

STAR – how a small group of linguists came together to form a company which now has global status

Geoffrey Kingscott investigated the origins of this dynamic company

The entry of the US language technology company Multiling into the STAR group, and the launch of the GRIPS document management system, has suddenly made everyone sit up and take notice of this fast-expanding enterprise.

STAR is today one of the major players in the multilingual documentation scene, whether through its technical writing and translation services, or through its software developments, which include, as well as GRIPS, the already well established STAR TRANSIT translation memory system.

The first STAR office was originally founded in Stein am Rhein, Switzerland in 1984 as a translation company. Today, it is the headquarters of the STAR group, which now operates from 18 locations in 13 countries around the globe.

I went to see STAR Deutschland GmbH in Böblingen, near Stuttgart, and talked to Manfred Hoelzgen and Bernd Dobbert, general managers of this arm of the company, and Gerd Janssen, responsible for TRANSIT. Besides being one of the larger translation service providers within the STAR group, Böblingen is home to the development of STAR's translation software tools. I was particularly interested to know how it all started, since no-one has satisfactorily explained before why so many developments, particularly in translation memory (IBM TranslationManager, Trados Translator's Workbench, STAR TRANSIT) all seemed to have originated in the Stuttgart area.

Manfred Hoelzgen looked back to the very beginning. His father, Hans-Joachim Hoelzgen, was a mechanical engineer who had worked for IBM for 33 years. He had learned English before the second world war, and he started doing translations for IBM. Hans-Joachim Hoelzgen, though semi-retired, is still translating. Manfred Hoelzgen himself studied Computer Science at university, but while still studying was drawn into translating for IBM. He and his father formed a small company in Böblingen to provide IBM with a translation service.

Manfred Hoelzgen had had about ten years' experience already in translating for IBM when, for

a particular project, he was asked to find two people for programming and for technical support. The first personal computers were then (the early 1980s) starting to make an impact on office organisation. And so an advertisement was placed on a notice board in the computer science department at Stuttgart University. From the applicants he chose two students, then aged around 19 or 20, Jochen Hummel and Iko Knyphausen.

At this time there were many freelances working for IBM, which was finding the sheer administration of all these different suppliers a rather irksome task. In 1984 an IBM manager expressed their desire to see established a company which could administer and in some case actually employ these freelances. Manfred Hoelzgen and his two software colleagues decided to set up a company, and the name chosen was Trados (as an acronym for TRANslation DOcumentation Software). Manfred Hoelzgen held one-third of the shares and was managing director (*Geschäftsführer*), and Jochen Hummel and Iko Knyphausen each held one-third. The company was founded in 1984, and at first provided translations mainly for IBM, but then later for the burgeoning Information Technology industry, growing eventually until it had 16 employees. Manfred Hoelzgen was actually managing director of Trados for two years.

Bernd Dobbert was an early recruit. After leaving school he had worked for a while as a civil servant, in social security, but then decided to study languages. He went to the famous translation school at the University of Mainz at Germersheim, and qualified as an interpreter for English and Spanish. One year before he finished at university, he was asked by a freelance translator of his acquaintance, "Could you start tomorrow, translating?". So he started working for Trados, and afterwards he worked for Trados three or four times till the end of his studies. It was Manfred who showed him how to set about translating using a computer.

So that when Manfred Hoelzgen left Trados to join the STAR group and set up STAR Deutschland, Bernd Dobbert went with him. Those first days they were buying, putting together and even

making their own furniture.

Why did Manfred Hoelzgen leave Trados, the company he had helped set up and of which he was managing director? Manfred Hoelzgen explained. "I was a translator; I saw my future in translation. The other two directors, Jochen Hummel and Iko Knyphausen, saw their future in producing software - not translation software, which was not a topic at the time, but every kind of software. So decisions were being made against me on the board of directors, two-thirds to one third. I thought to fulfill the needs of the future market. I considered it was extremely important to translate not only one language pair, English to German, but other languages. This would only be possible if we could have a network of subsidiaries and translators, all round the world. Trados was too small in those days to develop something with that amount of resources."

Having taken the decision to leave Trados, Manfred and Bernd renewed their existing contacts with two colleagues, Joseph Zibung and Hanspeter Siegrist, who before Trados was formed were themselves forming a translation company called STAR AG at Stein am Rhein in Switzerland. They too had been translating for IBM, and were well-known to IBM's Purchasing Department, who had put them in touch with Manfred Hoelzgen and Bernd Dobbert, and they found they all shared the same enthusiasm.

STAR is an acronym for Software Translation Artwork Recording.

STAR Deutschland was established in 1986, originally as a translation company for the IT industry. They started with translation work for IBM and other hardware manufacturers, and after a year and a half had 20 full-time salaried employees.

STAR AG (Switzerland) mainly does technical translation and documentation for automotive customers such as BMW and the Mercedes group.

Soon there were STAR subsidiaries in Italy, Japan, Munich, Neuchatel, all started from scratch. Manfred Hoelzgen explains. "Other companies seeking to expand simply buy up translation companies. There are bound to be differences in the way they do things between one company and another. That is not our way. We like to have a common company culture. It takes longer but we are convinced it is the best method in the long run. We now have 300 employees worldwide, and turnover is around the \$30 million mark."

In addition to translation services, each member of the STAR group has its own specialisation. STAR AG in Switzerland, for example, has a department for technical writing and illustration in German, English, Italian and French. Each department comprises approximately 12 people and often sends people to work on site. STAR Italy does technical documentation and translates for the aeronautical industry. STAR



Left to right;
Gerd Janssen,
Bernd Dobbert,
Manfred Hoelzgen

Deutschland (Böblingen) works mainly in information technology. The Munich office serves customers in southern Germany's new high-tech region. Each office has its own customer base.

The company faced a difficult challenge with the foundation of STAR's Russian subsidiary to serve the growing demand of East European languages. It took an enormous effort to find a building and the appropriate people to set up the Russian office. Now STAR employs more than fifty people working in technical translation, engineering and programming.

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In the mid-1980s the STAR offices found they were getting customers who wanted work in the Asian languages. At that time many such translations were being done in the USA by expatriates. Quality assurance was a problem for these languages, which STAR solved by going to the countries of the target languages and establishing their own offices there. Japan was the first, followed by the People's Republic of China, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand. These offices provide translation and other services in local languages for the European STAR subsidiaries but are also all steadily developing their own customer bases.

Manfred Hoelzgen says that the only solution which works in modern translation is to have an in-house solution, so as to have direct control over the people doing the work. Bernd Dobbert added that it needed specialist translators in the first place to start a company, to contact the right people, and to train them.

Asked how they maintain the company ethos, Manfred Hoelzgen said it was very simple. Managers met on a regular basis. In addition to general meetings where all STAR managers come together, and there was at least one of these a year, there were frequent inter-office visits, not only from managers but also from other members of staff.

I then probed how they had come to develop the translation memory tool now sold as STAR TRANSIT. Manfred Hoelzgen explained: "Even right back in 1986, in our early days, we saw the need, not only for working with personal computers, but also for developing tools for terminology management and for translation. Remember, these were the early days for the personal computer. When we saw the kind of text we were being given for translation, especially

when customers started giving us electronic files for the first time, we found that there were many many repetitions.

"I can clearly remember how we started producing translation memory. We were getting files from IBM to translate. In order to speed up the translation we started using the computer's search and replace facility. That was the very first beginning. Then we developed macros to do just that. Then I started writing macros which could operate not only in one file, but over all the files of a manual. Then I started putting those macros on to diskette in order to save them for the next job. Later, I could re-use them for any translation work involving the same product family which came from IBM."

Bernd Dobbert took up the story. "Then we thought on how, if we got IBM giving us source code files or ASCII files, we could also use search and replace macros on them. Our difference was that we had employees doing software development, and we set up a good exchange between the developers and the translators. We come from the translation side and know the problems. That is why we decided not to use a database-based system which cannot handle context very well. Finally we decided to create a tool based on the single source principle. Fortunately we had an excellent parser specialist who put this principle, which is highly advanced in comparison to a database solution, into practice."

STAR were also the first to apply translation memory to Asian languages, and to integrate all language pairs in the technology. In 1994 they brought the product to market, as STAR TRANSIT for Windows 2.1 (version 2.0 had been produced but was not for general sale). There had been some sales of TRANSIT for DOS to some of STAR's own translation customers before 1994, and the company ported it to Windows before offering it to the market. Bernd Dobbert comments, "Offering TRANSIT for everyone, including competitors, was a very important decision for us to take".

Marketing, distribution and support for the STAR TRANSIT system is run from its own department in STAR Deutschland, though all the STAR subsidiaries participate in an integrated operation, connecting to distributors.

The latest STAR product is GRIPS, a system designed to resolve many of the all too well-known obstacles in the authoring, translation and multilingual publication process.

One of the paradigms used in GRIPS is the systematic separation of contents and formatting by using SGML. If this paradigm is implemented consistently, authoring in a WYSIWYG environment is a contradiction. Today's many

possibilities to publish (paper of various sizes, CD-ROM for multiple platforms, Internet Web, multiple languages with different layout requirements) make it obvious that the author really should not work WYSIWYG. What they need is superior guidance and navigation in terms of structure and context. A practical advantage of this solution is that no desktop publishing work is necessary in any language.

A further paradigm is re-use. Re-use is achieved by version and variant control on a micro-unit level, but also by re-using data from the company's various product management databases in order to speed up the authoring process.

Another paradigm is the support of Unicode throughout, making the system ideal for companies that have global publication requirements.

GRIPS manages and structures SGML data in an object-relational database with client-server and multi-site architecture. Large teams can work together on the same projects. Simultaneous translation becomes possible without additional handling hassle, as GRIPS keeps track of the status of each information unit and can thus trigger the translation process for approved parts long before the complete documentation is ready.

STAR has built up this know-how by developing spare parts logistics management systems, authoring in SGML, CD-ROM developments for customers, multilingual publication and of course development of translation software. The combination of this know-how resulted in the design of a totally seamless process with a high degree of automation and the subsequent realisation of the "ideal solution".

STAR has not engaged in such costly development without first making sure of the active support of large clients. The company successfully sought commitment from several large clients based on the development plans; the advantages of GRIPS were so apparent that they were prepared to share the risk. In addition, the system is very modular: some customers have been using individual modules of the system in a production environment since last year.

A full-blown pilot model has been installed at one customer site recently, and several others are to follow within the next couple of months.

Europe-based STAR has always had its eye on the United States. The company already had one distributor for TRANSIT in the United States, Bureau of Translation Services, in Haddonfield, New Jersey but, it had become clear in recent years that one distributor was not enough for the whole of the United States, particularly as there is evidently some kind of breakthrough occurring there in the take-up of translation memory systems.

STAR was already looking for more people, and a wider geographical spread, and started talking to Multiling, whose base is in Provo in Utah.

"We found we had the same ideas about developing a company, and we shared a Swiss heritage" [with Daniel Oswald, head of Multiling] explains Manfred Hoelzgen. "STAR is a company providing services and selling translation software, and that is what Multiling is all about. We had the same ideas about developing translation memory technology and they wanted to contribute to development".

So STAR for once bought into an existing company, rather than follow their long-established policy of starting subsidiaries from scratch. The announcement of the new partnership has been something of a minor sensation in the translation memory world, since Multiling were previously

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IBM's business partner in the United States, selling IBM's translation memory system, TranslationManager.

Asked to look into the future, Bernd Dobbert spoke about the convergence of technical writing and translation. "We are one of the few companies," he said, "doing all of the things to do with multilingual technical documentation at the same time. We want to get ahead in technology. We want to stay at the front. We are continuing to be as flexible as possible. Whatever comes up in new projects, new ideas, we want to integrate in our company philosophy, e.g. speech recognition, controlled language, machine translation. We are looking, for example, how best to write for tools, whether or not you call it controlled language. It is not only a question of controlled language but how you create documents."

Progress seems to be accelerating as Bernd Dobbert muses, "And I can remember when for the first time I put my first disk into my first disk drive. It was only 14 years ago".

Manfred Hoelzgen said that the business of integrated service providers was growing fast. "Industry", he said, "needs a switchboard between customer and translator. The trend is towards one stop shopping and the full service provider. In our field only the big will survive. We want to be a big operator because we want to stay independent."

There seems to be every indication that STAR is on course to do that. Turnover is growing by one-third every year. ■