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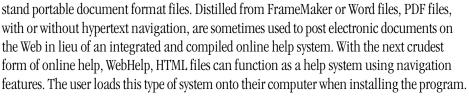
Is Help Online?

John Dibs, NorthBay News Editor

At our May meeting, Gary Farrell of Agilent Technologies in Santa Rosa presented some thoughts on help systems in general and demonstrated his online help expertise.

Sophisticated Help

Gary began by characterizing the different help systems in use. At the lowest rung of the sophistication ladder



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This poor guy looks like he

needs some help...fast!

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President's Column

By Kurt Huget, President

As most of you know, officer elections were held at our March chapter meeting. Once again, we proved that democracy works. There was an orderly transfer of power, with no soft money involved, no Supreme Court intervention, and no revolution in the streets. Just what you'd expect from a gathering of levelheaded technical communicators.

With the final vote count tabulated, I am honored to have been selected and confirmed as chapter president by my peers. I look forward to fulfilling my duties with dignity, and I will approach this as a learning experience: an opportunity to learn more about my profession, my fellow STC members, and myself.

I follow in the footsteps of John Dibs, his predecessors, and their exemplary work. John did a grand job as president, with many notable accomplishments, such as his work shepherding along the STC grant proposal to develop a local technical communications curriculum.

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STC Mission Statement

The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

This Month's Meeting

Thursday, June 21, 2001

InfoPros Presents Writing for the Web

Presenters: Caroline Drakeley and Anne Marie Smith

Communicating in the world of hypertext successfully so that your message is read and understood requires applying specific online information principles and using effective, proven techniques. In this session, attendees will gain the knowledge and techniques necessary to write effectively for a computer-based hypertext medium. Specifically, the attendee learns how to do the following:

- Adjust writing styles from linear to modular
- Group and nest information so the reader doesn't get "lost in hyperspace"
- Structure information for quick lookup
- Layer information for different user levels
- Label information effectively for easy access
- Say more with fewer words and in less space

Anne Marie Smith and Caroline Drakeley, are President and Chief Executive Officer, respectively, of InfoPros, a Sacramento-based technical communication firm they began in 1995. InfoPros offers a range of technology-related services, including Web site design and content development, information architecture consulting, site usability analysis and testing, technical documentation, and instructional and multimedia development. InfoPros, which currently has 45 employees, has been listed as one of the fastest 100 growing companies in Sacramento by a local business newspaper for the past two years.

Smith (B.A., Communications) has been in the technical communication field since 1984. Drakeley (B.A., M.B.A.) has over sixteen years experience in the publishing, marketing, and technical communication arenas. Drakeley and Smith are also instructors in the CSU, Sacramento Technical Writing, Train-the-Trainer, and E-business certificate programs. They frequently speak at both national- and local-level conferences in the area of online communication, marketing, and e-business.

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Meeting Schedule

Location:Parker Compumotor, 5500 Labath Dr., Rohnert ParkTime:5:30 - 6:30Networking and Refreshments6:30 - 8:15Introductions and Program8:15 - 8:30More Conversation, Idea Swapping

Is Help Online?

Continued from page 1

Macromedia Dreamweaver is an example of an application utilizing WebHelp. Still, WebHelp systems can be cumbersome.

Next in order of sophistication comes WinHelp, the most popular form of online help for many years. WinHelp presents a familiar help application pane with the help topic on the right and contents, search, and index tabs along the left. Gary pointed out the annotate feature in WinHelp, something not yet available in HTML help. WinHelp2000 from eHelp, the developer of RoboHELP, offers a new flavor of WinHelp, but requires a rather large roboex.dll file in order to operate.

Finally comes Microsoft HTML help, the star of Gary's show. HTML help has a look and feel similar to a browser, with navigation buttons along the top. Contents, index, and search tabs, as well as optional glossary and favorites tabs, can be used for navigation.

Stored on each of our personal computers are scores of help systems.

The In-Nerds of Help

Stored on each of our personal computers are scores of help systems. To view the help files in Windows, view a list the files on the c:/windows/help directory. Compiled WinHelp files have .hlp file extensions and HTML help files have .chm extensions. Since all the contents and features of an HTML online help system are contained in

its .chm file, you can place these files on the Web, e-mail them to a friend, or distribute them through just about any means.

At the heart of HTML help files lies the hhctrl.ocx ActiveX Control. In order to view .chm files you need the hh.exe file on your computer, along with Microsoft Internet Explorer. In addition, an .hhp file (analogous to the .mpj file in WinHelp systems) keeps track of the innards of your project, such as the links. For more information, Gary pointed us to Microsoft.com/ms.htm and suggested we



search for "HTML Help."
HTML help does have some limitations.
For example, HTML help doesn't support all the secondary window features that
WinHelp supports. Also, it does not provide a method for forcing help topics to display at the top of the user's screen.

Two Ways to Help

RoboHTML too expensive? Try downloading HTML Help Workshop, a free application, from Microsoft's Web site for developing your online help. There's no WYSIWYG editor, but you can use an HTML editor (many of these are free) for shaping up the help topics. Existing HTML files can be added and all links will be compiled. All the features of RoboHELP can be reproduced using this free tool, since HTML Help Workshop uses the same hhctrl.ocx file.

So why purchase RoboHELP? As Gary explained, the values are four:

- Reports can be generated for broken links, images, and style sheets used in the help project.
- · RoboHELP includes wizards for the index and glossary.
- · A good HTML editor is included with the product.
- Various help outputs can be generated, such as WebHelp and print versions of your help system.

To complete the picture, such systems as JavaHelp and OracleHelp also deliver online content. JavaHelp, an online help application, is also free from Sun Microsystems, or Java-based help files can be generated from eHelp's RoboHELP product.

What is DHTML?
Surprisingly, it's not a separate markup language.

Bells and Whistles Using DHTML

What is DHTML? Surprisingly, it's not a separate markup language. Rather, it's a method of using JavaScript or Visual Basic Script programming to manipulate HTML

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or cascading style sheet elements. As one member of the audience succinctly put it, DHTML is the "knowledge of how to use JavaScript or VB Script within HTML."

DHTML performs the following feats:

- · Image swapping
- · Text mouseover
- · Fly-in effects
- · Glow effects
- · Popup windows

JavaScript can either be embedded into the HTML code, or be set off in a js file (eHelp's method).

Gary explained that almost all DHTML uses JavaScript, whereas early in his online help career, he chose to use Visual Basic Script, only quickly to discover that no one else was using it. RoboHelp has a built-in an interface for implementing DHTML, so help authors do not necessarily need to know JavaScript in order to take advantage of DHTML.

Demonstrated Help

At the end of the presentation Gary demonstrated an online help system that he has worked on over the course of the past three years. The system employs DHTML and .gif images to create menu options for navigating within the product's help system. Image swapping during mouseover substitutes an image of a button with a button having an outline giving the visual effect of the mouse selecting the button. Behind the scenes, JavaScript is swapping one image for another. Gary explained that JavaScript can either be embedded into the

HTML code, or be set off in a js file (eHelp's method). Help authors can even use NotePad to edit the HTML files.

Gary showed his online help version of topic tabs, the code for which he borrowed from an HP site. Clicking on the tab brings up the specified topic. Another feature in Gary's help system was the use of an animated .gif file of an arrow that displays in the lower right corner of the screen, next to a scroll bar. The arrow remains in the same location on the help window independent of the user's vertical scrolling and allows a quick way to navigate to the top of the help topic.



Most help systems work a little bit better than this.

In closing, Gary fielded some questions about his approach to creating Agilent's online help system. He indicated that writing took most of the effort, while fitting the content into a style sheet for consistency took relatively less effort. In order to come up with content, Gary used

existing documents and adapted them for online use. For online help content, brevity was the rule. Sentences were made to the point, with no fluff or hype. Another convention was to include a brief overview or bullet list of the help topic at the top of the help window to give users a clear idea of what's covered.

With embedded
belp, help content is
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rather, it is part of
the user interface.

Gary's final comments included praise for the online help included in products such as Microsoft Money, where the help content is integrated into the application. His comments underscored the conclusion of Andrea Ames in her presentation last year on embedded help systems.

With embedded help, help content is not a separate application launched from product software; rather, it is part of the user interface. This seems to be the cream of the help system crop when it comes to usability. With embedded help, the application itself, and not a help component, guides the user through task-oriented steps and troubleshoots along the way.



Heavy XMetaL

John Dibs, NorthBay News Editor Barbara Herbert, NorthBay Chapter

If you missed our April chapter meeting, you missed a demonstration of XMetaL and a discussion about extensible markup language (XML) given by SoftQuad Software's representative Jay Di Silvestri. Jay joined us along with Janis Peterson of SoftQuad for this presentation. Attendees received SoftQuad coffee mugs, a nice marketing flyer on XMetaL, and coupons good for \$100 off the XMetaL list price.

Some may remember the somewhat exhaustive presentation on XML given by Berkeley STC chapter president Sarah Lee

XML applications are best implemented after a thorough analysis of company information usage patterns.

Hauslinger a while back. Jay kept the discussion of this extensive topic down to an hour.

Based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, SoftQuad Software also keeps a strategic presence in Petaluma. SoftQuad lays claim to an early involvement in the adoption of the XML 1.0 standard by the WC3 (World Wide Web Consortium). SoftOuad is also the developer of HoTMetaL, an HTML authoring tool popular among Web developers.



Who's into XMetaL?

As Jay explained, XML applications are best implemented after a thorough analysis of company information usage patterns, an analysis that SoftOuad, not surprisingly, provides as one of its XML solution services. For companies who have migrated to XML, XMetaL functions as a front-end interface for managing XML content.

For those of us not experienced with using XML-based content for documentation purposes, XMetaL looked both familiar and futuristic at the same time. Touted by SoftQuad as the "premier enabling technology for XML-based content applications in electronic publishing, ecommerce, and knowledge management," Jay explained that with XmetaL, "structured XML documents are created with the ease of using of word processor."

Using XMetaL, content from other applications such as Word or Excel can be pasted directly into the XML document. Jay indicated that with some work, data can be linked to the original file so that updates to the source file would automatically be reflected in the XMetaL XML file. From XML, documents can be formatted for either browser viewing or portable document format (PDF) using an extensible style sheet (XSL).

Element and attribute relationships are critical to a well-formed XML document. and XMetaLincludes several features for managing these rules. Jay demonstrated how XMetaL can streamline content creation with a customizable drop down list of allowable metadata labels that enforce the rules of your XML document. Another example of XMetaL's versatility is its ability to change the attribute order in ordered lists from Arabic numbers to alphanumeric and vice versa by using an ORDR attribute as a sort criterion. The demonstration showed XML content in both WYSIWYG view and XML view.

> Element and attribute relationships are critical to a wellformed XML document, and XMetaL includes several features for managing these rules.

Jay also demonstrated Resource Manager, which he described as the most powerful feature in XMetaL. With this utility, users can drag and drop files, URLs, and images from other locations or from the Internet directly into an XMetaL document. In addition, when content reuse is called for, material from an XML document (such as warning messages) can be placed in a common area for reuse.

Jay explained how XMetaL works as an

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interface with content management systems (CMS) such as Documentum. CMS workflow tasks, such as checking a document in, can be incorporated into XMetaL.



Single-sourcing lets us put one thing in...

XML Basics

After whetting our appetite with a new authoring tool, Jay moved into a discussion about XML. A common approach to understanding XML is comparing it to HTML. HTML tag names have specific format-related meanings, and it isn't possible to create custom tags.

With XML, data
becomes selfdescribing by
reference to its tag
name, which
describes what the
information is, not
how to style it or
bow to process it.

By contrast, XML tag names serve as labels for data rather than for formats and can be customized to fit the needs of the content. With XML, data becomes self-describing by reference to its tag name, which describes what the information is, not how to style it or how to process it.

XML enables the creation of a deeper structure for the information and makes possible feats such as content reuse and document portability among multiple vendors.

In short, HTML tags make information intelligible by computer applications (such as browsers), whereas XML tags make information intelligible by humans as well as by computer applications. XML enables the creation of a deeper structure for the information and makes possible feats such as content reuse and document portability among multiple vendors.

In response to a question from the audience about when to develop a DTD, or document type definition, Jay described SoftQuad's approach. Rather than start with the DTD, an XML conversion project results in a DTD that conforms to the business requirements of the client. As Jay conveyed, during consulting projects, SoftQuad must often overcome the assumption that a DTD is required upfront in the conversion process. (A DTD defines the structure of an XML document.)

Another question came up about whether it's best for clients to develop their own DTD or use one already developed, such as DocBook. SoftQuad characterizes DocBook as being tailored to software



...and get many things back!

documentation, having lots of elements and resources, and requiring training in order to use effectively. According to Jay it is cheaper to develop your own DTD, then implement the required XSLTs for conversion to output formats such as HTML or PDF. XMetaL version 2.1 doesn't currently support XML schemas, which also have yet to be added to the XML standard by the WC3.

SoftQuad's Process

SoftQuad's approach to XML conversion projects starts with the people who will create the content. As Jay explained, "a lot depends on authors, and how receptive they will be to structured writing." For example, what

Rather than design the most complex system, it's better to start simple.

authoring software do they currently use, and how consistently do they apply tags or styles? The concept of *granularity* is

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important. As Jay explained, more metadata means more work, whereas "a simple data model means that authors don't need to know XML" in order to do their job. Rather than design the most complex system, it's better to start simple and revisit the need for granularity six months after implementation.

After the people angle, SoftQuad next looks at system considerations, such as which content management system the client uses and how the documentation will be output. A well-developed CMS aids in content repurposing and the data model in place can be leveraged to meet the client's needs. Print output can take the form of PDF or FOP (formatting objects processor), postscript, or older FOSI/DSSL standards. In addition, clients must consider issues such as whether the data model is proprietary and whether information needs to be archived.

Finally, design matters are hammered out. The design of any XML application must reflect the people and system analysis conducted earlier. To arrive at a well-developed DTD or XML schema, the process of "design, test, and iterate" must be followed. If information is overly complex, clients must work through the causes for the complexity to determine whether the complexity can be justified.

Data Structure

Jay presented some basic concepts about information hierarchy. Critical to any XML application, information hierarchy defines the relationships or rules for managing the enterprise knowledge. Word processing files are flat, meaning that they possess no information hierarchy, whereas relational databases can contain a complex hierarchical structure. Jay warned that the richer the hierarchy, the greater will be the resources required to maintain the content, and the more complex the data model, the slower will be the XML conversion process.

The rewards for conversion to an XML application can be tremendous. For a set of technical manuals for cars, for example, much of the content will be the same, while some of the content will vary by model, by year, and by options. The documentation can be structured using XML so that repair steps will be linked to the actual symptoms, to the actual car in question, and to the appropriate parts lists for the identified model and year.

While brief and focused, SoftQuad's presentation helped demystify some of the issues surrounding XML. Jay's explanations increased our familiarity with the issues involved in implementing an XML application and the benefits of using XMetaL as an authoring tool for managing XML content. For more information about their products and services, visit their web site at www.softquad.com.



President's Column

Continued from page 1

presidential duties with aplomb (now there's a word that you'll probably never get to use in a technical document!).

Our chapter continues to grow in number and in spirit, reflecting both the continued need for qualified technical communicators among North Bay companies, and the enthusiasm of the new converts to our profession. I am particularly impressed with those individuals among us who came to our meetings to research the possibility of making a career change, liked what they heard and saw, and then took the brave steps to gain the necessary technical communication skills to make the change.

I like to think that our chapter meetings have been inspirational to these folks,

professionally, creatively, and socially. I recall my first visits to the North Bay chapter meetings, and the insights gained and new friends made. There is an esprit de corps among our group that I highly value and look forward to joining in every month.

Much credit also goes to our local academic and vocational institutions (including Sonoma State University, Santa Rosa Junior College, and the Tech Academy in Petaluma) for ramping up their technical communication course programs to meet local needs and better serve our chapter members.

In closing, I'd like to congratulate chapter member Kate Samsa for attaining the noble rank of STC Senior Member.



Writing for the Web

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ASI Golden Gate Chapter's 18th Annual Conference

Sylvia Coates, Karin Arrigoni, and Chris Ronhausen, ASI Golden Gate Chapter

On April 28, the Golden Gate Chapter of the American Society of Indexers held its annual Spring Conference at Fort Mason in San Francisco. Approximately 30 participants saw demonstrations of three voice recognition (VR) programs—ViaVoice, VoiceXpress, and Dragon—and how they are used with the three high-end indexing programs—CINDEX, Sky Index, and Macrex—, as well as with Microsoft Word.



You don't need to worry about these dragons...

CINDEX

http://www.indexres.com

Frances Lennie introduced CINDEX and demonstrated ViaVoice. CINDEX operates on either Windows or Macintosh platform.

According to Frances, the pros of using voice recognition software include alleviating shoulder, wrist, and neck strain; increasing productivity; and leaving hands free for other tasks. The cons include voice and throat strain, the need to speak very slowly; misunderstood or misspoken words; the need for "keyed" editing; and interference from background noise.

ViaVoice

http://www.comdex.com

Frances demonstrated the Millennium edition of ViaVoice, which sells for about \$80 or \$130 for an enhanced version. Unfortunately the enhanced version only works with Microsoft applications such as Word and Excel. The enhanced version can be used with CINDEX by dictating into the software's own word processor, SpeakPad.

ViaVoice has some shortcomings, including persistent insertion of spaces between characters, bolding of characters, and complex training of macros. ViaVoice requires both a major investment of time for voice training and upgraded computer equipment.

Dragon with Cindex

Many CINDEX users prefer Dragon
Naturally Speaking. Using Dragon, users
can dictate directly into CINDEX, or, as
many CINDEX users prefer, speak into
Dragon's own word processor—essentially
preparing a CINDEX data file—and then
import the file into CINDEX. The
advantage to importing a file into CINDEX
is that fewer instructions need to be
spoken, which speeds up the dictation
process. Editing can be done by voice but is
not recommended due to difficulties with
cursor placement.

Alternatives to VR Software

Though some indexers successfully use it, for many indexers VR software is not a viable option. As an alternative to using VR

software, Frances suggested training a typist to enter marked-up entries or exploring ergonomic workstation equipment.

Sky Index

http://www.sky-software.com

Kamm Schreiner of Sky Index announced the new Sky Index 6.0 version (available in June) and gave a demonstration of some of the new features, including the following:

- 1. Ability to preview the index
- 2. Un-deleting deleted records
- 3. Time stamping
- 4. Tracking of multiple indexers' work on an index



...with the right wizard, they'll fulfill your merest whim.

VoiceXpress

http://www.lhsl.com

Kamm demonstrated VoiceXpress 5.0 Standard Edition with Sky Index. While

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VoiceXpress was easy to install, the program was unable to automatically adjust the microphone recording level on the notebook computer Kamm was using.

Kamm shared some of the same frustrations with VR software expressed by Frances. He was particularly frustrated with having to repeat words with different inflections and varied tones of voice several times before obtaining the desired result. Even after repeated efforts, the program would frequently misinterpret the word and require physically keving in the edits.

For Kamm, VoiceXpress's features are very good for the price. VoiceXpress allows the creation of personalized commands, which can help reduce the speaking required for some of the voice recognition tasks. Still, Kamm was not able to create commands containing certain keyboard keys such as Ctrl and Alt, and his overall observation was that using VoiceXpress would simply cost the average indexer too much time to be cost effective.

Dragon with Sky

Kamm acknowledged that many Sky users employ Dragon Naturally Speaking for voice recognition. Kamm pointed out that VR programs require large amounts of memory to run; Dragon in particular requires 256 MB. In addition, successful transmission depends on the quality of the sound card installed in the user's computer.

Dragon Naturally Speaking

http://www.dragonsys.com

Ron Katuranis explained that Dragon's parent company, L&H, is currently experiencing some legal and financial difficulties. Unfortunately, no one is really able to predict how these problems may affect the availability of Dragon in the future. Ron demonstrated Dragon using Microsoft Word.

There were several apparent differences between Dragon and the other VR programs we had seen demonstrated earlier. Dragon did not become confused by other voices and so background noise isn't as much of a factor as with the other programs. And Dragon has some sophisticated scripting and macro capabilities but will only work with a limited number of word processing programs. Also, Dragon seemed to work very slowly with Word; a moderately adequate typist could input at a faster pace.

Macrex

http://www.macrex.com

Gale Rhoades presented the latest version of Macrex. A Windows application, Macrex has maintained a DOS-type interface. Rhoades demonstrated Macrex's extensive macro capabilities.

Macrex with Dragon

Gale reviewed her experience with indexers using Dragon with Macrex. Some Macrex users have successfully worked with Dragon since 1995. Dragon can be used directly with Macrex.

Gale discussed the advantages for an indexer of working with Dragon. Dragon is particularly good for embedded indexing. Dragon makes it easy to use macros to track the embedded codes throughout the index. In addition, Dragon can speed up the time spent entering entries for a slow typist. In contrast to Word, Dragon worked at a rather fast pace with Macrex. Gale did stress, like Kamm, that a good sound card and microphone are essential for an efficient indexing process.

Dragon does require some voice training in order to become efficient. Gale demonstrated how to begin voice training with Dragon and she input a number of entries during the presentation. It was

evident that the entry input had the potential of being very efficient.

Pros and Cons of Dragon

Gale cautioned that while VR programs are not for everyone, they are certainly viable for some indexers. Of all the VR programs, Dragon seems to be the most accurate and easiest to train. There are fewer problems with background noises. While in general indexers should take breaks from the computer at least every hour, when using Dragon, getting up every 20 to 30 minutes is recommended. It appears that using Dragon can be physically demanding even though it does protect the hands from additional stress. And while entering entries may go faster with Dragon, particularly for the slower typist, there is additional time spent editing the index for any misunderstood entries.

Conference Summary

The conference closed with a panel discussion with Frances, Kamm, and Gale. For anyone interested in VR programs, this conference was well worth their time. Frances Lennie, Kamm Schreiner, and Gale Rhoades were well prepared, knowledgeable, and ably demonstrated three VR programs. They covered the pros and cons of using VR programs for indexing.

Neither Frances nor Kamm could recommend ViaVoice and VoiceXpress. However, Gale said that if an indexer were to benefit from using a VR program, Dragon is probably the best program to use. Frances and Kamm agreed that Dragon is likely the best VR program available today and is being used successfully with all three indexing programs. But all three presenters agreed that the decision to use a VR program is a very individual choice to be made only after careful considerations of all the issues.



We meet on the third Thursday of each month

Our July Meeting Thursday, July 19, 2001

Topic:

"When I Grow Up, I Want to Write API Docs"

Presenter: James F. Bisso

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