1. OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO DITA AUTHORING SYSTEMS

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Introduction

During a recent development effort, one of our clients was alarmed at the conversion costs of the proposed XML-based content management system compared to the existing MS Word-based process. This was just one instance I've noticed in an alarming trend of balking at XML-based systems in favor of using public web folders that are indexed by some full-text search engine as part of a local intranet. In the short run, these edit, drop and index solutions have some appealing features, such as low development and conversion costs. But they are short-lived systems that either wither from lack of functionality or rapidly outgrow their design. Fortunately, the initial objections to the cost of building an XML-based content repository have become fairly predictable. In most cases they are based on either a misconception of XML technology or an overly optimistic view of alternative approaches. Even though implementing an XML-based system is not always the best approach for an organization, any architectural decision should be made only after thoroughly understanding the common misconceptions of the technology involved. The list of questions compiled in this paper is intended to be a guide for IT professionals so that they can intelligently discuss the pros and cons of developing an XML authoring system.

Why does my small group of authors need an XML solution?

Although it is true that the value of an XML-based content management system increases with the number of authors, even a small authoring community can benefit from using an XML solution. The core benefits involve document standardization, profiling and growth. Authoring in XML provides a natural structure to ensure documents adhere to corporate guidelines through the use of DTDs or schemas. By separating the style of a document from its content and structure, XML repositories can distribute different views of documentation to varying audiences from a single source document. Whereas in MS-Word or HTML systems, a separate version of the document is needed for each view. Lastly, XML authoring systems provides a solid foundation for future growth as they are platform independent and can be upgraded with relative ease.

Isn't XML used for business-to-business exchanges as a replacement for EDI?

One of the main reasons for the surge of XML-based technology in the marketplace is its application in business-to-business supply chain management. As companies continually look to streamline electronic commerce solutions, XML has emerged as a perfect mechanism to handle the requirements of exchanging product and transaction information. One unexpected side effect of the use of XML for supply chain management is that new users of the technology are led to believe that XML is suited only for this application.However, XML actually evolved from a markup language (SGML) which was designed to manage large volumes of textual information. For over fifteen years, SGML has been used by publishing, telecommunications and manufacturing companies to solve the same content management problems that XML addresses today. Even though XML does not support all of the functionality of its SGML counterpart, it enjoys wider acceptance which positions it well to solve most of today's content management problems.

Why do my authors have to learn a programming language to create documents?

Authoring effectively in XML requires a solid understanding of content as well as the structure of documents. Since authors no longer have to worry about the aspects of document style, they can concentrate on the core content and structure of their work. Getting started with XML is becoming easier since applications that use textual markup are now commonplace (HTML, etc.).However, one complaint about XML-based authoring systems is that they take away the stylistic freedom from the content creators. Although to some extent this is true, adapting to a controlled set of styles is much less daunting of a task than learning a programming language.

Why are XML consultants so expensive?

The two main contributors to the cost associated with using XML consultants are specialized knowledge and risk. Often an XML conversion project requires some initial design work that if done correctly will not have to be modified very frequently. Companies should not be creating DTD's, designing XML authoring platforms or configuring search engines very frequently. Consequently, it does not make sense for most organizations to build that skill set into its full time staff. Additionally, any architectural mistake committed during the design stage of these projects could result in very expensive rework down the

road well after implementation. For these reasons, despite the additional cost, it is often wise to utilize outside expertise during the critical stages of an XML project.

Why don't we just use MS-Word?

For all of the benefits of MS-Word and for all it has done in the world of word processing and office automation, it could be the single biggest obstacle to wide commercial acceptance of XML authoring solutions. Microsoft markets its style templates and HTML conversion features as the only packages that customers need for enterprise authoring. Additionally, with MS-Word available on virtually every corporate desktop, you can quickly and inexpensively start authoring documentation with it. But the fact of the matter is that MS-Word does not support XML directly and cannot be easily integrated into a structured content repository.

Why don't we author directly in HTML?

Authoring directly in HTML may be the quickest way to get new documentation onto a website. However, in addition to many of the same consistency problems that exist when authoring in MS-Word, there are some additional limitations as well. First, creating a repository of HTML files optimized for web viewing, will inevitably create problems for printed output. HTML does not support many standard page layout, font and line formatting features that are necessary for a production print environment. In short, if an organization chooses to create a repository of HTML documents, it will have to greatly scale back its print capabilities or utilize only a subset of HTML features that will look appropriate when printed. Otherwise, they will be forced to create two versions of HTML, one for online viewing and one for printing.

Even if an organization does not have to support document printing, creating a corporate knowledge base in HTML has other limitations. Authors will not be able to explicitly identify components (warnings, contact information, etc.) of their documents that can be used for specialized searching or formatting. Additionally, there is no way to rigidly enforce business rules for creating documentation by verifying it against an approved document type definition.

Why do we need XML if we are already using a relational database to track documents?

Using a relational database to store large volumes of textual content along with its metadata provides a solid infrastructure to build the security, version control and workflow components needed in a content management system. However, this technique alone does not ensure that the structure of distributed documentation will be preserved. XML attributes enable authors to store metadata directly with the content of each document, allowing this information to be used for online distribution systems as part of advanced profiling, style sheets and custom application features. In conclusion, with the content management marketplace becoming so competitive, the cost of XML-based authoring and repository systems are going to be questioned more than ever. This scrutiny will not be based on the uncertainty of the benefits of these systems as in the past, but by the growing sources of low cost substitute systems touting comparable features. Only after understanding the clouded atmosphere surrounding XML-based systems and anticipating the common misconceptions about the technology can one justify such a system in a business setting.

RULES

YOU DO NOT TALK ABOUT DITA

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SOMEONE YELLS STOP ★ REUSE IS OVER

ONLY TWO WRITERS TO A TOPIC

ONE BOOKMAP AT A TIME

NO STYLES ★ NO WYSIWYG

REUSE WILL GO AS LONG AS IT HAS TO

IF THIS IS YOUR FIRST DOC YOU HAVE TO

CONKEYREF