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Whitepaper

Why Exactly Do I Need
XML Based Documentation?

Introduction

XML-based technical documentation has been a topic of discussion for some time now. A recent study by the Aberdeen Group created quite a buzz when it highlighted that top performing documentation groups are more likely to use structured or XML-based documentation. However, despite the buzz, the value of XML-based documentation is not widely understood. And without a strong sense of XML benefits, inertia wins. The reality is that XML implementations are still rare in small to medium enterprises.

The focus of this paper is to introduce you to the key capabilities and benefits of XML-based documentation, and to help you decide whether it makes sense in your environment.

Key XML Capabilities

1. One Source for All Content

Reusing content or single sourcing has been the holy grail of content creation. But, reusing content with traditional desktop publishing systems requires copying and pasting, a process that ends up creating multiple copies of the content – thereby defeating the original purpose.

With XML-based documentation, content is not copied to the target document; rather, it is linked at the time of publishing. Everybody accesses the *same* content – dynamically. Content can now be developed and maintained only *once*.

2. Topic-based Content Design

To enable reuse, it is ideal to develop content in smaller chunks – even down to the topic level. But with traditional desktop publishing systems, combining these chunks into meaningful content is too cumbersome and impractical to pursue.

XML automates the process of mixing and matching the right chunks to produce the desired content. XML also offers several standardized architectures to structure the content for efficient use (e.g. DocBook and DITA). Only with XML does it become practical to develop and use content in small chunks.

3. Separation of Content from Template

Traditional desktop publishing systems do not distinguish between the tasks of developing a template and developing content. Authors often modify the template each time they develop content. But a constant tweaking of the template is very time consuming and causes inconsistencies in the look and feel.

XML-based documentation separates the tasks of template design and content creation.

4. Based on a World Wide Standard

XML is now a World Wide Web (W3C) standard. All major authoring tools can import and export XML content without any conversion.

5. Data about the Data

XML-based content allows you to have metadata, or additional information about your data. Although, metadata is not necessary to get started with XML, it becomes increasingly important, especially in larger implementations.

Business Benefits of XML-based Documentation

With this background about the capabilities of XML, let us look at the business benefits of XML-based documentation.

1. Cost Savings

XML provides significant cost savings in the following areas:
- With XML, content is developed and maintained once. Using XML's standards based structure and interfaces, this single source of content can easily be used in multiple documents using multiple tools. Implemented right, the savings due to this reuse are enormous.
- It is estimated that authors spend 20-50% of their time laying out pages and tweaking the template. With XML, this goes away - entirely. Authors can focus entirely on developing content, thereby improving productivity considerably.
- Topic-based or modular content is much cheaper and faster to translate and localize. Each topic or chunk has to be translated once – to be used in many documents. For updates, you only need to translate the topics that have changed.

By moving to XML documentation, Renault Trucks was able to cut the localization time for 14 of their documents, from two months to three weeks.

- Translators also benefit from the fact that XML allows for metadata that can be used to provide additional information about the content. For example, metadata could describe what to translate and what to leave out. Many companies have been able to make a case for XML-based documentation just on the basis of translations savings alone.

2. Faster to Market

- XML accelerates time-to-market. Content creation becomes 20-50% faster by eliminating the effort spent to lay out pages or tweak the template.
- By reusing previously developed content, final documentation can be published a lot quicker. Using metadata, you can identify chunks that are new or updated, and only these have to be proofread – thereby producing content faster.
- A recent case study from Siemens demonstrated how XML based documentation allowed them to increase content reuse tremendously. Without increasing any headcount, Siemens nearly quadrupled their document production from 200 per year using Microsoft Word, to 722 per year using XML.

3. Improved Quality, Consistency and Brand Image

- In XML authoring, everybody uses the same template – resulting in document consistency. This is critical in today's environment as content may be developed all around the globe.
- Using the same content source in all documentation eliminates possible inconsistencies and improves quality. Even the slightest inconsistencies and differences in content dilute the brand image – a problem that XML eliminates.

4. Improved Compliance and Scaling

- Many industries require strict compliance to document structures. This is critical in regulated industries such as government, aerospace and pharmaceuticals. Without a structured template, it is difficult to enforce consistency, especially if the content is generated by multiple people in multiple locations.
- Metadata about the content makes it easier and faster to search in a database. Metadata also provides for more precise searches such as User Data only or Administrator Data only etc.

5. Vendor and Tool Agnostic

Authoring tools and editors evolve and change over time. Many writers remember the pain of migrating from Word Perfect to Microsoft Word to FrameMaker and others. Converting from one to the other is costly, tedious and error prone.

As XML-based content is standards based, it does not have to be converted. XML-based content can be used "as is" by most tools today, and even more in the future. And, by having all your content in a standardized format, there is never a vendor or tool lock-in.

In Summary

XML-based documentation promises to revolutionize technical documentation. This is not just a move to a new tool, but an entirely new way of developing and maintaining content.

XML-based documentation requires a change in how writers develop content. Understandably, many writers find this move daunting. But the good news is that a migration to XML does not have to be one mammoth project. You can start with implementing a few capabilities that provide the most benefits for your business. For example, XML content may be developed with or without a topic-based architecture. And adding metadata is not necessary at start.

The following table correlates XML capabilities with the business benefits. Hopefully, it will help you in deciding which ones make the most sense for your business.

	Cost Savings	Faster to Market	Improved Quality	Improved Compliance & Scaling	Vendor & Tool Agnostic
One Source for All Content	√	√	√	√	
Topic-based Content	√	√			
Separation of Content from Template	√	√	√	√	√
Based on a World Wide Standard		√	√	√	√
Data about the Data	√	√		√	

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