

# Emergence of a new machine translation company - ESC

A new company offering bureau services by in-house machine translation facilities has been formed in the United Kingdom, with the backing of one of the world's major international MT companies, Worldwide Communications Corporation (WCC), of Chicago.

The new company, ESC Limited (the acronym stands for Engineering Services Consortium), came into being as a direct result of the closure of the Alcatel Engineering Support Centre in Harlow, Essex, which has a turnover of some five million pounds a year. The Alcatel (formerly ITT) centre had had some ten years' experience in providing translation and documentation services based on the Weidner machine translation system, and the translation team were determined not to allow this successful operation to be dispersed. They resolved to form a new company and WCC, impressed with their management expertise, agreed to provide the start-up capital.

The new company, which has moved into premises in the Harlow town centre, a mile from its previous location, will continue to provide services to many of the former clients of the Alcatel service and will expand its translation and documentation activities.

ESC was officially launched in December and employs a core staff of 12 ex-Alcatel experts. It is the largest of a number of start-up companies formed by ex-employees of the Alcatel centre, and so is also acting as the co-ordinator for their activities, which include industrial design and human factor engineering.

When the Alcatel company announced the closure of the Harlow-based operations, those working in the Engineering Support Centre explored the possibilities of finance for a management buy-out, but this became unnecessary when Worldwide Communications Corporation, informed of the situation, expressed their full backing for the new venture, and provided the totality of the start-up capital. ESC is now a wholly-owned subsidiary of WCC.

ESC will provide consultancy services for those interested in establishing a computer-aided translation system, using their unrivalled ten years' experience to advise on how to avoid the massive hidden start-up costs which have often been the experience of industrial companies investing in MT.

The history of ESC goes back to the mid 1970s when the centre was formed in Harlow to service worldwide translation and other engineering support needs of the multinational ITT Corporation. The centre was always a separate cost centre, and expected to pay its way, and be competitive in respect of other suppliers. It therefore began to operate as a commercial bureau, handling work not only for ITT but also for other industrial customers. As part of the ITT group it was expected to handle ITT technical documentation for any of the corporation's many products, and to perform translations from or into any language. Major subject areas at that stage included telecommunications, radar, fibre optics, submarine cables and electronic component technology.

At first all translation work was handled manually, but at a very early stage the then novel idea of machine translation was being looked into. At that time the centre's requirement was for a system which would translate between English on the one hand and French, German and Spanish on the other.



*Roger Lee, now managing director of ESC and European director of WTE*

After an evaluation of available systems the Weidner system was chosen, and installed in 1979; this made the centre the first group outside the North American continent to be using machine translation on a commercial basis. Over the years changes in operations were made. The VAX machine on which the original Weidner Macro CAT system ran became overloaded, the word processing facilities, which in 1979 had been considered good, had become outdated, and the centre's experts wanted to be able to use the dictionaries in a more client-specific manner. The organisation currently operates with the WCC MicroCAT system from English into French, Spanish, German, Italian and Portuguese, and from French and Spanish into English. They are expecting to have a fully operational German to English MicroCAT system some time this year.

In 1986 ITT sold all its telecommunications interests to the French-based company Alcatel, and this deal included the transfer of the Engineering Support Centre. Alcatel then decided to reduce its presence in Great Britain, and redeployed some of the functions and personnel directly to the production units on the continent of Europe, leaving the translation unit high and dry.

Those working in the translation department, however, were determined that what they saw as "one of the best and most experienced machine translation units in the world" (the words used by ESC linguist Marian Medhurst, speaking at a seminar in London in December) should not be disbanded.

The new company will have close relations with WCC's own offshoot, Weidner Translation (Europe) Limited, which is based at Chandler's Ford, near Southampton. In fact Roger Lee, former divisional manager of the Engineering Support Centre, whose background is in telecommunications, will act both as European director of WTE and managing director of ESC. WTE will continue to sell software and provide its translation bureau service, concentrating in particular on expanding the successes it has had in the academic sector.

In an interview with *Language Monthly* in January, the commercial director for ESC, David Thwaite, explained his ideas for marketing the bureau translation services of ESC, based on the experience acquired by the ITT Engineering Support Centre. He identified five different classes of translation services.

The first was what ESC class as their standard service, the sort of service which is said to be towards the top quality end of the market.

*David Thwaite, commercial director*



The second was a service of even higher quality, applicable in certain fairly narrow fields, where measures to obtain super-accuracy and super-quality would be adopted, such as additional revision passes, and the use of sources of specialised technical expertise.

The third class was of post-edited machine translation. Computer-assisted translation was often used in the standard service, he explained, but only after a decision that it was the most appropriate tool. In the third class, there would be no such prior evaluation; the material would be translated using the machine translation system. In many cases this would be just as good as the standard service.

A fourth option was for raw unedited machine translation. This would be limited to certain areas of technology where ESC believed that their dictionaries were good enough to give acceptable results for international use in a company.

The fifth option was for on-line raw machine translation. This would be provided only for clients with a heavy usage pattern. Although ESC was operating already the first four options, it had not yet been involved in an operation with the fifth option. However, they had run trials, and they knew that it was technically feasible.

Mr Thwaite said there was a large unsatisfied demand for translation, which for many reasons normally had to be done by subject experts in a company, rather than by professional translators. Such persons often became bogged down with the volume of work which they had to handle, in addition to their normal duties, and the provision of a raw translation on which they could work would be a boon to them.