



QUARDEV

Integrated Software Solutions

Quardev Monthly

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Welcome!

Welcome to the Quardev Monthly - the new version of our newsletter, now published monthly instead of quarterly. We look forward to sharing insights and helpful information in the areas where we know a thing or two - testing, quality assurance, technical writing and documentation, project management, and consulting.

This month we are highlighting Technical writing—with an article by Shelly Dillon about flexibility in using the right amount of process in technical communication projects.

Enjoy the newsletter with our compliments and please contact us with questions, comments, or article ideas.

-The Quardev Crew!!

Flexibility:

The first requirement in producing valuable technical content

Shelly Dillon, Manager of Technical Communication Division, Quardev, Inc.

You know the drill; you just found out this morning that a release of a new module for one of the company's software products happened - last night. If you really hurry, you can get some quick help topics in for the next patch build.

Meanwhile, you are simultaneously:

- creating a web-based help system for a new product the company is releasing in a week
- maintaining the online help systems for two in-house software products
- producing articles for the corporate Intranet
- proofreading documents and answering Word questions for colleagues
- creating a web-based tutorial for the corporate Web site

You don't complain - too much. It's the nature of our industry; but if you are a lone writer or even part of a team working for a company who releases multiple products and/or implements software for multiple clients, there's a good chance you're intimately acquainted with this scenario. This was once my world - working at one company but supporting multiple development teams and my colleagues as best I could as the only writer. And I loved it - every day was a new adventure.

Managing a workload like this raises the question: how do we incorporate process without getting bogged down in the planning? How much process is essential versus beneficial? Does it mean that we are producing poor documentation if we don't follow specific processes with accompanying documentation each step of the way? I certainly don't have all the answers to these questions, but I do have a

(Continued on page 2)



QUARDEV

Flexibility, Continued

(Continued from page 1)

few thoughts on the matter and have tried many techniques to work toward becoming more effective at my job.

Applying processes to constantly moving pieces

It can be difficult to convince project stakeholders of the need for some heads-up time to deliver help with an application, let alone try to convince them that you need time to create a formal documentation plan. To counteract this, it may be helpful to have some tools and tricks in your arsenal to help you jump in quickly. These can be templates that streamline the information gathering process, defined communication channels, and key supporters who you can turn to for help with various tasks or projects.

Templates: you can create basic templates that you'll reuse over and over on various projects that ensure you have covered all of the information you need to be successful. Depending on the types of documentation you produce you may want a small documentation plan template that gets right to the meat of the information you need and a checklist that details all of the steps you need to cover in the project. Additionally it may be helpful to have information on your audience as well as stakeholder and team member details.

At minimum, a documentation plan template can be very useful - this template can be used to ensure you ask the right questions and can serve as the basis for decision-making and writing. Additionally, you can use the document as a living document that changes with the flow of the project. This gives you a historical view of each project and the ability to see what worked well and what should be modified.

Defined communication channels: as a writer we have lots of questions and having quick access to the people who can efficiently answer questions is essential to the success of a project. I've found that it's best to have this information from the beginning, find out how

much information and detail the project stakeholders would like and then to communicate clearly and efficiently. Setting expectations and following through with clear communication is the best way to earn trust, add value, and ensure the project's success.

Key supporters and teammates: are there colleagues or co-workers who may be able to assist you? For example, I love to research and write but I sometimes look to others for help when there is a need for specialty graphic work or building javascripts.

Ultimately the job of a technical communicator is to provide the best documentation for our clients in the most cost effective way possible. So what is the best way deliver on this? Currently I have the luxury of a large pool of colleagues and proven resources that I can call on for specific projects or just advice – which has taken a long time to build; however, even though I was a lone writer at my previous company, I wasn't alone – I recruited help from my colleagues around me.

Conclusion

In the past I didn't have the luxury of working on one thing at a time and I still don't. I've since moved on from my lone writer job to running the technical communication division in my own company. Now, not only do I handle multiple projects, but I also have multiple clients and multiple procedures and work styles to manage. I need to ensure our team meets the requirements for each client's projects – this is where learning how much process you really need can help you. Incorporating the right amount of process for your writing scenario can go a long way in ensuring you are working smart and producing valuable documentation in an efficient way.