

OUTSOURCE DOCUMENTATION?

A Shoap Technical Services Whitepaper



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As a technical writing and training consulting firm, Shoap Technical Services is often asked: "Why outsource? It's cheaper and more efficient to do it in-house."

Cheaper? Rarely. More efficient? Almost never. Many companies are under the assumption that keeping functions in-house gives the greatest return on investment, while in reality for most companies, the costs involved are much higher than they realize.

Staffing

In order to sufficiently staff a business's writing needs, a company must usually hire more than one technical writer to cover peak times in the development cycle. However, in the times between documenting new products, the updates to existing products or training materials are rarely enough to keep the staff busy. This means that in-house writers often get paid a full-time salary to do no work, or worse, invent new work for themselves to fill time.

Product Cycle Theory

According to the product cycle theory of economics, for a product to have a profitable life cycle, a product must first experience a stage of slow profit growth with many changes to the product itself, and then have a phase of fast profit growth with minimal changes to the product itself. Any business, therefore, wants to maximize the time spent in the second phase, during which the product (and therefore the accompanying documentation) changes little. The most successful businesses may need full-time writers less!

Paying staff to invent new projects or sit idle wastes money. While the common perception is that outsourcing documentation to consultants costs more, documentation companies eliminate wasted money. When consultants stop working on a project, they stop billing and move on to their next project. Only when work on the project restarts or a new version of the product is ready to be updated is the company charged for the hours worked. Over the course of a fiscal year, the costs are significantly lower than those of hiring an in-house staff.

Efficiency

Efficiency is another important consideration when evaluating any business decision. If a service is not carried out efficiently, it will not give the same returns on the cost, because wasted time creates unnecessary costs. This makes the efficiency variable tantamount to cost, if not more important. Products are on a fixed release schedule, so it is important that documentation that will accompany them be delivered in a timely manner.

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Efficiency is the best money-saving technique

The common adage in America is "time is money." In these economic times, this rings even more true. Don't let your company waste time on things that are costing you valuable money!

Problems continually arise during the documentation process. Whether the issue is getting information from subject matter experts, figuring out how best to organize and present the material, or creating a new solution to a problem created by a tool limitation, roadblocks abound. Consultants can use experience gained through working on varied projects as well as using other writers as a sounding board and resource for finding solutions. This experience allows outsourced talent to develop competencies a person only working for the same company would not have. This makes the documentation process more efficient, as problems that would take an in-house person perhaps weeks to solve can be combated quickly using a team approach.

While in-house technical writers do develop product knowledge, this can create complacency with the tools and methods they use. Consultants must use unique processes and methods for each company and project they take charge of, and therefore are more likely to take an innovative approach. Innovation in both problem solving and methodology not only makes the process more efficient, but the final product superior.

Aside from the fact that it is rarely cheaper and almost never more efficient to do these functions in-house, there are other compelling reasons to outsource.

Project Management

Foremost is the problem of project management and documentation review. The usual technical writing project usually involves many different departments within an organization: development, product marketing, product management and quality assurance to name a few. A single person from any one department given the task to dictate content to a technical writer (or perhaps even more worryingly, assigned to write the documentation) is unqualified to do many of the tasks involved.

For example, while a developer can certify the accuracy of a document, few developers are qualified to proof a document for grammar, style and readability, and even fewer will be aware of company branding rules. On the other hand, a marketing director is rarely qualified to

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peruse a manual for technical accuracy. While an in-house writer could possibly pull from the talents of both of these groups to produce documentation, without having an editor to review the manual for accuracy and style, quality is lost.

Editing does the real work

George Wald, a Nobel Laureate for his research in vision and natural selection of these genes once said, "We are the products of editing, rather than of authorship." This can be said of any final product, be it a person, a software program or the documentation of said software. Nothing of quality is produced without a good editor.

One solution to this problem is to hire a full-time documentation manager. The cost of this approach is prohibitive for most companies. With an outsource company with several writers on staff, there is always a member of the team with a fresh perspective who has not worked on the project to review the work. Since a company is only billed for hours spent on a project, this saves large amounts of money. After all, a full-time manager with little to do is exponentially more costly than a consulting editor billing a few hours.

Another advantage of external documentation specialists is logistics. A documentation firm takes care of scheduling and internal logistics of the project. If a company needs to cut the number of hours billed to documentation, a technical writing consulting firm can cut hours from a project easily by putting the writer temporarily on other projects. In-house technical writers would not provide the same flexibility, as they would still need to be paid a full-time salary.

Also, if a change needs to be made to any documentation at the last minute, an outsourced technical writing firm usually has the manpower to handle such requests. An external documentation company has many more people to temporarily invest in the project to get it done on a strict schedule, while staying within a reasonable budget. A single in-house writer or team may not be able to accommodate tight deadlines for lack of resources. Outside firms have much greater flexibility to accomplish projects along a specific timeline within a certain budget, because they take care of the logistics in such a way as to be able to accommodate any project's specific needs.

Hiring and Training Issues

Finally, outsourcing documentation solves department hiring hassles. Many times it is difficult for any company to know what to look for when hiring a technical writer.

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Hiring managers often do not know what skills to look for that make a good technical writer. A good technical writer must be able to learn the new technology quickly, must be skilled in communicating in a clear and concise manner, and have a solid technical background. These skills are often difficult to pinpoint in a candidate if the person doing the hiring has no prior experience evaluating technical writing.

Hiring difficulties

"It's often hard for hiring managers to know what to look for in a possible technical writer... You need experienced writers who know how to learn in-depth, not just superficially--you need people who know how to build an understanding and not a passing familiarity. "
-TECHWR-L article on hiring technical writers

Outsourced firms have a large pool of quality talent to put to work on a company's documentation projects already. Even if the consulting firm decides to hire a new writer to work on a specific project, the hiring manager has years of experience identifying good technical writers, and has the knowledge to choose the candidates most prepared to succeed.

Outsourcing technical documentation also solves the hassle of training the new hires. As with any new job, technical writing has a learning curve—no new writers will know quite what their job entails when they first join a company. This learning curve makes it difficult for a new in-house team to produce quality work from the start. The time it takes to create a quality deliverable becomes exponentially longer as the new writers learn through trial and error with no one to guide their new project.

An outsourced company has a core base of experienced technical writers who are familiar with the types of projects that any company may need done. While the new hire requires training and guidance, there are many other writers around to ensure that the quality and efficiency does not suffer.

Although there are some instances in which having a full-time in-house writing staff is justified, for most companies the most cost-effective and efficient way to do documentation is to outsource to a technical writing firm. A large organization may be able to maintain the constant demand to justify an in-house staff, and if there is a constant need to update documentation, an in-house writer is sometimes a good choice.

Often, however, process inefficiencies, human resource allocation, and higher-than-average costs can plague any in-house team, no matter how large the company or how

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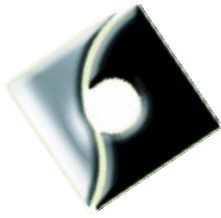
busy the product cycle keeps the team. Outsourcing documentation creates an alternative that minimizes the administrative stresses of an in-house team, while actually improving quality.

Outsourcing does work

It is important to consider many factors when deciding whether or not to outsource documentation to a firm. However, many times, clients not only save money and create a better deliverable, but also end up with the most useful and highest quality documents. Make sure to consider it as an alternative to traditional documentation preparation.

Outsourcing documentation is, of course, not the panacea for every problem that comes up during the documentation process. Products can change daily, sometimes without the documentation writer's knowledge, miscommunications with developers and subject matter experts are occasionally inevitable, and unforeseen last minute problems arise no matter how carefully a project is completed. Outsourcing is simply an attractive option to any company that wishes to produce accurate, clear, and usable documentation.

In-house writers are neither inherently incompetent, nor necessarily worse technical writers than those hired by a consulting firm. Writers of technical documentation consulting firms are just equipped with better tools to efficiently produce the most quality deliverable at the lowest cost to the company. With the built-in team approach and constant challenge to develop innovative solutions to problems, outsourced writers can provide a sensible alternative to traditional in-house documentation that more companies should consider.



About Shoap Technical Services:

At Shoap Technical Services, we work with you to quickly become a member of your team. Our expertise in documentation and training preparation allows us to provide professional leadership for the team. We are experts in creating documentation and customizing them to your needs. We can demonstrate all of the documentation and training options available and then discuss the timeframes, budget, and requirements of the chosen project. Our mission is to provide you with value-added service on each and every project.

Our writers are extremely technical, with degrees and backgrounds in computer science and engineering, and our editors have advanced degrees in composition and communication. We understand software and business processes, and can translate technical concepts into easy-to-follow material for a variety of audiences.

We are flexible with your needs, so we can take on all of the documentation and training responsibilities for a company, or work with an in-house technical writing group to provide the support you need. We are just as comfortable carrying a process through from start to finish as we are helping our clients start a project and then transitioning it back or finishing a project already in process. We are here to support what you need. For more information, you can contact us at info@shoap.com or visit our website www.shoap.com.

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