When we go to the supermarket to stock up, the one item we’re mostly oblivious to is the shopping cart. That’s the way I think of us in the language community and our place in the global business marketplace. Without us, corporate and cultural “shoppers” would have their arms full and have to leave stuff on the shelf. With us, we facilitate a real shopping spree. But we don’t seem to receive the credit for our critical role in facilitating commerce around the world. I know it’s a very simple notion to convey the workings of a highly complex supply chain and skills matrix, but it gets the point across. We are, I believe, taken for granted and the reasons are plentiful. However, the fact that everyone uses languages for a host of purposes without giving it much thought means that we are not as visible as we should be. One consequence of this that does concern us all is that we are challenged to attract and develop talent in a way that will allow us to command what I argue is our rightful place in the business skill tree. This was the subject of a session at the LocWorld conference in Barcelona in June of this year.

**Attracting and Developing Talent (ADT)**

The LocWorld initiative, Attracting and Developing Talent (ADT) started several years ago and was inspired by a specific panel during a LocWorld conference discussing the evidence of talent shortage in recruiting language professionals. A small group of hiring clients and recruiters that were facing such issues was quickly created and discussions started to identify the causes and finding a common ground to formulate solutions. Who better to lead this early advisory group than Ulrich Henes, president of the Localization Institute and co-organizer of the LocWorld conferences? Henes was fascinated by language, cultural differences and global business having spent his early career organizing campaigns against the arms race, apartheid and promoting respect for differences among people, countries and languages.
Henes’ background in the early days of localization helped him realize that there was a serious lack of quality training and learning opportunities, which he is filling with his certification courses for professionals in the Language Industry. The aim of ADT is to gather together people invested in hiring talent such as recruiters, clients and vendors, as well as university professors responsible for developing educational programs and facilitating a sustainable strategy to address job categories, career paths and increasing incentives.

Although the initial group has been replaced by a growing number of regular attendees, all the meetings take place during the LocWorld conferences, three times a year. The first few meetings focused on the first identified roadblock, which was to establish open discussions between industry and academics, understand each other’s challenges and facilitate solutions for both sides. Most of our prominent universities have attended previous sessions and had the opportunity to share their point of view and create open channels to the industry. A second roadblock that was identified was the visibility and recognition of the language industry to the outside world and was addressed during the last LocWorld conference in Barcelona in June 2017. A third and final roadblock that was identified and is due to be addressed during the next LocWorld conferences is retaining talent by addressing issues on the available career paths and incentives.

Henes regards himself as the facilitator of the ADT Initiative and would like to see more industry professionals step in and get involved on a sustainable, regular basis. When there are enough participants and contributors from all sides of the language industry and from all geographies, the ADT initiative can create a truly impactful, long-term strategy for the benefit of the entire Industry.

Facts, Figures and Assumptions
Although our industry is not the only one affected by a skills shortage, we are nonetheless in a unique position of having an increasing demand for language services, a steadily increasing number of language students in our academic institutions, considerably more than other disciplines, and yet we experience a skills shortage. To shed some light on this conundrum I spent a few hours searching for data on numbers of language students and any information I could get on their career paths after they graduate. I didn’t find any public information on undergraduates and their chosen career paths or the increase of freelancer translators on an annual basis, which could potentially indicate new entrants - perhaps professional associations across the world can join forces and address this question collectively.

However, I found some data on percentages of undergraduate language students studying to become teachers of either primary or secondary language versus translation language students from 2011 in Canada. Canada being a bilingual country would make sense to have higher than normal number of translation students. Their students who study translation services are 25% of their total language students. We can easily assume that a worldwide average would fall to something like 10%. This indication and other similar ones are very important to us to determine from where we need to attract the new talent. If there is already an upward trend for language degrees, how can we attract more of those students to the translation services niche? It would surely be easier to attract future language teachers to the translation services niche than to create awareness and visibility to non-language students.

Although we don’t have a clear picture for undergraduate students and their career paths, we do have new information for graduate students of translation. Keeping in mind that only a small percentage of language students continue their studies in specialized translation MA degrees (University of Leeds estimates 30%), we can safely assume that these students have already committed to a career path in
the translation services sector and this is reflected in their early employment. The MA institutions have a closer tab on their graduates. The European Masters in Translation (EMT) network has started a more rigorous process of researching the employment conditions of the graduates from EMT universities, and their data from 1519 respondents sheds light on the chosen career paths of the graduate respondents in the EU (831 respondents were working in the language services industry, 209 in education and 84 in advertising and marketing, to name only the top three categories), as well as their salaries (the majority were working in-house earning between €10-20k, followed by another group of in-house professionals earning between €20-30k), length of time before finding employment (the majority either had a job before graduating – 38.03% - or found one within six months – 40.73%).

I do believe that uncertainty about the real facts and figures of the language industry and the metrics for making sense of it create a headache for industry watchers. I’m also aware that we do not seem to have much certainty about what happens to new language graduates when they enter the workplace and whether they remain a part of the language community or whether they jump fields to work in other capacities with more defined career paths. In particular, I have concerns about those passionate individuals who pledge to join the ranks of the freelance translator community, but find themselves battling to make a living in what can be an unforgiving environment of providing language services as an independent contractor without experience, contacts, business knowledge and or specialization. So, if you are a new graduate determined to wield your hard won professionals skills, but cannot or do not want to work in a large organization and decide to work for yourself, how on earth do you go about it? If that isn’t a challenge, I don’t know what is.

**Universities’ point of view**
To find answers to that very question, I turned to Dr Dragoș Ciobanu, Assistant Professor of Translation Studies at the University of Leeds and Program Manager of the MA in Applied Translation Studies. He also chairs the Professionalization Talks series, a program connecting MA and senior undergraduate students with Language Industry professionals. Ciobanu is also a Board Member of the European Masters in Translation (EMT) consortium aiming to improve the quality of translation training and provide help for young graduates entering the job market. In his early career days in 2003, he joined a new project eCoLoRe, a three-year, EU-funded project whose consortium of universities built freely-accessible training resources on CAT tools and language technology for students, professors and language professionals, while at the same time pursuing his PhD in Computer Assisted Language Learning and started teaching in the University of Leeds Centre for Translation Studies (CTS). Although the eCoLo projects went dormant in 2009, he is part of a group reviving them through Translation Commons and participating in a pilot to enlarge the scope by involving students. Currently he is also involved with his colleagues Dr Alina Secară and Caroline Reiss in the DigiLing EU-funded project, building freely accessible training resources for tomorrow’s digital linguists. He is currently also researching Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) on the ergonomics, productivity and quality of a professional translator’s output.

Ciobanu shared with me that he is gratified to see the breakdown of communication between academic institutions and the language industry steadily being addressed through initiatives such as ADT and other similar ones through associations, LSP’s and nonprofits all together. He feels that the industry’s criticism of a serious lack of standards in training has been addressed by initiatives such as the European Masters in Translation (EMT), which collaborates closely with the industry through LIND-Web, the body that represents ELIA, EUATC and GALA. Moreover, inviting students to the annual Translating Europe Forum in Brussels also raises the profile of the profession among students, professors, international
organizations and industry alike. The University of Leeds CTS has had a large number of LSPs, EU and UN linguists, linguists’ associations, as well as various industry professionals give regular webinars, master classes and small courses adding significantly to the students understanding of the Language Industry and the career paths available to them. The CTS was even able to share with other universities some of the streamed webinars and talks created by Google and Belén Agulló. He also stressed the huge difference which LSP representatives such as Anu Carnegie-Brown and Raisa McNab from STP – recently joined by Kim Harris from text&form - have been making by proactively funding, supporting, designing and delivering practical sessions or even entire short courses in localization project management to academic partners. He is now convinced that there is a strong – if small, but growing nevertheless – bedrock of committed players to the quality, relevance and sustainability of translation training.

Overall Ciobanu sees a great deal more opportunities for collaboration and urges both sides to attempt to understand the challenges that the other side faces. Specifically the industry will need to appreciate that academic studies are not merely theoretical but also focus on applied issues such as technology optimization, productivity and quality amongst others. Although academics are very much willing and able to change their curricula to reflect the industry needs, it takes an average of a year to have changes approved. And even when they do change their programs, it is impossible to address all issues due to their limitation on language-specific resources. Many universities with limited knowledge of language technology face an even more challenging issue to educate their professors or acquire new talent themselves, which poses new problems in matching industry talent with academic background requirements.

Perhaps the biggest issue that universities are not able to address is the skill-set requirements for the various career paths within the language industry. It seems that currently there are no set skill
requirements. For example, for a Project Manager, the job description will vary from a large company to a small, from an LSP to a tech corporation, from one geography to another and definitely from one specialization to another. In Ciobanu’s opinion, perhaps the best way forward is to create internship opportunities for both professors and students and open up channels of communication on a regular basis. This could be an incentive for professors whose academic careers are dependent on research publications and by being involved with language companies can help them include real life research in their work.

However, Ciobanu is also clear about the responsibilities that universities have too. They need to appreciate that partnerships with industry will help them and their students. Clients and the work that professional linguists do is global and universities need to address and foster a more open, collaborative mindset to help their students transition from emphasizing their own individual success to being part of a team. It is true that today the academic language institutions which do not prepare their students to work on translation technology are inadvertently making them less employable than their counterparts who have been trained on tools. Individual professors need to be able to contact automation providers and ask for free academic licenses for their students, even if doing so is out of their comfort zone. In the same way, professional linguists are more than willing to volunteer a few hours to come and help students get a real life glimpse of what to expect when they graduate, as long as they get asked.

Ciobanu summarized: “Everyone in our industry has a slightly different perspective on what needs to be done to increase our collective visibility, status and recognition. Yet I feel that few have the patience to seek the full story and the big picture. We can no longer afford to indulge in a game of pass-the-blame or rely on hearsay and old news, and instead we should recognize the significant effort which representatives from the academia, industry, and international organizations have been making for
several years now to ensure translation, subtitling, and interpreting graduates are in the best place possible to join the language services industry as freelancers or in-house professionals. We should appreciate this work, build on it, and steadily strive to improve on it for the sake of our students, our businesses, and the whole world population who rely on language services to understand, tolerate each other and prosper together.”

**A Solid Bridge**

Clients have requirements and the job of translators is to meet them. The requirements of multiple products and services, multiple audiences, multiple competitors and multiple markets in multiple languages demand meticulous organization in strategic positioning. The needs we fulfill are international and global in their reach. Imagining that our universities can prepare the translation students for the multitude of real-life requirements and that when they graduate they will be as good as the veterans we seek them to replace is unrealistic.

Today the universities are preparing professionals in translation services with an advanced understanding of technology and specialties. I am always pleasantly surprised to experience the high standards of language proficiency that our graduates master during their studies today. Most of us had to learn on the job merely because we were the only one who could do it at the time. Whatever happened to “training on the job”? It seems to have vanished when all the in-house positions were outsourced. But still the training could be done by the service providers. We need to see our LSP’s picking up the pace and creating internship opportunities and matching experienced translators with graduates for mentoring. This is a critical stage in the transition of students to become professionals especially when we impose a freelance contractor business model. We cannot complain of skill shortage
when it is up to us to mentor and provide internships to help young graduates acquire the experience we demand them to possess before we entrust them with our work.

Without data to support that we have a serious skill shortage and with contrary evidence of growing numbers of language graduates I would like to suggest to look at the issue from the other way around: what is it that we are asking and not finding in prospective candidates? Are our requests and job descriptions too narrow? Are the hiring processes too impersonal and automated? Do we ask for at least 3-5 years of experience without having created the means for graduates to earn it? To build a bridge we need to start from both sides.

So what is it to be? Do we want a rope bridge, Indiana Jones style or an iconic Golden Gate style structure, resplendent in its International Orange color with tollbooths, moveable lanes, safety nets and a non-stop stream of traffic? We all want the latter. We all want to see the language community building solid lines of communication within and attracting the admiration of a translation-hungry world. The examples of how the endeavors of Henes and Ciobanu are brimming with potential to build a solid bridge, while visionary and inspiring, are not unique. My experience of meeting and working with many others in all fields of our industry fills me with hope that the symbiosis we need is a realistic, achievable goal. Let’s not make this a bridge we cross when come to it. We’re already there. Meet you in the middle!

Summary:

We need data to help us understand the workings of our industry. If we know more about the people who make up our community, how they got to where they are and how they do what they do, we can
define more accurately what skills we use and where to get them. It would be a healthy move for our industry to pin down some well-defined points on a settled language-services career path. Employers could attract talent to join the community with clear prospects for cutting-edge language work and some form of structured advancement. New language graduates might give the language services sector as a whole a closer look and not just flock to the teaching positions because they offer security and transparency.