

Sunday BIZ

Century-old books, journals kept under BPO watch

Text and photos by Maricar Chino
Inquirer Southern Luzon

CALAMBA CITY—Their job is to keep the materials safe and preserve their content for another hundred years or more. And with available technology, this has become easier and doable, according to Virgil Sangalang, director of operations of SPI Global.

SPI Global, a Filipino-owned company established in 1980 and subsidiary of Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co. (PLDT), is known for business process outsourcing and as a service provider.

In 2001, SPI Global ventured into the business of back filing and digitization or conversion of content materials and has gone a long way since from manually typing book contents to using the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology.

Two of its largest clients are Elsevier Science and Springer, publishers of scientific, technical, and medical (STM) references, which are based in Europe and the United States.

Oldest journal

The books and journals, converted into electronic files, are uploaded to the clients' websites so information becomes readily accessible to thousands of doctors, scientists, researchers and

scholars worldwide.

To date, SPI Global, at its Laguna facility, has maintained an archive of 256,200 books (89,670,000 pages) and 635,500 journals (69,905,000 pages) published as far back as the 1800s.

The oldest, "Journal of Franklin Institute," was published in 1826. The latest is "Constitutional Political Economy," published in March 2011.

"We have more (books and journals) than most libraries, although ours are mostly STM (materials)," Sangalang says. Its archive, a two-floor building with a floor area of 437 square meters, is said to be the largest of its kind worldwide.

Hard copies of the reference materials are shipped from abroad to SPI's facility in Calamba City.

To preserve the books and pages from getting crisp and easily torn due to moisture or termite attacks, each is sealed inside a protective polybag at room temperature of 18-20 degrees Celsius.

Fire safety measures are observed and only authorized personnel are allowed inside the archive room to protect the clients' intellectual rights over the materials.

Restoration

Digital conversion includes scanning the hard copies and



A WORKER passes through rows of manuscripts, each sealed in protective plastic.

materials stored in microfilms or microfiches. The captured images are converted into a PDF format or to an SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language) or XML (Extensible Markup Language) file, depending on the clients' required format, before the content is uploaded on the Internet.

"We used to manually key-in (the content) but over the years, (the process improved) through technology," Sangalang says.

For materials that are centuries-old and worn out, the company "cleans up" the image through Photoshop and runs a Spellcheck and proofreading of the final output.

Sangalang says it takes about ten hours and about ten people to work on a journal of 110 pages. So far, the company has about 1,100 full-time employees for this project, delivering more than a million digitized pages a month.

As for the end-result, old books and journals "do not look shabby anymore and are restored forever in an improved version," he says.

Mail digitization

In 2010, SPI Global ventured into another project, this time with Europe's largest postal and logistical company, TNT. The partnership gave birth to TNT Shore,



ABOVE, a technician handles voluminous texts prior to digitization. Below, call center agents go about their daily routine.

with operators also based at SPI Global's facility in Laguna.

"In Netherlands, they have these automatic (mail) sorters, but since the information (postal addresses and area codes) are handwritten, the machines could not read them all," Sangalang explains.

For this case, he says, the digital image of the postal mail, again captured through the OCR, is electronically sent to SPI's facility.

Employees, called video coders, manually decipher and type in the information from the mail and send them back electronically to TNT Shore's system for sorting.

"That's a lot for TNT that has to sort about six million mails a day," Sangalang says.

Source of pride

To be trusted with the world's medical and scientific content—references and information is a tough job but which also "makes SPI feel proud," he says.

This month, the company is improving its facility by putting up another building as an archive for STM books and journals.

Sangalang believes that the company's performance "is a proof of the Filipino's ability to easily adapt to the demands of our clients—whatever industry they come from."



SPI Global has been converting old manuscripts and periodicals into electronic files for the benefit of researchers and scholars worldwide.

