WCC's translation service bureau

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The reasons why Weidner Communications set up a translation service bureau using machine translation (which they prefer to call computer-aided translation) are given, with an account of the bureau's results in its first year, some operating details, and a forecast of how the corporation may meet the needs of the worldwide translation market in the future.

On behalf of Weidner Communications Corporation (WCC), I would like to say we are delighted to have been invited to participate in this year's Aslib conference, to discuss further with you the current status of CAT or Computer-Aided Translation, and especially to describe WCC's use of CAT to meet customers' translation needs in a service bureau application.

For a little background, it is interesting to note that WCC established a commercial service bureau about one year ago. In spite of this relatively short history WCC has rapidly grown into one of the largest - measured by revenue - service bureaus in the US.

The reasons WCC decided to open a service bureau are really quite simple. In the first place it offered us another means to increase our service to the translation community. WCC recognises this total group as its customer base, and whether this community seeks solutions through the use of service bureaus or its own internal resources, it is important for us to be ready to meet these needs.

Secondly, the service bureau offered WCC a good way to demonstrate the viability of CAT technology in a competitive and productive environment. In fact the idea

originated among many of our systems customers, as well as from potential customers who suggested that, if CAT works, why not demonstrate it in this way. Suffice it to say that our expectations have been surpassed. In less than one year WCC's Service Bureau has experienced phenomenal growth, producing translations at the rate of 800,000 to 1,000,000 words per month.

The principal reasons WCC has experienced such growth are two-fold: first, there is a definite and increasing need for translation and translation services on a worldwide basis. Even though there is little published information on the exact size of the translation market, it is evident that the need is crystalising and growing. This is particularly true in the US, although it is being fueled everywhere by the introduction of broad-based consumer products like the microcomputer. It is imperative that the supporting materials for this type of product be available in the native language of the customer. The marketing success of these products worldwide depends on translations.

The second reason for our service bureau's growth is the utilisation of CAT. CAT power has allowed WCC to meet this expanding need for translations in a timely and efficient manner. And, it has allowed WCC to do it profitably. CAT power translates into profitability.

I have used the term profitability as a measure of how well we are doing. In all cases, whether it be an indepen-dent translator or many translators in a corporate structure or commercial service bureau, some measure of productivity or effectiveness of their efforts must be established. In our case we use profitability. If we can satisfy our customers' needs efficiently, with a quality product, and make a profit, we believe we are on the right track. It is a very simple formula.

As I indicated earlier, our CAT-based service bureau's current productivity is 800,000 to 1,000,000 translated words per month. We are doing translations for customers around the world. And contrary to what many think is necessary with CAT, we do not specialise. We deal with documents in all subject areas - and as a result have produced significant databases of terminology. The cost of these computerised dictionaries is then spread across an increasing volume of translation, reducing significantly and rapidly the per-word cost.

How do we do it? How do we operate a service bureau and incorporate CAT? First, it is important to know that we recognise and treat the service bureau as a separate business. We have established revenue goals, we have established a separate sales team, and we have established profitability goals. And with CAT we can keep track of how we are doing. We measure most of the activities associated

with the CAT process and hence can be confident of our rates and rate of success.

A most important first step in this process is our contact with the customer. We feel it is very beneficial to establish a one-to-one relationship with our customer. Through this we can better understand what the customer wants as an end-product, as well as work out questions regarding terminology and style.

In this same way we can introduce the customer to our CAT-based procedure and the particular variables associated with CAT. These are the key variables which impact the CAT process: source text, computer dictionary and translator/editor. Those of you who have worked with CAT or any translation for that matter know the importance of good source text. The saying 'garbage in, garbage out' sums it up best. An examination of the source text can determine if any pre-editing is necessary. However, in only a few cases do we actually edit the source text, perhaps 10 per cent or less. In most cases problematic texts are still best handled through the dictionary or in post-editing phases. As technical writers become aware of the impact of their writing on CAT-generated translations, we are seeing an improvement in source documents. This makes for better writing in general and is no small benefit.

A second variable - the computer dictionary used - is most important in determining the quality of the initial output. We are constantly building and modifying these to assure optimum results.

In spite of what many people have heard about CAT, the translator is a key element in the success of this process. WCC has recognised this and, as I will explain later, has recruited and trained people specifically to operate CAT.

There are four general steps to the actual processing of texts on the CAT system: text entry, developing and using the appropriate dictionaries, running the translations on the computer during off hours - we maximise capacity and minimise cost by using the computer in this way - and finally, introducing the trained translator to produce a quality final product. In this last step, the translators use a specially-designed word processor to complete translations at rates of 600 to 1200 words per hour.

Let's look at each step separately.

Text entry may be accomplished by several means - entry via a standard keyboard or word processor; OCR (optical character recognition) devices; telecommunications via the phone lines or other machine-readable formats like nine-track tape or diskettes. The most significant aspect of text entry, however, is that no matter how you do it, in most cases you do it only once. Wherever we can reduce

keystrokes we can increase productivity and reduce errors. I know one of the arguments against CAT is that it is faster to translate a document from scratch in the traditional manner than go through the steps I have outlined here, but one has only to consider the reduction in keystrokes and potential errors to negate this argument.

Choosing the appropriate dictionaries is often determined by the particular customer as we develop and build customer-specific dictionaries in addition to general and area-specific dictionaries. We are constantly creating, checking and modifying these databases. By the way, this customised computer dictionary is a valuable asset to any company doing business with us. We have helped many customers decide upon and organise their terminology. We maintain these as part of our service.

All translations are done so as to maximise computer power and use. That is to say they are run in an unattended mode during off hours. Translations are generated at the rate of 8,000 words per hour, and are produced by an interaction between the dictionaries and our unique software which parses, analyses and reconstructs sentences. The result is translations ready for translators to edit and polish.

The final product and the final step are the result of human endeavour. It is a people-produced product. Translators, with the use of a specially-designed word processor, can edit translation at high speeds. Many paper-generating steps are eliminated in this way, and proofreading is also easily accommodated.

Recently WCC has introduced the use of new microcomputers as stand-alone editors to further increase the productivity of CAT. With this introduction the number of terminals per CPU can be expanded indefinitely. This has allowed us to set our goals well above the level originally determined by 10 to 15 terminals, easily at 80 to 100 terminals per CPU. Our potential is tremendous.

Which brings us to a key element of our discussion. Just who are the translators on CAT?

WCC currently engages approximately fifty translators on a full-time basis. With the recent introduction of the stand-alone editor, this number is rising as people can edit in remote locations. We divide these people according to special tasks or functions: some do nothing but build specialised dictionaries, others do final editing, etc. These people represent a variety of professions: law, chemistry, engineering, etc. They have prior experience in translation although we administer our own tests. Most are native speakers. A key factor, however, is their enthusiasm for CAT - they make the system work - they achieve the rates we indicated. People must want to work with a new technology to make it succeed.

Finally, I would like to summarise the results of people working with CAT:

- faster turn-around time
- lower costs/higher productivity
- consistency of terminology across documents
- quality final product.

In addition, and not to be underrated, by using computer technology we can manage, store and retrieve many times the number of documents handled in a traditional way. We do this for many of our customers and produce revisions in a fraction of the time it would normally take.

Having initiated this CAT-powered service bureau venture, what do we see in the future for CAT? Total automated document preparation. CAT belongs to this process as an integral part. Translation, typesetting and printing. The process is fast and less costly. And tele-communications is the technology which will make these processes most efficient. WCC plans to continue to expand its services in this way and to bring the market computer-aided translations via telecommunications on a worldwide basis.

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