XML in Technical Communication

XML-based technology, tools and methods have already impacted development of technical communication in several organizations. In the near future many more organizations are likely to jump on the XML train.

As XML has been a buzzword in technical documentation for several years now it is easy to get lost in all aspects of how XML can be a vehicle to increase in flexibility, productivity, quality and in the same time reduce translation cost, time to deliver as well as time spent with tedious repetitive work.

As the title indicates the book takes a very general approach and covers almost any aspects of how XML can be directly visible by technical communicators or used behind the scenes in producing technical documentation.

This book enables readers to actively participate in discussions around the impact of using XML-based technologies, tools and methods in technical communications.

**Audience for this book**

Three specific examples of target audiences are mentioned:

1. *Technical communicators*, to understand different aspects of authoring in XML
2. *Technical communicators*, who need an introduction to the use and advantages of XML for internationalization
3. *Documentation managers*, to get an understanding of the advantages that XML can provide in terms of increased productivity and cost reduction.

**Approach**

The author has long background in software development and developing technical communication in large corporation and takes an approach that is very structured, technically oriented and includes some historical background information.

The book that consist of 12 chapters and two appendices covers very many aspects of how XML could impact current processes for development of technical communication. The main areas covered are well described by chapter titles:
The book starts with XML basics and for each new chapter adds new aspects that build upon previous information. Readers with little experience of XML get a concise and comprehensive overview of how XML can be used in technical documentation in just 179 pages while readers with XML experience in addition get plenty of references to sources of information on the internet.

A big advantage over other books around XML is that this book focuses upon things that are important in technical documentation and leave out less important aspects of XML. The focus is upon the different topics that need to be considered when current writing environment including information shall be replaced with a structured writing environment with converted information using the selected target XML language. This includes:

- Modeling your information for the move to structured writing environment
- Choosing an XML Language
- Implementing an authoring system with publication tools
- Changed strategies for graphics in for example SVG
- Training in XML concepts and new tools
- Possible developing and maintaining DTDs or schema documents
- Consider conversion strategies as well as testing possible tools

In Chapter 5 Authoring with XML various tools that can be used to produce XML are discussed. This includes:

- Simple text editors that can be used to play with XML documents,
- Tools dedicated to XML authoring that to various degree hide XML and where tables look like tables, lists are styled as lists and different concepts as warning, caution, examples, comment are easily recognized
- Content management systems (CMS) that include versioning, publishing, mechanisms for re-use of information, handling translation projects as well as XML authoring capabilities.

In this chapter a useful checklist for desired features of XML editors is included.
Chapter 6 Migrating to XML gives clear advices on how to approach conversion from various source languages as HTML, Word, structured and unstructured FrameMaker as well as SGML. One important question is to decide if the conversion should be done in-house or outsourced experts in conversion projects.

Chapter 7 Transforming XML gives a good introduction to the special XML languages that is used in publishing tools to produce HTML and various help systems, PDF or other XML languages.

Chapter 9 XML and Localization gives a comprehensive introduction to the use and advantages of XML in translation of the same technical communication to an increased number of languages (internationalization). As translation costs are a major part of the total budget for many organizations in a global market this book is a perfect match for technical communicators responsible for translation projects.

Appendix A. Glossary is a real gold mine when you come across one of all terms and concepts used together with XML.

One drawback with this book is that good reading instructions are missing. One example is that many readers could benefit from skipping Chapter 3 Defining XML Languages (34 pages that discusses DTDs and XML Schema document in a rather elaborated example) in the first reading and go back to this chapter in a second reading of the book.

Documentation managers get a lot of useful technical arguments for how XML in various ways can reduce cost and increase productivity. What is missing to be able to convince upper management around the advantages of XML is one or two chapters that in a concrete way with real examples discusses possible productivity increase and cost reduction (with ROI estimates). The key thing here is to show the effect of:

- Effective methods for reuse of information
- Translation strategies that minimize the number of words that needs to be translated when technical documentation is revised.

In chapter 4 XML Documentation Languages (28 pages) the author have selected the DocBook and DITA languages as two examples where the approach to technical communication differs significantly. The DITA language stands for the new school in XML languages where modularization and reuse of information are key concepts. DocBook on the other hand stands for the old school where the target was large complex (printed) publications with limited needs for reuse and modularization.

In complex technical documentation outside software and especially in defense and defense industries the S1000D XML language is the clearly dominating language. A more interesting choice for readers that are in the process of entering the XML wagon had been to compare DITA and S1000D XML languages. Both languages use many small documents (modules) that can be combined in different ways to produce many different publications with the same set of source modules. Hot topics for next version of both languages are how the areas of technical documentation and computer based training.
Conclusions

This book covers an important gap of how XML-based technologies, tools and methods can impact development of technical communication.

About the author

Charles Cowan FISTC is a Principal Technical Writer with the Oracle Corporation. He has worked as a technical communicator for over a quarter of a century. He is an IBM Certified Developer in XML and Related Technologies and holds postgraduate qualifications in computing and software development.

About the reviewer

The reviewer has worked with XML-based technologies, tools and methods during more than 10 years as project managers, designer of XML-based tools for conversion, publication and presentation. He is employed by Excosoft AB in Sweden that develop and market Skribenta, a comprehensive solution for technical publications with focus upon effective facilities for reuse and translation.