Chapter 9
Case Study: Putting their Heads Together Virtually:
Case Studies on Collaboration using Content Management Technology

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ABSTRACT
Content management technology provides a flexible environment for virtual collaboration for technical and business writing. Internationally, small and large organizations in various industries are using content management system (CMS) technology to improve their communications while lowering their production and translation costs and enhancing the quality of their writing. The following case studies provide a look at how small and large writing teams are really doing it. These teams have successfully implemented content management technology and improved virtual collaboration in varying environments—within a department, between multiple departments, within a division, and across several divisions of their respective organizations.

INTRODUCTION
The task of writing content in an organization has shifted from one in which a writer (who might also do the work of an editor) works alone on an entire document (that is, a white paper, report, or a chapter or book) to a collaborative effort among colleagues to develop and refine topics within the document. Increasingly, organizations are finding value when colleagues can share their ideas and skills during the writing and editorial process to perfect their content before processing it for translation and/or multi-channel publishing. One proven tool to create and facilitate an interconnected virtual writing environment in an organization is a content management system (CMS).

The creation and management of content using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology is not new. Writers in all kinds of environments rely on tools beyond pen and paper to create content—whether they are employees in business or government workplaces, students or scholars in academic workplaces. From word processors and XML authoring tools to wikis, blogs, and social
networking software, writers depend on technology to develop content and deliver information to readers. The increasing sophistication of the tools used to create and manage information has made writing more and more virtual, and the use of virtual technology to publish content has had differing goals and outcomes depending on the purpose or occasion for writing. While CMC technology provides limitless opportunities for writers to publish an unlimited number of words in collaboration with a world audience, the same kinds of technology in business settings helps to contain words strategically so that content can be translated and distributed on the Web, through mobile devices, and in or alongside products across the globe. Given the contrasting goals for communicating and given the aim of this book to create links between diverse readers working in industry and academia, it is important to understand the contexts and tools that influence various approaches to writing. Understanding these differences can ensure that writers have the suitable skills needed to write effectively in a range of workplaces.

Comparing the context of writing in a CMS to that of writing in academic settings provides insight into the use of technology to write collaboratively. In an academic environment, writing often begins with a rehearsal of texts read by students, who are absorbing new ideas and learning to develop original content. Originality of thinking and writing is prized in the classroom and as ideas develop across Web-based environments, as described more fully in Chapter 7, which addresses how novice writers use technology to develop ideas. Such writing often is a creative process in which one or more writers compose a document and then deepen and extend it through review cycles with peers. Collaborative input from other students is intended to help students enhance the accuracy, fluency, and academic value of their papers. The writer’s focus is to emphasize the primary points of the work they have read with sound facts and references regardless of the length of the work. In many academic writing projects, the writing neither costs the institution financially nor does it overtly generate revenue for either the writer or the institution; its value is intrinsic in terms of knowledge development, idea dissemination, and prestige.

In contrast, the writing environment of many non-profit and for-profit organizations focuses more on efficiencies and cost savings, and less on originality of thought. A technical documentation team that produces user guides and other product documentation is a cost center for the organization. The technical documentation is necessary to support their products by providing customers with accurate instructions or parts information, making it easy for customers to install, use, or fix products. Good technical documentation not only reduces costs in the organization’s customer support area by minimizing help calls and returned products, but also it is useful to customers who want to use products, not wrestle with or return them.

Technical documentation typically does not generate additional revenue for the organization, making the department a target for reducing costs from management. Therefore, writers must focus on producing accurate, reusable topics that become building blocks for generating many different kinds of publications that deliver a consistent message. This work requires all writers on the team to collaborate by following an established writing style and applying the approved corporate terminology, as explained in detail in Chapter 15. In organizations that do business internationally, writers also must focus on writing in a minimalist style—writing as succinctly as possible and eliminating unnecessary verbiage—to keep the cost of translations lower, since translation services are charged by the number of words translated.

Likewise, organizations that publish and sell reference books, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and standards manuals have similar writing environments. Production and translation costs are continuously scrutinized by management teams to ensure that they generate a profit on their
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