

Localization Portland, Oregon-style

Jeff Williams

Portland, Oregon, is well known for its professional basketball team the Trail Blazers, nearby Mt. Hood (which lands in the national news every so often when hikers and skiers go missing) and the perception that it's a rainy place with strange people. Indeed, a local bumper sticker proclaims, "Keep Portland Weird," so that perception is perhaps well founded. Portland is also known for its great food scene with innovative restaurants and food carts, lots of indie music, and its proximity to the mountains and the sandy beaches, both within a two-hour drive.

Less well known is that the greater Portland area also has the distinction of being home to over a dozen translation and localization companies, earmarking it as one of the largest localization hotbeds in the country. An informal survey of similar sized cities, including Charlotte, Columbus, San Antonio, Milwaukee, Orlando, Indianapolis, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Cincinnati and Norfolk, shows that none of them has anywhere near the concentration of localization companies found in Portland. Moreover, the only similar city to have even one of the major players in the industry is Milwaukee, with Iverson Languages (a TransPerfect company). The next closest city with any significant concentration of translation and localization companies of any importance or size is Kansas City, Missouri, with five companies, but none of the majors.

Portland is fast gaining a reputation as a great place to have a localization business due to the pool of skilled and talented localization professionals. Savvy corporate localization buyers already know about the ready availability of talented localization professionals in Portland, making it a valuable marketplace for buyers to research and buy localization services and cultivate partnerships. Much as Nike, Adidas USA and Columbia Sportswear (all headquartered in the Portland area) draw upon a pool of skilled sports gear and apparel professionals found in

the region, the presence in the Pacific Northwest of large technology companies such as Microsoft, Intel, Symantec and FLIR is no doubt a driving force behind this attraction. Indeed, some of the largest localization companies in the world have offices or representatives in the Portland area. There are also many smaller, privately-held companies doing business in Oregon.

Let's take a look at some of the companies doing business in the Portland area. Certified Languages International is an over-the-phone-interpretation (OPI) company that supplies interpretation in 175 languages worldwide from its Portland call center. Jonckers is a Belgium-based company with a sales and production office in downtown Portland. Lingo Systems is a division of Language Line Services, the largest OPI company in the world. It has an office in Tigard, a suburb of Portland, with approximately 30 production and sales staff. Lionbridge is the largest company by revenue in the localization sector of the industry. It has a technology management representative based in Portland and a division office right across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington. PTIGlobal is privately held and has been in business for over 30 years. Based in Beaverton, a Portland suburb and home to Nike, PTIGlobal has approximately 140 full-time and contingent employees. It also has an embedded Managed Services Division in Hillsboro, Oregon. Transperfect is a New York-based company with an office in Portland and sales staff in Corvallis, Oregon. viaLanguage is privately owned and is based in Portland with approximately 50 employees in production and sales.

WeLocalize is headquartered in Frederick, Maryland, but maintains a production and sales office in Portland. CTS Language Link is privately held and has 50 plus employees, with sales and production staff, and an OPI call center in Vancouver.



Jeff Williams, director of marketing and sales for PTIGlobal in Portland, Oregon, is an 11-year veteran in the localization industry.

Oregon Translations is based in Beaverton, and is privately held. Passport to Languages, also located in Portland, specializes in face-to-face interpretation and OPI. ISA-Talent provides medical and legal interpretation and multilingual voice-over talent. Pacific Interpreters specializes in medical interpretation too, as well as having an OPI call center. TOIN is a Japan-based company with production and sales staff in Wilsonville, 15 miles south of Portland, localizing products into Asian languages. There are also representatives from localization tool companies, such as the Luxembourg-based WordBee. Collectively, these companies represent approximately hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue and are working with every sector of the economy, including government, manufacturing, IT, retail, medical and travel/tourism. They also actively support practically every member of the Fortune 100, 500 and 1000. The global impact of the services these companies provide is a huge boon to the Oregon economy.

Why Portland? The cost of living and doing business in Oregon is considerably



Downtown Portland is located on the Willamette river.

lower than most other major metropolitan areas, making localization services more affordable and setting up partnerships attractive. The net gain for international corporations is an enormous pool of professionals who have been performing localization for many years and have a wealth of experience and resources. It also helps that Portland is home to large populations (ca. 15%) of residents from Europe, Asia and Latin America, creating

a ready-made multilingual workforce. Olivia Halfen is a good example. She has worked for several localization companies in Portland, including Lingo Systems and viaLanguage, where she is currently a senior project manager for eLearning solutions. German-born, Halfen was raised and educated in the United States. In 2009 she left the industry and moved to France where she worked at a ski resort. When she returned to Portland, she landed a job with an international digital advertising company, but after a few months there, she decided localization was her true passion, and began looking for opportunities to return to the industry. Luckily,

with so many options available in Portland, she landed several interviews before accepting her current position. "I really missed being in the localization industry, as you are working with people from all over the world. Being German, and having spent a lot of time living and working in Europe, I thrive on the international interaction you get from working with other language professionals all over," says Halfen. "Portland is a great place to live and work and I take full advantage of all the natural resources found here. I ski in the winter and bike and camp in the summer. I also love all the vibrant activity on the streets in downtown Portland."

The Localization Institute, based in Madison, Wisconsin, coordinates educational events for internationalization and localization professionals. The Institute recognizes the concentration of localization professionals in Portland and feels that it is so significant, it contracts with three Portlanders to offer industry roundtables and seminars, which attract national and international attendance. One of those contractors, Jennie Jaeger, who also works as a client-side language project manager for dental manufacturer, A-dec, notes, "I've attended a number of Portland-area industry networking events that attracted many more people than I could talk to in an evening. On LinkedIn, I'm connected to about 40 Portland-area people in the business, and I'm sure that will continue to grow." She

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adds, “The cost of living in the Portland area is lower than many West Coast cities, so it is a relatively low-cost source of localization talent in the same timezone as big markets for services, especially Seattle and the Bay Area. Seattle is an easy drive or train ride away, and San Francisco a short plane ride away.”

Portland is also home to other localization professionals, such as testers, project managers and engineers, who work for the many companies in the area. PTIGlobal has approximately 50-60 employees who are linguistic and functional quality assurance testers, all of whom are trained in the best known methods of localization testing. All must reside in the area in order to work onsite and on proprietary systems. There are also many translators who live and work in the Portland area. A survey of my own company’s translator database produced over 370 qualified people. I spoke with a couple of them recently to find out what drew them to Portland to practice their art.

Ines Bojlesen was born in Brazil of multilingual parents; languages were a fascination to her from an early age. She spent her senior year of high school in Vancouver as an exchange student and dreamed of one day making the Pacific Northwest her home. Now married to a Dane, when the opportunity presented itself to move to Oregon, little convincing was needed to make the move. In 1998 she moved to Portland, bringing her 20 years of experience as a Portuguese interpreter and translator. The demand for Brazilian Portuguese was not very great in the area at the time, but neither was the availability of Portuguese translators and interpreters. Agencies were pleased to learn that a Portuguese linguist had arrived in their midst, and soon most of the local language providers had become her clients. For seven years OPI was part of Bojlesen’s routine, the phone ringing at all hours of the night for jobs that varied from helping to deliver babies, to interpreting for the US Coast Guard as rescuers tried to locate a boat in distress during a storm off the coast of Brazil. The translation business has grown to a healthy volume, and Ines receives a wide range of interesting work from technical software applications to marketing materials. Bojlesen works from her home office and has no plans to move. “Portland has welcomed my family and me with open arms,” she says. “We live in the outskirts

of the city, and enjoy the healthy country-like lifestyle it offers combined with its attractive downtown with many good restaurants and cultural activities.”

After teaching German at various colleges in the 1980s, Walter Keutel, a native German, moved to Portland in the early 1990s. He first worked as a part-time project manager for a localization company, but eventually became a full-time German translator. Keutel’s business contacts span the United States and Europe, and he has established close working relationships with most local agencies in Portland. “I arrived in Portland through some unexpected twists in life,” says Keutel, “but Portland has turned out to be a blessing for me. The many opportunities in the localization business that have existed here for the last two decades helped me to establish myself as a professional translator. Portland’s coffeehouse culture and its abundance of open Wi-Fi networks allow me to view the entire city as my office. After hours of working in my home office, it is often a welcome relief to visit one of the many coffeehouses, turn the computer on and continue to work – but now surrounded by people in a more social setting.”

The City of Portland and the Portland Development Commission (PDC) started a pilot program in 2011 known as PDX11. This initiative focuses on promoting four

economic clusters: software, footwear/athletic apparel, manufacturing and renewable green energy. Some interesting information came out of the research conducted before the launch of the initiative. The PDC conducted a survey to ascertain some of the drivers behind these industries and it was discovered, particularly for the software sector, that people working in software in Portland were not particularly motivated by money but were more concerned with their quality of life. The exact opposite is found in Silicon Valley, where money and promotion within the corporate ranks takes precedence. Typically, if you have worked at a Silicon Valley firm for a year or more, you have been promoted several times and are being headhunted by the competition. Once again the PDX11 research showed that the exact opposite is the case in Portland. As long as people have a steady job, they tend to stay with that company for a long time, thus keeping a valuable continuity and institutional knowledge intact. Portland’s Mayor Sam Adams has touted this stable workforce, most recently on a trade trip to Germany in the summer of 2011. For all these reasons, Portland area localization companies are well positioned to assist the growing number of startups and existing industries in the area as well as nationally and worldwide. **M**

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