

User Documentation

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For a user to benefit optimally from a Web site, the site must make its content easily accessible. It must define its domain of knowledge and vocabulary, and facilitate the completion of unfamiliar and difficult tasks.

Table 1: Summary of user questions and solutions

Goal exploration	What can I do with this program?	
Definition and description	What is this and what is it for?	Provide short looped video clips (micons) or provide a list of sample tasks as part of the indexed help message.
Task achievement	How can I do this?	Supply video to be distributed with program, a set of animated cartoons (ex. Part of HyperCard stack), or a set of indexed instructions (i.e. as printed book).
Diagnostic	How did that happen?	Include simple expert system.
State identification	Where am I?	Provide a state transition diagram as a map to show where to go and how to get there. Provide a dynamic map of the last few steps using little screen shots and a record of the command that made each transition.

The documentation should be task oriented. Identifying the most common and important tasks, plus the tasks, objects, etc. people had the most trouble with will help make the Help more relevant. To encourage exploration, it is necessary to explain how to recover from errors.

Minimalist instruction reduces the amount of information a user needs to know in order to learn how to use the product.

Documentation

In the design,

- use high contrast for increased readability
- don't use color alone to convey information
- don't use graphics alone to convey information
- make text readable - 12 point on paper, customizable on-line
- make on-line documentation complete
- make sure that documents convert to SGML cleanly
- bind documentation to lie flat

Information should be available

- in product documentation (chapter or appendix)
- in separate documents (on web or available through customer service)

Document accessibility features, tips and warnings for the product.

- accessibility features for users with disabilities
- mainstream features
- tips about how to work around limitations
- keyboard procedures to accomplish tasks
- warnings when the product isn't usable by individuals with certain types of disabilities, or using certain types of accessibility aids

It is advisable to contact Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic to help format documents so that they will be accessible to people with disabilities

User Assistance

Many technologies can be effectively used to support the users of software products. These technologies allow for the proper platform to provide conceptual and reference information, context sensitive stepped procedures, interactive tutorials, frequent on-line updates and much more.

When extensive documentation is required, book-like formats work better than hypertext networks that have less apparent overall structure.

Effective user assistance combines Help, Site Map, Index, and Search functions. The use of these user assistance devices (UADs) is required to support different needs of the user.

While a context-sensitive application programming interface (API) may ultimately be necessary for delivering Help topics on the Web, some straightforward design decisions would improve sites immediately. Ex.:

- use a unique Help page for every instance requiring Help.
- when supporting multiple instances requiring Help with a single Help page, employ mid-page targets.

Web developers could benefit from technical writers writing and organizing the Help content.

On-Line Help

- help messages generated by selecting the desired object. Ex.:
Shift + F1 in Windows
Balloon Help
- context-sensitive help built into application system states or dialog boxes
- generic help text, usually limited in length, available through a help command, menu bar item, function key or icon
- extended help screens, accessible through a “More” button. These can be linked together to form hypertext
- extensive written documentation available on-line, typically to be read like a book.

EPSS

Another approach to improving user assistance is to maintain information about usage and provide advice based on a particular user’s situation. The support system should maintain a record of the user’s actions and compare them to a set of common plans for actions. This would enable the system to provide customized help that reflects likely plans that the user is trying to accomplish.

The system could also suggest more efficient ways of performing functions, including the user adapting the program by creating menu entries and hot key shortcuts for frequent actions

Electronic performance support system (EPSS) is part on-line help, part on-line tutorial, part database, part application program, and part expert system.

Performance support systems can be

- integrated into application software, creating no distinction between performance support and the application
- linked to an application, much like on-line help
- stand alone, especially appropriate for work tasks that are not software-related

Because EPSSs are designed to meet the needs of users in a work-related context, the most significant challenges in designing them are not technical, but rather in understanding actual job requirements and structuring the information and access methods with an eye towards system power and ease of maintenance (Gloria Gery).

Performance support systems quickly and easily provide answers to the questions workers have when performing a job, and address workers’ concerns, which include

- Why do this?
- What is it?
- What’s related to it?
- How do I do it?
- How or why did this happen?
- Show me an example...
- Teach me...
- Assist me...
- Advise me...

- Let me try...
- Watch me...
- Evaluate me...
- Understand me
- How does it work?
- Why does it work like that?
- Compare this or these for me
- Where am I?
- What next?

The main component of an EPSS is the infobase.

Table 2: Types of information in the infobase.

Reference	Warehouse of specific information that users may need only once or twice
Procedures	Instructions on how to perform tasks or implement policies
Tutorials	Self-study materials to teach concepts and tasks so users can perform them with the levels of assistance identified
Advisor	Provides advice at a user's request
Wizards	Automatically complete a task using well-chosen defaults and essential input from users
Cue Cards	Guide users through a task step-by-step, explaining how to perform the task so they can perform it without assistance in the future
Electronic brochures, tips, newsletters	Inform and remind users about secondary information in the infobase
Tracking	Monitor users' performance for the purpose of evaluating work or providing assistance

The information can be presented as:

- Text
- Graphics
- Audio
- Video
- Artificial intelligence
- Database

References

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