

# **The influences of content structuration**

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## **Abstract**

Structuring content is the cornerstone of great documentation. Structuration ensures not only coherence across content, but also better user experience. How does structuration occur? We conducted a survey searching for internal and external factors influencing structuration. The investigation revealed that internal factors including tools, languages, standards, and guidelines are the basis of well-structured documentation. External factors, such as user-feedback, and a UX team within the company, also prove to be equally important. Structuration also improves with updates from the right people and for the right reasons. In this research article, we discuss content structuration, restructuring, and how it is heavily influenced by various factors independent from content.

**Keywords:** Structured content, Templates, Style guides, Content models, Design systems, User experience, Documentation guidelines, Writing tools, Feedback, Standards

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

In *Designing Connected Content*, Carrie Hane and Mike Atherton laid out an explanation of structured content: “Structured content is content that is planned, developed, and connected outside an interface so that it is ready for any interface. It allows you to define the skeleton of your content before you create it. Breaking content into the smallest pieces possible (within reason) so that it is free to go anywhere, anytime.” Structured content, as described by Hane and Atherton, are pieces of information ready to be reused whenever and wherever necessary. In addition, writer and content strategist Jory MacKay, points out that “in order to be useful, [content] needs to be presented in a way that is easy to parse quickly and find what you need.” But how do technical writers achieve structured content? Is it an unconscious writing habit? Is it constrained by the tools offered by the company? And does the audience influence the outcome?

As new technical writers, we are faced with both structured and unstructured content, so the comparison was only natural. As our knowledge grew and we became more accustomed to our tools, languages, and standards, we also faced the limits of structured content. At times we felt guided, other times we felt restrained.

This research article aims to identify a method for structuring content in the technical writing world and whether it is a direct choice (e.g. using a software solution known for structuring content) or an indirect result (e.g. handling of users feedback).

In addition, we wish to study the efficiency of these methods in practice. If a technical writer uses a content model, is it sufficient to improve content structure? Can some of these methods fall flat when misused? Is there a way to make sure they are efficient? Are they the ideal solutions for every technical writer? Or, are there solutions more suitable for different problems and different teams?

In this research study, we focus on writing tools and documentation guidelines used by technical writers, as well as feedback and UX teams. We analyze their influence with the assumption that they each have an impact on content structuration.

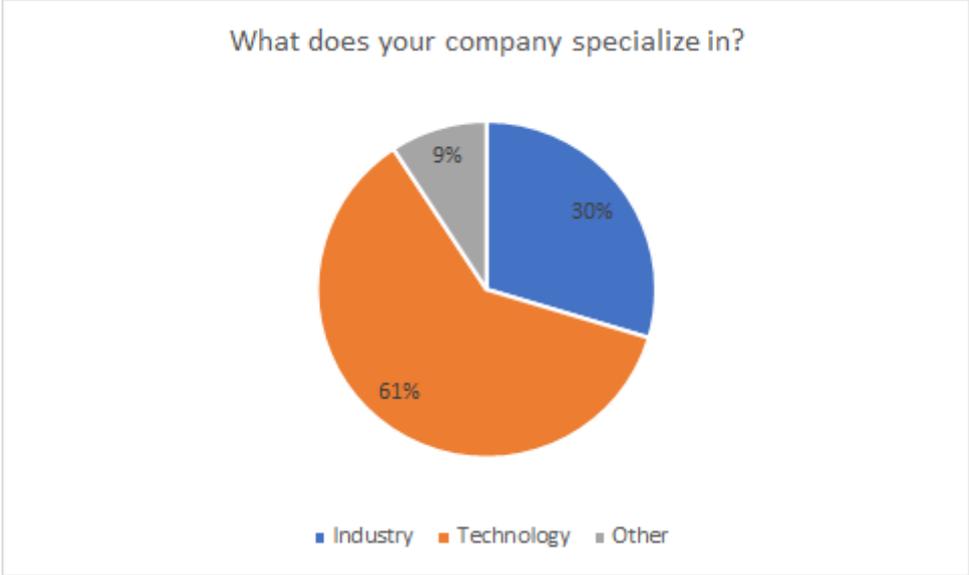
## Methods

We investigated the methods and the reasons why technical writers structure their content. We researched books, articles, and web documents, but our results focus on our survey results. The survey poses the question “Which factors influence content structuration?”. We hypothesized that both internal and external factors could have an impact. An online link was posted on a LinkedIn forum (Technical Writer Forum) and on the alumni mailing list of the Technical Communication Master's degree at the University of Paris between February and May 2020. We received responses from 51 technical writers from a variety of backgrounds. Results from the survey are presented with diagrams where relevant.

# Results

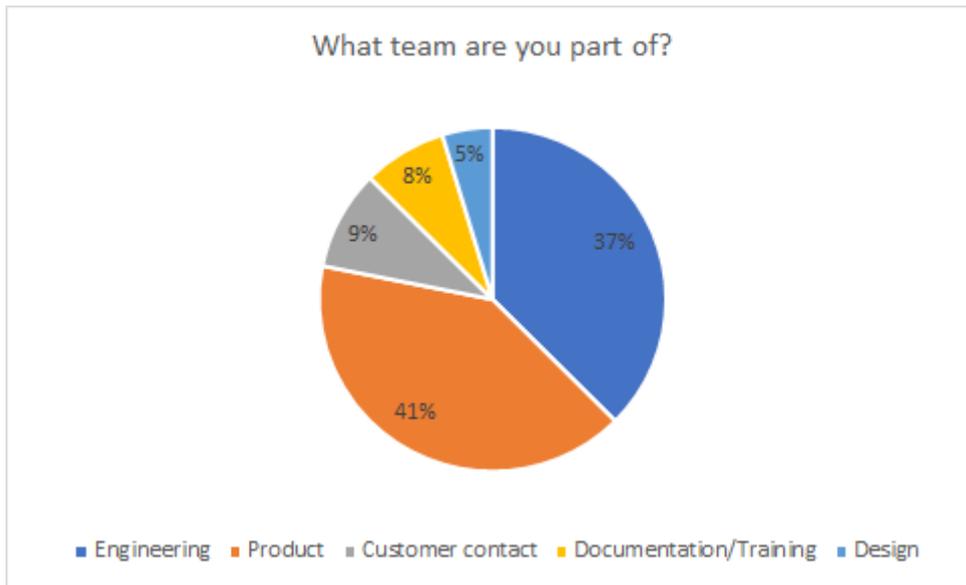
## I. The place and purpose of technical writing in companies

Firstly, we wanted to get to know our participants to understand their situation and background. The purpose of this section is to be cross-referenced with the rest of the survey in the Discussion section.



**Figure 1.** Survey results (2020), Main activity of the company

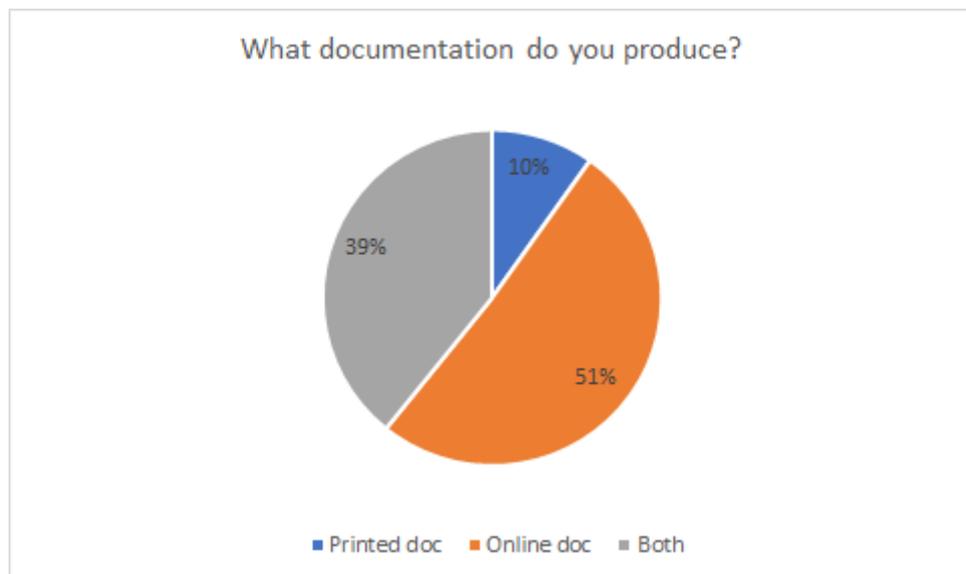
The majority of the participants work in technology (61%) whereas industry accounts for the rest (30%). By *industry*, we mean sectors such as medical, transport, defense, etc. By *technology*, we mean sectors such as software, applications, online platform, etc. As for *other*, we mean companies that belong neither in industry nor in technology sectors. For example, participants cited “content development”, “hospitality and casino gaming”, “technical documentation writing services and railroad engineering consultancy”, “documentation” and “chipsets” in the responses.



**Figure 2.** Survey results (2020), Technical writers' teams

Results show that technical writers do not have a recurring team or department across companies. They are part of different teams depending on the company. However, we defined recurring patterns in where technical writers fit. We divided these patterns into five major categories. In descending order:

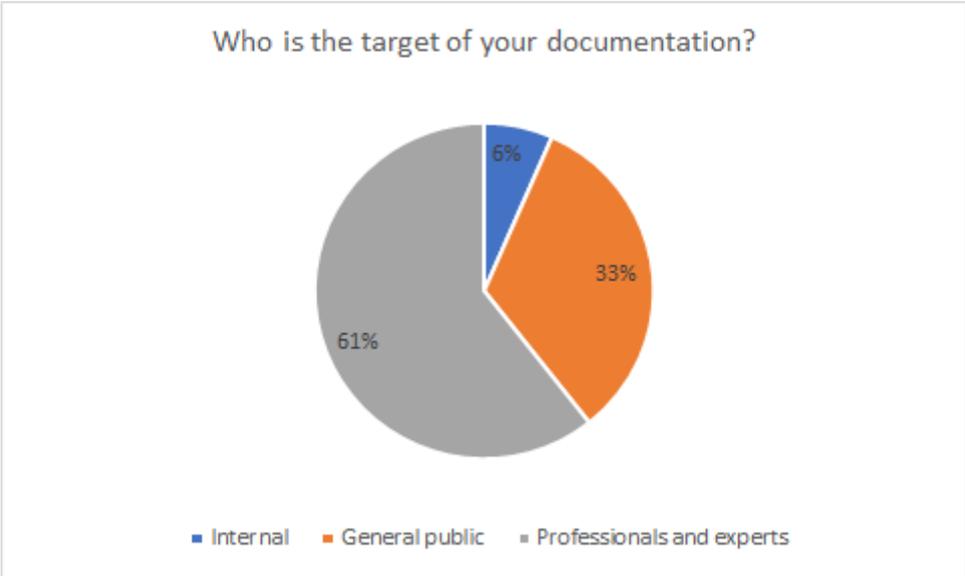
1. Product (product management, R&D)
2. Engineering (developers, quality assurance)
3. Customer contact (marketing, sales, support)
4. Documentation/Training
5. Design (UX, UI, graphics)



**Figure 3.** Survey results (2020), Type of technical documentation

We then asked our participants if they produced printed or online documentation. About half of them (51%) work exclusively with online documentation, such as embedded help, in-app, portal, online knowledge base on a wiki. We observed that there are 39% who work both

with online and printed documentation Only 10% work on printed documentation including printed user manuals and maintenance guides.



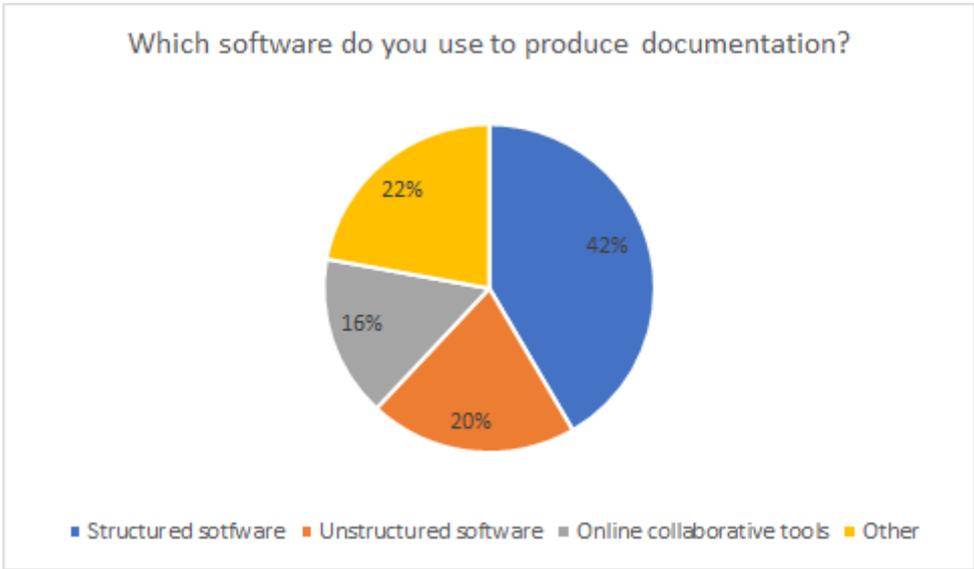
**Figure 4.** Survey results (2020), Target of the technical documentation

A large majority (61%) stated that documentation is targeted for professionals or experts with an intended use for installation or debugging. Another set (33%) of our participants said their documentation is targeted at end-users and general customers with little to no knowledge in the field. The remaining (6%) answered that their target is internal, for knowledge management purposes.

## 2. Writing tools and content structure

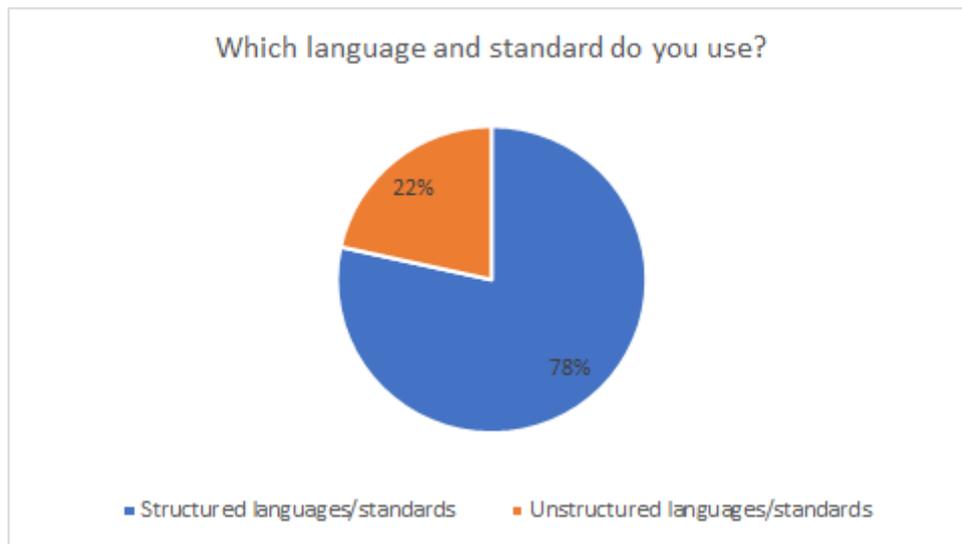
### 2.1. Software solutions, languages, and standards

#### 2.1.1. Software solutions



**Figure 5.** Survey results (2020), Software solutions used by technical writers  
Among the software solutions used by the participants to produce the documentation, 42% of respondents use what we call structured software solutions, such as the Adobe FrameMaker, Oxygen, MadCap Flare, Arbortext. More than half (58%) of the participants used unstructured software solutions, as well as online collaborative tools and graphic editors. The most popular ones were: Microsoft Pack Office (Word, PowerPoint), G-Suite (Google Docs, Google Slides) Confluence, Drupal, Adobe Photoshop, GIMP, and Inkscape.

### 2.1.2. Languages and standards



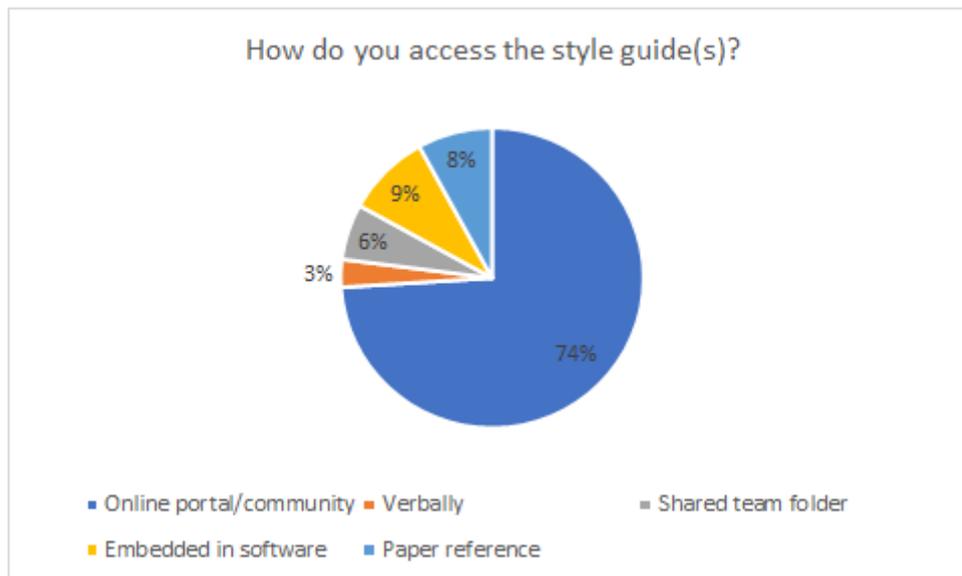
**Figure 6.** Survey results (2020), Languages and standards used by technical writers  
The vast majority (78%) of the participants said they use structured or semi-structured language or standard. Most of them use XML as the main structured language and DITA as a standard, but several others cited languages and standards such as JSON, HTML, S1000D, and APIs. The other 22% told us they do not use structured languages or standards at all.

## 2.2. Documentation guidelines

### 2.2.1. Style guides

When we asked participants if they used style guides, an overwhelming majority (85%) stated they do use style guides, while 11% stated they do not. A small percentage (4%) mentioned that the creation of a style guide was underway at the time of the survey.

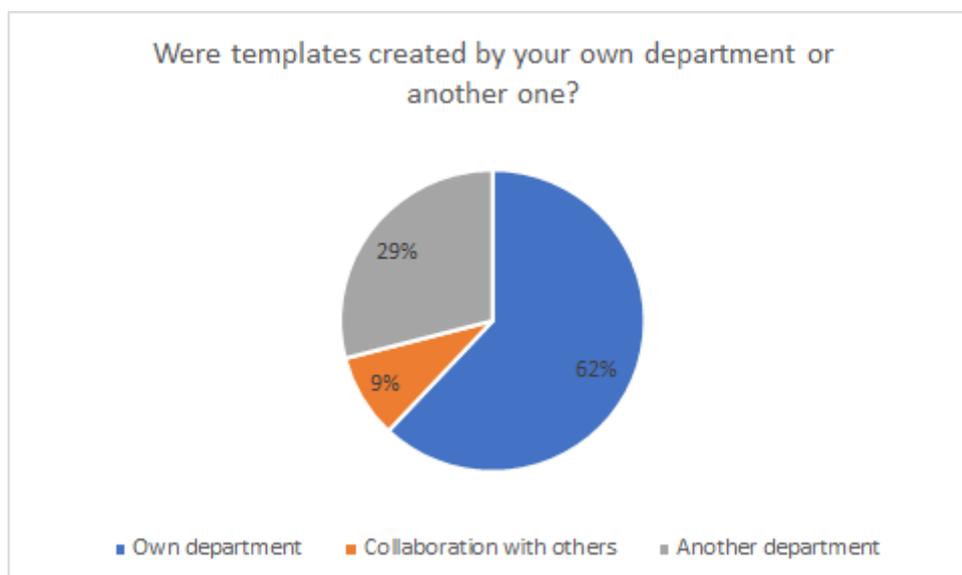
Among the participants who answered yes, 30% of them have more than one style guide. Respondents stated that since they handle a variety of content, different style guides are required. For example, they would have one style guide for images, another one for text, and another for the implementation of a DITA, XML, or other architecture standards. Other participants had specific style guides for specific products or type of outputs (for example, for each type of manual or for each type of content).



**Figure 7.** Survey results (2020), How technical writers access style guides  
 We asked participants who have at least one style guide how they access them. We observed that the vast majority (74%) have them stored on an online portal or community. Others access them through a shared folder (6%), directly in the tool or software used for technical writing (9%), while the rest (8%) use a printed style guide.

### 2.2.2. Templates

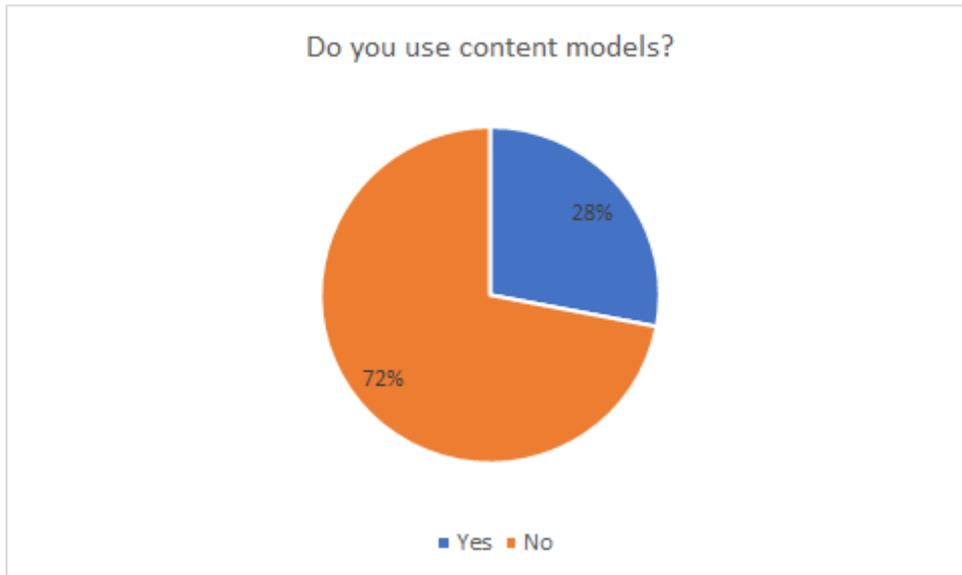
Then we asked if they used templates: 84% of participants said they do use them, and 14% do not. The other 2% stated they are planning on producing and using templates in the future, but that project was underway at the time of the survey. We also asked the participants who said yes whether they could edit those templates or not: 9% have no way of editing them; 72% said it is possible to edit themselves; 19% stated it is possible to edit the templates they use, but they either need to ask someone with specific rights (like an administrator a software supplier), or can only edit some of the components of the template.



**Figure 8.** Survey results (2020), Template ownership by department

We wanted to know whether participants were able to create their templates, or if other departments were responsible for creating them. The majority (62%) of participants stated templates were created by their own department, while 29% stated the templates they used came from other departments, mainly from Marketing and Communication. The remaining (9%) created the templates in collaboration with other departments.

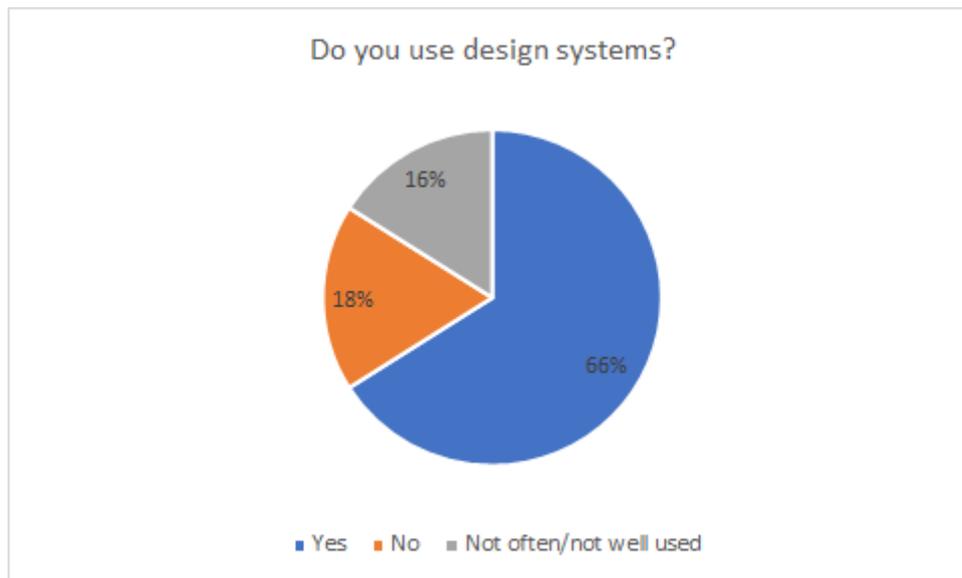
**2.2.3. Content models**



**Figure 9.** Survey results (2020), Use of content models

When analyzing the use of content models, we observed that 72% of participants use them, while 28% do not. From the participants who answered yes, we also gathered some insights into how technical writers use content models, such as the possibility of creating and using their own model; using a pre-defined one available online or through a tool; and the ability to make some elements optional and/or editable.

## 2.2.4. Design systems

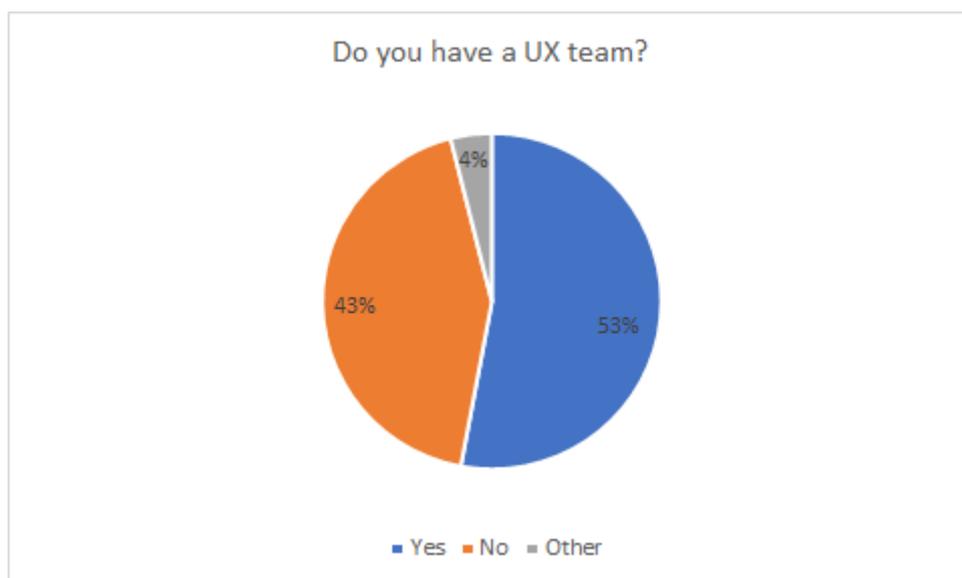


**Figure 10.** Survey results (2020), Use of design systems

We asked participants about their use of design systems: 66% of participants do have them and use them, 18% do not have them. The other 16% have a design system, but either do not use them well (due to lack of skill, poor understanding of the rules, or because the design system is constantly updated to fit another use), or do not use them often (because they forget about them or cannot access them easily).

## 3. Technical writing and user experience

### 3.1. UX team

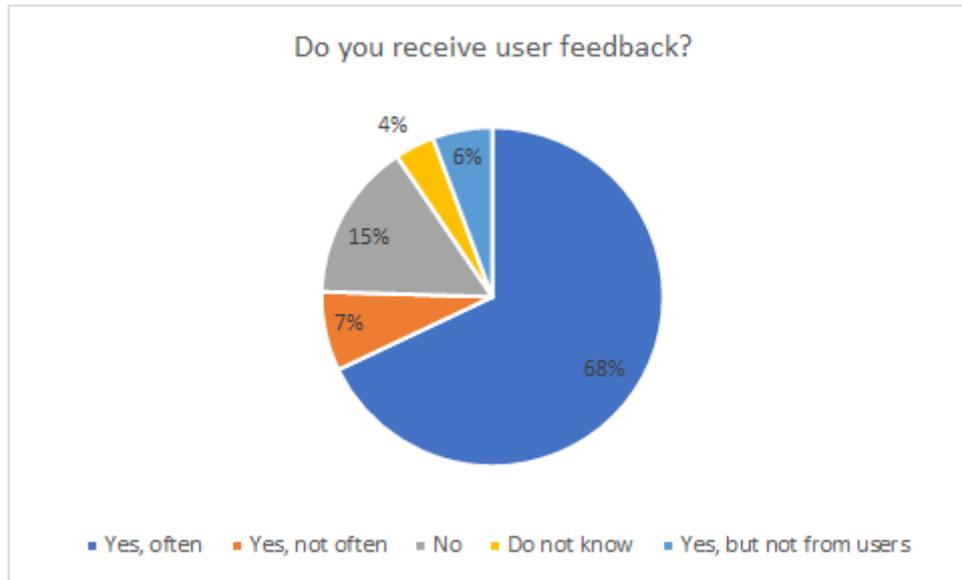


**Figure 11.** Survey results (2020), UX team in the company

For the question, “Do you have a UX team in your company?” 53% of participants said yes, 43% of participants either said they do not have a UX team or ignore if there is one. The remaining 4% do not have a dedicated UX team, but have a UX specialist in their team.

As for how often they get to work together when there is a UX team, the answers are split. 52% work with the UX team often, the other 48% do not work with them or feel like they do not work with them often enough.

### 3.2. Feedback

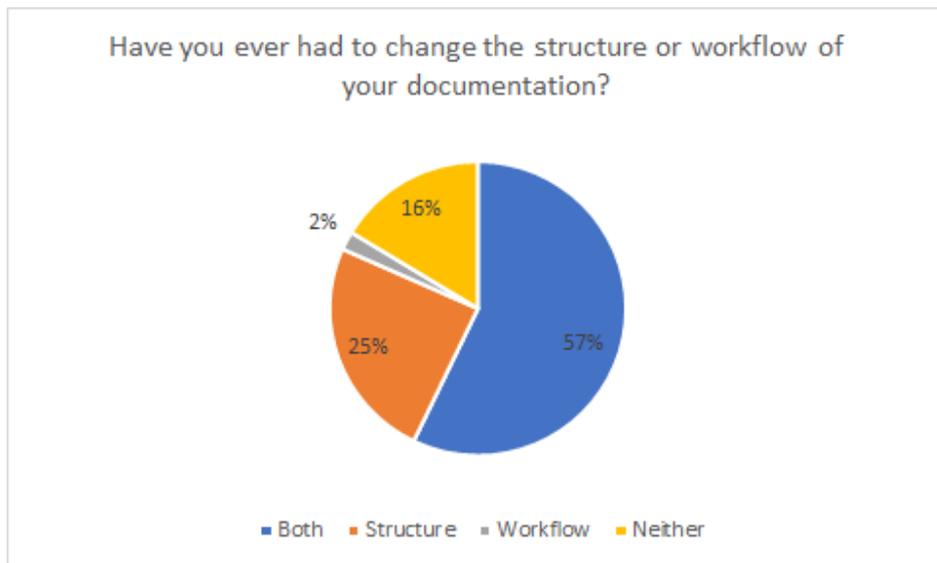


**Figure 12.** Survey results (2020), User feedback reception

We asked our participants if they ever received feedback.

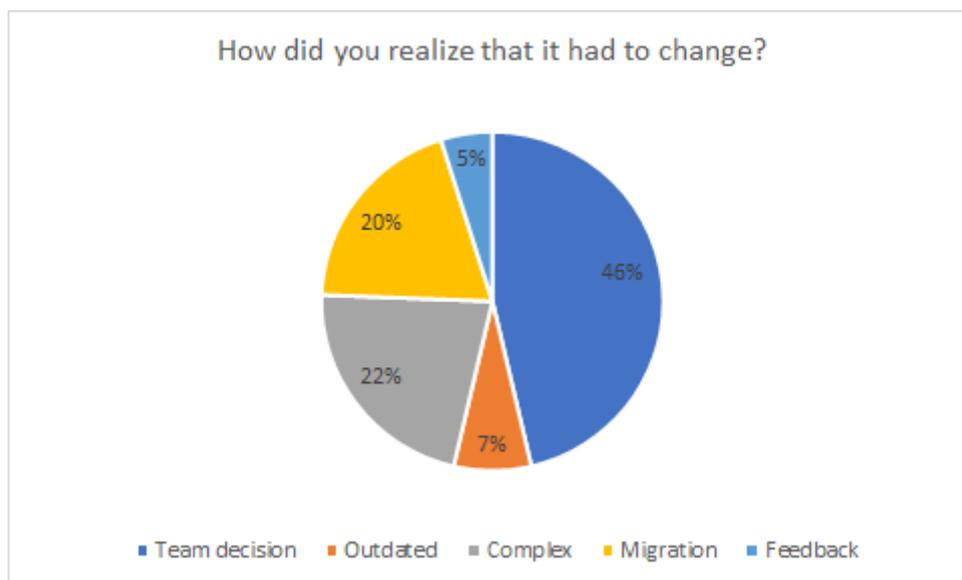
- 68% receive feedback regularly:
  - of those, a majority of them (58%) receive feedback directly either from comments, a feature that allows users to send feedback, via email, or via chat,
  - the others (42%) answered that they receive them indirectly from other teams such as various Sales, Support, or Product.
- 7% seldom receive feedback, and if they do, it is only indirectly through the Support team.
- 6% said they get feedback, but not from users.
- 15% answered that they do not get feedback, either because they have not implemented a way to receive them yet, or because the final documentation is not widespread, but they all expressed the desire to get feedback.
- 4% do not know if their team receives feedback.

### 3.3. Documentation adjustments



**Figure 13.** Survey results (2020), Structure or workflow adjustments

Concerning the impact of the documentation structure on user experience, when asked if they ever had to change the structure or workflow of their documentation, 57% of the participants changed both workflow and structure; 25% only changed the structure; 2% changed the workflow; and 16% said they changed neither.



**Figure 14.** Survey results (2020), Reasons for adjustments

In regards to why they had to adjust the structure or workflow of the documentation:

- 46% said it was theirs or their team's decision,
- 22% said it was poorly written and/or hard to navigate,
- 20% said it needed updating because the team migrated to a new software solution,
- 7% said it was outdated or no longer followed the guidelines and standards,
- 5% of participants said they realized thanks to client feedback (repeated requests or complaints to the support), or because of internal and external feedback or testing.

Out of the participants who implemented changes: 76% of respondents said it improved user experience, 12% said it did not improve, and the rest do not know yet or are unsure. Finally, when we asked how they knew if it improved user experience: 56% said thanks to user feedback (either directly from them, via a form, or via user testing), 15% observed the effects (data analytics, productivity gains, better sales), 23% do not know if it improved. The remaining 6% assume it improved because it had to be better than the last documentation structure or workflow which was impossible to understand or navigate.

## **Discussion**

We have divided the discussion into two sections: internal factors and external factors that influence content structuration.

By internal factors, we mean what technical writers use on a day-to-day basis. This includes writing tools such as software solutions, languages, and standards, as well as documentation guidelines such as style guides, templates, content models, and design systems. It helps them to decide how to structure content.

By external factors, we mean factors outside of the technical writers' realm that can have an impact on how they structure content. This includes user feedback and collaboration with the UX team.

The survey has helped us analyze what kind of technical writers were the most likely to make changes in the structure and/or workflow of their documentation. We assumed that if writers had to make changes at some point, it meant that there was room for improvement in their documentation guidelines (internal or external). On the other hand, no changes could mean two things: either the documentation guidelines have been perfected to the point where there are no quality issues, or that technical writers simply did not receive enough indications to decide if they ought to make changes. This is why analyzing external factors became crucial in our survey.

### **I. Internal factors for content structuring**

We begin with analyzing internal factors that could impact content structure by crossing this data with the instances of structure and/or workflow changes.

#### **I.1. Influence of writing tools**

We decided to distinguish structured and unstructured tools.

What we call *unstructured tools* are software solutions available to the general public. They were not designed for technical writers, but made for a broader audience. We also include online collaborative tools and graphic editors in this category.

Unstructured tools have several advantages. Participants commonly state that the interfaces are often intuitive and that, thanks to their simplicity, publishing and updating documents is quick and easy. For online and cloud-based solutions, they expressed that collaboration with other technical writers is very efficient. However, they also reported weaknesses in these tools. For instance, there is almost no possibility for single sourcing, or when there is an option, it is complicated to use. Mass modifications are also difficult to handle, which makes it inefficient for advanced tasks. These software solutions are also not meant for an important volume of pages.

Looking at the results and cross-referencing them with other questions of our survey, we realized that all technical writers who use unstructured tools had, at some point, changed the structure of their documentation. Based on our aforementioned analysis, this was probably due to the poor performance of the unstructured tools. The software solutions were not adapted to technical writing in most cases. Technical writers felt the need to structure data because it was too confusing and time-consuming when trying to retrieve information. Moreover, they often received internal or end-user feedback stating that they found that the documentation was not clear. Overall, the documentation was too dense and not well-managed.

Similarly, we analyzed the role of structured tools. What we call *structured tools* are software solutions such as MadCap Flare or Oxygen, which are based on a structured language and standard. They are made with technical writers in mind. About 70% of participants who use structured tools have made adjustments to their documentation.

It is interesting to notice, however, that the strengths or weaknesses of these structured tools were not mentioned as a reason to make documentation adjustments. Technical writers decided to change the structure of the documentation because it did not reflect the guidelines of the company or because the company was evolving and decided to make a major migration project. Overall, documentation had to follow the user journey and adapt with the evolution of the product.

The other 30% of technical writers who use structured tools did not find it necessary to make adjustments to their documentation. As we will argue later in the discussion, this is most likely due to a lack of external factors.

Based on the results of our survey, we can conclude that over 75% of the technical writers who did change the structure and/or the workflow of their documentation said it improved user experience. All technical writers who had to modify their documentation received positive feedback, either from end-users, coworkers, or both. For instance, support teams received fewer tickets asking for corrections in the documentation.

## **1.2. Influence of documentation guidelines**

In this section, we focus on style guides, templates, content models, and design systems.

We based our definition of style guides on the research article entitled *Tools and Methods to Achieve Consistency in Technical Communication* (2014), where the authors state that “style guides are reference tools that define style for writing titles and body text, grammar rules and punctuation usage, and how writers address the users.” Style guides are a common resource used by technical writers which can take many forms depending on the company. Therefore, reports on their effectiveness vary wildly. In one company, it can be verbal recommendations within the technical writing team, while in another it can be a document organized in multiple chapters and accessed through an intranet available for all technical writers.

The main advantage of owning and using a style guide is improving the consistency of different types of documentation, and in turn, the coherence within a document. Consistency has an impact on content structuring and, consequently, on user experience. For example, a guide defining the format of sections such as how to present “Notes” or “Warning” also gives a visual cue that catches the user’s attention. It helps users identify different types of information at a glance based on the way it is presented within a page.

According to participants, in order to make a style guide useful for a technical writer, it should be comprehensible, accessible, and digestible. It should contain different chapters which address different types of content. However, style guides can become a burden or be ignored if they are poorly written, are not integrated into the tool or CMS they use, or if there is no person in charge of enforcing its use (like an editor). This is why there should also be a process in place: a style guide has to be updated by the right people, for the right reasons. Style guides should be shared and used by all parties involved to truly have an impact on structuration. If the style guide is used by all but one technical writer, consistency within the documentation is impacted.

Templates, like style guides, are fairly popular among survey participants. Templates act as a starting point for technical writers to fill out documentation with the appropriate information. Its main function is to indicate which graphic and textual elements belong in which content types. Since technical writers can quickly identify what they can or cannot write, or where a type of information goes, harmonizing the architecture becomes a formality.

When we analyzed template ownership and asked which department was in charge of creating templates, we obtained mixed results. We concluded that, whether a template was created by the documentation team or by another team, it did not have a great impact on if technical writers operated a change in content structure. When it comes to the ability to edit templates, it should be noted that it can have a negative impact on its efficiency if abused. As one participant stated, attributing the ability to edit a template freely to anyone can do more harm than good, as changes are not mutually agreed upon and can disturb the work of other writers.

A template should be planned out to accommodate the content needed for a type of documentation. Making several versions of templates for the same type of content to accommodate small details can result in templates becoming less and less respected and therefore pointless.

We then analyzed the role of content models. According to Fenwick M. (2017), “The [content] model provides an agreed list of the elements that are needed – and shows hierarchy and proximity.” A content model is more than a collection of templates; it is a well thought-out plan detailing all types of content a user will be exposed to, and the templates can then be created to enforce this plan. Content models are particularly useful when documentation becomes too complex with several content types that are produced. It ensures that technical writers know which components can exist on a page and which attributes each component can have.

Design systems define reusable components and patterns for the interface. Today, some companies are extending them to include content. A technical writer will find reusable components and rules to use those components, such as branding guidelines, style guides, visual language recommendations and best practices. We found that the use of design systems was most prevalent with participants who used structured language and tools. This suggests that they can access resources embedded within their tools. For example, one participant specifically mentioned using Acrolinx, an add-on for Oxygen, in their daily work-life.

Design systems seemed to be the most misunderstood resource based on the participants’ responses to our questions. It should be noted that most participants who use design systems have a UX team or a UX specialist in their team, although their degree of interaction and collaboration with the writers can vary.

Interestingly, about 16% of participants have design systems but do not take advantage of them. In fact, design systems can be misused if the rules are not clearly documented and made available for all. This can lead to technical writers making mistakes, making frequent changes in order to fit another use, or preferring to work without them.

When crossing the data between the use of documentation guidelines with the occurrence of changes made to the documentation, we came to several conclusions:

- First, almost all participants who did not use content models or design systems had problems with at least the structure of their documentation. Some even had problems with the workflow as well. Only one participant who made no changes at all.
- Second, when we looked at the participants who never had to make changes in structure or workflow, we noted that almost all of them consistently use style guides, templates, content models, and design systems. Interestingly, we observed that these are the same participants who use structured tools and languages. A major advantage of these tools is precisely the integration of style guides and templates, which in turn increases the willingness of writers to use them. It is possible that since their tools and

guidelines are optimized, the documentation structure is already ideal and does not need any further changes.

- Third, in the group of participants who made changes pertaining to the structure, we observe that most use templates and style guides. Only half use content models or design systems. For the participants who use design systems and implemented changes, 25% said their design system was poorly implemented, prone to misuse or too difficult to access, which in turn made technical writers less likely to use them. This shows that to improve content structuration, preparing instructions for technical writers is crucial, since the misuse of resources can be as ineffective as if there were not any in the first place.
- Finally, in the group of participants who implemented changes to both structure and workflow, we observe that most of them did use style guides, templates, content models, and design systems. What is interesting is that the changes were made upon receiving user feedback. Therefore, user experience arose as a major element that made writers seek and enforce improvements in structure.

## **2. External factors for content structuring**

Almost 70% of our participants do get feedback on their documentation, which is a great thing. But what struck us the most, is the number of responses stating that they have little to no feedback. Among them, almost every participant is not comfortable with that situation and would prefer to receive feedback. Some of the participants have admitted to working towards receiving user feedback, while others only stated they find the lack thereof is regrettable. Indeed, peer-reviewing is great for spotting syntax, grammatical mistakes, and making sure the point gets across as clearly as possible. Analytics are also a great first step to get to know your audience, but how are you supposed to know if the documentation is helpful, if the main interested party is not in your documentation loop?

In *Tools and Methods to Achieve Consistency in Technical Documentation* (2014), the authors argue that “having a flow of information types that follow the same logic in the entire document is essential for the user to find what they are looking for.” Feedback is critical for achieving a logical documentation structure because without feedback, it is difficult to ascertain whether the logic is the same in all documentation.

It is interesting to ponder on why user feedback is not a popular habit among these participants. When user feedback is scarce, it always comes from the support team. We wonder if there is a mechanism implemented to receive direct feedback from customers. In some cases, participants mentioned that the only feedback they ever receive is when there is something wrong with the documentation, e.g. an error in the documentation, the documentation is out of date. In these cases, feedback can be dreaded and perceived as a punishment by the technical writers. Feedback should be valued, and not seen as a burden. In fact, most of the participants who do get feedback are enthusiastic about it.

It becomes evident that user feedback is critical when we compare answers about feedback and document adjustments. Technical writers who receive user feedback are more likely to adapt their documentation. Moreover, 5% of our participants directly stated that the primary reason for noticing their documentation had to change was feedback. As Baruch Sachs, Senior Director of UX at Pegasystems, says, “The content is critical to the overall experience” (Six, J. (2015), *Ask UXmatters: Is technical writing part of UX?*, para. 18). Similarly, if the content is not what is expected, the overall experience suffers from it.

This is when UX comes into play. When asked about the teams respondents fit in, the teams they work most often with, or with whom they would like to work more with, UX was not a popular answer among our participants. Moreover, only half of our participants have a UX team, and only half of them work with their UX team relatively often. That means only 25% of our survey participants have a UX team they can often get in touch with should the need arise. As Redish, G. and Barnum, C. (2011) argue, “Technical communicators are by training and necessity user-centered (...). Their goal is to make even complex interactions understandable and usable” (p. 92). The fact that only 25% of our participants are in touch with a UX team surprised us. As Redish (2010) reminds us, “Usability, user-centered design, and UX design also came from technical communication.” Technical writers are therefore qualified to be working with UX, but more than that, technical writers should be working with UX to improve user-experience and documentation. As we mentioned before, all of our participants who did have a UX Team to rely on, made changes to their documentation.

Another significant factor is that, as technical writers, we see the product first hand, so we are the most likely to pass on information about the possible problems that end-users might encounter. But if technical writers do not work with UX, they cannot easily give their own feedback to improve user experience. As Redish, G. and Barnum, C. (2011) explain, “The technical communicator is not part of the development team, but discovers when it comes time to document the product that many usability issues surface. At this late stage in development, however, it is not feasible to change the product; so the technical writer must “explain” the problem/solution in the documentation or context-sensitive help or embedded assistance.” It would therefore not only improve documentation, but also improve the product to have UX teams in the company, and have them work with technical writers.

Lastly, it is worth noticing that all technical writers from industrial sectors do not have a UX team. This may be due to the lack of online documentation. Indeed, in contrast, technology sectors where most of the documentation is available online, two-third of our participants have a UX team.

### **3. Study limitations**

In our study, we cannot accurately compare the industry and the technology sectors as our participants work predominantly in the technology field. Our study may be limited as only 15 participants were from various industry sectors, such as health, transports, or defense.

However, we observed that most of those participants lacked a UX team based on the responses provided and drew assumptions from it.

Another study limitation is related to the data about the use of content models and design systems. It seems that these resources are misunderstood at times, as some participants confused content models and design systems with templates. In addition, some stated they did not understand the question, despite providing definitions for each term.

## **Conclusion**

In essence, we can affirm that content structure is affected by several factors. In our analysis, we concluded that each factor is unique and builds up to others. Among the factors that have an impact on content structuration, are the choice of software solutions, languages and standards, as well as the documentation guidelines implemented. Additionally, receiving feedback is crucial for properly adapting structure to various needs. Having a UX team also turned out to be beneficial for the structure of documentation, as well as desired by many technical writers.

Guidelines like templates, content models, and design systems are useful but should be explained in order to avoid misuse. Setting up special editing rights is one solution to avoid distorting these guidelines. Misunderstood guidelines make it difficult to ensure consistency within the same document and across different types of documents.

Moreover, content structuration is not and should not be frozen in time. It is important to update the structure, but it is equally important that updates reflect the needs and are made by the right people. When changes are implemented for justified reasons, three-fourths of participants were satisfied with them.

It is important to remember, however, that these are most likely not the only factors that play a part in content structuration. For example, we have previously mentioned that we could not come to a meaningful result on the differences between industry and technology sectors due to our study limitations. Another possible factor is the number of writers in a company, which we could not explore due to the sample size and inconsistency within the sectors. These are two factors that would be worth pursuing to examine to see if they have an impact on content structuration.

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