

Selecting the Best Technology to Support your Content Reuse Strategy

Selecting a new technology isn't easy.

It can be overwhelming to figure out what type of technology solution your company needs, which often leads to inaction. Companies today realize that they need to take advantage of content reuse in order to save time, save money, and generate higher quality documentation. A successful content reuse implementation requires a well-planned, well-thought-out content reuse strategy and a technology that effectively supports this strategy. Often, technical communicators must lead this effort because they are working with the content, tools, and writing teams who are critical to the success of any content reuse and management efforts.

There is no universal, one-size-fits-all content reuse solution. There are countless vendor products, each differing in features, functionality, price, and complexity. With all these possibilities, it's easy to get lost.

This article is intended to help writing teams and company decision makers identify and prioritize needs in a practical way. Then, apply what you have learned about your current state and goals to figure out which technology solutions excel in the capabilities that are most important to you. At the end of this article I have provided a few examples and definitions of capabilities content reuse and management solutions have - ***Please contact me directly for the complete list as a useful reference and I'll be happy to share it with you.***

What is Content Reuse and Why Should you Care?

Before we continue, let's all get on the same page about what content reuse means. To put it in simple terms – **Write once. Approve once. Use everywhere.** This is the goal and this is what your company needs. Why? Because content costs money to create and maintain, it takes a lot of time to create and maintain, and the quality of the content (especially customer-facing content) has a direct impact on revenue and reputation. Whether your company is creating technical documentation, sales proposals, SOWs, or quality standards, content is critical to making money. Content reuse is critical for saving money.

Let's talk Technology...Where do you Start?

First you need a plan. Don't worry...you already know the answers to the questions I'm about to ask. You just need to think about them in the context of content reuse. Out of your company's responses to these questions, a content reuse strategy will evolve:

- **What content will be reused?** (Map out your content. What *should* be the same but currently isn't?)
- **Where will it be reused?** (Identify company departments who need to share content, document types, etc.)

- **Who will need to reuse it?** (Identify roles and responsibilities who need access to content. Content reuse isn't just for technical writers anymore.)
- **How is it going to be reused?** (How are your documents created? How else is your content distributed?)

Content mapping is the easiest way to visualize where content crossover exists within your company. Take a handful of representative documents or content outputs and analyze how they relate or how they *should* relate.

General Unsolicited Advice

There are a few things that are important to consider before you dive into specific features and technical capabilities. In the technical communication industry, we're inundated with information about XML and related technologies. It's important to understand that XML does not equal content reuse nor is it required for reuse. There are many tools that use XML-structured content as the basis for content reuse solutions and they can be very powerful. For some, this type of solution is ideal and allows them to achieve new content distribution goals. For others, XML-based solutions are far too expensive, inaccessible to certain types of writers, and just too "big" of a solution. Keep this in mind as you are reviewing capabilities of solutions but also when considering what implementation really means for your company.

When choosing a content reuse solution, you'll need to understand your budget and desired implementation timelines. As you begin to evaluate solutions, you should be equipped with this information so that you can have open discussions with vendors about it. They will be able to tell you in a very real way what you can expect as far as training requirements, ease-of-use, and overall cost of entry. That all needs to fit in with your needs.

Also, be sure you understand any technology constraints that your company may have. For example, if your company uses only Microsoft products, you need to find solutions that fit in with that. If you already have an in-house tool, be sure that other tools you evaluate do not conflict and that you'll be able to meet any IT requirements you'll need to adhere to.

The most important thing you need to keep in mind is that you want to set your team and company up for success. Invest the time in collecting the necessary information as well as training. Use your technology vendor's expertise and let them provide you with their proven path toward success. They know best and want you to succeed.

Prioritizing Technical Capabilities

Before you begin evaluating technology solutions, it's important to determine which capabilities are most important to you. I have compiled a list of capabilities, descriptions, and considerations found in content reuse technologies. You can use this list to prioritize what you are looking for in a solution – which capabilities are must haves, nice-to-haves, and not necessary for your team.

Here is just a small sampling of the capabilities you will consider when selecting content reuse technology. For a complete list, please contact me directly (lisap@36software.com) and I'll be happy to provide you with this practical guide to content reuse capabilities.

CAPABILITY	DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS
Component Reuse	The ability to reuse a chunk of content across documentation. Other common terms for “component” include snippet, chunk, topic, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a fundamental capability that any reuse solution should have. • Components can be text, formatted content, graphics, tables, or other media. • Reusable components should be stored in a centralized library that supports versioning.
Metadata and Taxonomy	The ability to classify your reusable components so you can easily find and reuse them later on.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a fundamental capability that any reuse solution should have. • Metadata is stored with your reusable components so you can search for them later. • Taxonomy provides a logical classification (think folder structure) for your component library. • Ensure your solution’s metadata and taxonomy capabilities are easily configurable so you can customize them to meet your needs.
Where Used	The ability to track where, when, and who reused content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is an important capability if you will be reusing content in living documentation. • Facilitates impact assessment and content updates by showing you what documentation is using a reusable component.
Document Assembly	The ability to easily assemble new documents from existing content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is an important capability if you will be using reusable content to generate repetitive documentation. • The solution automatically finds relevant content based on the context of the documentation the user is generating. (example: a sales associate answers a series of questions and the solution auto-generates a draft of a sales proposal using reusable components)

For the complete list, please contact Lisa Pietrangeli at lisap@36software.com

I look forward to hearing from you and sharing more information. Remember: your company’s needs may seem completely unique but there are certainly others facing the same challenges. The good part about that truth is that there is someone out there who has developed a solution that is right for you. Good luck in your search!

About the Author

Lisa Pietrangeli is a managing partner and executive director at 36Software. At 36, Lisa specializes in working with clients to develop customized content development strategies. Lisa brings over 14 years of experience to 36Software, having worked extensively with companies around the world, helping them to streamline their content development and localization processes. Before joining 36Software, Lisa was director of global client solutions at Language Intelligence, where she worked with clients to develop internationalization strategies for all stages of the content development process, from authoring through to translation. Her extensive experience has included everything from project management,

resource selection and management, to business development, localization consulting and managing client relationships. Her experience, combined with her analytical skills, make Lisa an ideal partner with whom to evaluate content development and localization processes, develop proof of concept, and tailor solutions for organizations of all types and sizes.

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