



Where do I start? Assessing the need for change in documentation systems

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Introduction

Managers of product or service documentation are flooded with a regular flow of new technology and vendor offerings. How do you filter these inputs to determine what you really need when you start to review existing systems?

Unfortunately, the flow of information focussed on technology and tools can lead us to ask many of the wrong questions when we are faced with a need to change how we manage documentation. If we ask the wrong questions, it is no surprise that we may not obtain the result we really want.

This presentation provides a guide for documentation managers to assist them to ask the right questions and follow processes that will achieve the best solution to documentation system problems.

So, what is the problem?

Often, there is a particular issue that motivates a review of an existing system. For example:

- Software tools may be obsolete.
- The company may be moving into new markets and it is necessary to provide documentation in multiple languages.
- Another division may be complaining about delays in a product release because documentation is not ready.

In these cases, there is an imperative to change. These change points offer great opportunities to consider wider issues with documentation systems and make other changes.

In many other cases, someone questions the status quo and may discover other issues:

- Content cannot be published effectively in multiple outputs to meet user needs.

- Users cannot easily find the information they need so they call the support desk.
- Information is not accessible to users where they work, e.g. in remote locations where machinery must be serviced.
- Customers servicing equipment may use parts from third party suppliers because its hard for them to get details, prices and to order parts from your company.
- Customers may be unable to customize documentation to reflect changes to their procedures or to equipment specifications following refurbishment because the documentation is not available in a suitable format.
- There is excessive duplication of content across documents, making it difficult to maintain and update.
- Due to duplication, inconsistency or complexity of content, translation to other languages is excessively time consuming and expensive.
- When changes are made to corporate styles, output requirements or software systems, it may be necessary to re-format large volumes of content at very substantial cost.
- The costs of production and distribution of printed documentation may be excessive.
- Content authors waste time dealing with re-formatting and presentation issues that should be handled automatically.

Look at almost any documentation system and it is likely that more than a few of these problems are present. They result in lost opportunities, production delays, high content production costs and excessive support and training costs for many enterprises.

What would be the financial benefits to your organization if these problems could be removed?

A common but wrong place to start

In many organizations, documentation systems are seen as ancillary to core business functions. Senior management may not easily recognize the costs of outdated documentation practices or the opportunities to use documentation to improve customer satisfaction, drive sales in new markets and reduce training and support costs. Management may not readily allocate a high priority to documentation issues. It may take some clever work to get management attention and secure meaningful funding for a documentation project.

In this environment, documentation managers may attempt to find the quickest way to a solution based on a tiny available budget. The first step may be to approach vendors to find out what various tools can do and how much they cost.

Another approach is for internal developers to begin development of custom prototypes that may become working systems that solve just a few of the real problems.

The fundamental problem with these approaches is that they are based on the question: “What tool do I need?”. This is absolutely the wrong place to start. The real question is “What problems am I trying to solve or what business results am I trying to achieve?”

Tool searches and prototype developments can easily be based on searches for “features”. This leads to the issue of requests for information or proposals that are check lists of supposedly required features. Often there is barely a word about what the system is supposed to do and for whom or what problems are to be solved.

Unless the requirements are quite simple, there is a high risk with both approaches that the solution is not really aligned to the needs of the business. How will you ever get the funding to purchase the system you think you want unless its value is demonstrated to management?

How do you demonstrate to management the value of a proposed solution?

The right place to start

The solution is to take a more business focussed and structured approach to project planning from the outset.

Management support will be secured only if it can be demonstrated that improvements to documentation systems can save money and improve revenue. The mechanism for this is a business case.

A good business case can only be prepared after a lot of analysis, collaboration and research. It must align business understanding with a knowledge of relevant technology and product options to present a practical vision for change.

Unless the project is initiated by management, it will be necessary to gain management support even to incur the costs of the analysis, collaboration and research that will be required to develop a business case. You will need a business case for the business case development.

The first step to success is to develop a white paper or vision statement that will sell the need for change to management. The vision statement must:

- describe the problems and opportunities;
- outline a realistic solution; and
- describe the expected benefits.

Commonly, it will include a budget request to undertake the business case development. Development of the vision statement involves relatively little work and risk, compared to later tasks. If the vision statement is supported by management, the next step is to develop a formal business case.

The aim is to build up the project incrementally as you gather information and build support for change within the organization. It is not necessary to ask management to make big leaps of faith which they are unlikely to do. Instead, the initial steps should be modest and always based on clear objectives for what is to be achieved at each step of the process.

If management does not support the vision statement, you will not have lost credibility or wasted resources on ill-conceived product investigations or prototype development. More likely you will have gained some recognition and planted a seed that may germinate in the future when circumstances are more favourable.

Review customer service & identify opportunities

The key to understanding problems and opportunities needed for the vision statement and business case is to understand the users of the documentation. After all, why else is it created? Who needs documentation for your company's products or services?

Commonly, users include:

- marketing department and sales representatives;
- trainers;
- support desk;
- customer users;
- customer product maintenance personnel, software developers, product installers, etc.
- business partners such as product distributors and original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) who may need to customize the documentation or incorporate it with their own;
- regulatory agencies.

Does current documentation really give each of these groups what they need, in the form they need it and when they need it?

Is all this documentation produced in the most effective way?

It is not uncommon to find that, say, training documentation is prepared by a group that uses different software to the group that prepares the user manuals. In such cases, it is almost certain there is substantial overlap in this content.

It is possible that some users will have printed documentation and others may have only web access. Are these distinctions based on user needs or constraints imposed by the way the content is created, such as file formats that cannot conveniently be published to print or web outputs?

It is necessary to analyse existing processes and talk to the listed user groups to determine just which problems apply in each case. It may be useful to develop a simple

matrix of the current situation to understand the issues affecting each user group. From this it will be possible to develop business requirements for change and to see how the needs of different user groups are related.

The analysis of users and their needs will identify areas where existing services are deficient, either because there is something wrong with the existing documentation, its method of production or because user needs are not being addressed at all. These deficiencies are opportunities. They can be turned into positive statements of goals for the project. It is essential that the financial impact of these deficiencies is assessed to gain an understanding of their relevant importance in the project. The aim is to find substantial benefits that can be gained relatively quickly as well as those that will require greater effort.

The vision statement

After the initial user analysis, it should be possible to form a view whether there are substantial opportunities for cost savings or revenue gain that can be presented to management. The process for doing this is the vision statement.

The vision statement is the first step in a formal, incremental process. It is a pump priming or boot strapping exercise to initiate the project with management. Its purpose is to:

- define the problem and goals to reflect the shared understanding of all proponents of change;
- communicate the need for change and the goals to management and others who may need to be involved;
- demonstrate that there are potential material benefits that justify the expenditure of money and allocation of personnel on a deeper investigation.

The vision statement should be quite brief, probably less than 10 pages. It should describe:

- the current situation and the problems that exist with it;
- the opportunities that may be available to cut costs and improve revenue;
- a broad indication of the likely scale of the benefits that could be realized; and
- a possible strategy for achieving those benefits.

It is important to state opportunities in qualitative terms, such as “reduce translation costs by 40%”, or reduce the volume of content for a particular set of manuals with common components by 30%. Obviously, there must be a reasonable basis for making those assessments. Qualitative goals provide several important benefits:

- They define clear success measures for the project.

- They keep people focussed on the real objectives and can be used to test requirements along the way. Will a supposed requirement contribute to the goal? If not, that requirement can be left for another time.
- They provide the foundation to quantify benefits.

The vision statement should be accompanied by an estimate for the work that is envisaged to verify the strategy and develop a formal business case for the project.

The business case

Key components of the business case include:

- an analysis of the existing circumstances, problems and opportunities (already developed in the vision statement);
- a realistic description of how the opportunities can be realized (canvassed in the vision statement but expanded here);
- the projected financial benefits, covering expected revenue gains, cost reductions and future costs avoided;
- the projected costs of the proposed system;
- financial return and benefits realization;
- the risks and how they will be managed.

A good business case will involve considerable effort and research to understand the business requirements and define the architecture for a technical solution. It is not necessary to develop detailed technical requirements at this stage. That work will be undertaken only when the business case is approved.

It is very likely that the business case should involve analytical and technical input from external consultants who can advise on the options available.

Benefits

The benefits of this approach are substantial. Fundamentally, it is the only way to pursue a moderately complex project and have any confidence that the results will be aligned to real business needs. In particular:

- It is the best way to ensure that the correct level of funding is achieved.
- It ensures that the project should have support from the highest levels of management so that the project is not left in the doldrums or summarily terminated when someone asks “why are you doing this?” and you are unable to provide a business focussed answer.
- It will provide clear success measures for the project.

- It will let you plan the project and coordinate the involvement of different units within the organization.