The Looming Crisis of Content

By Hans Fenstermacher

"People hate change…. and that's because people hate change. … I want to be sure that you get my point. People really hate change. They really, really do."
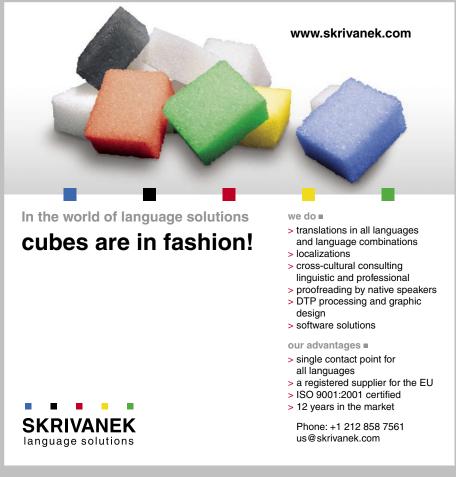
*– Steve McMenamin,
Atlantic Systems Guild*

Significant change, especially in organizations, doesn't happen because someone wakes up one day and suddenly decides to do things differently. Change comes as the result of a crisis that underscores a problem so dramatically and forcefully that it can no longer be ignored. Since the technology bubble burst half a decade ago (and probably even before that), such a crisis has been looming in the way we conceive of, create, and deliver content. Most notions about content are still rooted in old paradigms, but signs have increasingly pointed to significant shifts to come.

SIGNS OF A CRISIS

- **Cost-cutting**
  Anyone who's been in technical writing for more than a few years has been witness (victim?) to some dramatic cost-cutting measures. Remember technical editors? Gone. A vice president at one of the largest companies in the world once told me that he asked content development teams in one of his divisions why they no longer had editors. The doc manager told him, "Because no one knew what they did." Then there's the desktop publishing department. Page layout came in-house with much fanfare in the 1980s. Over the following decade it devolved to fewer and fewer "specialists" until nowadays writers are simply expected to integrate the function in their everyday work. Technology changes like XML may even make format and layout considerations completely obsolete. These cuts intensify the focus on writing and meaning, rather than process and delivery.

- **Offshoring**
  At the risk of stating the obvious, content is created by people. Since the tech bubble burst, many companies suddenly seem to have become aware of this fact. When cost-cutting measures failed to reduce content costs enough, companies went searching globally for solutions. And they found them in places like Bangalore and Mumbai, where technical writers are 50-80% cheaper. Global technology infrastructure has made the whole process of offshoring easy and affordable, too. But, U.S.-based tech writers lament, what about quality? Given the non-stop wave of offshoring, it seems that cost savings still outweigh any perceived "quality"

been under tremendous, increasing price pressure. Per-word pricing for most commercial language work has dropped by one-half or more. Costs for content-related services (like desktop publishing) have experienced similar pressures. Technology has facilitated this trend (and made it more palatable to service providers), but anyone who sells language services for a living will tell you that lower localization costs are still a top priority among customers. Why does this point to a looming crisis of content? Because as efficiencies and cost savings in localization (the back of end of the content cycle) are exhausted, companies are hunting further and further upstream for optimization opportunities. It is finally becoming obvious that the solution to content quality, cost, and time problems will be found in the content itself. (Those who have begun addressing this problem already know that it's much, much more difficult than squeezing costs out of localization.)

- **Volume creep**
In the old days, content announced itself with a resounding thud (17 manuals for the IBM Peanut? Impressive!). The digital era and the Internet have muted the thud factor, but volume grows unabated. In 2005, the CEO of a major enterprise software company mentioned documentation for the first time ever. Good news for writers? Hardly. He complained that there was too much of it and that the company was spending too much money translating it. A director of globalization at another major software company recently told of his company's volume crisis. The documentation set for one of their most popular products stood at 7,500 pages, and the writers expected the next release to need 12,000 pages (!). These companies are at the bleeding edge of volume creep, and the crisis they're staring down is not for the faint-hearted.

Caution: Inflection Points Ahead

Will we see a sudden content calamity at some point? I doubt it. Crises rarely occur at a single point in time, nor are they static. They tend to mutate with time and new influences. The crisis of content will probably manifest itself at different inflection points in different ways. Responses to the crisis will need to vary and may well depend on the success (or lack of it) that neighboring companies have in dealing with it. Here are some thoughts how responses to these inflection points may be shaped:

concessions companies may have had to make. Did quality become unimportant all of a sudden? No (at least no more than it ever was), but the perception appears to be that the quality from offshore labor is roughly equivalent to that of their erstwhile onshore counterparts. That's a bitter pill for tech writers to swallow and may indicate a trend to commoditize the way content is currently produced.

- **Productivity pressure**
Technical writers have come under increasing pressure to produce more content with fewer resources in less time. Writing teams have been reduced across the board and those that are left are expected to take up the slack. Most departments now have to make do with half the staff they once had. Full-time tech writing positions have become scarcer, too, with contract work the norm now, not the exception. This puts the emphasis on production, because the only way to get things done with fewer resources is to be more efficient. And efficiency invariably means technology, which has been allowed to define the content development process more. The result is a loss of focus on the value of content to the end-user.

- **Localization price pressure**
For years now, translation and localization have

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Creating what users want, not what writers like

Just as technologists like to develop, writers like to write. It's only natural. But that doesn't mean anybody wants what they produce. Content groups will have to develop content that is truly meaningful to end-users. They'll need to challenge formulaic notions of what content is (quick start, user's guide, on-line help, lather, rinse, repeat) and focus on why people are using the product to begin with. As Harvard's Ted Levitt observed in 1960, "People don't want quarter-inch drills; they want quarter-inch holes." The product authors are documenting isn't a product at all, but a way for end-users to solve their own "crisis" (and that is all they care about!).

Valuing substance over form

Not every possible screenshot in the software needs to be reproduced. Nobody on Earth (except the writers) will notice or care whether a stem sentence introduces each bulleted list. Templates and guidelines do not create usability; they may, in fact, diminish it. Writers will need to stop serving up content that is logical and satisfying for them to produce, but inconvenient and stultifying for the end-user to deal with. This means rethinking formats and deliverables to suit the information requirement, not the other way around (as is currently the case).

Keeping the information super-highway from becoming a landfill

Despite years (decades?) of warnings – even writers *themselves* say users never read the documentation – writers have continued to shovel information at an all-too suspecting public. Molly Ivins once said, "The first rule of holes: when you're in one, quit digging." Even if content developers can't climb out of their hole and make documentation truly usable overnight, they must at the very least stop piling up so much of it. With nearly every word, writers will have to choose whether the waste pile gets bigger or not.

Emphasizing results, not process

Technology is a set of tools used to deliver information to users. It shouldn't drive content decisions, but rather the other way around (just because a huge manual can be ported into on-line help doesn't mean it's the right thing to do). Documentation doesn't have to be comprehensive or preserve some internal logic; writers will have to come to terms with the fact that content only exists to support the user's objectives. People may need to learn something to reach those objectives, but learning is not what they *want* to do. People don't like to learn; they like to know. They like to "get it." The purpose of documentation is to enable users to get it. So, the documentation experience must be made painless, transparent, and brief. Our goal is for users to *have learned*, not for the content to have informed.

How will a crisis of content shape up in the next few years? It's hard to say. But it seems certain that many of us will have to give up our preconceived notions about content and establish new user-centric paradigms. Until the crisis of content becomes acute enough, though, users will continue to bear the brunt of information that often just plain doesn't work.

"A mobile phone needs a manual in the way that a teacup doesn't."

– Douglas Adams

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