



ALPHA



White Paper

Under one roof: a philosophy for localization and translation services

An interview with Alpha's founder, Isabelle Weiss

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For more than three decades, Alpha's "under-one-roof" philosophy has brought talented people together to share expertise, ensure quality and foster a sense of ownership and community. Founder Isabelle Weiss talked about how this started and what it meant then and now.

Later, we also talk to some of Alpha's division heads about their take on "under one roof".

Why did you feel it was necessary to create a localization company with an “under-one-roof” philosophy?

IW: Before setting up Alpha, I had worked as a freelancer for different translation companies and some direct clients. Sometimes work would be split among four or five people, but they each worked anonymously and autonomously in their own homes.

There was never a kick-off meeting or a brief, usually not even a shared glossary or a style guide. And at that time – the 1970s and 1980s – there wasn't really the possibility of being in touch with each other. It was also before the Internet, and before CAT tools, so translation memories had not been invented.

In fact, we had only just started to use computers, a big step up from the typewriter. After the work was delivered, there might be a “thank you” from the client, but hardly ever any feedback. Translators were picked more or less at random and just got on with it. Research had to be done manually, and typically this involved hunting for reference materials in a library.

This way of working seemed rather unsatisfactory to me. Instead, I dreamt of a kind of translators' workshop where linguists of different languages would pool their knowledge, solve problems together and provide support for each other, bounce ideas back and forth, etc.

In addition, I realized there was a need to have project managers at hand who would look after the projects, the negotiations, the milestones, the deliveries, and generally keep the translators shielded from the buzz so they could concentrate on their work. And it became clear that we needed skilled desktop publishers who knew how to handle multiple languages and how to avoid copy-paste errors, wrong hyphenations, and sentence truncation.

If they were unsure about something or needed to shorten a text, they would be able to grab a translator and ask for help. By having all these people in the same place we were able to produce higher quality translations and meet the requirements of the buzzing IT sector. Consequently, we were able to avoid the embarrassment of software packaging with glaring errors in German, French or Spanish.

What does Alpha's philosophy of “under one roof” mean to you now? Has it changed?

IW: The basic idea has always remained the same. When we set up our first office in a different country, in Barcelona, we replicated the original idea, and recreated a team consisting of five or six different language groups, plus project managers, desktop publishers and technical support.

As time went on and clients' ideas changed somewhat, we added a different type of “module” to the company as a whole: teams of in-country linguists, for example in France, Italy and Germany. And of course, with the changes in technology – such as CAT tools, email and easy communication via Internet – physical proximity was no longer an absolute necessity.

Speaking at this particular moment, Covid-19 has forced everyone to work in a dispersed environment for a time. While clearly it is possible to carry on in that way, it is revealing some of the limitations of virtual collaboration, and I believe that many of us will relish getting back together sooner rather than later. Perhaps we will start to fully appreciate the “under-one-roof” model once more when this is all over.

How does “under one roof” benefit Alpha’s clients?

IW: The fact that Alpha has translators, transcreators, project managers, desktop publishers and QA [quality assurance] staff all under one roof gives our clients the assurance that their projects are in good hands. Our staff have in-depth knowledge of clients’ preferences, of their products or services, and they identify and engage with “their” clients.

Clients also get continuity, which is really important. Sometimes we create project structures so that clients are always working with the same trusted linguists who they can talk to directly. In other cases, there is one lead linguist with whom they communicate, share feedback with, and who is their “champion” within Alpha.

Alpha even provides dedicated teams of linguists for some of our regular clients. In these cases, translators work exclusively for them and, to all purposes, act like in-house linguists, functioning like the client’s own translation/localization team. That means they can respond without delay and are available for quick turnaround or emergency translations. It also means they identify with the client, and they are accountable for their work, rather than working anonymously as in the freelance model. For clients, this brings a number of benefits: high-quality translations, high levels of engagement and commitment from their service provider, and working with translators who they know and trust.

Do you have any final thoughts about working “under one roof”?

IW: For me, this model has always been the ideal way of working, as it provides for a congenial working atmosphere for translators, in some ways reminiscent of the early translation schools, where ancient texts on philosophy, medicine, etc., were translated across the languages that were important at that time – Arabic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin – by groups of scholars.

It fosters the idea of mutual exchange of ideas, constructive feedback and continuous learning. It also gives linguists a chance to see the full cycle of a project, the way it moves from the translation stage to other stages, perhaps into our sound studio, or to our multimedia artists, to page layout, or onto websites.

Another advantage is that translators’ voices are heard. They have a say in the choice of tools we use as our preference, they can propose improvements to the workflow or the cooperation with clients – and they have options to move into different roles if they wish to make a change in their career.

I still very much cherish this way of working, and I believe it makes for a great working atmosphere, with people from so many different regions and cultures sharing a common experience, and collaborating in a friendly and professional way.

More views on Alpha's "under-one-roof" philosophy from some of our divisional heads

"For our team, 'under one roof' means the resources are available at your fingertips. You know who the people are behind each language/service.

"For our clients, it provides extreme flexibility. We understand the strength of our resources and can set (and reset) the priorities and use the best resources for each task. We can be transparent about the services we offer, and we have no problem introducing the linguists so they can talk directly to our clients. Our competitors will not always even provide named linguists.

"Ultimately, it means we can provide bespoke solutions to our clients – we set up different workflows that are better aligned with our clients' needs."

Mette Clark, Director, Alpha Games

"For me, 'under one roof' is about resource pool stability, the ability to tightly control quality output, and the possibility to create work efficiencies across languages by having linguists working in close proximity. "Keeping a pool of resources stable means that instructions and guidelines can be absorbed more easily and permanently. Effectively this specializes a pool of resources on long term translation programs.

"Quality is improved by having more direct same and cross language exchanges on how to approach and resolve linguistic problems. This results in immediate internal feedback, reducing the generation of queries and cutting down the transactions needed to achieve optimal quality results. Proximity also creates an environment in which similar experiences (linguistic problems, tips and tricks, even jokes) can be shared. This generally improves the overall spirit and gives better results in terms of timeliness, attention to detail and understanding of the material being worked on. It also reduces the interactions with external suppliers and the effort it generally takes to source, qualify and monitor external resources."

Fernando Blasi, Director, Strategic Accounts

"Having everything 'under one roof' means I can easily communicate with all involved departments very quickly and negotiate with regards to clients' priorities. It also helps to keep experience for a particular client in-house, which is not possible if you outsource it."

Dmitri Kanarjov, Head of Operations (Estonia)

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