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XMetaL's Content Reuse Powers Innovation for Moldflow

'Write Once, Update Everywhere' Authoring Environment Inspires Higher-value Content Creation

For manufacturers, 'measure twice, cut once' is a guiding principle of the highest order. To make products that are truly indispensable, organizations need to push the boundaries of design while safeguarding the integrity (and limited supply) of costly raw materials.

Moldflow, creators of engineering and optimization software for the plastic injection-molding industry, enables manufacturers to do just that.

Moldflow's niche is narrow, and they enjoy the rare luxury of minimal competition. Their products are extremely technical, but universally used. Any company pushing the boundaries of injection molded plastics part design – communications, consumer goods, medical and virtually every automotive company in the world – likely counts Moldflow among its key tools in the art and science of product development.

The Pressure of Rapid Development

Due to the product complexity and accelerating schedule of product development, Moldflow's documentation team were finding it a challenge to keep pace with even the most elementary of accompanying information. Swamped with a constant stream of globally-marketed product advancements, the most basic of tasks – such as identifying pieces of content impacted by a new release – were becoming increasingly laborious and time consuming.

Tim Lake is Moldflow's Manager of Technology Transfer. In searching for new efficiencies within the content creation process, he and the documentation team discovered that the maintenance of duplicated content across multiple onlinehelp systems and product lines was costing them dearly in time and effort.

"Since the technology we sell is developing so quickly, our content is a moving target," he says. "We spent a considerable amount of our time identifying what needed updating, finding it in all locations and making the same changes multiple times. Were we creating the best possible content? Was it actually useful for our customers? We had very limited time to think about those things."

In an ideal world, says Lake, the team wanted to be able to slice and dice the material to ease creation and maintenance. If they could approach content as individual topics – each with a master version replicated in multiple locations automatically – they would also improve quality by being able to track the process of constant updating. All roads led to XML as the obvious enabler: the write once, update everywhere authoring environment that would make day-to-day life in the documentation department more efficient.

Minimizing XML Migration Downtime

In sourcing the right solution, Moldflow placed a premium on robust functionality. But they also wanted

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the freedom to leverage that functionality at will, choosing pre-packaged templates or building on their own as needs changed over time.

“XMetaL was first on the block with a proven, mature solution that suited us well,” says Lake. “We wanted the ability to use and configure our own stylesheets—some other solutions claim to do this, but in reality they don’t offer many options. And XMetaL was the most complete DITA solution, enabling a standard that would help us make the transition more easily.”

The team began the transition with small projects, first targeting widely-disseminated topics for migration to the XML format and then publishing to online help systems, user guides and reference manuals.

“The migration process – in our case, converting over seven thousand FrameMaker and HTML topics to XML – is significant. We started small, but with every piece of content we migrated, we could see how the new process would make life easier.”

To minimize the downtime associated with translating FrameMaker- and HTML-based documents into XML-ready topics, the team worked steadily during the lull between product releases. Piece by piece, the new authoring environment has been populated with little impact on resourcing of project deliverables.

Old Dogs and New Tricks: Organizational Change Management

As Lake notes, the organization’s shift to XML-based authoring has transformed not only the process, but the roles of people working within it. “Writing topic-based content has led us to differentiate our roles,” he explains. “XML’s more structured approach makes us think more carefully about matching the skills within our team to the right activities. It puts you in the right frame of mind to think and work more efficiently.”

Individuals with years of experience can be hardwired to a more organic creation process, preferring a less rigid workflow. Fostering the right team-wide ‘frame of mind’ can often come down to two things: good change management combined with familiar, easy-to-use tools.

“Topic-oriented writing is a different approach than traditional writing and may take some patience at first,” says Lake. “If writers give it a chance, they’ll see within one project how much XML frees them to write on a whole new level in terms of value, depth and quality.”

Lake believes XMetaL’s WYSIWYG editor, and approach to DITA topics and maps has made the transition more comfortable. “Our writers always have a holistic view of progress towards the complete document,” he continues. “Even though they’re working within the confines of topics, they can still visualize the finished piece. This feels familiar, and they appreciate that.”

The XML Revelation: How Much is Content Worth?

Almost as soon as the team began the transition to XML, Lake says, a revelation struck. Success was no longer measured by simply asking, how much is content costing? Instead, the resource-freeing nature of the new system invoked a whole new perspective: how much could our content be worth?

“Re-using our content is like selling the same product twice by making the raw materials work harder,” says Lake. “With XMetaL, we were able to think more strategically about our content as our product, our

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JUSTSYSTEMS.
<http://www.justsystems.com>

North America:
 +1.866.793.1542
contactsales-na@justsystems.com

Europe:
 +44.0.1462.889.082
contactsales-emea@justsystems.com

International: +1.604.697.8705

About JustSystems

JustSystems is a leading global software provider with three decades of successful innovation in office productivity, information management, and consumer and enterprise software. With over 2,500 customers worldwide, the company is continuing a global expansion strategy based on its xfy enterprise software, XMetaL content lifecycle solutions, and its pioneering work in enabling XBRL financial reporting technologies. JustSystems is one of the 2008 KMWorld 100 Companies that Matter in Knowledge Management, a 2008 EContent 100 member, and was recognized on the 2008 KMWorld Trend-Setting Product list for XMetaL. Major strategic partnerships include IBM, Oracle and EMC.

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value. For instance, we may take some of the more advanced, exploratory aspects that would normally be buried within our help system and publish it as a book that we sell.”

The team was inspired. He continues: “Success, for us, became defined by the highest rate of value for every piece of content we produced. We wanted to reuse the same topic as many times as possible.”

On-the-Ground Results

Aside from the unexpected shift in thinking that DITA and reuse has brought to Moldflow, the documentation team has seen a dramatic change in its day-to-day life. “It’s amazing to think of all the repetition we avoid now,” reflects Lake. “Now that our productivity is so focused, it’s hard to imagine how things used to be. Not to mention all the hassle that’s been eliminated since updates are so much easier.”

And easier means faster – even globally. “The flaws and strengths of your content process are magnified when replicated across regions,” he says. “We are now approaching localization with the same unified, ‘write once’ philosophy – and across 14 distinct languages and markets, the impact is huge.” When editing topics “we make necessary updates in less time, and move on to enriching the value of our content. We’re not spending as much time formatting each topic anymore.”

As Lake notes, his writers aren’t the only Moldflow staffers hailing the new XML era. “The new system allowed us to create a variety of new document formats which didn’t previously exist – and you can’t underestimate the value of tailored, polished content,” he says. One particular product manager saw the new product materials and said, ‘It feels like a real product now’. Anytime we can lend credibility and confidence to our sales force, we’re thrilled.”

Consolidated efforts and single-source authoring have enabled not only greater output variety, but almost limitless customizability as well. “Our internal clients can have almost whatever they want,” says Lake. “We’re able to say ‘yes’ more often to help them with their documentation needs.”

The Ultimate Benefit: When Content Drives Customer Value

In a niche, highly technical company such as Moldflow, value is not embedded within the product alone. Value is measured by the correct application of the product – or even better, in the imaginative stretching and customer-directed expansion of the product’s usefulness.

“We’re not just writing instructions,” says Lake. “We’re inspiring, planting ideas, nurturing a collective of power users who then innovate on their own merit ... thanks to a nudge in the right direction from us.”

Before XMetaL Author DITA Edition, providing that nudge was difficult. It took much of the team’s effort to simply keep up with the pace of development, to provide the most basic instructions. They sensed a tantalizing wealth of insight beneath the surface.

“A group of people in technical communications can have an amazing impact on a technology organization,” he continues. “We have the potential to help customers push the envelope of how our technology can be applied and morphed into new and unexpected areas.”

“As a team, we want to create the kind of high-value content that eventually fuels customer-led innovation. By taking away the mundane and repetitive aspects of content creation, XMetaL leaves us free to focus on authoring content that’s worth more to us and to our customers.”