

Tools save you money, except when they don't

Not a day goes by that I don't see a post about tools. Just this morning I saw this: "10 Social Media Tools for Small Businesses and Freelancers." We are obsessed with tools, especially the online and free variety.



watercolors sets 1 by
niftynotebook on Flickr

Tools exist to make jobs easier

It'd be hard to create this blog post without Microsoft Word or WordPress. If I wanted to make a cake, having an electric mixer would be helpful. But, owning or having access to tools, even the most advanced or professional type, does not make you a professional or an expert. In other words, owning a paintbrush does not make you an artist, any more than having Adobe Photoshop makes you a graphic designer.

Having a tool does not make you an expert

Say you bought some sculpting equipment. Do you think you will now be able to sculpt something like Michelangelo's David? Well, you might...*if* you had years of training, Michelangelo's genius, and some amazing Italian marble to work with.

The problem is not using tools to help you do your job, it's that some organizations and individuals believe they can substitute a tool for an expert, or worse, that having the tool (Adobe Photoshop comes to mind), makes you the expert.

Doing it yourself could cost you

Last week, I was meeting with my accountant and he told me about a new client he recently started working with. This client had been filing his taxes using a popular online tax software. It turns out that my accountant was able to find the client thousands of dollars in tax savings because the do-it-yourself client had not known how to take depreciation on his mortgage and other deductions. Having tax software does not make you an accountant. The reason accountants can charge for their time is that they know what to do with the tax software, they understand tax laws and how they affect individual situations.

How do you say wrong in Spanish?

Some organizations are turning to tools like Google Translate (or other online translation software) in order to save money by not hiring a professional translator. The results can be disastrous. Same can be said for do-it-yourself graphic design, website building and any number of services people think they can get for free or cheap.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was on a national environmental group's website. The group has chapters around the world, and in the Spanish version of the website, the word used for "chapters" was "capítulos," which quite literally means chapters in a book. In Spanish, capítulo is *not* used as a synonym for a section or group of people.

My advice is to only use tools for routine jobs and leave the skilled work to the professionals. It may seem to cost more to hire somebody, but as my accountant proved to his new client, it could end up saving you thousands down the road.

What do you think? Do you rely on tools to avoid hiring a professional?