



White paper

The programmers wrote the help file

Get the right people to do the job

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Help systems and web sites are commonly designed and written by programmers. This is usually a mistake. I've known enough programmers to know that they are not the perfect resources for such work. Programmers simply do not have the aptitude or inclination for such tasks, yet they are often the ones that do it. Writing help systems seem to rank up there with earwax removal. It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it.

Programmers are not the right people for this job because they are usually focused on solving highly technical issues, and have a difficult time operating outside their area of technical expertise. They don't lift their heads from the details long enough to notice the needs of their own customers. It's not their fault; programmers generally don't think like customers, even when the customers are programmers. They focus on technical operability, not usability or readability. Remember, these are the folks that brought us DOS. They often don't have a firm grasp on how customers actually use their own products, so how could they possibly document them? You must think like a user before you can write documentation for them, and programmers usually don't think like users. I've even known brilliant programmers who can't spell or produce 8th grade quality grammar! It's true; they just don't focus on such "unimportant" matters.

If you want to do this job right, hire a technical writer, even if for temporary assignments. You'll likely pay them less than your programmer, and you'll get a well-written document that users will be happy with. This is especially true of your web site. Too many sites are designed and written by programmers who aren't wired for such work. It's like trying to get a marketing man to write software; he might be able to get started, but the results may be disastrous.

About Us

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