The independent information profession has roots in the United States, having developed contemporaneously with online databases, Internet and associations serving independent information professionals, such as AIIP. Although AIIP is an international association, more than 75% of its membership is based in the US and just over 5% works in non-Anglophone countries. As an independent information professional (IIP) in Italy, I’ve taken an interest in the role this figure serves in Europe, a geographical mosaic of languages, currencies, laws and cultures. To understand the challenges of running an information service business across Europe, I surveyed my colleagues in continental (non-Anglophone) Europe about business start-up, opportunities for continuing professional development, business focus and marketing. Initial survey results were presented at the 2010 AIIP conference. This paper examines in detail one aspect of the responses, namely how portfolios of clients and services are adapted to (or dictated by) the multicultural work environment of our continent.

The Non-Anglophone Europe IIP Study Group
Considering that the term independent information professional is not widely known in Europe and translates poorly into some languages (a literal translation into Italian defines a freelance journalist), the survey was not limited to self-declared IIPs but was open to any entrepreneur who met AIIP’s definition. Thus, the survey was extended to persons who ‘possess high-level skills in finding, managing, applying and communicating information, . . . pursue their calling with an entrepreneurial spirit . . . [and] also consult in a wide range of specialty areas involving the organization and

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use of information, such as: document digitization; database development; web and print publishing; library and document management; writing and editing; document delivery; coaching on information research skills; management; and technology training” [1]. This approach allowed inclusion of persons who were not AIIP members as well as some who were unaware that they could be classified as an IIP.

Overall, 18 IIPs responded to a questionnaire followed by discussion. Including myself, the study group comprised 11 AIIP members. Eleven countries were represented, mostly Western European nations (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland) but also former communist states (Bulgaria, Poland). All these countries but Switzerland are in the EU and thus obliged to implement EU directives in national legislation (although how and when this implementation is done varies widely). Only seven of them use the euro, while the others have different currencies, weaker or stronger than the euro. Finally, these countries have altogether 11 official languages, with Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland having more than one, and numerous recognized regional and minority languages. Thus, the study group is representative of professionals who work in the culturally diverse reality of Europe.

Languages and the Role of Language

That IIPs of continental Europe use multiple languages was expected but the responses were enlightening nonetheless. As a group, we use a median of three languages daily: we all work fluently in at least two languages (English and a national language), and as many as five languages are managed by one colleague (this contrasts with some Anglophone IIPs whose declared ability to work in multiple languages requires a multilingual staff). Even in this non-Anglophone setting, English was the first working language for seven interviewees. As Rita Weissenberger commented, “We could not have this business without fluency in English.”

Knowledge of a national language as well as other languages was, in all cases, a determinant of market geography, but the role of language varied. Some colleagues leverage language skills to help local (that is, same-country) clients access international information in English and other languages. Examples of IIPs serving mostly local clients with international services are Guido Moradei researching patent data, Frédéric de Hemptinne specializing in environmental issues and Veerle Persy, expert in medical information. English fluency is key to helping clients work globally, especially for IIPs active in the sciences where English is lingua franca; a case in point is Brigitte Albers, whose services include the preparation of drug safety reports for regulatory purposes. Other colleagues use their knowledge of local language and economy to serve foreign clients in another language. For example, I offer a service of information research about Italy for non-Italian businesses that use English at work, while Martina Reich serves German-speaking clients interested in Spain. Finally, fluency in some languages allows IIPs to access information about distant markets, as in the case of Teresa Ramirez, whose first language (Portuguese) permits her to use sources from Brazil, Angola and Mozambique. Thus, European IIPs are not limited by language but use it to advantage for international business.

Local Knowledge: Fundamental Aspect of an IIP’s Business Niche

Language is a necessary but not sufficient aspect of local knowledge for an IIP’s business niche. A researcher fluent, say, in Italian who has never lived nor worked in Italy lacks local experience to understand the deeper meaning of Italian information sources. Also, a researcher not inserted into the local context will have difficulty interpreting the needs of local clients. Local knowledge comes from a presence in the community, exposure to issues that impact on the people, connections with business groups and institutions, and insight into the quality and authority of local resources.

Like language, the role of local knowledge in an IIP’s business niche varies. In limiting my research activities to Italy, I have made it my business to be knowledgeable about Italian information sources and to appreciate how governmental bodies and institutions share information; this allows me to gauge if a particular request from abroad can be completed and to advise clients appropriately. Anne Styren has established a vast international network of researchers in order to reap the value of local knowledge for global research.
Currencies and the Direction of International Business Exchange

Introduction of the euro in 2002 simplified doing business within the 16 countries that have now adopted this currency (in 2011 there will be 17 EU states using the euro). Within the euro area, international bank transfers are simple and fast and thus preferred to credit card or online payment systems. Moreover, currency transfer from banks in non-euro European countries or in the United States is straightforward. The knowledge that payments from these countries will actually arrive in one’s bank account makes working with foreign clients worry-free.

The possibility of currency exchange, however, is less market-determining than the exchange rate. When the euro was strong over the dollar, U.S. clients viewed my prices as high, while prospects from third countries, say Brazil, saw them as exorbitant. Particular cases of IIPs whose client base is influenced by currency include Susanne Riz in Switzerland, serving mostly Swiss clients who use the same strong local currency, and Viktor Manev in Bulgaria, who offers an international competitive intelligence (CI) service to Western European and American clients.

Conclusions

The IIP is not a common figure in continental Europe but, as this survey found, information businesses here are established and offer highly qualified, international services adapted to both the local market and requests from beyond borders. European IIPs facilitate the exchange of knowledge among diverse national economies, legal systems and cultures by leveraging language skills and adjusting to the impact of currencies. As Udo Hohlfeld, a CI specialist, observed, “Language is the key to culture, people and trust – particularly important in regard to primary research.” And, I would add, not only to primary research. Languages, local knowledge and specific (international) information skills are fundamental to an IIP’s success in Europe.

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Resources Mentioned in the Article