

Big Toys: Powerful Solutions

Not long ago, a typical technical author would have worked with pen and paper, scissors and paste. Now, the documentation world is changing radically to embrace e-culture. Al Hidden visited Bristol-based Piper Group plc and found a world of contrast between the old and the new...



WHETHER IT'S THE LATEST GENERATION of super-jumbo airliners, a top-secret defence system, or an earthmover, today's 'big boys' toys' demand ever more sophisticated documentation support. I recently visited the Piper Group Plc to learn how high-tech information engineers work alongside documentation traditionalists, and to understand the opportunities for new entrants to the business.

■ The atmosphere at the firm's Bristol office holds important clues about a changing industry. My host is Paul Burke, head of business solutions for the Piper Group, and one of a new breed of documentation evangelists who talk convincingly of 'embracing technology' and 'the realisation of client visions'. "We're facilitators," he tells me with characteristic enthusiasm, "knowledgeable guides on the new frontier of data-management, helping clients make sense of fast-changing documentation technology. We make client data work harder; that's what we do best."

■ We talk in a relaxed environment of quiet productivity. There are no dingy, echoing drawing offices here. Intrigued, I ask Burke about typical projects. "The amazing thing is the sheer range of documentation we can tackle, extending from conventional hard copy aircraft manuals through to the state-of-the-art SGML and XML solutions underpinning major aerospace and defence projects," explained Burke. "As we develop applications, or tailor software to clients' requirements, we are often literally rewriting the documentation textbook. It's very exciting."

■ Burke hands me over to project manager Phil Sage, a quietly knowledgeable knight of the new XML and SGML order, with skills honed in computing and helicopter documentation. I ask him about industry trends, and about SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language) and XML (Extensible Markup Language), the current darlings of documentation professionals. "XML," Sage explained, is the new big thing, the future of the Web, more versatile than HTML, Web-friendlier than SGML, relatively easy to learn, and incredibly powerful. Directly or indirectly, XML will influence your life if you join this industry." Sceptical, I suggest that XML must be an arcane, hard-to-master tool.

■ "On the contrary," Sage reassures me, "XML is surprisingly easy to learn. With aptitude and the right attitude any IT-literate person can do it. And new development is only one side of the XML coin," he adds, telling me about the massive legacy of data that needs to be converted into XML. "It's the future for military and commercial data-management applications."

■ My head reeling with 'tech talk' I need the contrast of a traditional view. I talk with Pete Baldwin, an experienced author who, on the cusp of retirement, and

eschewing Gigabytes, mice, and document data definitions, painstakingly brings order to vital hard copy engine manuals.

■ "I look at IT with admiration; what goes down those wires is truly amazing," says Baldwin, with not a little envy, before we talk about the old times, recalling manuals created with scissors and gum, process cameras and typing pools. He is someone who has probably forgotten more than many authors ever learn, so I ask him about the need for his traditional skills – and why his desk remains PC free. "A lot of important work is still done the traditional way," he explains. "The industry is changing, but for some customers change happens slowly. New technology is essential, but tasks remain where traditional ways suit the client. It suits me too," he adds with a chuckle, recalling an afternoon when a power-cut stymied computer-users.

■ As an experienced author, what advice would he give to potential industry newcomers? "Get into the IT," he counsels without hesitation, "but don't neglect traditional values of attention to detail and 'right first time' – they haven't changed."

■ My visit ending, I reflect on what Burke, Baldwin and Sage have told me, and on my heightened awareness that there's never been a

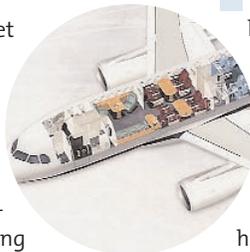
better time to sign-up for a career on the new frontier of documentation. Summing-up, Burke says: "As the toys get bigger and more complex, so the documentation requirements grow too. The challenges and opportunities are tremendous and the Piper Group is ideally placed to offer true one-stop documentation and data-management support to business. We even have our own in-house recruitment team," he explains, adding: "Given what we know about the industry it makes a lot of sense and enables us to add even more value for our clients."

■ I leave, bearing changed perceptions, a clear understanding of the opportunities awaiting those who enter this fascinating industry, and no doubts that the Piper Group Plc are up there amongst 'the big boys' at the leading-edge of documentation and data management. 🌀

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