

Translating for Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies: The Translation Group – Rx&D

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to give an overview of the pharmaceutical translation field in Canada, particularly within brand-name companies. It will also discuss the work of the Translation Group – Rx&D. It should be of special interest to corporate employers, translation firms, freelance translators, and present or potential university students in translation programs.

Key Words: Translation—Pharmacy—Didactics—freelance translators – Programmes

Résumé:

Le but de cet article est de donner un aperçu du champ de traduction pharmaceutique au Canada, en particulier au sein des entreprises de marque. Il examinera également le travail du Groupe de traduction - Rx & D. Il devrait être d'un intérêt particulier pour les employeurs d'entreprises, cabinets de traduction, traducteurs indépendants, actuels ou potentiels et les étudiants universitaires dans les programmes de traduction.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to give an overview of the pharmaceutical translation field in Canada, particularly within brand-name companies. It will also discuss the work of the Translation Group – Rx&D. It should be of special interest to corporate employers, translation firms, freelance translators, and present or potential university students in translation programs.

The Rx&D Companies

In Canada, about 55 brand-name pharmaceutical companies within the innovative pharmaceutical industry are members of a national association called Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies, or Rx&D (www.canadapharma.org). These companies include large multinational organizations that have a Canadian subsidiary, like AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Merck Frosst, and Wyeth, as well as smaller Canadian companies, such as Theratechnologies. Many of these companies have their head office in Montréal or Toronto, and collectively employ more than 23,000 Canadians.

The association Rx&D was founded in 1914. Its mission is to “improve the quality of life and enhance the health care system by fostering the discovery, development, and availability of new medicines” (Rx&D website). The association has a number of publications, including a *Code of Marketing Practices* that all its members must adhere to. Many similar organizations in other countries, such as the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America in the U.S. (www.phrma.org), pursue basically the same goals as Rx&D. Over 60 of these national associations are members of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Associations (www.ifpma.org).

The Translation Departments

Approximately 25 of the member companies of Rx&D have their own translation department. These departments vary greatly in size, ranging from one person, who may or may not be a professional translator, to a group of 15 to 20 translators. The translation department at these companies is managed by either a coordinator, translator, manager, director, or another employee who can outsource all, part, or none of the work. Translations are usually done at the Canadian head office in either the Montréal or Toronto area, sometimes both.

Although the translation department handles documents originating from all areas in the company, it necessarily belongs to a specific division; however, there is currently no consensus as to which division. Consequently, you will find the translation department in any of the following: Regulatory Affairs, Sales and Marketing, Finance, Human Resources, Corporate Services, etc.

The Translators

In Canada, about 90% of the translators and other employees working in the various translation departments of Rx&D companies are women. They translate mostly English documents into French or vice versa, but they also work on translations from or into other

languages. They come from various parts of the world, but especially Québec, Ontario, and other Canadian provinces. Translators who speak more than two languages have usually acquired their unofficial languages either in their home country or at various schools in Canada. In fact, some translation departments at Rx&D companies cover quite a few languages internally.

The translators of the Rx&D translation departments offer a wide range of experience, skills, and knowledge. Many of them have university degrees in translation and sometimes in another discipline. Some have previously worked as health professionals, language teachers, or in another profession. Many of them have obtained their professional accreditation from the Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council (www.cttic.org), and are members of the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario (www.atio.on.ca) or the Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec (www.otiaq.org).

The in-house translators may be assisted by coordinators, terminologists, revisors, and other colleagues. The translation departments also use a number of freelance translators or translation firms, some of whom have many years of experience in the industry.

The Rx&D companies generally offer excellent working conditions for their translators, which has resulted in fairly stable and long careers. Over the years, however, mergers and acquisitions within the pharmaceutical industry have brought some changes to the various translation departments. These mergers explain the hyphenated names of many pharmaceutical companies, like Merck Frosst, AstraZeneca, and Janssen-Ortho.

Finally, as in many other sectors, the translators within these departments are inevitably aging, and there are some concerns about succession. It seems that, in Canada at least, university programs are not producing nearly enough translators to meet the increasing demand for language services in various industries, including pharmaceuticals.

The Work

The 100 or so translators working in Rx&D companies translate documents that are obviously related to their companies' products, mostly prescription drugs and some over-the-counter products. Because these products cover a wide range of therapeutic areas, translators are expected to have a solid knowledge of medical concepts and the English and French terminology in a number of medical specialties, such as cardiology, women's health, psychiatry, neurology, infectious disease, gastroenterology, and urology, to name just a few.

These translators handle various types of documents, from one-page internal memos to lengthy and complex product monographs, voluminous sales training materials, journal ads, slide presentations, CD-ROMs, posters, and websites. Moreover, since they offer their services to the whole company, translators also have to tackle legal, financial, administrative, and technical documents.

Throughout all of this, they must be mindful of who will read the document they are translating and to adjust the style and reading level to the targeted audience. It goes without saying that a brochure on oral contraceptives for young women will have to be written

differently than a summary addressed to psychiatrists concerning the latest conference of the American Psychiatric Association.

The good news about the great diversity of material to be translated is that the work is rarely repetitive, is often interesting, and is even useful for one's personal life. Translators spend their working hours reading documents on ways to maintain good health, prevent diseases, make rational therapeutic choices, eat properly, etc., and they get paid for communicating this important information in another language. Nice work if you can do it!

Issues and Challenges

In Canada, as elsewhere, the pharmaceutical industry is highly regulated. Health Canada is the federal department "responsible for helping the people of Canada maintain and improve their health." Its Therapeutic Products Directorate "regulates pharmaceutical drugs and medical devices for human use. Prior to being given market authorization, a manufacturer must present substantive scientific evidence of a product's safety, efficacy, and quality as required by the Food and Drugs Act and Regulations" (Health Canada website, www.hc-sc.gc.ca). Once a drug has been authorized, pharmaceutical companies that are members of Rx&D must submit all external marketing pieces to the Pharmaceutical Advertising Advisory Board, "an independent review agency whose primary role is to ensure that the advertising of prescription drugs is accurate, balanced, and evidence-based" (PAAB website, www.paab.ca). Finally, to list a drug on provincial formularies for reimbursement by public health plans, a pharmaceutical company must present detailed submissions to each provincial Ministry of Health, a time-consuming but critical process for the success of any prescription drug.

This complex regulatory framework means significant challenges and risks for translators working in the industry. Errors can be fatal. (For example, in the erroneous warning "It is hazardous to exceed 80 tablets per day," the extra zero could kill somebody.) Products have been recalled because of labelling mistakes, all at a huge cost to the manufacturer. The critical nature of many documents in the pharmaceutical sector requires translators to be extremely careful and to submit translations to a rigorous quality control process. The problem is compounded by the increasing complexity and variety of documents to be translated, often within very tight deadlines. Furthermore, the medical sector is constantly changing, so translators must keep up with new concepts, products, technologies, services, etc., in two languages. Just the sheer volume of translation work to be done has stretched the already limited resources available.

Considering all these risks and constraints, it is amazing that people would still want to translate documents in such an environment. And yet, in the pharmaceutical and many other sectors, one finds a solid group of highly competent language professionals dedicated to facilitating communications and relations between different linguistic groups.

The Translation Group – Rx&D

In 1982, a group of translators working in the pharmaceutical industry felt the need to meet regularly to discuss terminology, project management, and other issues. They formed a group

and invited other translators to join them. Since they were working for brand-name pharmaceutical companies, they decided to limit the membership to those translators working in the translation departments of member companies of Rx&D (then called the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association of Canada) and of the Council for Continuing Pharmaceutical Education (formerly the Council for the Accreditation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Representatives of Canada), a not-for-profit organization that develops and administers education programs for the Canadian pharmaceutical industry.

The Translation Group – Rx&D has two sections, one in Toronto and the other in Montréal (the two cities where most major brand-name pharmaceutical companies have their head office). Each local section meets regularly and, twice a year, the whole group holds a meeting in one of the two cities. Each meeting includes an administrative part and a training component. Participants have the opportunity to hear presentations on various topics of interest to them.

Since 1990, the group has published a quarterly terminology bulletin, *Pharmaterm*. Each issue, which discusses terminology problems, is prepared by a specialist in the area. The publication is reviewed by the group's Terminology Committee and is distributed to all members and interested parties. A cumulative index is published every other year. This index, as well as a sample issue, are posted on the group's website.

Throughout the year, the group organizes training sessions, which are attended not only by member companies, but also by the freelance translators who work for them. These sessions focus on medical terminology, linguistics, or other health-related matters. Moreover, the Translation Group – Rx&D seeks to increase its links with university translation programs in order to make students aware of the area of medical/pharmaceutical translations and to help attract new translators. It maintains a website (www.groupetraduction.ca) that includes a list of its members, useful links, a job posting section, and some information about its objectives, *Pharmaterm*, and other matters.

The Translation Group – Rx&D also brings together in-house and freelance translators for social activities. These initiatives allow participants to network and reduce the inevitable isolation that is particular to this type of work. All members agree that such an exchange of ideas, information, and terminology benefits the whole industry and contributes to the improvement of French communications. These factors probably explain the longevity and enduring success of the group.

Conclusion

The translation sector within Canadian brand-name pharmaceutical companies is a dynamic, challenging, very interesting, and promising area for its members and other stakeholders. The Translation Group – Rx&D is proud of its modest, but nevertheless important, contribution to this field over the last quarter of a century.

Bibliography

The Translation Group – Rx&D

www.groupetraduction.ca

Group of translators working for about 20 member companies of the association Rx&D.

Contains basic information about the group, useful links, and a sample issue and cumulative index of *Pharmaterm*, a quarterly bulletin on medical/pharmaceutical terminology. Includes a

section containing postings of job opportunities within the translation departments of the member companies.

Rx&D (Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies)

www.canadapharma.org

National association representing some 55 research-based pharmaceutical companies in Canada. Contains various policies, publications, and information about the industry.

Health Canada

www.hc-sc.gc.ca

Federal Canadian department responsible for helping Canadians maintain and improve their health. Contains a wealth of information about health and diseases, both in English and French.

Pharmaceutical Advertising Advisory Board

www.paab.ca

Independent review agency whose primary role is to ensure that the advertising of prescription drugs is accurate, balanced, and evidence-based. Publishes the *Code of Advertising Acceptance*.

Translation Bureau

www.translationbureau.gc.ca

Canadian federal agency handling the translation needs of the federal departments and agencies, and of both houses of Parliament (House of Commons and Senate). Produces the terminology database Termium, available by subscription on the Internet (www.termium.com) and on CD-ROM. Publishes *Terminology Update/L'Actualité terminologique*, a bilingual quarterly periodical on language and terminology.

Office québécois de la langue française

www.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca

Québec government agency responsible for administering the Charter of the French Language and promoting the use and quality of the French language in Québec. Produces the *Grand dictionnaire terminologique*, available free-of-charge at www.granddictionnaire.com.

Canadian Pharmacists Association

www.pharmacists.ca

Publishes the annual *Compendium of Pharmaceuticals and Specialties*, a bilingual publication containing 3,000 product monographs (available in print, on CD-ROM, and online). An indispensable tool for members of the industry.

Canadian Translators, Terminologists, and Interpreters Council

www.cttic.org

National organization responsible for managing the accreditation process for various provincial associations of language professionals.

Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario

www.atio.on.ca

Professional association seeking to promote a high level of competence in the fields of translation, conference interpretation, court interpretation, and terminology in Ontario.

Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec

www.ottiaq.org

Professional association whose mission is to promote the competence and professionalism of its members in the fields of translation, terminology, and interpretation in Québec. Publishes *Circuit*, an award-winning quarterly magazine on language, communication, and translation.