



Microcontent Migration: Making the Move to New Content Opportunities

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If your company's content is difficult to navigate, is hard to read, and often doesn't give you the answers you're looking for, it may be time for a microcontent migration! At Precision Content, we recently moved an important internal publication out of Word and into microcontent; now our content can be easily updated, reused, or published to whichever output our users need. We identified opportunities for improvement in our unstructured content, strategically rewrote certain sections to maximize reusability, marked it all up in specialized DITA XML, and thoughtfully planned a microcontent governance strategy to safeguard and extend our newly unlocked business benefits.

Imagine your first day back in the office after coming home from a long work trip. It's time to submit your expenses to be reimbursed. You open your company's employee handbook to look for the instructions, but you can't find any help. You start to wonder and worry about when and if you will be reimbursed. When the newly hired team of Associate Information Architects at Precision Content began our efforts to provide some much-needed updates to our company's employee handbook, we discovered that this and other important information wasn't even covered in the handbook. Moreover, because the handbook was written and published as a static Microsoft Word document, the content was not living up to its full potential. Authors could reuse content only by copying and pasting, as opposed to referencing or linking to content. Authors also lacked the ability to easily publish the content in other formats. Our employees want to get answers quickly, so we need to make content accessible in, for example, a web portal where employees could browse and filter the content, or a chatbot that could intelligently draw upon the content to serve the correct answers to questions such as "Which holidays do we have off work?" What we needed was to migrate our content into a microcontent architecture.

Magnificent Microcontent

Microcontent is

- "about one primary idea, fact, or concept,
- easily scannable,

- labelled for clear identification and meaning, and
- appropriately written and formatted for use anywhere and anytime it is needed" (Hanna & Zhu, 2021).

Microcontent should not be confused with microcopy, which refers to the brief words or phrases that make up the labels, buttons, error messages, and related copy on user interfaces. Microcontent requires topic-based structured authoring, written and formatted so that it will naturally fit whatever possible output the future calls for.

The four principles of intelligent microcontent are

- focus
- function
- structure
- context

Focus

Microcontent must be about only one subject (Lam, 2019). This precise focus is what allows microcontent to operate as building blocks of information. Our company's existing employee handbook content was not as focused as it could be. For example, the section labelled "Hours of Work" contained not only the fact that our office hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., but also bulged with information about lunch breaks, planned absence procedures, and differences in overtime for full-time and part-time workers. If an employee wanted to find who to contact to inform them about a

planned absence, they would likely skip the seemingly irrelevant label “Hours of Work.” Our unfocused content gave off a poor information scent.

To turn “Hours of Work” into microcontent, we split the section into briefer, more tightly focused chunks with headings such as “Work Hour Limits” and “Time Tracking Requirement.” These microcontent “building blocks” were then assembled together under the more universally applicable heading, “Your Work Environment.” This had the effect of making the content more scannable for readers searching for specific information. The stronger semantic links between title and body content will also have the effect, down the line, of providing artificial intelligence systems with better clues as to the nature of the content. Among other applications, this will facilitate the efforts of chatbots to match queries to answers in conversational interfaces.

Function

Microcontent must be typed to identify user intent (Lam, 2019). In other words, “information is what information does.” Microcontent is written with a clear purpose, such as to introduce a new idea to a reader or provide the steps needed to complete a task.

The information types “task,” “concept,” and “reference” are familiar to technical writers trained in DITA. In the Precision Content microcontent architecture, we provide authors with the information types “process” and “principle” in addition to the original three DITA information types. The “Hours of Work” section in our original employee handbook contained both reference information (e.g., “The typical office hours for Precision Content are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.”) and principle information (e.g., “Employees are required to notify the Accounting and HR Manager in advance of planned days away from the office.”). This mix of purposes muddled the content’s clarity and limited its reusability. Our move to microcontent meant we needed to separate discrete types of information into their own topics.

Structure

Microcontent must use predictable patterns and language (Lam, 2019). This can be accomplished through structured authoring, which is characterized by systematic labelling, a topic-based architecture, constrained writing environments, and the separation

of content and form (Self, 2011). One of the ways we added structure when adapting this content to microcontent was by adjusting the titles of topics to match their function. For example, the titles of task information were rewritten to always begin with a verb. This signals to the reader that this information is about something they *do*, and it sets the topics apart from those that begin with nouns. Patterned language improves the scannability of microcontent.

Context

Microcontent must be easily relatable to other content (Lam, 2019). It is designed to fit within a larger ecosystem of related information. Microcontent needs to be able to link to its context to be meaningful (Hanna & Zhu, 2021). Stuck in a static Word document, individual topics in our original employee handbook had no inherent associations with one another. Now our microcontent topics exist in their own DITA XML files. They also exist within maps, which themselves exist within chapters in a larger DITA bookmap. Furthermore, we appended related links to several topics and even embedded some topics within larger topics.

Microcontent Migration

The process of migrating our company’s employee handbook into microcontent began with a lengthy planning phase. Our team of three Associate Information Architects created a detailed outline for the new version of the handbook in Microsoft Excel. We populated the outline with our desired topics, some of which corresponded to what already existed, and some of which needed to be written. We broke many bloated topics into smaller topics when we found a mix of information types. Our planning process allowed us to uncover numerous gaps in our content set. For example, an original section titled simply, “Expenses,” was broken into smaller, more focused pieces, such as the principle topic, “In-Person Travel Expense Reimbursement Policies,” and the task topic, “Apply for Reimbursement,” the latter of which had not yet been written in any form. Other gaps in our existing content set were uncovered through stakeholder interviews with representatives from human resources and our executive team. The result of this planning phase was an employee handbook that was significantly longer than before, but made up of a larger volume of smaller, more focused topics.

After our topics were identified, labelled, and ordered, we determined purposes, descriptors, and information types for all of them. This provided guidance for the authoring phase; if we know a topic is of the task type, for example, we already know what kind of information to provide and in what order. This information typing proved especially helpful when the topic in question was new and not a rewrite of an existing topic.

Our team split the topic assignments amongst ourselves, and we got to work writing them. Instead of writing in Microsoft Word, as had the original authors of the employee handbook, we created our topics in Oxygen XML Editor. Topics were written in Precision Content DITA, our specialization of DITA. We managed our work in the component content management system Heretto, connected to Oxygen XML Editor via the WebDAV protocol. Heretto allowed us to configure workflows that automatically notified our subject matter experts when content was ready for their approval. After a few rounds of collaborative checks and edits, we were finally ready to produce our microcontent-based employee handbook. We styled a publishing template, plugged it into Heretto, and successfully published our new handbook.

Conclusion

Restructured as microcontent, our employee handbook now has greater inherent flexibility than ever. The content is ready to be easily transformed into other formats. It has become possible for us to “create once, publish everywhere.” Topics can be reused rather than rewritten. We can depend on our microcontent to act as a “single source of truth” for company policies. Collaboration is much easier thanks to the fact that the content lives inside a component content management system. The lifecycle of the content can be better governed with automated workflows. The content is now written according to a microcontent standard. Most significantly, we can even use tools such as WittyParrot to feed our microcontent topics into an AI-powered chatbot system. By paying close attention to the focus, function, structure, and context of the content, we have improved its usability and potential.

References

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