

WORKING NOTE AC77

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11 December 1989

DOCUMENTATION DOCUMENTATION.

This note is a response to Richard's invitation¹ to suggest a documentation policy. It's a gross overreaction, because I think that the quantity and quality of the documentation we produce is a matter of the highest importance. (Everybody says that, but I mean it.) As I suspect most people associated with this department already know, I also think that our record in the field of documentation is abysmal.

Because I think it's so important, I haven't taken up the invitation. I don't think it's as easy as that. If the job is to be done properly, we should worry about documentation as a whole, not just bits of it; a few ad hoc decisions by me or -all or John or Richard or whoever, however sensible they may be in isolation, don't begin to address the problem. (Example of ad hoc decision, sensible enough in parts : we have two English dictionaries, both of which become inaccessible when Penny goes home.) What follows, then, isn't a proposal for a solution (though one or two suggestions have crept in here and there) : it's an attempt to state the problem.

I hope it's concrete enough.

DOCUMENTATION.

Documentation is information, organised in such a way as to be readily accessible to people who may need it. It is something we should be concerned about as a matter of professional standards (if not of common courtesy). We are, after all, in the business of providing information, both as an institution of learning and as a department concerned with information technology, whatever that might be. If we can't manage our own information systems, it's not much of an advertisement for the department. And, yes, I know the joke about recognising the builder's house because it's the one that's falling down, but that's only funny if it IS a joke.

We need documentation to answer people's questions straightforwardly, effectively, and economically. Here's a list of questions² :

How ?
What ?
When ?
Where ?
Who ?
Why ?

These questions and their possible variations cover a great deal of ground, and if we can answer them for any topic, we must know a great deal about it. Therefore, following the recursive theme introduced in the title, I shall ask, and attempt to answer, these questions about documentation itself.

WHY DO WE NEED DOCUMENTATION ?

I've already answered that³. To particularise, though, there are several reasons why someone might wish to refer to documentation of one sort or another. Here are some sample questions :

How do I start using Unix ?
What is the syntax of Hypertalk ?
When is the laboratory open during the vacation ?
Where should I get my 105 assignment marked ?
Who knows about database systems ?
Why won't my Macintosh connect to the Vax ?

In that short selection, I have tried to suggest that we are concerned with much more than instructions for using local software. For further details, see the next but one bit.

WHAT - IS DOCUMENTATION ?

Broadly speaking, anything which helps people to find out about things. For our purposes, it will include manuals, handouts, computer help, the library ... dare we say multimedia things ?

WHAT - IS DOCUMENTATION ABOUT ?

Anything we want people to be able to find out about. That means (I suppose) pretty well everything except forthcoming examination papers and other people's private concerns. Everything we do - hardware, software, courses, research, administration - is likely to need some sort of documentation, and if we don't start with a unified system, we'll probably regret it later.

WHO - USES DOCUMENTATION ?

Anyone who needs it. Here are some categories; the "wanting to know ..." lists are not meant to be exclusive, but to suggest the wide range of things that should be recorded somewhere and accessible to someone or other.

- Visitors - wanting to know things about the department, how to find people, details of courses, timetables, etc.
- Students - wanting to know how to use machinery, how to use software, assignment dates, etc.
- Technical staff - wanting to know about equipment and software we use, both from external sources and homegrown, etc.
- Academics - wanting to know about pretty well everything, but notably who's doing what, plans for the department, how to get things done, etc.
- Administrative and secretarial staff - wanting to know about current regulations, finances, and generally the state of the department, where to find things, procedures for coping with the registry.

WHO - MAKES DOCUMENTATION ?

There are two parts (at least) to this. First, someone has to decide what is to be documented; then someone has to do the work. The two someones need not necessarily be someone; alternatively, either of them may be some several, provided that the job gets done satisfactorily (which almost certainly means that it must be someONE's recognised responsibility). Attempts at documentation which disappear when the server goes down and are never heard of again are less than satisfactory⁴.

Who should decide what is to be done ? Clearly, whoever knows what's to be done, but that doesn't help much, as no one knows everything that's needed. One solution would be a committee, but I'm against committees on principle, so I'll ignore that. The alternative is to let anyone wanting documentation record a request with a responsible someONE as mentioned above.

Who should do the work ? Ideally, whoever best knows the material to be documented. It is unfortunately true that such knowledgeable people are not invariably eager to record their knowledge for the benefit of the masses, nor always able to do so in comprehensible form. To have it done well, then, there must be someone able to extract the information from the knowledgeable people and to record it in some suitable form. This takes a lot of time; it can't be done in anyone's odd moments. It has to be a recognised and significant component of someone's job, and the someone has to be selected with some care.

WHERE IS IT ?

That depends on what it is, and in what form it comes. At present we have lecture handouts, manuals on the laboratory racks, manuals (sometimes) in the technicians' rooms, notices on the wall, memories (human and semiconductor), randomly distributed computer help, departmental reports, textbooks, word of mouth, myth, and rumour, not in any particular order, least of all of reliability. That's inevitable, and will probably always be so : but we should have a reliable way of finding out where to find whatever it is we want. For very low level simple material, notices on the wall are hard to beat, but need keeping up to date. Even for more complicated stuff, things written on paper and well indexed are effective, cheap, and (once they come out of the copier) not dependent on power supplies or technical help. They are also permanent, which is both good and bad, but at least they're a good backup system.

To keep up to date, though, I think we need an on-line system, accessible through any of our computers - and, therefore, to anyone in a position to use our machinery at any time that the machinery's available.

That gives us three sorts of documentation : electronic, paper (sheets) and paper (books). Each has its metaphorical place in the complete documentation system, and each must have its physical place in the department, and perhaps some means of controlling access to it. Read on.

HOW DOES ONE GET IT ?

The answer to this question is implied fairly strongly by the answer to the previous one. Judicious deployment of posters, paper, and computer systems should ensure that most people under most circumstances can find out most things.

It would not do for things to be too simple, though. We can afford to be a bit breezy about odd sheets of paper and computer help, but what about things that must be coddled ? Like manuals, which might walk away ? Or copyright material, which we can't just copy when we feel like it ? That's why people have librarians.

There is a clear need for both paper and electronic indexing and searching facilities to direct people in search of information to appropriate sources.

What if you can't find it ? Doubtless from time to time people will ask questions which the documentation system can't answer. For such cases, there should be ways to transmit the failed request to a responsible body who will assess it to see whether the additional information should be added, or is already there but for some reason wasn't found, or is pretty silly anyway, and institute appropriate action.

WHEN - IS IT AVAILABLE ?

Ideally, always. Or, at least, whenever it's wanted. That's one good reason why there must BE documentation; the people who know what you're trying to find out (if they exist at all) aren't always available to ask.

WHEN - IS IT DONE ?

Before it's needed. Indeed, documentation about documentation should be available to give notice of forthcoming items, and changes to existing items, so that anyone searching for information about a topic will find out about such pending modifications and additions.

REFERENCES.

1 : R.J.E. Lobb : electronic mail :

From richard Thu Dec 7 09:00:12 1989

I'd appreciate ideas on what john-t calls a "documentation policy".
Something a little more concrete than "we need documentation".

2 : Based on lists of things, amended and interpreted when it suited me, from J.C. Nesfield : *Manual of English grammar and composition* (Macmillan, 1901).

3 : G.A. Creak : *Documentation documentation* (Unpublished Working Note AC77, December 1989) - and for real historical interest, G.A. Creak : *Computer Centre information services* (Unpublished Working Note AC34, September 1982).

4 : C.J. West : electronic mail :

From clare Mon Jul 3 17:08:13 1989

I am afraid to say that the only copy of said documentation WAS on the server
We are all subject to these little lapses