Content Management—What Are the Real Cost Savings?

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Have you moved your organization to DITA and topic-based authoring? Have you made the big investment into a component content management system? Have you promised your senior management a Return on Investment based on your best business case analysis? If you answer yes to each of these questions, you have a serious obligation to demonstrate that the investment was worth making and that you are achieving the cost savings you promised.

In building a business case, most managers create a set of predictions about process changes that will result in cost savings and increased productivity. I’ve divided the most common predictions into four levels from reductions in desktop publishing and translation costs to improved content reuse across the enterprise.

**LEVEL ONE—REDUCING PUBLISHING COSTS**

Publishing costs include the costs of producing output in multiple deliverables from PDFs and help systems to mobile devices and custom delivery. They also include the cost of publishing in multiple languages. Desktop publishing costs, restructuring the translated content into the original desktop source, can often reach 50% of the cost of translation. Text in graphics that must be translated generates even higher costs.

If you have promised to reduce publishing costs by decreasing the amount of time your information developers spend on desktop publishing, avoiding multiple tools and people time to produce different deliverables, eliminating DTP translation costs, and automating the translation of text in graphics, you should be able to document the cost reductions. Of course, that also means that you know how much time and money you were spending on these activities before your move to content management.

Conveniently, these are the simplest costs to track and the easiest to show significant improvement very early in your implementation process. Even if your initial move to new editing tools and structured authoring techniques may require a staff learning curve, the more rapid decrease in time spent on publishing in every language should be more immediately apparent. However, it’s important to separately calculate the percentages of time for these activities in your business plan so that you can show the trend down (we hope) over time.

**LEVEL TWO—DEVELOPING A REUSE STRATEGY**

Many of the business cases I review focus on the elimination of duplicate content, especially when that content must be maintained in more than one location. However, creating a basic strategy for content reuse frequently requires process changes in addition to new tools. Too often, management naively believes that new tools only will improve practices but I find that is rarely the case. Achieving cost savings on basic content reuse requires a new information-development strategy.

A basic strategy should include storing standard content (frontmatter, hazard statements, standard instruction sets) in common and easily accessible files. Not only does this practice result in increased content consistency, but it also reduces translation costs significantly because the words in standard content need be translated only once. Not even good Translation Memory can give you this level of reuse and consistency.

Using the DITA standard provides several mechanisms for eliminating unnecessary duplication of content. Standard conditional publishing was part of the first DITA standard in 2005. Since then, especially with DITA 1.2, more advanced and capable mechanisms have become available to eliminate the problems caused by bulky conditional publishing.

I recommend developing master topics that contain or point to a host of variations, eliminate cut-and-paste, and reduce a proliferation of near duplicates.

**LEVEL THREE—EXPANDING YOUR STRATEGY**

Once you have basic reuse in place, you might consider expanding into best practices for authoring in topics, using a structured information model, and creating a collaborative authoring and planning environment. A comprehensive Information Model in which you record your decisions on not only implementing DITA XML elements but on authoring in a structured manner is essential. Without careful decisions in place, accompanied by templates and authoring guidelines, you open yourself to growing inconsistencies.

Your information strategy should also include the development of the Information Architect role. Development includes a solid job description and promotion criteria. An Information Architect should be responsible for updating the Information Model and authoring guidelines, training new...
writers and working to improve authoring throughout the team, researching customer requirements, and building better customer-focused solutions.

The Information Architect or a project management specialist might also become responsible for keeping track of author productivity. By tracking time to develop topics, developing a dependency calculator to account for content differences, and accounting for writer experience, you can chart your productivity improvements across time and project type. If you include measurements of word count reduction through minimalism and normalizing, you have material to report to senior management that shows how well you are managing your content management.

**LEVEL FOUR—IMPLEMENTING SOPHISTICATED PROCESS CHANGES**

Finally, I would urge organizations that have made strides in implementation to consider some next steps. Are you pursuing a vigorous minimalist agenda, which should include reducing content by focusing on real users needs and removing content that customers do not use? One major organization has a new directive in place for 2013 to reduce the number of topics on its information website by 50%. They argue that content that customers do not use or need makes finding valuable content all that more difficult.

Consider, in addition, monitoring review time. Reviewers are always a challenge, but have you considered reviewing source content once rather than the same content multiple times in your output? Do you have an automated review workflow in place? How about a review portal where reviewers can easily see one another's comments?

Some organizations have reported a reduction in litigation costs as a result of improved content management. Inconsistencies in content among deliverables can result in lawsuits. Eliminating the inconsistencies in content can yield benefits in surprising ways.

Don’t forget that measuring is critical in your ongoing communication with senior management. If they don’t know what you are achieving in increasing productivity and reducing costs, you won’t get their continued support. Measurements are critical in any business, including information development. Numbers are your business.