

The role of computer-aided translation in translation services

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INTRODUCTION

When invited to speak at the conference, I was asked to explain why Automated Language Processing Systems (ALPNET) is getting out of software and into services. The true story is that ALPNET is not getting 'out of software'. Indeed, our commitment to the translation industry, and specifically to translation services, continues to be based upon ongoing, as well as past, software development. We believe that in tomorrow's market you cannot have one without the other. Commercial translation suppliers must use computer technology to be viable vendors. Likewise, developers of computer-aided translation (CAT) systems must look beyond their display screens and link technology to real-world requirements including multiple text formats, job sizes and cost-effective terminology management.

The gulf between software developers and professional translators is disappearing as their jobs become more mutually dependent. Ironically, translators and CAT developers still remain practically strangers to each other. Until now, both parties have lost time and precious opportunities for giving a better service to our mutual customers. ALPNET has remedied this by linking multinational customers with innovative translators and with today's technology, and the effect of this linkup will forever change our way of doing business. I would like to discuss the inevitable market shifts our company foresees, but first a brief review of CAT's present status in the marketplace, its disappointments and successes. CAT disappointments are perceived as follows:

- lack of profits
- staff reductions
- high costs
- extensive support required.

The total revenue from all CAT software sales over the past ten years would not equal one half of the money spent by CAT vendors in development and marketing over the same period of time. Yet CAT software vendors can cite very impressive results achieved by customers.

CAT can be regarded as successful where the following circumstances prevail:

- productive sites
- consistent quality of output
- growing acceptance by translators and clients.

Some customers using CAT have achieved savings which pay for the software in three months, others however, will never recover the investment. The degree of success of a CAT installation is determined by the existence or lack of terminology management, machine-readable input, compatible text formats and management support.

CAT IS INEVITABLE

I think that we would all agree that some form of CAT is inevitable. The question is in what form and when. The CAT market can be characterised as follows:

- limited real demand
- overly optimistic salespeople
- technology push (machine-readable input, high volume, staff commitment).

Today's translation services market can be described as follows:

- large multinational customers
- small regional suppliers
- lack of compatibility
- technology gap
- excessive administrative costs.

THE CURRENT CAT MARKET

The average translation company has six employees and can barely afford a PC, much less CAT software. In fact, translation suppliers are in need of technology which can cost as much as one-third of the average annual

turnover. The annual translation requirements of the 50 largest commercial translation customers would require the total resources of approximately 500 of the largest suppliers of translation.

Many of these translation customers would prefer to license fewer workstations and contract out most of their work to a supplier using similar software and thus ensure compatibility and consistent quality.

Many translators have been suspicious of the technology that will soon be mandatory for their employment. However, today's technology will not replace translators, but will supplement their talents instead, elevating the professional translator to a position of greater respect and increased income. Translators will be supported by staff who will provide training, support for text processing and CAT, and online glossaries. They will not be bothered with text conversion, communication set-ups, linkup issues nor text processing either before or after translation.

ALPNET'S OWN EXPERIENCE

Perhaps a quick case study of ALP Systems and the realisations that led to the formation of ALPNET will help to illustrate my industry predictions. The people at Automated Language Processing Systems (unofficially known to many in this industry as ALPS) have spent over 18 years and \$25 million developing and marketing CAT technology. Many of our customers bought our software to ease the production burden that they preferred to contract out. After using the software, one customer even bought a number of licences to distribute to his network of suppliers, only to find that few suppliers were sophisticated or large enough to use the software.

I must also admit a few disappointing installations. In the beginning, we did not understand the user adequately, and earlier releases sometimes proved too cumbersome. However, as a company, we continue to mature and improve, much like our software.

As I stated at the start, ALPNET is not getting out of the software business. In fact, ALPNET employs one of the largest development teams of any commercial CAT vendor. It is also worth pointing out that many of our development projects are paid for directly by customers in return for licences. Yet despite this development support, and the income generated from what is probably the translation market's largest installed base, our software-related revenues have not equalled the cost of doing business.

CAT suppliers exhibit the typical characteristics of a technology-driven company:

1. high cost of consultative sales, requiring numerous demonstrations and discussions explaining how customers must change their way of doing business;

2. high cost of training and customer support;
3. an inordinately high percentage of turnover going to fund development;
4. too few customers paying for ongoing enhancements;
5. little or no profits.

ALPNET'S NEW STRATEGY

As for ALPNET, the company chose not to get out of the software business but rather to assure success in becoming our own user, as well as remaining a vendor. We have seen the benefits of the software. Why not use it ourselves and offer the translation service many of our software customers would prefer to receive? Sales and support would be provided by our local ALPNET service companies who can eliminate the apprehension of software buyers by encouraging them first to contract for services provided by ALPS software. At a later date, customers might choose to purchase the software once its success with their texts has been proven. Meanwhile, our development team would get valuable user feedback, allowing for further enhancements.

With this strategy in mind, we have purchased five well-known translation firms with 22 offices in nine different countries. Will we sell software? Yes. Is it our highest priority? No. In fact we are discouraging sales of less than three workstations to better harness our resources. We believe that ALPNET can best serve the translation market by:

1. providing translation services using the best technology available;
2. developing and licensing modules of our technology to systems retailers;
3. licensing our software to multi-station users;
4. introducing translation firms not ready for full-blown CAT to the many smaller, yet useful, translation aids being introduced by other firms.

THE FUTURE CAT MARKET

I should now like to discuss some major changes that are likely to occur in the marketplace. We foresee a major consolidation of suppliers in order to respond to market demands. We envisage tomorrow's CAT supplier to be:

- a systems vendor (with a large, established customer base)
- supported by linguistic development firms.

To survive, CAT vendors must realise a higher return on turnover. The logical way to achieve this is by lowering sales, support, and development

costs as a percentage of turnover, which is done either by cutting costs or increasing turnover. We believe the best solution is to focus on the technology of languages, allowing systems vendors to provide the marketing and promotion. We are already providing linguistic modules which computer retailers are integrating into their systems.

Major multinationals who, until now, have seen no alternative but to create their own translation capability are looking seriously for a new breed of supplier. To date, translation suppliers have been a capable, yet relatively small and fragmented, group. Tomorrow's translation supplier will offer the following features:

- technology investment (telecom, CAT, DTP, termbanks)
- worldwide locations (resident, mother tongue terminology)
- full services (writing, translation, graphics, printing)
- large range of in-house work force (mostly permanent staff)
- global project management
- global operating standards
- professional management
- 'look like' the customer.

For purposes of confidentiality, the customer wants translators to work in secured areas on the vendor's premises. Customers also require the vendor to accept their text files, via modem or on magnetic media. Consistent terminology is a must. Freelancers are keen to co-operate with commercial vendors in order to work under a technology umbrella. Firms will increase their investment in translators, with the inevitable increase in technology training and support systems.

This up-front investment will make the trained translator a more valued and respected individual, and this will be reflected in the monthly paycheck. Sorely needed attention to terminology management will become commonplace. Translation service companies will find it necessary to merge in order to spread the cost of technology, terminology and professional staff. (Some existing companies will form awkward and ill-fated associations in an attempt to respond and appear multinational.) Meanwhile, the need for global coverage and innovative technology will continue to grow, with new faces, including a few well-known multinationals, entering the services business.

The result will be global associations offering benefits which include: shared marketing and technology investments, global project management, mother tongue translators and professional management. Global supply networks have long been talked of but can only be successful if they include translators supported by state-of-the-art technology and professional management. As one large translation customer stated: 'we want suppliers who look like us.'

In order to achieve that, we have already instigated some shifts in resources within ALPNET. The current ALPNET personnel pattern can be summarised as follows:

Nine countries with 22 offices, employing 515 staff, categorised as: 49 development, 17 technical support, 114 translators (staff), 143 translators (freelance), 44 text handlers, 63 account managers, 30 sales support and 55 professional services.

THE EFFECT OF TECHNOLOGY ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATORS

Will our technology ever create final copy translations, without translator prompting or post-editing? Yes, this is possible with properly-prepared text. In fact, ALPNET currently has modules in beta test form that convince us of this. Our company is committed to coupling CAT with pre-editor technology, and current developments appear promising.

Will technology cause a surplus of translators? No, on the contrary, the translator's ability to process greater volumes of words accurately, with the same efforts will allow latent demands to surface that until now have been cost-prohibitive. The translator's talented efforts will be enhanced, rather than diluted, by technology. As a result, translators will begin to enjoy a more respected position and a better working environment. For example, they will be:

- computer comfortable
- company employee (versus freelance)
- more respected.

To better support the translator, technology vendors will offer packaged systems which require less training, provide good terminology support, and pre-editing facilities, all at very low cost.

This is an exciting time to be involved in translation. The demand for quality translations is growing exponentially. Talk of 1992 and the single market has stimulated greater awareness and commitment on the demand side. Technology advances in DTP, telecommunications, and CAT are providing a bridge between emerging suppliers and awaiting customers.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we have been living in a market of disparities: large volumes of work and few large vendors; more money spent on the administration of translated materials than on translation itself; computer technology

with interfacing problems that burden translators, and reduce rather than increase results; and professional translators desiring financial stability being forced onto freelance positions. Customer demand and innovative technology are coalescing to create a completely different translation service industry. We suppliers simply need to apply sound business principles to capitalise on this market opportunity. I should like to conclude with the wish that we help each other and enjoy the experience along the way.

AUTHOR

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