

The stakes of collaborative writing

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Abstract

The arrival of Web 2.0 has changed the ways of working, especially for writers. A wide range of tools now exists, enabling different people to participate in the writing of one single document and introducing new methods of work within teams. These new work methods rely on tools that are constantly evolving. While some companies remain skeptical, others are already embracing these new practices.

Either way, our position of apprentice makes us ideal observers concerning the choices made by our companies and the difficulties that the adoption of these new work methods raises. Such a change can be a real challenge, and selecting the right options to fit one particular situation can be a difficult task.

We will first present the results of our research on the current state of the art in collaborative writing and how and why companies tend to use more and more collaborative writing methods.

We will then explain the situation in the two companies that we work for, Atlas Copco (industrial tooling and equipment) and CNES (Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales, the French space agency), two companies which are heading in opposite directions in terms of collaborative writing. We will observe the practices, tools, processes and work dynamics involved in writing for both companies.

Finally, based on what we found and observed in the first two parts, we will compare theory and reality concerning collaborative writing in companies.

Keywords

Collaborative writing, writing, writer, writing process, tools, editorial, rewrite, CNES, Atlas Copco, work method, apprentice, wiki, EDM, Electronic Document Management, editing, team, email, translation

1 Introduction

“Collaborative writing is becoming increasingly common, often compulsory in academic and corporate work.” [1] It is a fact that work methods have evolved tremendously during the last few years, and we are now living in the collaborative era. Today, these new processes have reached the writing field, where a lot is at stake.

In this article, we will first study the state of the art (theory) in collaborative writing, showing how and why companies implement these processes and looking at the pros and cons of such methods.

We will then compare these studies with our experiences at CNES and Atlas Copco (practice).

2 In theory

2.1 The need for a collaborating writing process

The writing process in a company often involves people from multiple locations, in multiple fields, and with multiple skills [1]. Usually, people share a document by email: making sure that everyone is working on the last version of the document can be bothersome. This “classic” method, in addition to be a waste of time because of email exchanges, is often the cause of errors. This is where collaborative writing can help.

In the last few years, collaborative writing methods and tools have evolved dramatically thus improving efficiency.

A good collaborative work method should enable people to easily:

- access the information needed when needed
- reuse the methodology and content from previous projects
- find the person with the skill they are looking for

Another advantage of collaborative writing is that it allows each participant to see beyond their point of view by sharing everyone’s experiences and skills [2].

2.2 Implementation of new work methods and tools

Among the collaborative working tools, one is essential to collaborative writing: the Electronic Document Management (EDM). Storing, sharing and editing documents must be easy and efficient, so that anyone can edit the always up-to-date file at any time. A simple shared hard drive could do the trick, but a good environment that stores different versions of a document and guides people is best for collaborative writing.

A project management system also helps assigning tasks and deadlines, and, well combined with the EDM, it can improve the team's efficiency.

Wikis and communities are great for gathering knowledge from different persons at one place.

From brainstorming to reviewing, these tools can dramatically speed up the writing process, as well as building "context around information" by linking external and/or internal pieces of information together using interactions [3]. Such writing processes also encourage innovation.

2.3 Challenges raised by collaborative writing processes

Although these processes may improve the company's efficiency, it can also have some disadvantages, or at least raise some challenges, and maintaining consistency is one of them [1]. People have different writing styles and sometimes use different words to refer to the same thing, so obviously, when a document is written by more than one person, it can lack consistency. This is why reviewing is an important part of the collaborative writing process [4].

Also, in a computer-based context, people tends to provide more ideas than they do in "real life", which is why consensus can be hard to reach [5]. Collaboration is a key point of a good collaborative writing work, otherwise, conflicts and redundancies can occur [6].

The Internet has plenty of free and reliable collaborative writing tools, but these solutions are designed for public use. Therefore, companies must turn toward professional softwares which include security and governance functionalities, indispensable for companies.

3 In practice

3.1 At the internal communication of CNES

The editorial policy of the internal communication at CNES (Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales, the French space agency) is constantly evolving. Since 1961 – foundation of the French space agency –, internal communication publishes documents, mainly on paper via CNESQUISEPASSE, CNES's internal newspaper. By these times and until a few years ago, this was the work of a team, where each article or section was given to one of the team members (mostly engineers, not writers). The “writers” had to get information by phone, and then by email from the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

With the arrival of the Internet and the portal, people were given a powerful tool to write, publish and share information. The internal communication started pushing and helping people to use these functionalities to increase the teams' efficiency, but also the overall communication and the circulation of information inside CNES. Some SMEs started writing in their shared folders, in blogs and communities. In a few years, a huge amount of information and documents was created and stored into the portal.

Yet, the writing process of all these documents was still not “collaborative”. CNES was stuck at the “participative” stage, where internal communication writers had to search into existing documents to pick up information to write theirs, which then had to be reviewed by email, sometimes by the same SMEs who had written the original content. This is a real waste of time and totally inefficient.

During the last few years, internal communication focused on developing collaborative writing, where everyone works on the same document. This is not an easy task, because not everyone is used to working like this, and tools are not always well-designed for this work method. It works well in the internal communication team, because its members are familiar with the tools and because it represents a limited number of people, working in the same field.

Since 2012, CNES has been working on the fourth version of its portal, which will be based on Sharepoint. This new version should enable further collaborative working, especially because it merges MsOffice applications and online editing: tools will be easier to use for employees, because the environment will remain the same.

At CNES, the advent of collaborative writing coincides with the arrival of the enterprise portal in 2007. Indeed, such a tool has enabled several writers to write on one document, which provides flexibility depending on the knowledge, skills and availability of team members.

Subsequently, internal communication showed a strong desire to involve more employees into publishing. This desire emerged partly from the need to obtain information from those who hold it (project managers, engineers, technicians) and partly from the more and more powerful tools the enterprise portal was given.

Versions

The collaborative writing system at CNES is based primarily on the online file hosting on the portal's EDM (Electronic Document Management). So there is always a single version of a document at a time, which everyone can edit or update (provided he has the necessary rights to do so). The EDM keeps all previous versions of the document, which allows to see which changes were made, when and by whom they were made, and to restore one of the previous versions if needed.

Rights

A proper rights management system is essential to the success of collaborative work. The rights management interface proposed by Livelink, CNES's CMS (Content Management System), allows assigning different rights to users or to predefined and configurable user groups. For example, this way, some people cannot edit a document, and not all those who can may restore a version. Within a community, one can also create roles, assign them to members, and dynamically display documents based on roles.

Wiki

The wiki is still the most effective way to engage CNES workers into writing documents. Simple to use, it contains all the classic elements of the user's favorite text editor.

3.2 At Atlas Copco Compresseurs' communication department

At Atlas Copco (industrial tooling and equipment), things are a bit different regarding collaborative writing. In fact, Atlas Copco does not use collaborative writing tools at all, although it could really be useful.

As a communication assistant at Atlas Copco Compressor Technique, part of my job consists in checking the translation quality of technical-commercial leaflets. Those leaflets are made to help vendors selling compressors and other technical machines. They are written in English by people of Atlas Copco all over the world and then translated in different languages by a translation company which then emails it to me for review.

I rewrite some – sometimes a lot of – sentences, mostly because they are translated too literally to sound natural in French. I also check if the technical terms are correct in French, but since there is no glossary and Atlas Copco sometimes uses a different terminology than the regular one, the product managers have to review the leaflets too. This is why, when my review is done, I email the reviewed document to them. Product managers tends to review some sentences too, not just technical terms, so when they email their review back to me, I have to check it once more and email it back to the translation company.

One can see that a leaflet “travels” a lot and that the number of emails sent about it is high. This is the reason why I think a collaborative writing method would be much more appropriate for this review system. The translation company would translate the leaflet on an online document which Atlas Copco involved employees would have access to, and both the product managers and I would review it as soon as the translation company's translation is done. The translation company would then validate the changes we made much more quickly. In short, all reviews could be made almost at the same time, which would obviously save a lot of time for everyone – in addition to save emails. Also, communication would be better and easier between the translation company and me, as we sometimes have conflicts about how to translate some sentences or paragraphs.

I talked about this work method with the colleagues involved in this review process, but the “all email” communication style doesn't seem to bother them. They are used to working like this, so they don't see the point in switching to a new work method. Apparently, I was the first person to suggest working with collaborative writing tools, which means that they haven't thought of it by themselves. I think that one of the principal reasons for this, is that most of them are from an older generation and that they don't even know that collaborative

writing tools, like Google Drive for example, exist. Overall, Atlas Copco's employees are pretty old fashioned when it comes to 2.0 technologies, which is kind of ironic, considering that Atlas Copco prides itself on always producing products at the top of the innovation.

4 Analysis

As we can see, not all companies embrace the wide range of possibilities offered by collaborative writing processes. Some of them still trust traditional work methods, as they have proven to be reliable and helped them develop in earlier decades. Even companies claiming to be at the cutting edge of innovation can hesitate to take the plunge, as it implies re-thinking whole parts of the company's organization, planning budgets and selecting tools. Above all, the success of this “revolution” depends on informing, training and helping employees all along the implementation of such methods.

Nonetheless, collaborative writing has proven to be a great way to boost the efficiency of content design for the company, and should continue to develop in the next years. One can argue that it could become the main writing method in most fields in a few years or decades.

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