

News from David Farbey

June 2008

DITA Exchange

The Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) is an open XML-based standard for technical documentation, which is managed by the [OASIS DITA Technical Committee](#). The DITA standard is designed specifically to improve the efficiency of technical documentation teams by enabling single-sourcing and content component re-use. Major organisations report considerable cost savings through content re-use, and these savings are multiplied further where there is a need for content to be translated into other languages.

I am very pleased to announce that my company, Dannywell Ltd., has been appointed as the first Authorised Reseller in the UK for [DITA Exchange](#).



DITA Exchange is a complete, web-based, content collaboration platform for small, medium and large companies and organizations, based on Microsoft Office SharePoint 2007 and the DITA open standard. DITA Exchange is developed by [Content Technologies ApS of Denmark](#). Because it makes use of many standard SharePoint features, DITA Exchange offers a surprisingly rapid route to DITA implementation. For example, you can use the DITA Exchange form-based editor to create DITA topics straight away without the need to use XML or DITA tags. You can run DITA Exchange on your existing Microsoft SharePoint Server 2007, or you can use a hosted solution instead. In either case, there's no software to install on the client.

For more information see our [DITA Exchange page](#) or contact me by email at [DITA Exchange enquiries](#) to discuss how DITA Exchange can help you. I will of course be continuing my work as an independent technical communications and information design consultant alongside my work with DITA Exchange.

No-one reads your web site



I am often asked to write content for web pages, so I was a little perplexed to learn that about three-quarters of what's written on the web rarely gets read! The average visitor has time to read only 28% of the text on your web page, according to a study reported by Jakob Nielsen in a recent [Alertbox column on his web site](#). Nielsen, an acknowledged expert on web usability, analysed the report data and concluded that people will only spend an extra 4.4 seconds on a page for every additional 100 words of text, which means they have very little chance of reading everything you write.

The lesson from this study is that if you want visitors to your web site to get information, or take some sort of action, you have very little time in which to do that. It seems that a clear layout with obvious targeted headlines has a better chance than a page packed with detailed text. This implies that using information design principles to plan your site visitor's web experience may be more important than using search engine optimisation to pack your pages with key words. If you think your web site may be text-heavy, I'd be happy to work with you to improve it.

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STC Summit in Philadelphia

I recently attended the [STC Technical Communications Summit](#) in Philadelphia where I gave two short presentations. I also heard a number of outstanding speakers, including [Janice \(Ginny\) Redish](#) who spoke about *Writing as Asynchronous Conversation*. In this presentation Ginny asked writers to look at written communication, particularly on the web, as a form of conversation. In a conversation that is asynchronous - one in which the participants don't meet at the same time - we need to anticipate the questions our unknown interlocutor may have, and prepare answers that are not merely accurate, but also appropriate in tone and context. The lesson is don't lecture your web site visitors, and don't tell them only what you want to say, but try and answer the questions they are likely to have. Once again, thoughtful planning is a key to success.

As many of you know, I am the Co-Manager of the STC's [Europe Special Interest Group](#), which aims to educate technical writers throughout the world about the challenges and opportunities of the European marketplace, as well as providing a meeting place for writers working in Europe. It was great to meet so many members and to make so many new friends.

Another discussion I attended was about the efforts currently going on to develop a "body of knowledge" for the technical communications profession. This has implications for the teaching of technical communication, both at the entry level (such as the [ISTC Open Learning Course](#)) and at University level (such as Sheffield Hallam University's [MA Programme](#)).

Supporting Business Continuity Planning

I am currently working with [Jigsaw Business Networks](#), a Carlisle-based consultancy specialising in business continuity (BC) software and services, to develop an integrated offering of software, services and documentation, for business continuity and disaster recovery. Many BC support tools are good at helping businesses document their equipment and software inventory, and their network infrastructure. What these tools don't do automatically is create the policies, procedures, instructions, that a business needs to keep operating. We hope that by working together we can fill this gap in the marketplace.

New business phone number

Please note that I have a new contact phone number for use during UK office hours. The number is 0844 561 0742. If you are calling from outside the UK, dial +44 844 561 0742.

Thank you for reading this newsletter

Please forward this newsletter to any colleagues or friends who may be interested. Please get in touch if you want to find out more about DITA Exchange, or business continuity planning, or if you want to discuss your company's internal or customer-facing documentation. I look forward to hearing from you.

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