



FORETHOUGHT PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Revaluing Writing

by Jack Shulman

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Companies spend whatever it takes to develop intellectual assets. At the same time, they routinely seek to minimize their investment in the technical and procedural documents that tell people how to use those assets. Such meta-information as instruction manuals, process descriptions, and procedure guides script the experience of customers and the performance of suppliers and employees. Yet companies view the creation of this information as, at best, a cost of doing business and, at worst, something they can safely ignore.

Good writers can change all that. What's more, good writers who are consulted early enough can improve the product development process and, potentially, products themselves.

Unfortunately, writers in many companies don't get that chance. Brought in at the end of the development cycle, they are expected only to take what the project team says is important and turn it into English. When this happens, the writers may become caught in a squeeze play between the engineering and marketing groups: The engineers are unavailable, having built little or no time into their schedules for tedious meetings with people whom they believe think only in adjectives and verbs, not specs and functions. And the marketing folks are losing patience, having been slowly going mad for months, waiting to find out what they are expected to sell and unable to understand why it takes so long to get facts on a product that is nearly complete. In a multinational, multilingual corporation, the burden of translation and localization compounds this problem.

In addition, the writer's act of mastering a product's or a process's complexities and then distilling those into simple, clear language for a lay (or expert) reader sometimes reveals flaws, contradictions, or unfulfilled product promises that developers are too close to the project to see. Questions from smart and skillful writers can cause engineers to reconsider a product design element after it has been finalized. When writers are brought in late, the result can be slipped manufacturing and shipping dates, cost overruns, and delayed or lost revenue.

Companies that want to reverse this dynamic and use their writers as a strategic asset can take

the following steps:

Involve writers early. It takes time to understand a product, process, or technology well enough to effectively explain it. Early involvement gives writers a realistic chance of delivering complete and accurate information at launch. The marketing department and your customers will be pleased.

Make use of writer "audits." Ensure that writers have sufficient time to question the development team as the product evolves. Ideally, and perhaps uniquely, writers can perform continuous reality testing on the product or process, comparing what the team tells them about it and their own experiences with it. Products and processes are often modified and even redesigned based on discoveries by writers in their quest for the facts.

Use writers to compound the value of your intellectual capital. The best writers aren't just adept at technical or business language; they are also expert communicators. Much of a company's intellectual capital resides in the brains of people who have difficulty making their ideas accessible outside their narrow disciplines or who simply don't recognize that something they know may be useful or important. Writers can elicit that information, provide it in exactly the language and structure required by each audience, and, in the process, preserve and enhance the value of your intellectual capital to your customers, suppliers, and employees.

The written word and the writing process itself are powerful tools that can have a real, strategic impact on your business. Give your writers the opportunity not just to document but also to help create.

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