CASE STUDY

From Cost to Revenue at LSI Technical Publications

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A TRANSPERFECT COMPANY

The Technical Publications Department for the Storage Group at LSI Corporation, an Avago Technologies Company, decided to implement a pilot project to assess the feasibility of three major operational changes: implementing modular writing, creating new markets for our information, and customizing our information solutions. The scope of this initiative is extensive, but the potential rewards could not be more attractive. As an information-development manager, you will find this article valuable because our strategy blends rhetorical, business, and architectural perspectives. This combination of perspectives builds on technical communicators' traditional strengths, helps engender stakeholder support, and capitalizes on state-of-the-art architecture. Our implementation strategy earned senior management's support by showing how we can convert from a cost center to a revenue-generating operation. We're not there yet, but we are confident that our strategy, tools, and communication plan will enable us to succeed.

Our motives for implementing these changes focus on benefits to our information users, our information customers, and our organization. For the purposes of this article, "information users" are the people who read and apply the ideas our information contains, and "information customers" are the OEM customers who purchase LSI's technology and information. Implementing modular writing will help our existing and new information users derive optimal value from the information we provide them, and our new business model promises to help our department move from a cost center to a revenue-generating organization. It's win-win. We are completing these implementations "live" – during a product launch – and that is significant because it means failure is not an option.

Nine months later, we are certainly not finished, but we have completed some major milestones. This article summarizes the changes our team is implementing and why they are valuable. I will begin by telling you who we are, and then I will explain how we combined Comtech's Information Process Maturity Model (IPMM) assessment, the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA), and the Vasont® Content Management System into a strategy to help us accomplish our objectives.

A TALENTED TEAM

The LSI Technical Publications (LTP) Department is a great team. We could not have accomplished nor even attempted the objectives outlined in this article without the strengths of our 19 information developers, artists, editors, and project leads, or without the support of our manager and our director. LSI provides network storage solutions for OEM customers around the world, and LTP (located in Wichita, Kansas; Boulder, Colorado; and Norcross, Georgia) develops a wide range of information products to support our hardware and software solutions. Historically, our target information users have been system administrators, so our information was designed to help experienced, technically savvy, action-oriented users accomplish critical tasks in a high-pressure context.

Our team uses a five-phase information product development process that focuses on thorough planning and helps ensure that our processes are consistent, repeatable, and effective. Each team member on our projects understands the workflow, the quality-control checks, and the role-based contributions that enable us to deliver high-quality information.

LTP's problem, a problem we perhaps share with you, is that we are a cost center. Despite the wide range of talents our team regularly displays, our contributions to LSI's bottom line are limited because, while we generate a significant amount of value, we do not generate a corresponding amount of revenue. That is precisely why we decided to implement the three strategies on which this

article focuses. By making our information development processes more economical, creating new markets for our information, and providing customized information products and services, we hope to move from a cost center to a revenue-generating organization and realize an economic return on LSI's investment in our team.

VALUE FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS – INCLUDING LTP

LSI is expanding its target customer base for storage solutions to include customers in smaller business environments. In addition to the technically savvy network administrators for whom our information products have always been designed, we now must provide information to users who might have no IT support, technical training, or desire to learn storage-system concepts. LTP saw this shift as an opportunity to create new markets for our information. Since we are delivering products and services of significant value, we can reasonably expect the customers to whom we provide those products and services to pay for them rather than having them provided for free.

A REVENUE-BASED INFORMATION-MANAGEMENT MODEL

LTP's traditional business model included a series of expertise-intensive steps our team completed through which we converted valuable source information into even more valuable, customer-specific information. However, while our model comprised a chain of increasing value, LSI saw no return on that value. Our customers saw that value through revenue they derived from the products we delivered to them at no cost, but we did not see a similar return. Converting to a fee-based model for the information we deliver enables LTP to continue providing value to our customers while we begin to realize a return on LSI's investment.

A VIVID STARTING POINT

Our first step was to understand our starting point. To help us gain insights into our team structure, processes, strengths, and opportunities, we asked Comtech Services to complete an assessment of LTP based on the IPMM. Comtech's team interviewed key LTP team members, analyzed our strategies and processes, and used the IPMM's eight key characteristics to complete the assessment. They helped us understand what we were already doing well, and they provided us recommendations about what we would need to do differently to manage the changes we were effecting and accomplish the objectives we had established. LTP earned a Level 3 process maturity rating, which gave us confidence that we could move forward, and Comtech's maturity assessment report provided detailed recommendations on how we could take our processes to the next level.

A USER-FOCUSED ARCHITECTURE

You have likely read about DITA, so I will not repeat here the information you can learn from excellent resources on the topic such as Michael Priestley's article in the CIDM Best Practices Newsletter (April 2005). Instead, I will focus on how LTP applied DITA's topic structures to reshape our information architecture.

LTP team members completed a comprehensive analysis of our information products and determined that DITA meets our structural needs. Depending on their objectives, our information users seek to complete tasks, learn fundamental concepts, or identify answers to questions about the technology they are using. Using DITA topics enables us to structure our information so that we provide the information users need in the format that is most conducive to users' learning processes. Task topics

enable users to complete processes; concept topics enable users to learn and remember critical ideas; reference topics provide immediate answers when users do not necessarily need to remember the information long-term. By applying DITA to our information, LTP is reorganizing our information to match our users' experience with our technology solutions. Rather than merely documenting the hardware functions and software features, LTP's information can empower users to accomplish their objectives by providing the appropriate type of information in the appropriate format.

LTP's information developers own themes (such as software installation or hardware cabling) within the subject matter rather than owning books, and the information developers are developing user-oriented, streamlined, reusable topics to convey those themes. Our information is mapped to our users' scenarios, so our new topic-based architecture supports users more effectively than books ever did. To support our architectural changes, LTP is also updating our information development processes. Some of the elements of our former information product development process are consistent with topic development, but other parts have proved misleading. For example, our product delivery tasks – production, customization, and distribution – must now be planned before design documents for the information are approved; our "develop-on-demand" approach is cost-effective because production tasks occur on a customer-specific basis and only after there is a demonstrated need for the products. This merger of the business and rhetorical aspects of information management supports LTP's value-based business model, and it is possible only because of the structural control DITA provides us.

THE RIGHT CMS FOR THE JOB

Our starting point, our department goals, and our quality standards became our tool-selection criteria. LTP recognized that in order to make our modular writing strategy work, we needed to invest in a content management system (CMS) that would grow with our team and processes. Because our team members' primary area of expertise is the information we develop about data storage technology (that is, we are not CMS experts), we needed a CMS and a vendor that made our conversion as seamless as possible.

Vasont Systems® provides a CMS that met all the criteria we identified, and Vasont Systems helped us identify tool-related questions that we should have been asking but were not yet CMS-savvy enough to understand. Vasont Systems provided us a staged implementation of a scalable CMS that interfaces with our information development application and database to help us save a significant amount of time and money. The implementation learning curve has been very manageable, due in large part to Vasont Systems' onsite consulting and role-based training for our team members, as well as to Vasont Systems' responsive support team. These factors have been critical to the successes LTP has accomplished to date. Some of LTP's most significant advances during our implementation have resulted from mapping specific project goals directly to our tool-selection criteria. We evaluated a number of vendors and systems while we developed our strategy, and selecting a system that has meshed so well with our people and processes has helped make the initial phases of our implementation successful.

A GOAL-ORIENTED STRATEGY

We realize that the scope of our initiative is extensive. In fact, one consultant, upon hearing what we were planning to do, asked, "That's a pilot project?" We are still defining how we will accomplish our

move from cost to revenue; however, we have made significant strides by merging the various components and perspectives into a focused strategy that helps us keep our goal in sight.

One key component of our implementation strategy is our communication plan. A conversion as dramatic as the one we are attempting represents a significant cultural change as well as a change in our approach to customer-relationship management. That means we have internal communication demands as well as external ones. Our communication plan began with a thorough stakeholder analysis and frequent contact with the LSI team members from other functional groups who are vital to our success. Our business-development team members have been supportive because they see the value of our proposed changes. LTP is now included in a variety of meetings and decision processes because our stakeholders recognize that our success is their success.

STATUS AND NEXT STEPS

LTP has created numerous substantial wins during our initiative, and we recognize those wins regularly in team meetings. In addition to the strides we have made toward our goal of converting from a cost center to a revenue-generating organization, we have created opportunities for our team members to use their talents in ways we did not imagine a year ago, and the best is yet to come. We are improving our mastery of our tools and architecture, enhancing our topic models and reuse strategies, and creating opportunities for team members to enhance skills and competencies that further our professional development and challenge us to excel in creative ways. We are confident that LTP will continue to make valuable contributions to our company, our information customers, and our information users.

About the Author

Randy Clark served as a project manager in the Technical Publications Department at LSI Corporation's LSI Storage Group, a data storage solutions provider in Boulder, Colorado. He earned a master's degree in technical communication at Oklahoma State University, taught communication and management courses in the United States and Japan, and served as a technical communication consultant for companies in various industries. Randy led the initial team assigned to LSI's modular writing implementation as well as the development of localization services and other information-based services.

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