Chapter 11

Making Collaborative Writing Decisions Virtually

Alexia P. Idoura
Symantec Corporation, USA

ABSTRACT

When it comes to team decision making, people are more likely to carry out decisions they have helped make (Weisbord, 1987). However, some key decision-making differences in roles, processes, and tools between virtual and traditional writing teams exist. This chapter uses the experiences of Symantec in making decisions, such as the decision for purchasing a content management system (CMS), for how people can make decisions in virtual settings. In particular, this chapter examines how virtual writing teams move through the decision-making process: knowing who has authority, deciding how to decide, using the right decision-making model for a particular decision, doing the groundwork, sharing the information, evaluating the information and making the decision, capturing the decision in a place available to all, and following up on decisions and resulting actions. It also provides a list of tools that can help when making decisions virtually. Finally, keeping the audience—readers or product users—in mind throughout the decision-making process can assist with all of these tasks by keeping decision makers focused on those who most benefit or suffer from writing-based decisions.

INTRODUCTION

What can be done when trying to streamline a budget for managing information products and costs only seem to escalate? How can translation costs be managed when the price per word to translate starts to make translation unaffordable—even though localized information is essential in a global economy? How can companies merge, combine information products authored in different applications, and publish the combined information quickly? How can information products be created quickly for rapidly configured products? How does one respond to immediate demands from customer for product information?
These questions reflected a significant set of challenges for Symantec, which was growing significantly because of its purchase of various companies. At one point, the company was absorbing an average of two major and at least six minor acquisitions a year. The organization became geographically distributed with almost 200 writers, a number of whom are in located in India. The result was multiple tool sets, no common design template, no common editing standards, and no common information model. Relying on these circumstances, writers had to develop information products suitable for seven kinds of help systems, PDF files, print publications, and HTML output. And the localization requirements were substantial, with some of the materials needing to be translated into more than 30 languages.

Symantec had to find more effective ways to work globally and deliver information to customers requesting it in multiple formats. The company needed a streamlined approach to developing and providing information. It seemed that the best way to address these challenges was to consider automating the information development process. This realization gave rise to seemingly endless decisions as the company investigated different tools for single sourcing. Teams worked collaboratively to perform content audits, develop information models, and reexamine tools, templates, and standards. Symantec identified complex reuse goals, and given the large amount of content being shared, it seemed logical to purchase a content management system (CMS). But the many questions and issues that were raised prompted intense deliberation and decision making that employed more than logic alone. The whole process of investigating automated reuse strategies tapped strongly held beliefs about the best ways to develop information products. The need to make decisions required strong leadership, a deep sense of trust, and collaborative teams with a willingness to shift technical writing paradigms.

This chapter uses the experiences of Symantec’s decision-making process for purchasing a CMS as a primary example for how people can make decisions in virtual settings. However, those with other decision-making goals in various virtual collaborative writing settings would benefit from such understanding as well. Principles 1, 4, and 5 that ground this book have particular pertinence in this chapter. Without developing a culture of effective collaboration, making good decisions virtually is difficult to impossible. The right tools and models of collaboration also are necessary to accomplish the decision-making task. To that end, Principle 5’s emphasis on creating structures by which collaborative writers can make decisions virtually is a crucial consideration.

BACKGROUND

By definition, the writing process is about decision making—deciding on a topic, why it is important, who might be interested in it, how it will be used, how it should be organized, and what words to choose. Writers make, unmake, and remake decisions. It is not uncommon that writers second guess their decisions. A whole new set of decisions arises after a piece is reviewed—how to address reviewer comments, what to do if they are in conflict, and how to combine far-flung feedback, as suggested in Chapter 16. In workplace settings, decision-making becomes formalized as writers consider what tools to use, what style guidelines to follow, and how to gather review comments. The magnitude of the decisions escalates at the enterprise level when organizations investigate options for single sourcing, including whether or not to employ advanced single sourcing technology, such as managing content in a CMS. And at the point of purchase and implementation, the number of decisions seems to spiral out of control.

When it comes to decision making and virtual collaborative writing in the workplace, a key question to ask concerns who should benefit from the