

Point/Counterpoint

Erin Vang & Tina Cargile



Which constraints keep *you* up at night?



Erin: *All five, all the time! – but mostly quality, time, and scope.*

Project managers talk about a “triple constraint”: scope, time and cost. These are the three constraints where a change in one forces a change in the other. Increase the scope of a project (the amount of work), and you need either more time or more money to pay for overtime and extra people. Decrease the time available, and you’ll spend more on resources or will need to cut down the scope somehow. And so on.

The triple constraint (Figure 1) is usually drawn as a triangle with each constraint at a vertex and a haunting reminder of what’s really at stake in the middle: quality. The idea is that if you don’t keep all three in control, quality suffers.

A different triple constraint makes a little more sense to me – time, cost, quality – because it’s a no-brainer that more scope means more something else (cost or time or both), but what deserves our attention is how messing with cost or time affects quality. You can boil this triple constraint down to a pithy “good, fast, cheap; pick any two.” Or as a contractor friend of mine jokes, “If you want it bad” – wait for it! – “you’ll get it bad.”

Even that triangle isn’t quite right, though. Let’s go back to PMI’s (www.pmi.org) project management body of knowledge where five constraints are listed: scope, cost, time, quality and risk. Quality isn’t a result of your other choices. It’s one of the constraints, and you have choices about it. Risk is a constraint, too. Many project managers throw up their hands and ignore risk, but the thing about risk is that – here comes another cute line – “failing to plan is planning to fail.”



Figure 1: The triple constraints of localization project management as Erin once saw them.

So, we should be talking about a quintuple constraint, and the correct image is a pentagon. Let’s make quality and scope green (because more is usually better to our stakeholders) and the other three red (because less is better).

The idea is the same: mess with any one of the constraints in Figure 2, and at least one of the others also changes. But instead of drawing a warning “quality” in the middle as if it’s an uncontrollable result and instead of ignoring risk altogether, we include both as the constraints (and choices) that they are. Our job is to execute projects with all five constraints in balance.

The shaded area inside the pentagon shows which of the constraints are most likely to keep me up at night in my work on the client side: quality, time and scope. Some of our customers use my company’s software to make life and death decisions, so quality is paramount. We’re chasing tough deadlines, though, and keeping the scope under control is never easy. I am on a budget and manage a variety of risks, but cost and risk don’t usually keep me up at night because I can manage them over the long haul. It’s quality, time and scope that have me putting out fires.

Tina Cargile on the vendor side wrestles with all five, too, but in different proportions that vary by client and project.

Erin Vang is international program manager of the JMP R&D division of SAS, the world’s largest privately held software company. She combines management credentials with domain expertise gained through 20 years of experience.

Tina Cargile has served at McElroy Translation since 1988 as production manager and senior project manager. She is currently business development manager.

Tina: *Right now, it's cost and time – but ask me again in ten minutes!*

When Erin Vang and I first began collaborating, she introduced me to her five-constraint theory. At first it seemed odd and redundant, based on my traditional project management training on the triple-constraint theory, but the more I thought about the complexities of our industry and my client-facing role, I realized that I had intuitively been applying five constraints all along. I simply had not identified them as such.

As a multi-language vendor working in a wide array of verticals, I'm constantly looking at the question of determining fitness for use. It is one of the most difficult interrogative skills to learn or teach. Some claim that it is the clients' responsibility to communicate their goals accurately, which is technically correct, but I think serving in a partnership role with clients who may spend less than 10% of time on translation projects is a more forward-thinking approach. Simply saying "Sure! You have a corporate bank account? We can fly you to the moon and back in two hours!" is not a winning long-term strategy.

Our primary industry sectors include legal, medical/pharmaceutical and energy, but within those sectors, very different needs and roles emerge.

Legal translations involve the most diverse variations of constraints – from basic fact-finding, where time, scope and cost may be paramount, but quality and risk may be less important, to patent filings, where quality and time are often most important.

Medical/pharmaceutical work generally demands the highest levels of quality. Some translations just need basic research, but others have legal implications and need considerable vetting. Cost is not necessarily a primary factor, and an experienced project manager should advise the client on the risk

of attempting a rush translation. Often the rework needed to reach the necessary quality will erase any gains from rushing. Project managers can assist by breaking the project scope into smaller, rolling deliverables.

Energy is a mixed bag. Material safety data sheets must have top quality, and time and cost are usually not as critical.

Marketing materials for any of these verticals often have limited scope and time, but quality implications come first.

Parsing trendy, creative writing aimed at US residents into text that makes sense abroad is one of the most difficult tasks we ask of our translators.

But seeing your company's translation of an advertisement for disposable diapers is oddly thrilling!

Whatever the business sector, risk management is what keeps me up at night. I work hard at advising clients early and often about risks. Risk typically falls under the umbrella of cost but is inseparable from the other four constraints, in ways that can affect both client-side and vendor-side operations.

On the client side, say Big Pharmaceutical Corporation ABC is trying to schedule patients worldwide for a clinical trial or finalizing FDA submissions, a late delivery from us can disrupt

hundreds of scheduled activities and milestones. My job is to understand the sequence of events that will unfold after our delivery so that I can advise the client up front and help weigh the risks.

Risk is also critical for the vendor serving Big Pharmaceutical Corporation ABC. A delayed FDA submission might only lead to lower/slower revenue, but a translation error involving dosages or warnings could lead to patient illness or death. It is possible to limit our financial liability, but we could never limit our culpability or repair our reputation. So, I'm all for client education, but my focus is on providing leadership and consulting to avoid catastrophe. There is not a sleepless night nor weary day that I lose sight of the importance of the work we do and the responsibility that we hold for our clients. **M**

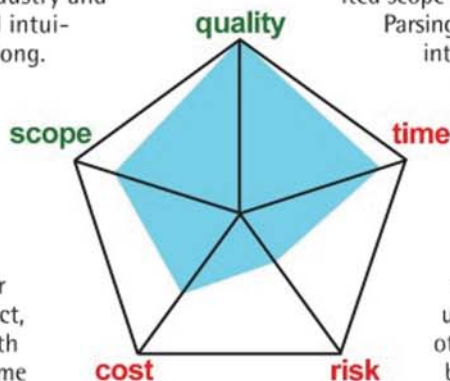


Figure 2: The five constraints of localization project management, with Erin's focus shown in blue.

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