Regardless of where a business is located geographically, there comes a time when it may need to learn about its industry or market outside its own country or about companies located elsewhere, whether for strategic planning for growth or simply to assess its competitiveness.

In order to get the knowledge a company seeks it will have to gather, filter/evaluate, analyze and synthesize whatever relevant information it can find. When this process involves getting information from other countries, the researcher can face challenges such as knowing the proper sources, ascertaining how up-to-date information is and assessing the authenticity of sources and information.

Language can be added to the list of challenges when countries involved are not English-speaking countries. Granted that there are many sources such as databases and the web that provides coverage of news, reports, documents and other information for other countries in English, but it is also a fact that even those sources do not nearly cover everything available in the original languages.

Under these circumstances enlisting help from an information professional who either lives in the country of interest or is capable of speaking, reading and writing in a foreign language can be helpful. Some AIIP members take advantage of the availability of other members who live outside of their home countries or who have knowledge of the language and culture of other countries for their projects involving foreign countries.

Even if nearby countries share a language, getting local help can be very important for knowledge of and access to local sources.

To illustrate conducting business research for non-English speaking countries, I will use Japan as an example since I have worked on many projects focusing on Japan.

As noted earlier in the article, one can conduct research using databases and web-based sources in English to a large extent. Nevertheless, there is much information missing in English language sources.

For instance, I was surprised to learn that Teikoku database (company information) offered by Dialog contained only part of the original database in Japanese. When I could not figure out why I was not getting results for a company, I contacted Teikoku and learned that they simply could not translate every entry. The Teikoku database contains more than 1,250,000 Japanese companies, but financial information, including balance sheets and income statements, is available for only 290,000 companies in English (as of December, 2009). There are also databases similar to Teikoku that are available only in Japanese. As we know, translating from one language to another language requires time and cost.

Even contents of company websites in English do not exactly mirror those in Japanese in many cases – sections for company news, PR pieces, product catalogue and detailed information related to products may not be included in English websites. Moreover, many companies have websites only in Japanese. Furthermore, web searches in Japanese bring up totally different results compared to searches in English. These examples show that by depending only on databases in English, one could miss substantial amounts of information.

Not all newspaper and magazine articles related to companies and industries are available in English either. I remember finding interview articles with executives of a company in a Japanese magazine that provided valuable information related to the direction the company was taking. These
pieces would not have been found in English, and yet they were relevant in the context of the project.

Knowledge of and the ability to contact government agencies, companies, associations and so on can also be a challenge for someone who doesn’t speak Japanese, as not many workers in Japan speak or write English. Yet, contacting these sources can lead to very valuable information.

When I encountered a problem not being able to find a product defined by a 10-digit number (6-digit Harmonized System number plus additional digits for a detailed level) in the United States, I spoke with a person at the trades statistics office in Japan and learned that Japan defined the product by a 9-digit instead of a 10-digit code. Such a difference in the number of digits in product codes applies to other countries as well, and it is important to be aware of this possibility.

Culture, another element, can play a role in what one can obtain as business information. What you can ask in your own country as a normal question or request related to business information may turn out to be not acceptable in another. For example, I was pleasantly surprised that a trade association in Japan offered to send me a hard copy of its membership directory when I knew I could not access the membership list of most such associations in North America unless I was a member.

I also learned while I was helping a Japanese company with a Canadian product that the Japanese company preferred that a person in Canada go to sources personally, interview people and check things, although this process involved flying to another city – and therefore extra cost. This preference made sense because relying on a person living in the country who speaks the language, knows the business culture and has knowledge of and easier access to sources is a faster, less expensive and more reliable way to get information.

Another interesting point a colleague noted is that when dealing with foreign news sources, one has to keep in mind that newspapers can have political, even religious, slants. Political slant is true of most newspapers, be it in Canada, where I live, or in Japan. It is, therefore, important to be aware of this when reading news articles and making reports based on them. This problem is also why it is important to cover as wide a range of sources as possible.

**Conclusion**

As discussed above, when we are researching business topics related to other countries, there are many elements to be taken into consideration in order to get as accurate information as we can. There are many benefits to working with someone fluent in the language of the country and knowledgeable about the local culture in cross-country research. Sources and items can be consulted that could be missed otherwise; the process of making contact with local sources can be better facilitated; work can move faster and more efficiently; and deliverables can have added value as a result of more thorough research.

Below are some questions to ask in conjunction with a project that involves countries beyond your borders:

1) Will using databases, websites and web sources in English be sufficient for the project?
2) Will you need someone who reads and writes the language a. to search sources in the language? b. to read and understand the content of documents? c. to translate documents into English?
3) Will you need someone who speaks the language to contact sources such as government agencies, associations and companies to facilitate research process?
4) Will you need someone who has knowledge of the culture who can assist in avoiding missteps and help move things smoothly?
5) Will you need someone who lives in the country, has knowledge of sources and can visit them if necessary?

**Potential Sources for Information and Leads When Doing Business Research Beyond Borders (in the Language of the Country)**

1) The web 5) Trade and professional associations
2) Databases 6) Experts in industries – analysts, columnists, bloggers, editors, etc.
3) Websites related to companies, industries, markets, associations, publications, etc. 7) Companies within an industry
4) Government agencies – different levels