

How Documentation Specialists Can Help the **BOTTOM LINE:**



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Five Things Management Should Consider When Restructuring

In today's economy, some businesses are restructuring in order to stay afloat. They must decide if they can maintain a satisfactory productivity level with fewer employees, and how to do so if necessary. Restructuring also might include revisions to internal processes to improve areas such as time management, production output, and defect/error levels; as with any company and any process, there is always room for improvement. When management determines that a process is ineffective, they may need to analyze, modify, and implement changes to the company structure as a whole.

This article presents ways in which management might consider using documentation specialists when restructuring internal processes. The parts of the product development process that are presented are based on five specific areas:

- project and time management
- content and/or enterprise management
- user analysis
- design specifications
- usability testing

Documentation specialists have experience and training in these areas. Companies should not overlook a valuable resource already present in the

organization when making large- or small-scale changes.

Project and Time Management

Many documentation specialists are used to managing multiple projects at a time. They typically have to track project time at a granular (individual task) level, often using a program such as Microsoft Project. In many cases, a company could benefit from other departments using this same program. Statistics can be quickly compiled among departments when everyone is working with the same program and using a similar tracking structure. This can save time when collecting data and determining product release dates. It also can help avoid mistakes from or confusion between departments that use different units of measurement or tracking methods.

One thing we have learned, however, from studies conducted by others in the field and from our own experience, is that a company can track too granularly. The process of gathering too many statistics typically only achieves wasted time. If you gather granular statistics with a few failed projects (missed deadlines, features pulled out to meet the deadline, quality loss, etc.) and you continue with the same tracking methods, then the statistics either did nothing to improve the

process as a whole or they were not used effectively to improve the process. It's important to determine if the statistics you gathered were used in the best possible way or if the information wasn't useful at all. Once this analysis is complete, you can modify the type of statistics to be gathered for upcoming projects and repeat these steps until you have an effective tracking process in place.

Because documentation specialists have project and time management experience and tracking skills, they can assist in setting up a company-wide tracking system to decrease time for project and product managers. Saving time means that management not only receives up-to-date and accurate information quicker, but it also allows additional tasks to be completed by existing personnel. Managers then can focus on moving forward instead of tracking the past.

Content and Enterprise Management

By definition, content management is an established system designed to manage content within a specific area (i.e., website, documentation). Enterprise management goes a step further in that it is used to manage content within an entire company. Implementing this type of management system in your company can increase your bottom line.

If you gain buy-in from all departments to apply a new system, productivity will increase, time spent tracking projects will decrease, and overall success will follow. Here are just a few benefits of moving to a content and/or enterprise management system:

- Easier to keep internal and external documents current and consistent.
- Allows single-sourcing of content among departments and/or projects.
- Ensures that everyone is viewing the same, most-recent version of any company content.

Shifting your company to a content or enterprise management system takes effective planning and time to incorporate; however, the benefits gained far offset the effort and time required to implement the system. Your documentation team can assist with organizing content, setting up the structure, documenting processes, and designing a company intranet or other centrally located method of communication.

User Analysis

One of the first things any good documentation specialist considers before developing or revising an information product is the audience. Because of this, the documentation team can lend insight into the process of effectively analyzing your end users. If you do not have a clear and defined understanding of your end users, you might lose time developing undesired products or features. Or, you might develop a product that is far from user-friendly.

For example, say you develop software for the retail market. Your primary users are the salesperson on the floor and management. In this case, if you focused solely on the salesperson, you might overlook key reporting features that are vital to effective management decisions. Alternately, if you focus too much on management's needs, you might develop a product that decreases the salesperson's productivity due to poor design. Each audience has different needs from the same product and, in order for the product to be successful, the needs of both groups must be met.

Not only can you take advantage of

audience analysis skills to help you pinpoint the needs of your end users, but you also can use them to ensure your internal content management system is set up in the most effective way. If you are implementing a new system or revamping an existing one, determining the needs of the departments that access the content can help create the most effective system. Get your documentation team involved in setting up outlines or templates for user analysis. After all, they do this nearly every day.

Design Specifications

Your documentation team is trained to write clear and concise content for their readers. What better place to make sure the content is clear than in your product specifications? Not only can the writers develop effective, user-friendly specification templates, they also can lend assistance with the design process.

As previously mentioned, documentation specialists are familiar with analyzing end users. Developing specifications requires creating a design that is conducive to different end users at different times in the development process. For example, the programmers, software quality team, and documentation team all need certain information from the specifications and use them at different, and sometimes overlapping, times throughout the product lifecycle.

Technical writers are also trained in visual design that is aesthetically pleasing, user-friendly, and functional. Let your documentation team review the product specifications from the users' perspective, and allow them to take part in the overall design. Get their opinions and insight into the visual effectiveness of your document(s). In reviewing the content, they can help resolve inconsistencies, unclear language, and ineffective design choices. It's especially important that everyone understands the specifications the same way and that there is no confusion about how a feature is supposed to function.

Usability Testing

Another part of the product development process to which your documentation team can contribute is usability

testing. Usability testing is important in ensuring the success of many businesses. If a business continually produces faulty products, they won't be in business long. Usability testing can help prevent this by testing the product with end users before it's released to the public. Conducting small-scale testing throughout the development process can save you big headaches at the end, or even worse, after the release.

Because many documentation specialists have training and/or experience in usability testing, they can be a great internal resource. They can effectively develop the usability testing materials and facilitate or assist during the tests. Because they understand the end user, they can provide details as to how to test the product and what to have participants do during the tests. Documentation specialists also can compile the raw data gained from the tests into a comprehensive report.

Conclusion

In the end, the primary concern of a company that is restructuring is improving the bottom line. From the five areas addressed in this article, you can see how your internal resources can prove beneficial during this restructuring process. After all, whether your company needs to make changes in order to stay in business or is looking to improve its earnings, the more you can accomplish in-house, the less money flows outside the company. When you are looking to restructure your development process, meet with your documentation team before you hire costly individuals to assist you. You might be pleasantly surprised at the valuable resources you already have on-site. 📍

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