Exploring the Perceived Usefulness of System Documentation

Gene Rathnam, Illinois State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to determine whether there is a difference among computer system users in the perceived usefulness of online system documentation versus printed system documentation. Recent trends in the computer software industry have seen printed system documentation replaced by online system documentation. This has resulted in a debate among computer software system users with regard to whether or not they can successfully learn and use the software with only online system documentation. A survey was conducted of information systems professionals. The survey respondents completed a survey that asked them to rate online system documentation and printed system documentation for the mainframe and PC platforms and also for specific tasks. It was found that system developers on PC platforms had a strong preference for using online system documentation versus printed system documentation. On both PC platforms as well as mainframe platforms, there was a significant difference in the perceived usefulness between online documentation and printed documentation for performing specific tasks. For tasks that involved searching for specific information, users preferred the online documentation. For tasks that involved initial learning about the system, and for tasks that involved a significant amount of reading, the users preferred the printed documentation.

Keywords: online documentation; perceived usefulness; printed documentation; system documentation

INTRODUCTION

One of the current trends in the computer software industry is to replace printed system documentation with online system documentation. This action by the software providers has generated debate among computer system users with regard to whether they can successfully learn to use the software system without the help of printed system documentation (Conaster, 1995). Some computer sys-
tem users have the perception that printed system documentation is more useful than online system documentation and cannot be replaced. Other computer system users have the perception that online system documentation is more useful, because that is where they more find answers to most of their questions. The research issue that is addressed in this article is: Is there a difference between users’ perceived usefulness of online system documentation and printed system documentation? Does the preference for online system documentation or printed system documentation depend on the nature of the task being performed?

System documentation that is provided with a computer software system assists the user in working with the system to perform a specific set of tasks. System documentation tries to fill the gap between what the user knows about the tasks to be completed and what the user needs to know in order to effectively use the computer system (Horton 1993a, 1993b). Without some set of instructions, training, or help, most computer software is too complicated for many users to use. For this reason, system documentation is a necessary and valuable component of any computer system. In order to realize the full potential of system documentation, users must use the documentation. One factor that could influence whether or not users of computer systems would use a particular type of system documentation would be the user’s perception of the usefulness of the system documentation.

This research study was concerned with computer system documentation, which was provided in the following two forms:

1. Printed system documentation, which consists of printed manuals, quick reference cards, and training guides.
2. Online system documentation, which consists of online manuals and help facilities.

Different computer systems provide different forms of system documentation. Some provide only online documentation, some provide only printed documentation, some provide both, and some provide neither.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Brockman (1990, 1992), adult learners have the following characteristics:

1. they are impatient and want to get started quickly
2. they skip around in system documentation, rarely reading them fully
3. they frequently make mistakes, and learn most often by correcting such mistakes
4. they are best motivated by self-initiated exploration
5. they view the complexity of a system as being directly proportional to the size of the system documentation

Users learn new things by actually trying to perform the tasks. According to Brockman (1990, 1992), users do not want to learn about something in a class-
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