XML Based Schema: Saving Time, Eliminating Errors

# Situation

Technical writers are most efficient when they focus on what they do best: Write content. However, writers waste valuable time when they are forced to take care of their content design. For example, content design examples of Microsoft word include highlighting, italicizing, indenting, and bulleting lists.

Also, with larger technical writing projects, the editing process creates many versions of the working document. Developmental Editors, Technical Reviewers, and Copyeditors can all be involved in the editing process. These team members must always be working with the newest version of the document. However, humans are prone to error and it’s possible for an old document to be reintroduced into the editing cycle—wasting time and introducing errors. Is there a technological solution for quickly designing content and keeping only the freshest document in team rotation?

Tracey, an independent consultant and technical writer, says yes. As a consultant, she’s forced to use whatever documentation software her clients use. She’s found that the XML based proprietary content management system she uses while working at Microsoft solves all these problems. She even uses the system to turn her content into multiple output media.

# Solution

When Tracey goes to work at Microsoft to write content for Exchange Hosted Services, she knows she’s looking at the most current version of the project document, the “one single version of the truth” she calls it. That’s because the XML based proprietary content management systems makes sure that only the most current version of the document is available to team members. The documents get checked in and out like at the library.

Also, Tracey doesn’t have to worry about formatting. A Microsoft production team creates an XML schema beforehand that takes care of the look and feel of the document such as titles, subtitles, font colors, and bulleted lists. When Tracey goes to work, she simply types her content within the XML tags and all formatting is taken care of automatically. No highlighting. No bolding. No bulleting.

Also, she can create multiple media output from one file called single sourcing. Therefore, she can create both a PDF file and a CHM file from one XML based schema file.

# Benefits

With the XML based schema, Tracey estimates that over the course of writing 45 help topics, she saves 25 hours of formatting and production time. Also, she always knows that she’s looking at the latest version of the document and will not waste any time working with outdated content.

She also saves time by using the single sourcing feature of the XML based schema for creating multiple output media.

She even uses the program to tokenize words. With this tool, the team can instantaneously change a word appearing in the document to a new, updated word. For example, they could change the term ‘storage’ to ‘backup.’

Tracey explains that with other programs, she can use one or two of these features. But with the XML based proprietary content management system that she uses at Microsoft, she has access to all these features: solely write content without having to format, always work with the latest version of the document, create multiple media output, and tokenize words.