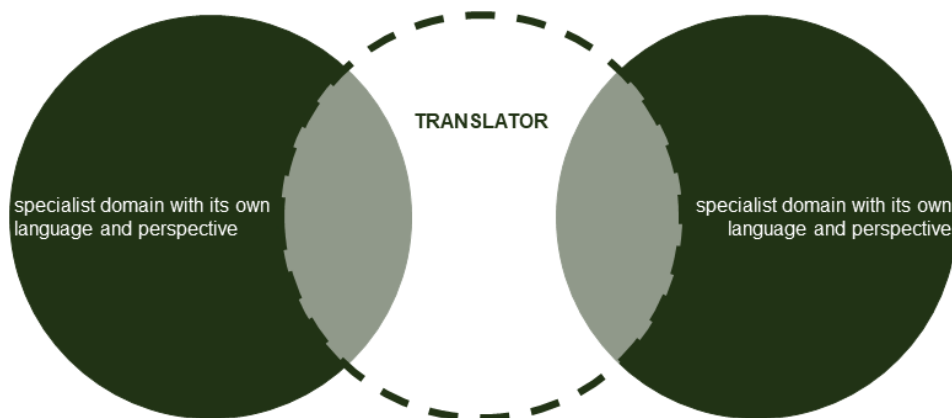# Lost in Translation

People in publicly funded organisations are often expected to collaborate across domains to solve complex or wicked problems, or codesign new ways to deliver services or regulation using new techniques or technologies. Contributors from different domains often think and work in ways that reflect their own deep content knowledge, assumptions, and jargon. This can lead to teams that feel like everyone speaks a different language.

Community expectations of publicly funded organisations have changed over time with shifts in values and improvements in technology. Where it used to be acceptable for organisations to offer services only face-to-face, for limited hours, in limited locations, the same organisations are now expected to offer highly integrated, customer-centred, user-friendly, and online interactions 24 hours a day. While this has had benefits for citizens, it has also increased the pressure on people working in publicly funded organisations to either become, or to work effectively with, a wider range of technical specialists.

At the same time, technical specialisations have become deeper, so that it is more difficult for generalists or specialists in one domain to collaborate, or even communicate, across domains.

For generalists, or specialists within their domains, it can be frustrating collaborating with people from disciplines that speak a different language, based on different assumptions and values. This can lead to interesting insights, but misunderstandings and misdirected work are almost inevitable and can be disengaging, especially when working to a deadline. Miscommunication can shift working across domains from collaboration to compromise, with poor results.

Some approaches to cross-discipline collaboration try to limit this inefficiency by saving time elsewhere, like the way AGILE projects accelerate decision making by making all decisions in the room. These approaches may not always work well in the complex authorising environments of publicly funded organisations.

TRANSLATOR

specialist domain with its own language and perspective

specialist domain with its own language and perspective

When people work across different languages and cultures, they tend to immediately recognise and manage the risk of miscommunication. They use translators and cultural advisors to communicate clearly and efficiently with people from different cultural and language backgrounds without causing confusion or offence.

These functions and roles are just as important to facilitate communication and collaboration across technical specialties as they are across cultures. A technical translator is more than a dictionary. They do not need to be deep experts in every domain, but should be skilled in building collaborative relationships and be conversant in the relevant technical jargon and assumptions on all sides.

Adding a technical translator to a team can seem like an extravagance for a publicly funded organisation. People who speak the same language are often expected to collaborate effectively without help. In practice, however, a technical translator can save an enormous amount of time, effort, and frustration. By taking charge of engaging diverse contributors through metaphor and interpretation, a technical translator reduces distraction for experts who no longer need to explain complex ideas in a new language. A technical translator also improves efficiency and effectiveness by reducing misdirected effort and rework.

This frees the team to focus on creating something that is more than the sum of its disciplines, rather than a compromise of all of them, helping to translate their efforts into better outcomes.