

# Project Management Tales – Multi-Language Mix-Up

By *Debbie Gallagher*

*Each story in this series of Project Management Tales is true, but company names have been changed. Some stories occurred in Canada and others took place in the US and overseas.*



*Debbie Gallagher*

## Background

A Portuguese company hired Standard Inc. to assist them with selection and implementation of web-based Human Resources software. For the implementation phase, the client had a contract with Standard, who sub-contracted the work to the US-based software vendor, Acme Corporation.

The implementation went well, completing on time and on budget. Afterward, the client wanted custom enhancements and modules, and similar arrangements were made. Standard was to be the main contractor and language translator. Acme was to work off-site, developing the custom programs based on user requirements. The custom work in the first year was expected to be worth several million dollars. The process for each modification would start with the client developing requirements in Portuguese. Standard would translate the requirements into English for Acme. Then, Acme would determine the effort and estimated fees for the modification. If approved, Acme would complete the development and testing, and produce documentation and installation instructions in English. Standard would translate the English documents into Portuguese, and do the installation at the client site. All communication between Acme and the client would go through Standard.

## The Situation

Acme received a set of specifications, and based on the stated requirements, estimated that the modification would take three months and cost about three hundred thousand dollars. Standard provided the estimate to the client. The client was appalled. Surely this particular modification was not that big a deal. The client asked Standard to have Acme break down the price into components to justify the effort and fees.

Once the client saw the detailed components and fees, it was obvious that Acme had not understood the requirements. Standard re-wrote the specifications and Acme produced a new estimate of three weeks and thirty thousand dollars. The client accepted the estimate, and the work was completed and delivered.

## Action Taken

The Acme project manager had the same problem with other modifications on the project. Sometimes, the modification

would be installed at the client before anyone discovered that the modification did not really deliver what the client had asked for.

The project manager repeatedly tried to convince Standard to allow direct communication between Acme and the client for clarifying requirements. However, Standard insisted on being the go-between. The problem continued to occur. The client felt that Acme was not serving their needs very well. Acme felt that Standard was the problem, with their sloppy translation of requirements.

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## Epilogue

The project manager did manage to continue to deliver modifications, but the client was never totally satisfied with Acme, and Acme was continually frustrated with Standard. The Acme project manager left the company after the first year.

## Conclusion

Standard had no programmers, analysts, or hardware technicians assigned to the project. Their main function on the project was to translate documents from Portuguese to English and back. This was not a necessary service for Acme, who had already done similar projects for clients in Spanish, German, Arabic and Japanese-speaking countries. Acme had found that there were usually enough English-speaking employees in a company that they could discuss anything they needed just by asking an English-speaking person from the client company to join in any meetings and phone calls. The problem was not the language difference. It was the process that was

put in place to solve the supposed language issue. Standard filtered every communication between Acme and its client, and the filtering caused numerous errors and assumptions. The Acme project manager failed to find a way to solve the problem because she was reluctant to report the issue to Acme management. She also didn't figure out the real reason for Standard preventing Acme from dealing directly with the client.

Standard provided little more than translation services, but was able to make money by marking up the fees charged by Acme. Standard was careful to keep itself between Acme and the client, in order to prevent the client from eliminating Standard from the process and the next contract. The Acme project manager should have escalated the issue to Acme management. Acme management could have encouraged Standard to provide some of the technical or analytical resources for the modification team. This approach would allow Standard to be involved in a way

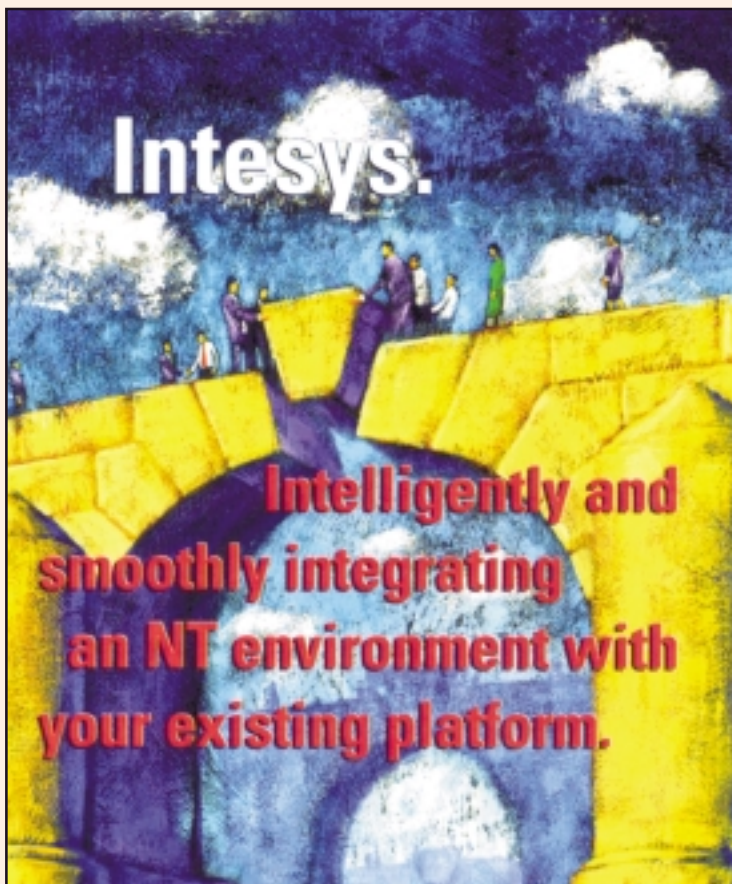
that provided value to the client, thereby reducing the chance that they might be eliminated.

Then Standard likely would be more inclined to allow the Acme team to speak directly with the client to obtain and clarify requirements. Speaking directly with the client would certainly shed light on the requests, and allow the client to receive what had been asked for. The client, in turn, would be more satisfied than with the current arrangement, and more likely to renew the contract with Standard and Acme.

Multiple parties to a project are a complicating factor in project management. In this case, the process of filtering communications through a third party caused a lot of confusion between the first two parties. [TMG](#)

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