
Authoring and maintaining operational documentation

Operational documentation for a large infrastructure such as an airport or a railway-system covers many types of document, from general policy statements to detailed operating procedures. The audience for these documents ranges from upper management to unskilled ground-staff, with no effective guarantee of reading- and comprehension skills. The subject-matter experts providing input for the documentation are required to be good at their job, but not required to be experienced technical communicators. In the worst case, then, readers and writers may be almost incapable of understanding each other.

It is exceptional for any operational document to be completely stand-alone. Most operational documents include references (or even hyperlinks) to other documents. Defining and maintaining a clear picture of the relationships between hundreds of documents is a challenge in itself. Ensuring that updates stay in step and are reflected in all related documents is an equal challenge. In the worst case, then, a library of procedures may turn out to be an assortment of contradictory information sources.

No software system can entirely remove these problems. Some systems and methods can help, giving your prime resources – subject-matter experts and technical writers – more time to focus on quality and accuracy: essential aspects no system can validate.

document management

Storing all your documents in a system that forces you to enter descriptive information (meta-data) about each document helps build up a picture of relationships between documents. You should be able to say “give me a list of all the documents that mention {topic}”, for example.

content management

Every procedure should include a context. Writing six procedures involved in the same process should not mean writing a description of the context six times. You should be able to say “insert the approved description of {context} here.”

structure

“Every procedure should include a context” is an observation to do with structure. You should be able to say “I’m writing a procedure: which bit of information should I start with? which bit comes next?” You should not be able to miss anything out. You should not be able to put anything in the wrong place.

controlled vocabulary

Making sure that writers always describe the same thing (object, concept, activity ...) with the same words helps them achieve a level of consistency, and makes the output easier for the reader to comprehend.

A word on “structure”

The term “structured documentation” terrifies many people who don’t realise that everyday forms such as a letter – the familiar sequence of your address, the date, “Dear so and so”, body, “sincerely”, your name or signature – or a recipe with ingredients followed by method and serving suggestions are already simple examples of structure. We find it easy to assimilate information presented like this precisely because of the underlying logic and consistency.

Properly implemented, structure is not restrictive, like a strait-jacket: it’s something that helps you get farther, faster and safely, like scaffolding.

References

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