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The future of Help? Nine trends in online user assistance.

By William Birn. 18 February 2003. Amended 28 February 2003.

Overview

Whilst applications are becoming more complex, many people believe that online user assistance hasn't changed much since WinHelp was introduced with Windows 3. This is a misconception. There have been many developments in this field aimed at increasing end-user productivity and satisfaction. In this article, we have listed (in no particular order) nine of the most significant trends in online user assistance. Depending on your situation you may wish to include some or all or these into your solution.
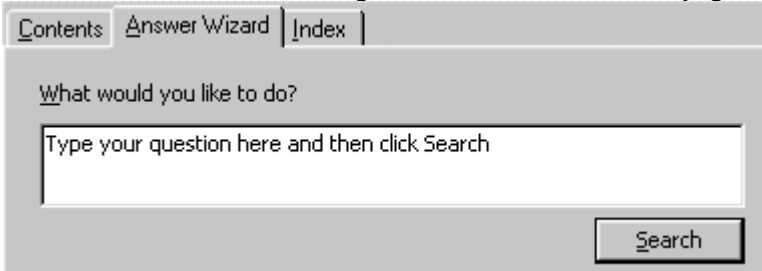
You can also contact us if you would like a PDF version of this article.

What do you think?

We'd welcome your feedback on these trends, so that we can post them up to this site. Email us your thoughts. We won't reveal your identity if you don't wish us to. The Elegant Hack Weblog http://www.eleganthack.com/archives/003266.html" also contains some comments on this article.

Searching using plain English sentences

Natural language search enables users to type their questions using plain English and receive a list of the most appropriate pages to answer their questions. For example, a user could type: "Where do I find information about deleting?" and receive a list of the pages that contain the relevant information.

Interacting live and static content

Live online content from a Web server can be integrated with static content to enable the Help system to interact with dynamic Web-based software. For example, the Help system could include the price of the item they are trying to buy on eBay. The image below shows a screen for creating a Google advert. The embedded Help is dynamically updated to show the actual content that will be displayed on the advert you are creating.

"Mass Customised" documents

Mass Customisation is a trend within industrial societies that is likely to affect everyone within an organisation. It is a term in vogue with Ford and others. Mass Customisation is the idea that you offer a bespoke product - A Focus with a stripy roof and a cup holder on the steering wheel – at a cheap mass production price. So we may see a day soon when you could buy MS Word with only the bits you want, plus extra bits unique to your situation. 1-1 Marketing, in effect.

So what should software vendors do to the Help system? Should they ship the Help system that is for the original, uncustomised version or build a Help system for each unique solution supplied? Or should the vendor get the customer to amend the text?

This leads to some major issues – how to do it cheaply (how to re-use, re-purpose the information) and how to make it usable.

## Getting feedback on questions asked and topics used by users

It can be difficult to know if you are meeting the needs of your users with the online assistance you are providing. You can now analyse reports on usage patterns to help you identify information gaps and areas that could use improvement. You can use reports to answer questions such as:·

- What questions do users ask that are not answered?
- What questions do users ask most often?
- What is the most commonly viewed content?

Embedding Help into the application

Applications can suffer from Help windows being placed in inconvenient locations—often covering the portion of the interface on which the user is working. You can embed Help into the application and make information viewable as part of the application window itself. This has the following advantages:

- The information is there to prevent the initial frustration and time wasting of failure.
- The user is much more likely to read the information before struggling, since it is directly in front of them.
- There is no stigma attached to reading the Help as it is seen as part of the software itself - so users need not read it as a last resort.
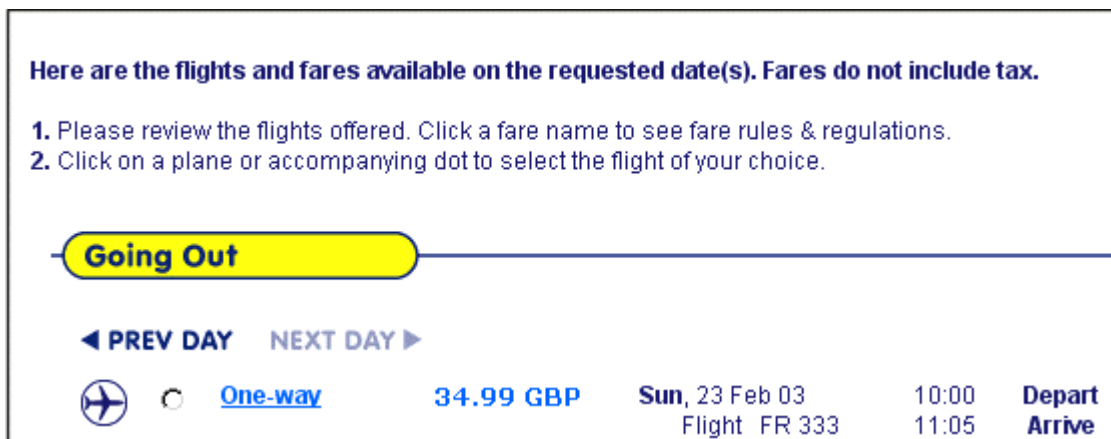

Customising the look of Help

You can change the look of the Help system to that of your organisation's Web site or application, and provide a more cohesive and professional-looking solution. This can include creating special images for navigation buttons, custom buttons, icons, and more.
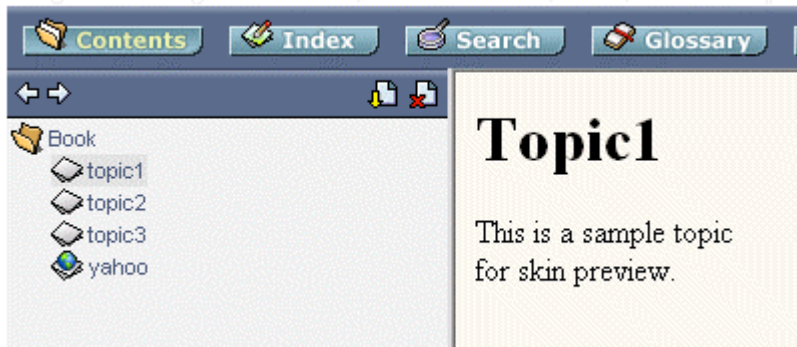
Providing just–in-time training

You can turn your Help system into a performance support system that provides an access point to more than one type of support information. For example, you can embed computer-based training material into a Help file and provide just-in-time training to complement the context-sensitive Help. You can use interactive tutorials and demos to demonstrate your software, train users or provide support.

The Flash file Creating custom Word paragraph style on the fly provides an example of an animated demonstration that could be used for training embedded into a Help file.
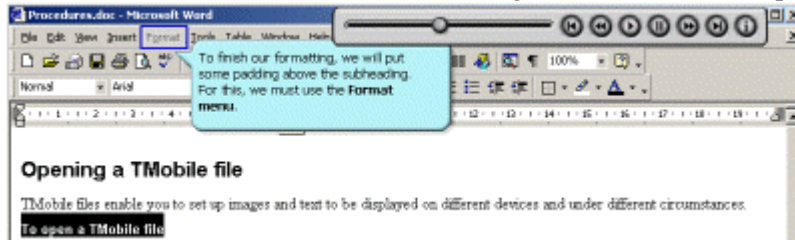

Linking to technical support information

You can link the Help system to a support Web site and include commonly asked support questions and just discovered workarounds for minor software bugs within the Help system. This can improve user productivity, reduce the number of calls to support desks and improve the quality of technical support.

Re-using information

You can write, manage, and publish documents in a variety of output formats, all from a single source. By using concepts such as "conditional text" you can deliver multiple versions of the output from a single project – for example, an expert and beginner version of a Help system, or a different version for German and Austrian users. This means you can change the document in one place, and your changes will be contained in each output format when you next publish them.
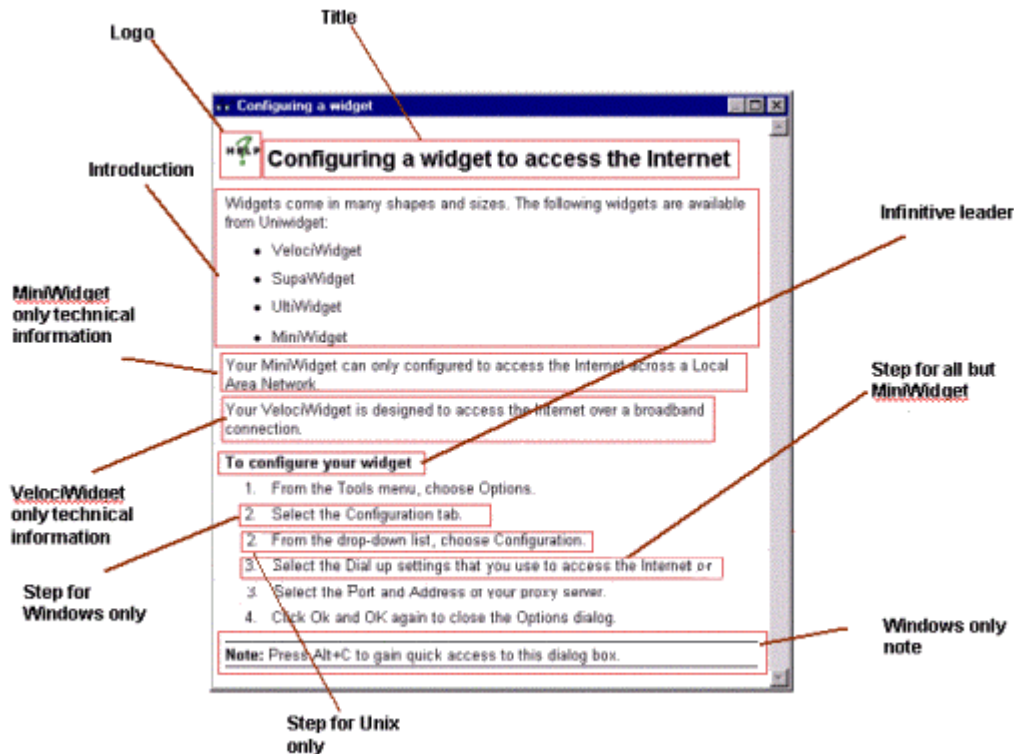
For more information on Single sourcing, see our article: An Introduction to Single Sourcing - Part 1.

Implications for technical authors

Of course, many application developers will carry on offering the same type of online documents they have always offered. However, in an increasingly competitive commercial world, more and more organisations will need to move towards a more personalised approach to their products and their documentation.

Many of these trends will affect how the software application itself is developed, and a programmer might say: "It's my job to include these capabilities!" Whilst there will be a need for the technical author and application developer to work more closely, we believe there will still be a need for the specialist user-focused skills that a technical author provides.

It is also important to select the right authoring tools and have the right processes, namely:

- User analysis tools
- Technologies that enable interactivity with the customer
- Component-based, flexible authoring systems
- Processes (or rules) for generating different versions of the documents

Email us your thoughts. We won't reveal your identity if you don't wish us to.

Survey

This summer, Cherryleaf will be producing a report on our survey into technical communication. We'll be looking at how many people are using these trends today. To participate, please complete this survey http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=55967177787".

For more information

Contact us if you are interested in finding out how Cherryleaf can help you.

The Managing Change http://www.managingchange.com/masscust/overview.htm" website provides more information on mass customisation.