



The XML Strategist

Casting a critical eye on the Next Big Thing in technical publishing.

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The Hidden Cost of DITA

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In the past few years, we have implemented both DITA-based and custom XML solutions for our customers. Given the right set of circumstances, DITA provides an excellent foundation for structured content. But I seem to be in significant disagreement with DITA advocates about how often the “right set of circumstances” is present.

The Gartner Hype Cycle, shown in Figure 1, describes the “common pattern of human response to technology.”

In my opinion, DITA appears to be near the Peak of Inflated Expectations. (For more on the hype cycle, visit Gartner’s Web site: www.gartner.com/DisplayDocument?doc_cd=130115.)

The Peak of Inflated Expectations is the point where technology seems incredibly exciting, but none of its flaws—and all technology has flaws!—are being given serious consideration.

I hope this article will allow us to begin discussing DITA implementation challenges.

Content Modeling

Too many people see the DITA architecture as a shortcut to avoid content modeling. The logic appears to be something like this: “The DITA designers are smart people who designed something very useful that will work great for my content.” I agree that the DITA designers are smart and that DITA is a significant achievement. It’s the last part that concerns me.

Here’s a brief checklist of content modeling questions:

1. Is the DITA content model appropriate for my content?
2. How much work would be required to customize or specialize DITA to make

3. How important is the content model to the information I create?
4. How different would the content model look if I built it from scratch?

Most important, I think you need to ask this question:

4. How different would the content model look if I built it from scratch?

One trade-off in choosing DITA (or any other standard) is that you must conform to the general worldview of the standard you are implementing. DITA was initially designed to create topic-oriented, modular content that describes software applications. If your content is currently not topic oriented, a DITA implementation means a significant shift in how your content is written and organized. Although it may be the

right approach, the transition will be expensive and time-consuming and should be included in the cost analysis.

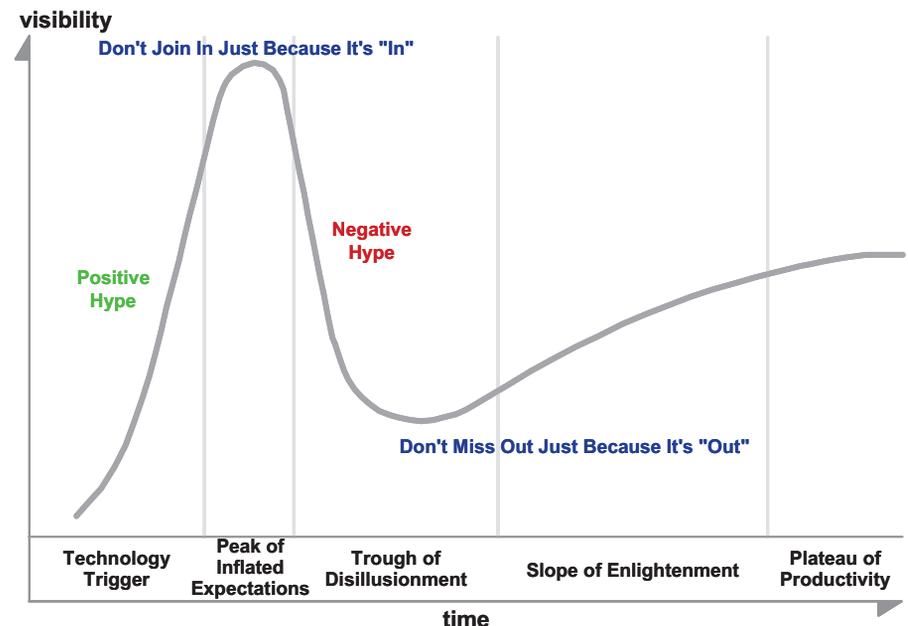
In addition, I believe that there is another important consideration—if you decide to build on DITA without fully understanding your content model, you will end up with a DITA-shaped box that may or may not be the correct shape for your content.

Specialization

DITA specialization lets you customize the DITA structure without breaking the output processing. Because you create new elements that are explicitly based on existing elements, default processing is still available. However, when you use specialization, your new element must be congruent with the parent element. That is, the specialized element must use a structure that is valid for the original element. The content model must either match the original element or be a subset of the original element (for example, you could eliminate optional elements to make the new element stricter). Your specialized element must not use a structure that is invalid for the element from which you specialized.

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Figure 1. Where is DITA on the hype cycle?



Source: Gartner (July 2007)

