

Research Report

Multilingual Product Content:

Transforming Traditional
Practices to Global Content
Value Chains

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The Gilbane Group

Extract: Microsoft
Best Practices Profile



THE GILBANE GROUP

Microsoft

In 1975, 19 and 22 year-old Bill Gates and Paul Allen founded Microsoft with the sales of their first program, BASIC. Revenue for this inaugural year totaled \$16,005. Fast forward 34 years to current state in which fiscal 2008 year-end revenues totaled \$60.42 billion. Within this total, Microsoft reported significant revenue increases in numerous regions including:



- 64% across Central and Eastern Europe.
- 54% in Brazil, Russia, India, and China.
- 30% in Latin America.
- 25% or more in well-established regions including Norway, Spain, Australia, Canada, and Germany.

Five business segments comprise this global software company, including Client, Server and Tools, Online Services Business, Microsoft Business Division, and Entertainment and Devices Division. Ranking #35 in the 2009 Fortune 500, Microsoft employs 95,029 personnel worldwide and has offices in more than 100 countries.

Focus on User Assistance

“Great software is of little use unless people know how to use it. That’s the purpose behind User Assistance & Education at Microsoft. This team empowers our customers by letting them know how to get the most out of Microsoft products and services.”

Microsoft’s User Assistance & Education groups employ over 1,500 content professionals, including executives, project managers, technical writers, and editors. Defining user assistance (UA) as a mix of conceptual, task-focused, and reference content, each Microsoft product across all five business segments is aligned with a UA team. Outputs can include books, online help, training and e-learning curriculum, troubleshooting, and customer support materials for web sites such as MSDN (Microsoft Developer Network) and Microsoft TechNet. Audiences vary from end users to IT professionals and developers.

Ben Jackson, Senior Director, User Assistance, manages a UA team within the Server and Tools segment, an organization that employs over 10,000 team members across six business groups. Charged with meeting corporate objectives for global customer satisfaction and increased product adoption, Jackson leads a team of approximately 250 UA professionals dedicated to three of this segment’s product line of businesses. The team subscribes to the philosophy that “whatever users need *at the moment* is what we need to provide.”

As Jackson notes, “Content has a large role in the success of products; it is the link between the product and the customer.” This perspective inherently includes multilingual product content, critical to serving Microsoft customers across 100 countries. The company produces product content in 17 languages for server products, largely for the IT professional and developer audiences, and increases to 30-40

languages for client products. MSDN and Microsoft TechNet provide product content in over 28 languages.

Content Globalization Challenges

Microsoft needs little introduction in terms of its influence on the field of technical communication, particularly within the evolution of product documentation and embedded user assistance. In its 3rd edition, the Microsoft® Manual of Style for Technical Publications is considered an industry standard.

Like all global organizations however, Microsoft experiences the challenges inherent to managing complex projects across multiple divisions, organizational structures, and product lines. With respect to multilingual product content strategies, it is not immune to the challenges of cross-functional collaboration and governance nor the issues of process-driven technology integration. And lacking that immunity means that the company's User Assistance & Education groups strive for incremental, continuous improvements to corporate and divisional Global Content Value Chains (GCVC).

Jackson's efforts within the UA team for the Server and Tools segment focus heavily on sustaining and expanding the people and process ecosystem that enables product content to measurably influence global customer satisfaction. As he notes, "Constant advances in our own internal technologies coupled with the power of the Internet provides the computing infrastructure required for great user assistance. The continuous challenge is to *fundamentally* bind processes with our objectives."

From this perspective, consistently leveraging corporate commitments to global product content can be both challenge and opportunity. Addressing challenges in the areas of quality at the source, collaborative language support decision-making, and the measurement of content value in product experience is paramount. Strengthening the GCVC within the Server and Tools segment includes initiatives to:

- Minimize style variations within the segment's UA teams and across product lines through increased governance and collaboration.
- Consistently utilize centralized terminology databases from the Microsoft Language Excellence team¹ and the Microsoft Language Portal² while increasing cross-functional sharing of product-driven glossaries.
- Extend XML-driven structured authoring strategies to increase the impact of an estimated 51-60% reuse level to repurpose content to customer support communities.
- Meet customer expectations and compliance regulations through "continuous publishing," an approach that delivers a subset of the total mono and multilingual content deliverables at Release to Manufacturing (RTM) with subsequent, continuous web-based publishing.

¹ Microsoft Terminology Blog: <http://blogs.technet.com/terminology/default.aspx>

² Microsoft Language Portal: <http://www.microsoft.com/language/en/us/default.aspx>

Multilingual Communications as a Business Imperative

- Contribute to corporate language support decision-making by moving UA to the *front-end* of the process as customer experience specialists.

The Solution

Microsoft UA teams are fortunate to have significant internal resources to facilitate a corporate-wide commitment to content globalization. The focus on the creation and delivery of multilingual product content is strong, amounting to 60%+ of product localization/translation costs. The company uses a mix of centralized and regional revenue expectation metrics and known regional expectations to make internationalization investments.

Even so, Jackson's UA group is striving to avoid the costly "translate it all" approach. "We need to be smarter about what we localize," says Jackson. "That means understanding our global customers better and delivering content that matches business needs, which differs from market to market." A commitment to product content relevancy has become decidedly multilingual, with UA-driven customer feedback loops poised to help drive localization/translation volume, depth, and locale-specific relevancy:

- Feedback from several customers in China has already revealed a level of "over-localization" for traditional product content deliverables, providing a potential investment shift to new types of multilingual product content including podcasts, animations, and multimedia.
- A Director-led International Strategy Team within the Server and Tools segment's UA organization has executive sponsorship to establish more formal marketing and product engineering partnerships.
- The extension of relationships with Microsoft's international/localization teams is resulting in joint decisions regarding process, timing of multilingual "hand-offs," and a shared view on the extent of localization/translation. Given the corporate use of machine translation (MT) to internally "back-translate" customer feedback gathered from surveys and quality reviews, this collaboration will result in enhanced value propositions. A prime example is increased MT use for content that receives the most customer traffic according to usage data collected in specific geographical areas.

In many ways, these collaboration efforts model longstanding agile software development processes across the segment. Product design teams rely on UA team members for usability expertise, customer expectation guidelines, and the ability to determine how, when, and what customers need to optimize their experience with products and technologies.

Results

Strengthening the people and process ecosystem for multilingual product content is enabling Jackson's team to set the foundation for taking user assistance "to the next level." Today, UA-driven initiatives are utilizing infrastructure technologies to solidify the alignment of corporate objectives with group projects in measurable ways.

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Utilizing the company's business intelligence foundation for continuous product content improvements, the group is mining information from a comprehensive mix of web analytics (including content usage and relevancy statistics), Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, call center databases, and survey data from multiple product teams. Subsequently merging the results with customer-facing knowledge from surveys, sales feedback, and user conferences is creating a stronger framework for unified customer satisfaction metrics.

In tandem, face-to-face global customer meetings are bolstering a focused global customer engagement strategy in which UA expertise and value is prominent. "Increasing product adoption requires understanding global markets and focusing on localized product content that is specific and critical to those markets; there is no 'one size fits all' product content approach."

Aligning UA strategy with Microsoft's vision for cloud computing is also well underway. Describing a convergence of information and product, Jackson foresees embedded user assistance as a part of a "dynamic online experience, synchronized with the context of work processes and relevant to the product state, channel, and customer." As software enters the cloud, so too will product content, realizing the vision of delivering exactly what the customer needs at exactly the time when he/she needs it.

Gilbane Group Perspective

Microsoft has a longstanding commitment to multilingual product content, evident through broad language support, thought leadership in localization/translation requirements, and investments in language-centric research and development. Although it is too soon to tell how Bing Translator will impact the marketplace, it is clear that "language as a priority" will continue to heavily influence the company's content globalization strategies.

By consistently applying user-centric principles to product content deliverables, the Server and Tools segment's UA teams are facilitating stronger links between language requirements and global customer experience. Culling customer requirements and satisfaction levels from multiple data sources will certainly strengthen the influence of user assistance in product development cycles and validate strategies for what Jackson notes as plans for "taking user assurance to the next level." Microsoft clearly has the technology infrastructure to implement the vision. Proactively combining product content domain expertise with cross-functional and regional collaboration ensures that the *definition* of the vision is distinctly customer-driven.