Evaluating System Management Process Documentation

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An important aspect of any System Management process is the documentation that accompanies it. Many shops develop excellent processes but fail to document them adequately. After an initially successful implementation of the process many of these procedures become unused due to lack of documentation, particularly as new staff members unfamiliar with the process attempt to use it.

Simply providing documentation for a process is not what distinguishes an average one from a robust one. The quality of the content of the material is the true differentiator. Evaluating the quality of documentation can easily become a very subjective activity. Few techniques exist to objectively quantify the quality and value of process documentation. That is why the following methodology is so unique and beneficial. I developed this approach over several years while working with many clients who were struggling with ways to determine both the quality and the value of their process documentation.

The intent of evaluating the quality of content is to show to what degree the material is suitable for use. The intent of evaluating its value is to show how important the documentation is to the support of the process, and how important the process is to the support of the business. The quality of the content of documentation is evaluated with ten common characteristics of usability. Table 1 lists these ten characteristics of quality of content with each of their respective definitions.

The value of the documentation is next evaluated with five common characteristics of importance. Table 2 lists these five characteristics of value along with each of their respective definitions.

Table 1 Documentation Quality Characteristics and Definitions

1. Ownership – This characteristic rates to what degree the three key ownership roles are clearly identified, understood and supported. These are the process owner, documentation custodian and the technical writer. For some processes all three roles these may be the same individual.

2. Readability – This characteristic rates the clarity and simplicity of the written documentation. Items evaluated include the use of common words, terms and phrases; correct spelling; proper use of grammar; minimal use of acronyms and explanations of those not widely used.

3. Accuracy – This characteristic rates the degree the material is technically accurate.

4. Thoroughness - This characteristic rates to what degree all relevant information is included in the documentation.

5. Format - This characteristic rates the overall organization of the material; how easy it is to follow; how well it keeps a consistent level of technical depth.; to what degree it is documenting an actual process rather than tables, spreadsheets and metrics.

6. Accessibility – This characteristic rates the ease or difficulty of accessibility.

7. Currency – This characteristic rates to what degree the current version of the documentation is up-to-date and the frequency by which it is kept current.

8. Ease of Update – This characteristic rates the relative ease or difficulty in updating the documentation, including revision dates and distribution of new versions.

9. Effectiveness – This characteristic rates the overall usability of the documentation including the use of appropriate examples, graphics, color-coding, use on multiple platforms and compliance with existing standards if available.

10. Accountability – This characteristic rates to what degree the documentation is being read, understood and effectively used; all appropriate users are identified and held accountable for proper use of the documentation.

Table 2 Documentation Value Characteristics and Definitions

1. Criticality of the Process – This characteristic describes how critical to the successful business of the company the process is that is described by this documentation.

2. Frequency of Use – This characteristic describes how frequently the documentation is used or referenced.

3. Number of Users – This characteristic describes the approximate number of personnel who would likely want or need to use this documentation.

4. Variety of Users - This characteristic describes the variety of different functional areas or skill levels of personnel who would likely use this documentation.

5. Impact of Non-use - This characteristic describes the level of adverse impact that is likely to occur if the documentation is not used properly.

Each characteristic was rated on a 0 to 3 scale based on the degree to which elements of each characteristic was met. Table 3 below describes how each of these ratings is applied.

Table 3 Rating Quality and Value Characteristics of Documentation

Ratings are either 0, 1, 2 or 3 and are applied as follows:

0 – None or an insignificant amount of the characteristic has been met;
1 – A small portion of the characteristic has been met;
2 - A significant, though not entire, portion of the characteristic has been met or is present;
3 – All aspects of the characteristic has been met or is present.

Benefits of the Methodology To Evaluate Process Documentation

There are three major benefits to this method of documentation evaluation. The first is that it gives a snapshot benchmark of the quality of existing documentation, particularly those of high value. Improvements to the material resulting in new ratings can then be compared to the current rating.

The second benefit is the ability to customize the criteria for quality and value to reflect changes in priority, strategy or direction. In this way the methodology remains applicable regardless of the specific criteria used. The third benefit is that it allows comparisons between various types of processes within an infrastructure using the same standard of measure.
Table 4 below lists the 32 pieces of documentation that could be assessed and shows the wide diversity of material involved in the review.

Table 4 Types of Infrastructure Documentation Evaluated for Quality and Value

Number	Description of Documentation
1	Procedure for logging all calls.
2	Method for prioritizing calls.
3	Determining ownership of problems.
4	How to escalate problems.
5	Resolution Status of Problems.
6	Trending Analysis from Clarify Viewer.
7	Problem Management Performance Reports.
8	Responsibilities of Help Desk Staff.
9	User Feedback Procedures.
10	Use of Training Plans.
11	Analysis of Cell Phone Invoices.
12	Analysis of Monthly Cost Trending.
13	VMS/UNIX Initiation Procedures.
14	New Equipment Planning Request.
15	Use of Site Scan Tool.
16	Monthly Review of Vendor Performance.
17	Change Management Procedures.
18	Charter of Domain Architecture Teams.
19	Monthly IT Business Review.
20	Submitting Request For Service Form.
21	Administration of Service Level Agreements.
22	Disaster Recovery Plan.
23	Application Support.
24	Work Initiation Process.
25	System Development Life Cycle.
26	Project Management Procedures.
27	Production Acceptance Process.
28	Data Center Administration.
29	Backup and Restore Procedures.
30	Production Scheduling Process.
31	Network and Server Operations.
32	File Transfer Procedures.