Stuff or nonsense

by Bev Cline

Mapping tools make sense of the information explosion

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THE APPEAL OF a content management system (CMS) should be its ability to provide re-usable information easily managed from a database to a wide variety of media that encompasses paper, the Internet, Intranets and PDF files.

Yet according to Jim Purdy, vice-president of Communicare (**www.communicare.com**), a Toronto-based company that specializes in clear-written communication, 85 percent of all the content residing in an organization's content management system is unstructured.

As a result, the content is written in a way that makes finding specific information difficult to understand, as well as hard to locate within pages and pages of text. This lack of accessibility translates into wasted time and lost productivity.

For government organizations, the challenge is to deliver relevant information to users in the most time-efficient and accessible format. After all, by the nature of their mandate, each day governments provide pages and pages of text that need to be accessed quickly and accurately. Providing users with the ability to search and retrieve relevant information quickly is a priority.

According to Purdy, if a user is searching for the start date of a government program, for example, or needs to retrieve the name of the relevant procurement officer, then the goal is to be able to search and locate that material efficiently. He adds that if they are searching a policy manual, they need the ability to scan, skip and retrieve the required material.

Yet Purdy believes that for most government organizations, significant time is spent attempting to access the relevant information.

"Using unstructured content compares to wading through an impenetrable wall of words," he comments. "Not just by users who cannot take the time to search through pages of text, but also by the technology that cannot break the content down into a usable configuration."

When faced with unstructured content, he says, employees and end users cannot access the relevant information they need with the specificity they require to perform their jobs well or to put the information to good use.

Purdy's answer to this problem is Information Mapping® services, for which Communicare is the sole Canadian distributor.

"Information Mapping breaks content down into modules that are structured to be used rather than read," says Purdy. "It is not software and not a format. Rather, it is a way of thinking and communicating in which users approach content and content-users with a set of systematic principles and techniques to ensure that the content can be readily used."

Through Information Mapping, writers are able to break complex information into basic elements. The information is then presented in a graphical format that reflects the meaning back to the reader. The result is a set of precisely defined information modules consistent from writer to writer and document to document.

Government organization employees who deal with content management systems often asked these questions: Which information is most critical, that people use most frequently and need most often? How can access to this material and related material stay consistent throughout our CMS?

"No matter where they enter the system, Information Mapping modules take users directly to where they want to go and get them the information they need. It's a very direct way of thinking and organizing information," says Purdy. "That's the value of this methodology."

On a practical level, Hydro One has chosen Communicare's Information Mapping methodology as an answer to its need to allow easy access of information.

"One of Hydro One's business objectives is to ensure that work procedures are in place to meet all regulatory, corporate, business and worker needs," says Tony Fritsch of Work Methods and Training, Hydro One Networks Inc., in Orangeville, Ontario. "It is of fundamental importance that these procedures be structured and written to enable easy access to and use by supervisors and workers.

"We have several thousand procedural-type documents in place to support our workers, and it is important to me that the staff developing and managing these documents have the knowledge and skills to develop them properly," he continues. "The use of best practice techniques and methodologies, such as Information Mapping, are essential to accomplish this goal." ∧∧∧

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