

Realizing ROI through Content Reuse

How much can you really save?

It's easy to calculate your potential return on investment.

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In a reuse environment, content is written once and used wherever it is required. This not only enhances consistency and usability, but significantly reduces the costs to write and review content. Two (or more) writers and subject matter experts working on the same or similar content is at least double the cost.

So, how much can you really save? Let's calculate your potential return on investment. The calculation is really quite simple. You start by figuring out what it costs to produce your content now, then figure out how much it'll cost once you implement a reuse strategy.

My parents went through a similar exercise many years ago when deciding to purchase a dishwasher. Figure out how long it takes you to do the dishes by hand, then calculate how long it takes to do the same amount of dishes in the dishwasher. (Don't forget your loading and unloading time!) Calculate the difference, and you know how much time you'll save. But, the calculation involves more than just time saved.

Time saved is money saved, but you also need to consider the costs of water, electricity, soap, and of course, the dishwasher itself, including the costs to install it in your home. Being an enterprising woman and an ex-accountant, my mother made the calculations work in her favour and the dishwasher became an essential member of our household, freeing us up to do far more interesting things...opportunities we wouldn't have had without the dishwasher. Opportunities are also critical to consider. They become part of the equation as lost opportunity costs (if you keep doing things the same way), and they're essential to your business case.

Calculating ROI: What you need to know

If you want to know how much you'll save, you need to know what it costs now. You'll need to measure:

- Your current metrics – Identify your tasks and how long it takes to do them. Using a loaded labour rate, calculate the cost associated with tasks. For example, if it takes five hours a page at a loaded labour rate of \$85/hour, the cost to create a 25-page user guide would be \$10,625.00. Don't forget to include review and editing costs when identifying tasks and their associated costs. Translation costs are also a big factor when identifying costs and potential savings.
- How much of the content you can reuse – Estimate how much of your content you can reuse by analyzing a representative sample of your documentation set. If you can reuse 35% of your content, your costs are reduced by 35%.

Knowing what it costs to produce content now and estimating how much you can save by reusing content is a good start. But, there's more—your investment costs. You'll need to measure:

- The time required to do the analysis – While you are analyzing content, looking for opportunities to reuse content, you are not busily producing content. Even if you use consultants to help with your analysis, they will require some time from your staff.
- The time it takes to prepare your content for reuse – Some of your content may not be reusable in its current state. You'll need time to prepare the content for reuse and to decide how to implement reuse, what technology to choose, which leads to the next item.
- Technology costs – Most often, content reuse must be supported by technology. Whether you are investing in a new authoring tool, buying a complete CMS, or simply setting up a file server where reusable components of content are stored, you will incur costs.
- Training – Whatever your solution, you will need to train the authors in your department and everyone who is involved in the content life cycle in the new processes and tools.

Naturally, you will incur costs up front, but your content reuse strategy may more than make up for it in savings. For that reason, ROI must be calculated on an ongoing basis, after implementation of your content reuse strategy. Also, don't forget about the potential lost opportunities—the business you could have gone after but couldn't because you were too busy creating and recreating content.

What about quality and user satisfaction?

Technical communicators serve their users, so user satisfaction should always inform all your documentation decisions. Unfortunately, while improving content quality and hence, increasing user satisfaction are admirable goals, they are difficult to measure. However, if your reuse strategy improves content, reducing calls to support or eliminating lawsuits, then you can calculate savings. To be able to accurately quantify user satisfaction, you will have to be able to link the reduced support calls/lawsuits to the improved documentation.

Summary

Return on investment is the anticipated savings you can realize after subtracting the costs of implementing a reuse strategy. Figure out what you are trying to accomplish, then work on quantifying your goals.

- Gather metrics
- Estimate reuse percentage
- Identify investment costs
- Do the math – subtract your anticipated investment costs from your potential savings