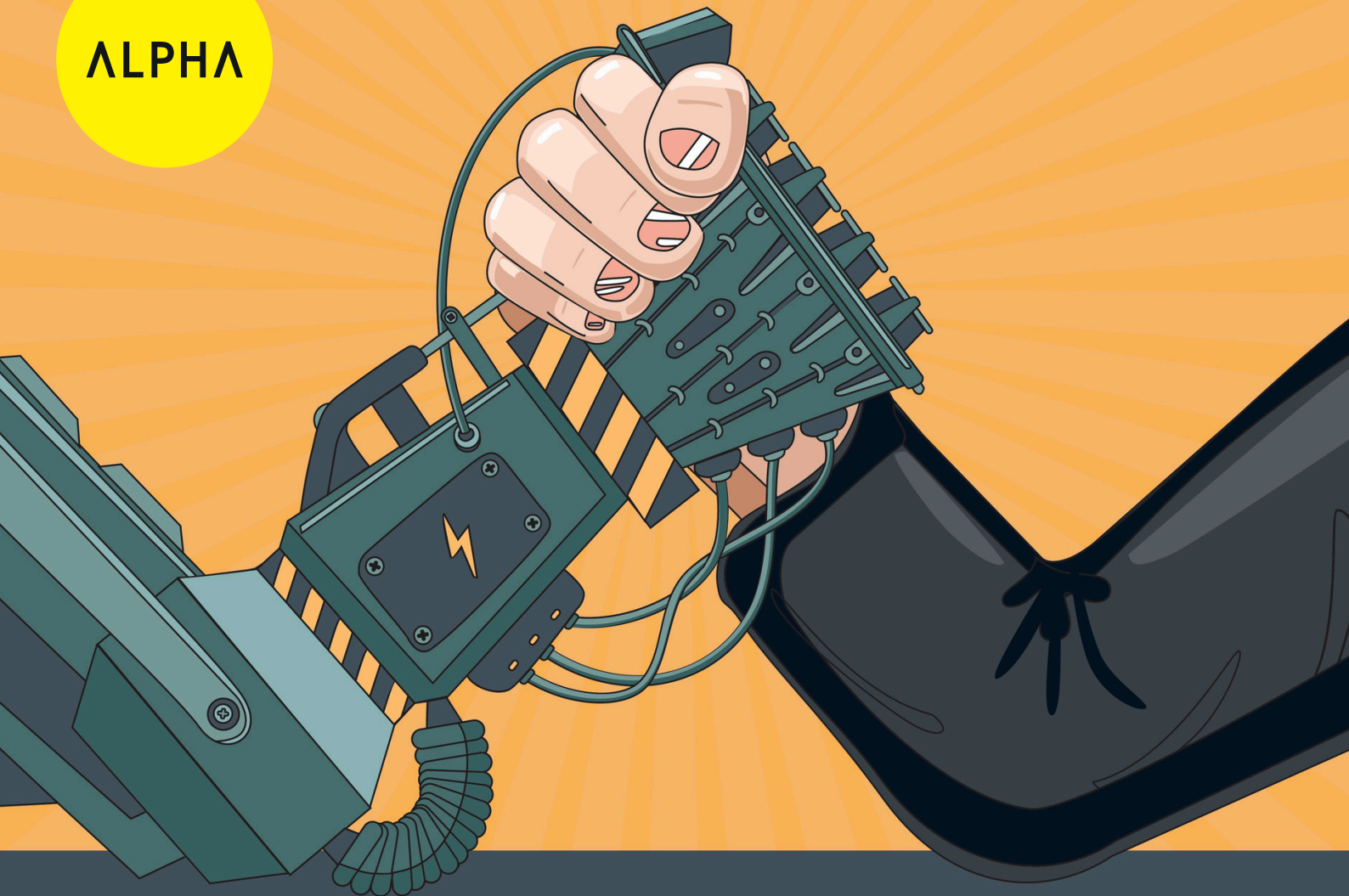


ALPHA



Humans vs. machines?

White paper

How to develop human translators in the age of translation technology

An interview with Alpha founder, Isabelle Weiss

Machine translation is an undeniable force that is continuing to reshape this sector. In the US alone, the machine translation market was worth \$400 million by the end of 2016, and it is predicted to grow by nearly 20% by 2024¹. So, for translation graduates fresh out of school or even those mid-career, does it mean that it's time to start looking for new ways to pay the rent?

We think not. In terms of delivering cultural relevance, linguistic nuance and truly localised content, human translators are still essential to the translation process. But, with the ever-increasing automisation of processes, there are some important changes in the way human translators can develop skills and build careers in the 21st century.

Isabelle Weiss, the founder of Alpha who has more than 30 years' experience in the translation industry, shares some of her insights into the professional choices translators – and their employers – need to consider.

ALPHA LTD
St Andrew's House
St Andrew's Road
Cambridge CB4 1DL
United Kingdom

 @thisisalphalive

thisisalpha.com

¹ <https://www.gminsights.com/industry-analysis/machine-translation-market-size>

Q: It's a very different translation landscape to when you first founded Alpha back in 1987. Do human translators still have a place in it?

A: Very much so, but it's a different place of course. Over the last ten years, the use of technology has become the norm in our industry. Every translation provider uses CAT [computer aided translation] tools with translation memories to make projects faster, more consistent, and ultimately cheaper. It's a different way of working.

Q: Has the training that translators undertake changed to reflect this?

A: Not nearly as much as it needs to. We meet a lot of translators straight out of the academic system who've never used a translation software package such as MemoQ or SYSTRAN. It still surprises me that this kind of technical training is not a part of many professional translation courses.

Q: Are traditional translation training courses still valuable for working in the real world?

A: Of course, because they develop the core skills that are at the heart of any good translation. Professional training and academic courses have always focused on aspects such as reviewing work and attention to detail; ensuring that the tone is appropriate as well as the meaning; or knowing how to approach and understand source materials. Ultimately, they help translators develop the rounded linguistic knowledge to ensure that content reads fluently and accurately in the target language.

Q: So where is training for translators falling short?

A: Translation technology. Translators entering the industry in 2017 need to know that nothing happens in our industry without translation tools. They'll play a big part in your career, so you need to master them.

In the academic study of translation, the role of technology is often underplayed or even ignored – human translation is seen as the gold standard to which all translation projects should aspire. But in the commercial world, it simply doesn't work like this any more.

Q: How do you think the focus should shift?

A: It's really important to look more at the interplay of humans and technology. In fact, best practice in localisation is very much about creating a strong symbiotic relationship between human translation and machine translation.

The technology takes a lot of the painstaking and time-consuming legwork out of large and complex localisation projects. It means there's no need to retranslate existing materials. Translation memory is also extremely useful for ensuring consistency, and translation software helps to provide really accurate mapping of source material against target material. This all saves time and money, and it improves quality.

But these increases in efficiency don't make the human translator redundant. In fact, it means there is more time and more resources for human translators to add value in the areas in which they contribute the most. This includes the creative and intellectual aspects of translation, the understanding of cultural context and, where necessary, the creative reinterpretation (or transcreation) of source material for new local audiences. So, in these ways, I'd like to see training for translators emphasise more the benefits that working with technology brings for all sides.

Q: You mentioned transcreation and understanding of cultural context as important skills for translators in the current marketplace. Are there any other skills you'd like to see more of?

A: One area in which machine translation really falls short is when the source material is badly written. This can happen for many reasons – for example, when the source material is written by someone working in their non-native tongue. If the message in the original is not clear, machine translation simply compounds the problem.

Of course, it may be that the human translator will also struggle to understand the meaning of a poorly written piece of content. But the advantage the human has is to be able to open a dialogue with the originator and clarify any issues. So the development of communication and interpersonal skills is definitely an area which should not be ignored.

Q: What is your focus when it comes to developing the many translators working at Alpha?

A: We make sure they have a really thorough grounding in the translation technologies we use and how to get the most out of them. The tools are a part of everything we do, so strong technical skills are absolutely essential.

But we also encourage translators to see the limits of these tools and not to become over-reliant on them. We still very much want our translators to use their intelligence, their cultural knowledge and their linguistic skills. These are all invaluable career-long attributes.

Of course, our translators have a lot of support in learning about the clients they are working with and the industry sectors they cover. We make sure that translators who are really experienced in particular sectors can transfer this knowledge to newer members of our teams.

Q: Finally, what kind of advice would you give to a new translator about developing their career?

A: One of the key things that will put you in a strong place is to develop three or four areas of subject specialism. Really get to know these industries, the terminologies, the marketplace and the clients. And, where possible, choose areas where you have a genuine interest.

Some of the other things are basic but always worth remembering: really understand your brief; take time to look at and absorb your reference material; and do relevant research but don't get bogged down in irrelevancies.

One of the most important things to understand is that we do is not about providing the "perfect" translation; it is about finding the best way to service our clients. Ultimately, that is what makes us professionals.

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