

RoboHelp Online Demonstrations, A Professional Development Opportunity

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Introduction

As desktop applications become more complex, successful user experience requires effective documentation to help accomplish the task at-hand. RoboHelp is the leading software program for creating Help documentation and systems. In January and February 2004, I had the opportunity to attend three live, online demonstrations of RoboHelp, sponsored by eHelp Corporation and Macromedia Corporation.

Through attending the demonstrations I found RoboHelp to be very user friendly and it seems that the software developers have anticipated the needs of a technical communicator. I would like to highlight the features that I think can help technical communicators with creating Help systems and managing the project development process.

RoboHelp FlashHelp

The first demonstration I attended involved RoboHelp for FlashHelp output, which uses XML and Macromedia Flash. FlashHelp is a relatively new Help format, introduced in RoboHelp X4, which can run on any platform and is bandwidth and firewall friendly. What impressed me the most is that FlashHelp has an identical appearance across all platforms and browsers. I have a little experience with Web design and it is quite a struggle to develop a Web site that looks consistent with both Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator. A Web format that eliminates the headache of taking consistent appearance into account across all browsers and platforms can help technical communicators by reducing Web development time.

Workflow with RoboHelp X4

The second demonstration I attended was an introduction to RoboHelp X4, in which the presenter took us through the RoboHelp workflow. The workflow I have highlighted is the same with version X5.

Workflow Step 1: Import Existing Content

By using Import Tabs, you can create a Help system by importing your already prepared software user guides, getting started manuals, etc. RoboHelp analyzes the document, creates topics based on the headings you select, and breaks the pages into individual HTML files. RoboHelp can import content from HTML, MS Word, FrameMaker, PDF, and XML, to name a few.

Workflow Step 2: Create and Edit In Your Preferred Authoring Environment

You can build with RoboHelp's built-in HTML editor, any popular HTML editor, and MS Word. RoboHelp has many great features; however, I am particularly impressed with the Conditional Build Tag. The Conditional Build Tag allows you to create one source project and to build multiple outputs. If you need two Help systems (e.g., a pro and a lite version), you can create one project and tag certain content to only appear in the pro Help system or in the lite Help system. Once you specify the conditional content

in your project, the pro content will be highlighted in one color and the lite content will be highlighted in a different color. Implementing conditional content is also ideal for separating printed Help with high-resolution images and online Help with low-resolution images.

Workflow Step 3: Output the Help System

RoboHelp can output as FlashHelp, WebHelp, HTML Help, WinHelp, XML, HTML, Oracle Help, JavaHelp, and printed documentation. Deciding the format in which to output may be overwhelming; therefore, RoboHelp has a tour that gives a screen example of what each format looks like and lists the purposes of each format. RoboHelp also gives the freedom and flexibility to switch formats whenever you want. If you are building your Help system as FlashHelp, but change your mind and want it as HTML Help, then you have the ability to switch.

Project Control with RoboHelp X5

Multi-Author Support System

The third demonstration I attended was an introduction to RoboHelp X5. In my opinion, the most important new development is the comprehensive multi-author support system, which allows for safe file sharing between users by requiring users to check-out each file they intend to edit. Therefore, all users can work in the same project at the same time, but a file is restricted to one user at a time.

Multi-author support also gives complete control to the administrator of the project. The administrator now has the ability to control the access rights and privileges of other users. As an administrator, you can divide tasks among a team by assigning (or not assigning) users the ability to add, delete, rename, and revert, to name a few. The File Status Tab allows you to view which user edited each file and how long that user spent doing so; this is a great feature for keeping track of billable hours. Also, by configuring the Web communication protocols, local (LAN) users and remote (dial-up) users now have the ability to work together on the same project.

Content Management System

RoboHelp X5 also has a content management system, which offers accountability with complete edit history. Now, if you accidentally delete items or if unauthorized changes were made to your project, you can rollback to any previously saved version. When you rollback to a previous version, you will not lose the versions between the current version and the one to which you rolled back. Also, with the version labeling feature, you can easily locate the Help versions of products that have already been shipped.

Summary

The important features of RoboHelp that were highlighted are:

- FlashHelp can reduce Web development time since it displays an identical appearance across all platforms and browsers.
- RoboHelp can import existing content from HTML, MS Word, FrameMaker, PDF, and XML, to name a few.
- The Conditional Build Tag can be used to create one source project and to build multiple outputs.
- RoboHelp can output Help systems as FlashHelp, WebHelp, HTML Help, WinHelp, XML, HTML, Oracle Help, JavaHelp, and printed documentation.
- RoboHelp can aid the user in selecting a Help system output format with a tour that gives a screen example of what each output format looks like and lists the purposes of each format.
- RoboHelp can support safe file sharing between users by requiring users to check-out each file they intend to edit.
- The administrator can control the access rights and privileges of other users of a project.
- The File Status Tab can be used to keep track of how long each user worked on a particular file.

- The rollback feature can be used to revert to any previously saved version without losing the versions between the current project and the one to which you rolled back.

Of course all the features above are available in RoboHelp X5. FlashHelp as well as some other features are available in X4.

These online demonstrations were offered free of charge and all I needed to attend was an Internet connection, Flash Player 6, and a telephone in order to hear the audio of the presentation. The online instruction method offered the convenience of attending from my workplace and allowed for interactivity with the presenter through instant messaging. Whether you are upgrading your RoboHelp product or are a new user of RoboHelp, I highly recommend attending any future online demonstrations of RoboHelp software.