Documentation – one way forward

Corporate documents generally use and re-use information provided by more than one person or department. This immediately poses three major challenges:

- consistency: information from source A may complement information from source B, duplicate it with a change in wording or approach, or – worst case – contradict it
- timeliness: when information from source D is updated, the change needs to be managed so it shows up in all the documents where the information appears
- quality: writing is a distinct skill, not something anyone can do and definitely something everyone enjoys trying to do

Help is at hand. Handling these challenges and helping make documentation activities more efficient is the job of the technical author.

Management summary

Effective, productive work within a large company supports Area Experts with a central editor/ technical author. This division of labour guarantees an agreed level of quality (including accessibility, usability and accuracy) for both operational and regulatory information, and increases productivity: Area Experts spend less time away from their area of expertise while trying to produce documentation, end-users spend less time trying to find and understand the information they need to do their jobs.

To maximise the value of your Area Experts and their knowledge, provide them with coaching and support from an editor/technical author using an appropriate authoring environment.

The following advantages of working with an in-house technical author are considered in greater detail:

- – Reduced duplication, overlaps and contradiction …
- – Increased productivity …
- – Improved usability of documentation …

A case-study is outlined under Real-life example: an Aerodrome Manual, on page 4.

Reduced duplication, overlaps and contradiction …

Without a central point of responsibility, consistency and co-ordination – where documents overlap or where several documents need to share key information – will be difficult. There is a real danger that different people may start noting information covering the same topic.

Managing this information, resolving contradictions and re-using work that has already been approved takes time and is open to error. Where documents then have to be translated, the costs of dealing with poorly-managed content spiral out of control.

… is delivered by

- a professional technical author/editor, who co-ordinates input from area experts and develops/updates content as required

  Area experts are free to concentrate on their area of expertise, not required to learn an additional set of skills to support writing documentation, and centralisation is an immediate help to consistency.

- robust, professional documentation software capable of delivering different documents by combining unique content and reusable information elements or "chunks"

  Blocks of information used in more than one deliverable are defined once and inserted where required.

  A robust software platform for documentation also makes it easy to implement good version control, for example, a change-log with each new edition, and integrates well with the systems used by the majority of professional translation companies.

- a content repository (CMS, web server …) for non-text information such as maps and plans

  Instead of trying to embed this information in the deliverable, hyperlinks mean that someone using a document on-line always has access to the latest version of the map or plan; someone using off-line media such as a CD has access to the version released for publication when the CD was published.

Improved usability of documentation …

Users need to be able to find the information they are looking for easily, and assimilate it quickly. One of the most important tools to help deliver usable information is "structured documentation": simply put, specifying what sort of information a particular type of document needs to contain and in what order, and then validating documents against the specification. Both aspects are important.

Structure brings real value when linked to content management and re-use: procedures are a prime example. The time taken to produce and validate a set of related procedures is considerably reduced when content common to all of them can simply be re-used. In an unstructured environment, expensive and time-consuming manual editing is the only way of ensuring consistency.

… is the result of

- assembling consistent documents from re-usable "chunks" of information
- providing automatically-generated tables of contents, change-logs and so on
- working with an open information architecture such as DITA

Increased productivity …

Using the right tool for the job always gets the job done quicker, which soon pays back initial investment in new tools. Desktop word processors, while widely available, are not appropriate for co-operative corporate documentation. Also, because many users lack basic skills they lose a lot of time struggling with lay-out and formatting instead of focusing on content.

… is a return on

- separating content and lay-out: this approach also helps guarantee long-term availability of valuable corporate knowledge
- working with structured documentation, so that Area Experts need only provide concise content instead of lengthy, formatting-rich documents
- matching tools to tasks: Area Experts may still deliver content as Word files, but the author will use professional tools for preparing a final deliverable

Real-life example: an Aerodrome Manual

Airport operators in Belgium are legally obliged to deliver set items of information to DGLV (the Belgian Civil Aviation Authority) in the form of a single document. This document, known as the Aerodrome Manual, must be updated and republished at least four times a year.

The approach outlined above has been used to publish twenty-one releases (Amendments) of the Aerodrome Manual for Brussels Airport: Area Experts delivered approved content to a technical author for publication, who worked with them to ensure that the final deliverable was easy to use, up to date and consistent.

DGLV representatives have praised the quality of the results, including the ease-of-use brought by delivering a single main file that gives access to all referenced items by means of hyperlinks. The Safety Management Unit, the point of contact between DGLV and the airport operators, concluded that using reliable documentation has a positive effect on day-to-day safety and on contingency planning, and supports effective training.

Proven efficiency

Other documents published on the basis of co-operation between Area Experts and technical author include:

- Safety Management System Manual (an important extension of the Aerodrome Manual)
- Traffic Rules Airside
- Bird Control Unit Handbook
- Safety Newsletter (six issues a year)
- CAD Guidelines and other reference documents for the Drawing Office
- user-guides, on-line helps and admin documentation for customised document management

The same software platform has also been used for publishing other airport documents, including the Operational Handbook, a number of SOP-SAF procedures, and versions of the Bijzondere Nood- en Interventieplan and the Mobilisatieplan Brandweer Brussels Airport.