The business case for content operations

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Defining content operations

We have an ingrained mental model of writers as introverted hermits, toiling away in solitude. Eventually, they produce manuscripts, which are fed into a publishing pipeline for editing and production. This model might hold for some fiction writers, but content production looks very different for marketing and technical efforts.

Today's corporate content requires close collaboration across multiple specialties, style guides, standardized processes, governance, and industrial-grade tools. Creating content for a large organization resembles a manufacturing process rather than our traditional model of heroic solo writers.

There is an additional complication. Most content is not just written, processed, and delivered once; rather, it undergoes edits, updates, and corrections over time. Although you may package and deliver information, the process doesn't end there. Content production is a lifecycle, in which information is constantly evolving.

We can borrow further from manufacturing and think of content ops as an assembly line, which lets an organization optimize each component of the content development process. Just remember that our content process, unlike an actual assembly line, can loop back on itself for content updates. The idea of a "content factory" is in stark contrast to the image of a solitary writer, and it can provoke resistance or outright hostility. Typically, it's easier for more technical content creators—technical writers, UX writers, and API documentation writers—to think in manufacturing terms than it is for more creative writers in marketing roles.

Executives view content ops through a different lens: they demand a business justification for any investment. ([1]For a more detailed discussion of the business drivers, refer to "Summarizing the Benefits" in the "Defining ContentOps" chapter included in "Content Operations from Start to Scale: Perspectives from Industry Experts.") These are the most common justifications:

- Scalability
- Velocity
- Consistency
- Risk management and compliance

Scalability

In most small businesses, content development is inefficient and fragmented. As long as the content volumes are relatively low (and all in one language), this inefficiency is reasonable.[2]

[1] This content was first published in Content Operations from Start to Scale: Perspectives from Industry Experts. O'Keefe, S. 2024. The Business Case for Content Operations. In: Evia, C. (ed.) Pp. 25–32. Blacksburg: Virginia Tech Publishing. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/content_oper ations_evia_4. License: CC BY.

[2] Scriptorium uses a guideline of around $250M in revenue for US organizations. That is the point at which organizations start to prioritize global operations and therefore scalability. The cutoff tends to be lower for European organizations (which prioritize localization earlier in their business lifecycle).

However, as a business grows, content demands multiply. In particular, once a business starts expanding product lines and globalizing, it faces the following content challenges:

- The problem of controlling content without creating multiple copies of information for related documents. (For instance, a company might split a product into "regular" and "premium" versions. The "premium" product has a few additional features, but the overlapping features are the same. For this, the organization needs a way to manage the overlapping content without making copies.)
- The challenge of delivering information into multiple channels—web, print, email, social media, and so on—with consistent messages and terminology.
- The challenge of sharing information across multiple content types—product reference, knowledge base, training, marketing, and so on—while avoiding duplicate or contradictory information.
- The rising demand for locale-specific content, including new languages and potentially new regulatory requirements.
- The need to identify and target specific audiences with certain content.

Thus, a single piece of content might live in multiple product versions, channels, content types, and languages. At this point, the price of fragmented content rises to an unacceptable level. When every piece of content goes to the web first, is used in several other delivery channels, and is translated into dozens of languages, any friction in the content process gets multiplied for each channel and each language. Five minutes of manually moving content from point A to point B doesn't sound like much, until you have six channels (30 minutes) and 20 languages (600 minutes, assuming five minutes per language per channel). Suddenly, you've spent hours just moving files around. Industry conversations mention that technical writers spend nearly half their time on "document maintenance" tasks.

To build out scalable content operations, an organization will need to invest in the following:

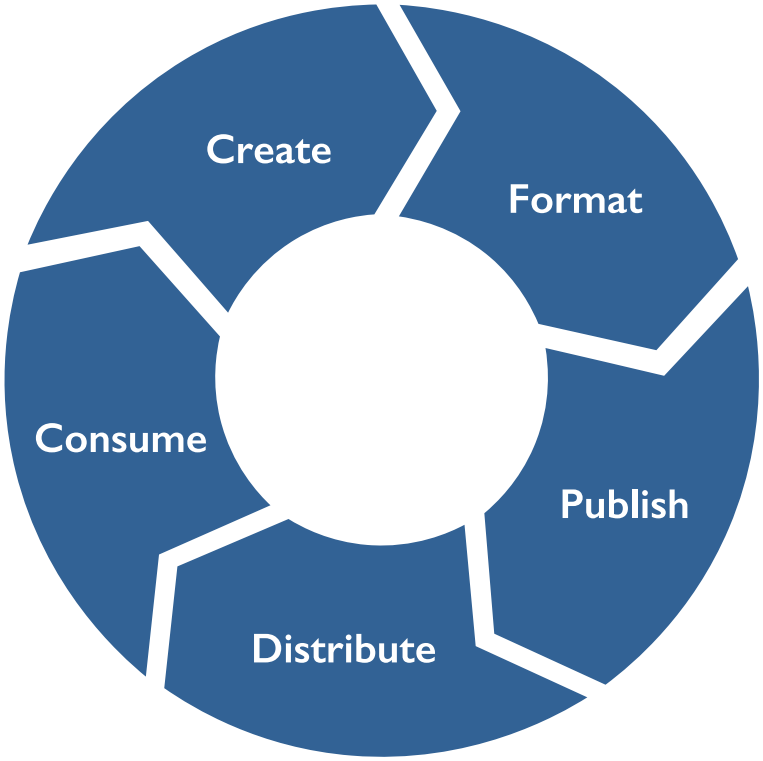
- A centralized repository for content.
- A reuse strategy to identify and manage reusable components across channels and content types.
- A conditional strategy to identify and manage variant content (where most of the content is reusable, but one small chunk is unique to a specific deliverable or audience).
- An omnichannel delivery pipeline.
- Audience profiling.
- A global content strategy to address locale-specific content requirements and localization/translation work.

The payoff for this investment is a content pipeline that lets the organization maximize the value of each piece of content.

Velocity

Content velocity affects an organization's ability to speed up time to market, and content ops provides a way to improve content velocity. A basic content lifecycle looks like this:

Create > format > publish > distribute > consume.



In a paper-based lifecycle, most advances were confined to physical production, such as faster printing presses. But in a digital content lifecycle, an organization can automate and optimize all stages of the content lifecycle.

Authoring and editing

Organizations can speed up authoring either by making content creators more efficient or by reducing the amount of content that needs to be created.

To increase efficiency in the work of content creators, you can provide authoring frameworks, efficient authoring tools, and authoring support (through software and processes). For example, an organization might have a tool that automatically identifies overly complex sentences and offers recommendations to simplify them. Structured content templates can guide authors as they create content to ensure that they include all of the needed components in a particular document. If a magazine article requires a summary at the beginning and an author profile at the end, a structured content tool can prompt authors to include that information.

A reuse strategy, which makes content more scalable, also reduces the amount of content that needs to be written and thereby improves velocity. To increase content reuse, it's critical to provide authors with a way to locate existing content and identify good candidates for reuse. Authors shift from prioritizing writing new content to identifying new ways to mix and match existing content. Most organizations can expect at least 20% reuse in their product content; that number can rise to as high as 80% for certain industries (the semiconductor sector is a good example) that have huge content volumes and lots of overlap among product lines.

Reuse also improves outcomes downstream in the content lifecycle—more reuse means less information to edit, review, approve, translate, render, and deliver.

At a bare minimum, editing content by passing around files and using some sort of change tracking is a huge velocity win over paper-based comments. To increase editing velocity, organizations can augment human editors with software for structure and terminology. Another approach is to step away from the author/editor framework and instead create shared documents for collaborative authoring. If a group of two or three authors work together in a shared file (Google Docs is a great example of this), they can create a collaborative document instead of each working on their own personal filesets. A truly collaborative writing approach blurs the distinction between authoring and editing.

Maintenance

Once content is published, it needs to be maintained. Typically, that means correcting any errors and making updates as things change. A solid content ops workflow means that you can update a piece of content in a single location and have the change flow to every place that uses that information. If content is reused via copy and paste, then a single content change needs to be made in multiple locations. Those problems multiply across languages and content variants.

Another opportunity in maintenance is to examine how changes and corrections are captured and managed. For example, how are user comments handled? Are they ignored, or is there a process to capture them, validate the information, and then ensure the underlying content is updated? After the correction is made and published, what should happen to the comment?

Review and approval

The review and approval process is a common cause of friction in the content lifecycle. The problem often lies with limited authority. If a single person is responsible for approving content, that person's availability determines how quickly content moves through the approval process.

The single point of failure problem can be addressed by increasing the number of people who have approval authority, or identifying a backup approver when the primary approver isn't available.

Once an organization has clarified the approval assignments, it should consider a review and approval workflow, which may live inside its content management system. This software lets the company set up assignments and notifications, so that when an author completes a piece of content, the content is automatically routed to reviewers. Reviews could be serial (reviewer

A, then reviewer B, then approver C) or parallel (reviewers A, B, and C all review at the same time, and when their issues are resolved, the content moves into an approved state).

Review and approval workflows vary widely across industries and organizations. In some places, authors approve and publish their own content. In other organizations, extensive review cycles are the norm. Regulated industries typically have compliance requirements that drive their review process. Review stakeholders may also include legal teams or quality assurance.

Rendering

Velocity in rendering requires formatting automation. Content is stored with tags or labels that indicate meaning (like “heading 1,” “button label,” or “warning”), and then the appropriate formatting is applied as the information is rendered for PDF, HTML, or other formats. A multichannel delivery pipeline requires the organization to think about rendering across many channels and ensure that the content has all of the labels needed to create every format.

For maximum velocity, a content team needs to ensure that all rendering is automated. Furthermore, it should build in localization support for all target languages.

Manual formatting is doable in small content ops, but it will become a problem as the organization scales.

Delivery

Delivery is perhaps the phase that has been most transformed by the shift from paper to digital workflows. Although modern content ops workflows have added new tools and technologies everywhere, authoring and editing is still recognizably the same process on paper as in a digital workflow. But delivering paper documents requires manufacturing (to create physical books) and logistics for actual physical delivery, as opposed to putting content on a website for instant availability.

So even without formal content ops, digital delivery is faster than physical delivery. The content team does end up with complications because the number of channels that they need to deliver to has increased. Content ops for delivery requires thinking carefully about content governance—how soon after approval should content be posted? Is there a delivery schedule? Do you use content delivery networks or other intermediaries to manage the load?

Another way to look at delivery is to use a *pull* rather than a *push* model. Instead of finalizing content and then pushing it to publication channels, an organization can have content clients. The content client requests information from the organization’s content repository (or an intermediate layer) and renders the content that’s delivered to the client.

Digital delivery should be instantaneous in any digital workflow, so once a team gets to this point, it doesn't have to worry too much about velocity.

Consistency

Improving consistency of content provides another justification for investing in content ops. The technology and processes in a mature content operations environment make it easier to achieve the following:

- Control terminology across all languages.
- Ensure that the look and feel of content matches; for example, if the rule is to italicize glossary terms in technical content, then all glossary terms are italicized throughout the content set.
- Ensure that content used in multiple places is the same throughout the corpus.

Content consistency helps build user trust and makes it easier for users to understand information. In high-stakes content, such as that related to medical devices or industrial equipment, content consistency helps ensure the safety of the people using the products. Ensuring that all warnings are highlighted consistently and follow industry standards helps people avoid injuries due to incorrect product use. (It may also reduce the manufacturer's legal liability if an injury does unfortunately occur.)

In addition to safety issues, consistency helps with brand identity and customer trust in the following areas:

- The use of consistent terminology across all channels and content types makes the customer feel more comfortable. Customers build confidence as they learn an organization's terminology, instead of stumbling when multiple terms are used for the same concept.
- A consistent look and feel assures the customer that the content is trustworthy. When clients notice design variances, they may wonder why they occurred. Does inconsistent design mean that the content is not fully vetted?
- Consistent voice and tone help support the brand identity and messaging.
- Consistent design patterns (for example, warnings always boxed in red) mean that customers get familiar with a team's design and know how to navigate the content.
- Consistent content writing can be reused across multiple channels and content types, which reduces the overall cost of ownership for the content.

The business justifications for consistency run the gamut from "stay in compliance with regulators" to "build trust in our brand." Each organization will value consistency based on different considerations.

Risk management and compliance

I've mentioned risk management and compliance as a factor in several of the other business justifications, but I think it's worth addressing separately. If an organization has compliance requirements, content ops can formalize the content life cycle and reduce the risk of compliance errors.

Providing the wrong content or omitting a required content component in a regulated environment can lead to delays in product approvals, fines, or worse. Establishing a rigorous content ops system to prevents these errors is well worth the cost because the risk is so high.

Even without compliance requirements, better content ops is a risk-mitigation strategy. If an organization has good control over its content, consistent formatting, and appropriate reuse, it reduces the risk of content errors.

Publishing content introduces some risk for any organization, but it is especially important for regulated organizations to get their content right. For example:

- Submitting incorrect information to a governmental body could result in sanctions.
- Having policies and procedures that do not accurately reflect how a medical device manufacturer operates could result in the factory being shut down.
- Incorrect operational instructions could result in product users being injured or killed.

Risk mitigation is more important in some industries (like industrial equipment) than others (such as video games), so each content team should consider the risk profile for its products.

Building your business case

A scrappy startup with a couple hundred pages of content in three languages needs a different solution than a global medical device manufacturer, and the investment should be commensurate with the expected returns. So as you build out content ops, assess your organization's requirements for scalability, velocity, consistency, risk mitigation, and compliance—and build accordingly.