

# ATA Certification: View of the Corporate Members

*By Jiri Stejskal*

## ATA certification is one of

the oldest credentials for translators in the world. ATA's Certification Program was launched in 1973 with two concurrent sittings in New York City and Camden, New Jersey, for 30 candidates translating from German into English. Since then, the program has undergone a number of significant changes.

In 2000, ATA's Board of Directors commissioned an outside expert on certification programs to analyze and evaluate the credential offered by ATA. Based on the recommendations and further research, ATA's Certification Program received a facelift in 2004. The most visible recommendation that was implemented was to change the program's name from "accreditation" to "certification." This change was necessitated by the fact that the term "accreditation" is typically used as a credential bestowed upon organizations, institutions, programs, or systems, whereas "certification" is a process by which an organization bestows a credential on an individual. Thus, individual ATA members can be certified through ATA's Certification

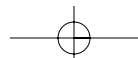
**Without a doubt, ATA certification is a key program offered by our Association. Today, more than 2,100 ATA members in 40 countries are certified.**

Program, while the program itself can be accredited by a national or international body, such as the American National Standards Institute or the

National Organization for Competency Assurance. Other significant changes to the program included the introduction of eligibility and continuing education

**Table 1: Use of Certification as a Criterion for the Selection of Translators**

| 1. How often do you send an assignment to a translator who has not previously worked for you based only on the fact that he/she holds ATA certification in the relevant language pair? |  |                  |                |
|--|--|------------------|----------------|
|  |  | Response Percent | Response Total |
| Always   |  | 3.9%             | 3              |
| Often  |  | 27.6%            | 21             |
| <b>Sometimes</b>   |  | <b>36.8%</b>     | <b>28</b>      |
| Seldom   |  | 11.8%            | 9              |
| Never  |  | 19.7%            | 15             |
| <b>Total Respondents</b>   |  |                  | <b>76</b>      |
| (skipped this question)  |  |                  | 0              |



## ATA Certification: View of the Corporate Members Continued

**Table 2: Criteria for Translator Recruitment**

| 1. Which of the following criteria matter most when you have to select a translator who has not previously worked for you? Please select your top five criteria only and rank them in order of importance (1=most important, 5=least important). |                 |                 |                 |                |                 |                  |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
|  | 1               | 2               | 3               | 4              | 5               | Response Average |
| ATA membership   | 7% (1)          | 14% (2)         | 7% (1)          | <b>43% (6)</b> | 29% (4)         | <b>3.71</b>      |
| ATA certification  | 25% (12)        | 12% (6)         | 19% (9)         | 17% (8)        | <b>27% (13)</b> | <b>3.08</b>      |
| Samples submitted by the translator  | 14% (2)         | <b>29% (4)</b>  | 21% (3)         | 14% (2)        | 21% (3)         | <b>3.00</b>      |
| Translation test that you provide  | <b>60% (18)</b> | 3% (1)          | 13% (4)         | 13% (4)        | 10% (3)         | <b>2.10</b>      |
| Academic qualifications  | 3% (1)          | <b>32% (11)</b> | <b>32% (11)</b> | 21% (7)        | 12% (4)         | <b>3.06</b>      |
| Years of experience  | 5% (2)          | <b>41% (17)</b> | 29% (12)        | 22% (9)        | 2% (1)          | <b>2.76</b>      |
| References or referrals  | <b>24% (10)</b> | 17% (7)         | 17% (7)         | 22% (9)        | 20% (8)         | <b>2.95</b>      |
| Subject-matter expertise   | <b>28% (11)</b> | 22% (9)         | 25% (10)        | 12% (5)        | 12% (5)         | <b>2.60</b>      |
| Price  | 16% (6)         | 14% (5)         | 16% (6)         | 24% (9)        | <b>30% (11)</b> | <b>3.38</b>      |
| CAT tools  | 11% (2)         | 11% (2)         | 6% (1)          | 22% (4)        | <b>50% (9)</b>  | <b>3.89</b>      |
| <b>Total Respondents</b>   |                 |                 |                 |                |                 | <b>66</b>        |
| (skipped this question)  |                 |                 |                 |                |                 | 10               |

(CE) requirements, as well as an overhaul of the grading process and improved grader training.

Without a doubt, ATA certification is a key program offered by our

Translation Company Division (TCD), many users of translation services, particularly translation companies that work with freelance translators, apparently think that ATA's Certification

## What is needed is a better understanding of the certification process and its value to the translators, the users of their services, and the translation industry in general.

Association. Today, more than 2,100 ATA members in 40 countries are certified. The program offers certification in 27 language combinations and serves as proof of translator competence for government and corporate entities in the U.S. and abroad. Yet, based on my observations as a participant at many gatherings of ATA's

Program is of little or no value. Such a perception can be quite damaging to the program, and it is in ATA's best interest not only to improve the program continuously, but also to educate the users of translation services about ATA certification and to improve its image in the public arena. To establish a baseline for how best to go about

doing this, we asked ATA corporate members what they thought about the value of ATA's Certification Program.

I had the pleasure of serving as a sounding board to a group of dedicated volunteers who prepared the *ATA Certification Value Survey*. In particular, I would like to thank Nicholas Hartmann, Dorothee Racette, Vigdis Eriksen, Kim Vitray, Lilian Novas Van Vranken, and ATA President Marian S. Greenfield, who designed the survey that was distributed to ATA corporate members in July 2006. Of the 518 surveyed members, 76 responded. I would like to make it clear that the fairly low response rate of 15% provides room for error, and that the results presented here do not necessarily represent the opinion of ATA corporate members as a whole. My comments below should therefore be viewed as an exploratory pulse-taking of ATA corporate members with my subjective evaluation, rather than as a statistically valid instrument.

The collected demographic data show that most companies responding to this survey have been working with freelance translators for more than 10 years, have 1-10 employees, send work to more than 50 freelancers in a typical year, and have project managers with 3-5 years of experience on average. Here is a review of the questions asked and a summary of the survey responses with analysis.

Table 1 is quite self-explanatory. It shows that ATA certification only rarely serves as the sole basis for selecting new translators, and that other criteria are considered as well. The next question in Table 2 shows what these criteria are.

Table 2 is not easy to interpret. You will note that each row has one percentage figure in boldface type (the exception being row 5, with a tie of 32% for columns 2 and 3). This figure is the one that has been selected most often for the particular variable. Thus,

**Table 3: Value of Changes to the Program**

| 1. Which further changes to the certification program would increase the weight you give to ATA certification as a criterion for selecting a translator who has not previously worked for you? Please rank each aspect in order of importance (1=most important, 5=least important). |                 |                 |                 |          |                 |                  |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|------------------|
|  | 1               | 2               | 3               | 4        | 5               | Response Average |
| A more difficult exam (yielding a lower pass rate than the current 20%)  | 6% (3)          | 24% (12)        | <b>25% (13)</b> | 24% (12) | 22% (11)        | <b>3.31</b>      |
| Subject-specific exams   | <b>60% (35)</b> | 22% (13)        | 9% (5)          | 3% (2)   | 5% (3)          | <b>1.71</b>      |
| More stringent pre-qualification of exam candidates (e.g., years of experience, academic qualifications)   | 19% (10)        | <b>35% (18)</b> | 21% (11)        | 19% (10) | 6% (3)          | <b>2.58</b>      |
| Program administered by third party rather than ATA  | 17% (8)         | 10% (5)         | 8% (4)          | 19% (9)  | <b>46% (22)</b> | <b>3.67</b>      |
| More stringent CE requirements for those who have already earned certification   | 4% (2)          | 15% (7)         | <b>36% (17)</b> | 28% (13) | 17% (8)         | <b>3.38</b>      |
| <b>Total Respondents</b>   |                 |                 |                 |          |                 | <b>61</b>        |
| (skipped this question)  |                 |                 |                 |          |                 | 15               |

for example, using ATA membership (row 1) as a criterion for hiring a translator, most respondents (43%) who selected this criterion among the top five criteria ranked its importance as 4 on a scale from 1 to 5 (i.e., somewhat unimportant).

In ranking the variables, the top criterion cited is “Translation test that you provide” (row 4), and the least cited criterion is “CAT tools,” following close on the heels of “Price” (freelancers, take heed!). To see which criteria are *most important* to survey respondents, one has to look at the “Response Average” in the rightmost column. The lower the score, the more important the criterion. With this in mind, the top five criteria in order of importance are:

1. Translation test that you provide
2. Subject-matter expertise
3. Years of experience
4. References or referrals
5. Samples submitted by the translator

However, when we look at which criteria were selected by the respondents as the top five, we get quite a different

picture. To determine which criteria were selected *most often*, one has to add the number of respondents for each row (these are the numbers in parentheses following the percentages). The ranking is then as follows:

1. ATA certification
2. Years of experience
3. References or referrals (a tie with the criterion above)
4. Subject matter expertise
5. Price

Thus when choosing the criteria, only 30 respondents selected “Translation test that you provide,” which means that this variable does not make it in the top five (it ranks as number seven). However, those who selected this criterion feel really strongly about it, and a full 60% (18 out of 30) selected this criterion as “most important.” On the other hand, 48 respondents selected “ATA certification,” which makes it the most frequently selected criterion. This presents us with a mixed message, because while ATA certification ranks number one as a selection criterion, it also ranks

as the “least important.” Interestingly, it has the most uneven rating of all variables, with “most important” and “least important” rankings nearly identical, the difference being in a single vote.

The collected data in Table 3 indicates that the addition of a subject-specific exam would greatly enhance the value of ATA’s credential in the eyes of the users, whereas administration of ATA’s Certification Program by a third party other than ATA would add little to the credential’s value. This is quite interesting because according to certification experts, program administration by an independent body is quite desirable in terms of enhancing the program’s credibility outside of the organization. However, given the fact that this survey was distributed to ATA members only, it does not necessarily reflect the priorities of translation users outside ATA.

### Value of Retaining Certification

When respondents were asked if they intended to check regularly whether their ATA-certified translators had enough CE points to retain their certification, a majority (52%) answered “No.” In a follow-up question, namely asking why the respondents did not intend to check CE points, a majority (again 52%) answered that the retention of certification was not important to them. When asked if they would continue to work with a translator whose ATA certification has lapsed for lack of CE points, 49% of respondents selected “It would depend,” 48% answered in the affirmative, and only 3% in the negative.

Clearly, translation companies have no desire to police their translators in order to make sure that certification is maintained after a successful working relationship is established. It would seem that the CE component of

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ATA certification is more important in initiating the relationship with new clients and with translation users outside of the Association (who might not be as good at judging the translator's

the program with confidence to the outside world.

The survey respondents indicated that a subject-specific certification would greatly enhance the value of the

the certification process and its value to the translators, the users of their services, and the translation industry in general. ATA corporate members who work with freelance translators are major stakeholders in this process, but so far their involvement in the Certification Program has been marginal. Greater involvement of translation companies in the program will lead to an improved image of the program internally. Once this is achieved, it will be much easier to boost the program's image outside of ATA. ATA leadership is already exploring the possibility of having ATA's Certification Program accredited in order to enhance its credibility and quality further. Such accreditation would serve as a basis for future mutual recognition of translator credentials on the international level, and provide a chance for ATA to become the global leader in this area.

As I indicated in my opening remarks, the conclusions drawn and suggestions made here are based on my own interpretations of the survey results as well as on interviews with a number of corporate members, and should not be viewed as hard data with rock-solid evidence. Once again, this was but a first step in exploring the opinions of corporate members regarding ATA's Certification Program, and it has provided us with valuable clues and helped us to identify areas that merit further investigation.

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competence as ATA corporate members) who are looking for an assurance that the translator keeps active in his or her field.

### What Does All This Mean?

Looking at the survey results, it is evident that while ATA certification was chosen by most respondents as a criterion for the selection of new vendors, there is no consensus as to its importance. It would be advisable to get an internal "buy-in"—wide acceptance by ATA corporate members—before we turn to the outside users of translation services. The complicating factor is that the recent enhancements to the program, such as the introduction of eligibility and CE requirements, were directed outward, for the benefit of users of translation services outside of ATA, rather than toward our own members. Going forward, it would seem beneficial for the Board and for the Certification Committee to work with the TCD and other ATA corporate members and solicit their feedback and support. Once the program gains solid support across the entire spectrum of ATA members, we will be able to present

credential. This is an area with great potential for fruitful cooperation between ATA corporate members, the Board, and the Certification Committee. As the users of translation services, ATA corporate members could provide valuable insights regarding what subjects are in greatest demand and how subject-specific certification could be structured. The introduction of subject-specific certification would certainly increase the value of the credential, but would likely increase the demands on the volunteer graders, language chairs, and the Certification Committee members to unsustainable levels. Before we can entertain the idea of subject-specific certification, we will need to figure out where to get the manpower to administer it. It is very likely that such a development would mean a shift from a volunteer-based program to a paid consultant-based program, which, in turn, would lead to a substantial increase in the cost of the credential.

The survey respondents also made it clear that ATA certification should not be used as the sole criterion for the selection of vendors. What is needed is a better understanding of

**Start  
planning now!**

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