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Zylinc wins a UK TC Award

Morten Müller explains the rationale behind the award-winning Zylinc unified help.

Zylinc makes unified communications software for call centres and receptions. Unified communications means the ability for call centre agents and receptionists to handle phone, e-mail, chat and social media inquiries in a single solution. Ideally, users/potential customers should be able to find help and other information about Zylinc solutions in one place, but in 2017, that wasn't the case: content was scattered across wikis, PDFs, printed manuals, PowerPoints, support cases, etc.

That's why we formed a small dedicated documentation team and decided to create Zylinc unified help; a website that, like Zylinc's software, brings together information that audiences previously had to access through different channels, in different formats. The brief from top management was that Zylinc unified help should not only serve end users, but also other stakeholders, from supervisors, administrators, installers and system integrators to C-level executives. Furthermore, it should support Zylinc's business partners in promoting, selling and delivering Zylinc solutions.

There's growing evidence that openly available quality online help can influence buying decisions and establish positive brand awareness

Zylinc award-winning unified help

Jesper Juul Pedersen and Morten Müller collecting their award from Paul Ballard

(Riley et al., 2013; Abel, 2018; Porter, 2018). However, Zylinc operates in a tough marketplace where players are wary of revealing much to the competition, so another part of our brief was that the entire site should require a login. While that made it harder for us to reach people who weren't yet users, it helped us focus on helping Zylinc's partners form the initial customer relationships.

System out, people in

We created Zylinc unified help using MadCap Flare, but before we opened Flare, we did a content audit. It showed that existing content was mainly system-oriented, used passive language and had unclear target audience definitions. At the time, Zylinc was thus no different from many other growth organisations, where communication is often ad-hoc and uncoordinated until there's critical mass to justify establishing dedicated communication teams.

We wanted to change the system orientation to scenario-based help, which would also make it easier for us to use active language, because we'd describe how people achieve objectives rather than what systems passively offer. That required insight into users' worlds, so to cover relevant scenarios we used experience mapping (Nodder, 2011), a method that I'd previously used when re-designing user interfaces. Even though it's originally based on task observation at user sites, which we didn't have time for, it turned out to work well for laying out typical user journeys based on interviews with stakeholders, including Zylinc's user networking group. It helped us plan content and navigation around users' roles, which was important, because we wanted to avoid overloading any part of our varied audience with irrelevant information.

Having prioritised scenarios, we built topics around an inverted pyramid of concept, procedure and reference information, and we used a simple form of progressive disclosure, through Flare's expandable drop-downs, to let users focus on specific tasks. We soon realised that rewriting old content was time-consuming, so we mostly

produced new content from scratch, frequently reusing snippets and incorporating short interactive videos, which we produced in Adobe Captivate.

We also needed many topics to double as classroom training material so we based them around exercises that would also work as procedural help in non-training contexts. We included test-that-your-setup-works elements to stimulate knowledge retention through successful Hello world! experiences.

Despite our aim to create engaging, scenario-oriented help, we realised that some procedures were still complicated, because they covered complex integration with telecom protocols and third-party solutions. We decided not to hide that fact, but instead treat it pragmatically. For example, we created PowerShell scripts to help users quickly overcome processes that would otherwise have required us to write long multi-step, error-prone (for users) procedures that would have been costly for us to maintain and localise.

Zylinc unified help is currently only available in English, but our audience comes from many countries and cultures. To ease future localisation and make content accessible to users who must use the English version when we don't offer content in their languages, we used Global English guidelines (Kohl, 2008). For example, we tried to avoid ing-forms, because many languages don't have equivalent constructions. Contrary to what our English teachers taught us at school, the use of fewer ing-forms, and more imperatives, didn't prevent active language, and it helped shorten sentences, so fewer headings and menu items wrapped onto new lines.

Impact and recognition

Zylinc unified help went live in early 2018, and it has been successful in that users on all levels no longer need to access information through different channels and formats. In addition to increased user satisfaction based on higher consistency, comprehensibility, currency and authoritativeness of information (according to feedback), the site has helped reduce support volumes and speed up onboarding of new staff.

Content reuse has improved the ability to localise, and has led to a consistent messaging across documentation, training and partner communication.

Winning a UK TC award has been a great confidence booster for our small team of Jesper Juul Pedersen and myself, but even if we hadn't won, the constructive feedback we received from the UK TC judges would have made our participation worthwhile. You should really consider entering next year. **C**

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