Just as LISA shuttered its site at the end of February, it hosted a Standards Summit near Boston. The Summit drew a small but dedicated cadre of professionals interested in setting standards for the language sector. Delegates represented industry associations, language service providers (LSPs), academics, language tool suppliers, and a small group of heavy-users of translation services and tools. The Summit concluded with everyone agreeing to work on a standardized container specification for translation and a transport mechanism for these containers.

Fast-forward a few weeks through some of the dying gasps of LISA and a lot of discussion about where existing specifications such as TBX and TMX would reside (ETSI, OASIS, or OMG, with LISA's managing director favoring ETSI), who would be the interoperability watchdog for standards (TANS, by self-nomination), and who would lead the charge for standards in an industry where participants couldn't agree on fundamentals such as what constitutes a word or even what translation encompasses (see "How Translation Projects Are Priced," May11). More esoteric topics such as containers, interoperability, and transformations stretch comprehension and agreement even more.

Then the language trade association GALA (the Globalization and Localization Association) stepped forward, pledged funds to create the GALA Standards Initiative (GSI), hired LISA's outgoing director of standards Arfe Lommel, and asked for industry cooperation to set the standards that LSPs, tool providers, and buyers had been asking for. The GSI effort was in response to long-standing member interest in developing standards for tools, workflows, and even requests for proposals (RFPs).

Again, hit the fast-forward button through a choppy period during which some industry commentators questioned GALA's motivation (“Was it money? Power? World domination?”). The carping and caveling was testament to negative perception of the previous standards efforts. Other industry pundits said simply, “Sign me up.”

GALA spent weeks gathering information from all stakeholders, including translators, and refining a plan that was built on consensus. The association recently hosted a webinar in which it outlined its progress to date. Lommel focused on the three pillars on which the GSI was founded: 1) Coordination of the 20+ standards bodies concerned with the language and content sectors, accounting for nearly 200 bilateral relationships; 2) education and training, to disseminate usage information and guidance; and 3) promotion and development, to ensure marketing of the standards and implementation in tools and processes.

To address these issues, GALA will take the lead on coordinating the efforts of the various standards bodies and constituencies, by establishing relationships, hosting regular meetings, and representing the stakeholders. This effort at coordinating the activities of multiple bodies is in stark contrast to LISA with its members-only approach to standards. The GSI will launch a standards website, develop guides for using the specifications, and conduct monthly webinars. It will also promote that implement the standards. Importantly, the standards effort is separate from other GALA activities and has its own budget and staff. GALA’s chairperson Hans Fenstermacher stated that all accounting for the GSI will be transparent and available upon request.

Lommel said that the initiative would work with industry standards bodies to produce new specifications for a container, sending and receiving jobs, and assessing quality at both the general and domain levels. He also said the GSI would work toward establishing standard definitions for industry processes and tasks, model business tools such as RFPs and contracts, certification for procurement specialists, and development of model technical resources for troublesome issues such as segmentation.

The presentation concluded with a pitch for cooperation and announcement of the GSI charter members. It was encouraging to see industry providers such as TheLevel, ADAPT, text&form, and others step up to the table with cash to develop the initiatives. Most of the companies that signed up were suppliers of language services and tools, but just two – Amway and Hewlett Packard – came from the demand side.

This initial investment is critical, but it won't be enough to develop the standards, fulfill the ambitious aims of the initiative, and normalize how buyers and suppliers interact. What's missing is something that only the many stakeholders can deliver — strong support from other language industry associations such as ATA, ALC, and EUATC, more financial support from every quarter, and strong vendor and buyer participation in the technical and other committees that will be required to develop standards.

Will GALA take the same path as LISA? We don't believe so. LISA started out with a narrow focus on standards and then moved into other areas, while GALA began by representing industry stakeholders.
moving into standards because of the importance of this issue for its members. In other words, the initial support bases and motivations are different.

In the final analysis, what GALA needs to do is achieve what LISA never did – build industry-wide consensus and support for cradle-to-grave standards. Without it, the GALA Standards Initiative won’t go anywhere. Meanwhile, it’s critical that the GSI continues its broad appeal to all stakeholders, include other associations in all aspects of the standards process, and avoid becoming the judge, jury, and executioner on language standards.

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