and what you did with the proceeds of your work.

Through this you find that you don't actually need to earn as much as before in order to satisfy your basic needs (not talking about the fleet of sports cars in your driveway, or that shuttle trip to the moon).

You have a stable base of repeat clients who are comfortable with you, always pay within your comfort zone, and provide the kind of work that you like.

Basically, you've reached a point of comfort and stability.

When I first started in business, I realised that by the time you feel comfortable you've missed an opportunity. This is true.

But what I didn't know then, that I do now, is that since not every opportunity is the right one, sometimes deliberately missing opportunities is a good thing.

Where Have You Reached?

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What stage are you at with your business?

If you're in stage 3 or 4 take some time out every week to do physical exercise or something relaxing and pleasurable. Look after yourself.

When you're self-employed, there is no sick pay. A day off sick is a day not earning. So take your short breaks now to avoid an enforced long break later. Too much work on? For goodness sake don't be so greedy - turn the least attractive project away.