WCC GOES TO WALL
HOW PRECARIOUS IS COMMERCIAL MT?

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX KISMAN

Illinois bankers have seized the assets of the Worldwide Communications Corp., following the resignation of WCC chairperson Toshiyaki Yamamoto. The Chicago-based company, developer of Weidner standalone computer-aided translation software, was taken over by Japanese translation giant Bravice early this year. Now its assets are up for sale, and its Southampton-based UK subsidiary WTE has closed down.

What does WCC's failure indicate about the overall state of the MT marketplace? The three big commercial contenders that remain – standalone package developer ALPNET, and remote system suppliers Logos and Systran – wring their hands in anticipation at the thought of each other's lot. But none will be fazed about their own.

USERFRIENDLY
Boston-based Logos's Jon Cave: "The industry has generally taken a turn. WCC failed because the standard of standalone systems is simply not high enough. The linguistic analysis is too primitive. Another indication of this is the fact that ALPNET has got out of distributing off-the-shelf standalone packages and is now concentrating on supporting their use onsite. And rumor has it that they're even finding it hard to convince their customers to use it there.

"So far as we're concerned, there's growing and exciting interest in the sort of online service that Logos provides – especially for the internal translation of memos, letters, and reports. We're also changing our emphasis. In the past four years we've developed four new language pairs – and we feel we've reached a certain level of maturity on the language side. So we're shifting our emphasis to systems level improvements, like Filius – making the system more userfriendly, loadable, and usable."

QUALITY
J.-P. Matard of Gachot S.A., the French firm that owns Systran, reckons WCC and ALPNET have queered their

own pitch: "They've let the customer do all the work himself, and for a poor return on investment. For quality, they couldn't compete with online services."

And Gachot, natur*elle-ment*, was vigorously applying itself to quality. "This is the Systran strategy. Our Russian to English is now 98% correct according to USAF criteria – almost as good as human translation. And it's fully operational. Bidirectional English and French will reach the same standard within the year, and our English to Arabic in one to two years."

NO RETREAT
As reported in LT, WCC's standalone stablepartner, ALPNET of Salt Lake City, has recently "de-emphasized" the *distribution* of CAT software and moved into translation services. It now has 22 translation locations worldwide. However, ALPSNET president Fred Zirkle is quick to deny that the company has *retreated* from CAT, and he's indignant about how LT has – in his opinion – spread this impression.

Zirkle: "The dilemma in computer-aided translation is that no *one* is really making money. The reason WCC failed is that there aren't enough customers with the sophistication required to make good use of it and the translation volume necessary to justify it. ALPNET is tackling the problem by shifting from a technology-driven to a market-driven approach. We realize that the software itself needs to be more userfriendly, training support needs to improve – and the costs of both need to fall.

"ALPNET's new direction is already paying off. We've recently landed two million dollars' worth of CAT technology development contracts. And we still have the largest development team, the greatest installed base, and the most locations of any CAT supplier in the world."

LOW BUDGET
With respect to ALPNET's online-based competition, Zirkle is fairly magnanimous: "So far as Systran and Logos are concerned, I don't feel that large and expensive systems are the future. But I recognize that there are different solutions for different applications."

Zirkle also has something to say about smaller, low-budget PC-based CAT software producers such as Linguistic Products and Globalink: "With regard to these $500 solutions, the market's going to be flooded with them. And I welcome it – because they'll act as a springboard to our own software – which is more sophisticated. We do everything they do – and add better linguistic capabilities, more flexibility in glossary building, and other facilities like repetition processing and source text analysis tools."

CAT FOR SALE
Will anyone buy Weidner's CAT software? One possible purchaser is strongly rumored to be GA Investments, led by ex-WCC directors Nevil Garrett and Robert Adams. GA Investments is a major shareholder in the ITC (International Translation Corp.) group of companies, with offices in Miami, Toronto, Buenos Aires, and Harlow, UK. GA Investments also holds exclusive rights to the Weidner products – PC-based Micro-CAT and VAX-based Macro-CAT – in Canada and Latin America.

ITC's UK offshoot ESC (Executive Services Consortium) has already hired the staff of WCC's disbanded UK subsidiary WTE. And ESC's commercial manager David Thwaite is as enthusiastic about Weidner software's potential as Cave, Matard, and Zirkle are theirs: "MicroCAT and MacroCAT offer the only viable machine translation for commercial use. The main rivals, Logos and Systran, are both too expensive, and AI-based systems are still just toys that promise a lot but won't be anywhere near productive for three to four years."

Maybe no one's making money, but machine translation is not going away. As Logos user Peter Wheeler, of Antler Translations, New Jersey, puts it:

"Among professional translators, MT is no longer being laughed out of court. It's definitely here to stay for the right sort of material. Which still means: not where meaning is made implicit, as in political or advertising texts, for example – but where it is explicitly stated, as in how-to manuals."