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WHY ONLINE DOCUMENTATION?

Benefits and Implementation Options

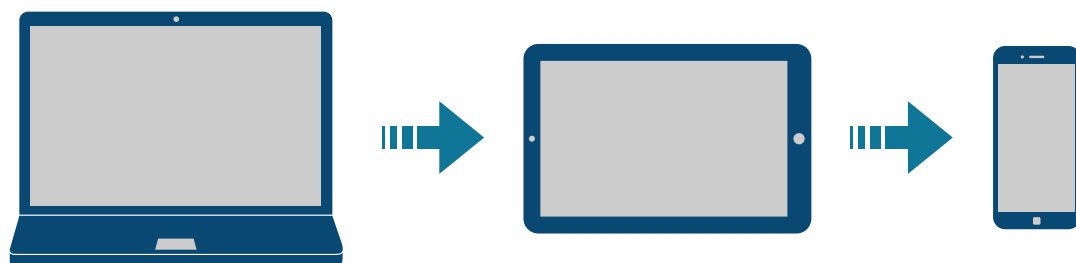
Online Documentation is used to provide user assistance for most software-based products, services, and applications. What exactly is Online Documentation, what are the different flavors, and what is involved in deploying Online Documentation? This white paper addresses these questions.

What is Online Documentation?

Online Documentation allows its implementers to present the most appropriate information according to the request at hand most efficiently and effectively. Rather than ask a user to thumb through a printed document or scroll through a massive PDF, an effective Online Documentation system will provide the user the most pertinent information related to the specific task that they are performing.

The general term “Online Documentation” refers to topic-oriented, conceptual, procedural, and reference information that is delivered through a web browser as a form of user assistance. Most Online Documentation systems are linked to or integrated with the software product, service, or application and can be used to present information on a broad range of subjects.

Online Documentation systems are delivered in a number of ways, such as a standalone web site for a single software application, documentation portals for multiple applications, embedded in the software application itself, or as branches off of a customer support portal. Some Online Documentation systems utilize features such as video, animations, context-sensitive links directly from the application, secure logins, and responsive design for viewing on a phone or tablet.



The Features of Good Online Documentation

When properly implemented, Online Documentation acts as an extension of your technical support team by providing quick answers to your customers' questions. Online Documentation is superior to other forms of end-user documentation because it is:

- **Integrated.** Online Documentation is integrated directly into the software's user interface by selecting an item on a Help menu, or by clicking a link or button within the interface.
- **Task-oriented.** Online Documentation provides information that guides and assists the user in actual work tasks and workflows, not just reference information about a button or a feature.
- **Immediate.** Online Documentation provides "just in time" information that gives immediate answers to a user's question. True Online Documentation is search-able, browse-able and structured in a manner that provides complete answers without requiring a user to pore over information they don't need.
- **Cost-effective.** Every time a user finds an answer to a problem on their own without contacting your support center, your company saves money.
- **Controlled.** PDFs, even when delivered online, and paper documentation are out-of-date the second the software is revised, and there is no way to ensure a user has the most recent version. Online Documentation can be easily updated and synched with your software releases and updates. A central online location for your documentation becomes the "Source of Truth" for your product.

Types of Online Documentation Topics

Online Documentation systems are organized into "topics." Topics are "bite-sized chunks" of information that are easily found and comprehended. Generally, topics contain one of the following types of information:

- **Concept.** Concept topics provide the "What" and "Why" information about an application, feature, process, or task.
- **Task.** Task topics provide the "How." Each task contains the specific steps for performing a single procedure. A collection of task topics can explain how to perform a complex workflow or process.
- **Reference.** Reference topics provide identifying information, descriptions, specifications, or tabular data about the application itself or its functions.



Online Documentation Implementation Options

Online Documentation systems can be implemented in several ways:

- **Standalone.** Standalone Online Help is a single self-contained website that provides just the documentation for the current version of the software application. You can install it on a corporate webserver that you manage or host it in the cloud. For web-based applications you can place the Online Help system on the same webserver as your application and leverage the same deployment tools already in place for your application.
- **Offline Standalone.** Yes, your Online Documentation can be offline. If your application is installed locally on a laptop or a server, you can install your documentation files online to be accessed from any internet browser.
- **Documentation Portal or Information Center.** Online Documentation can be in a central location that hosts all of your company's product documentation. You can have multiple products and multiple versions of the documentation. A Documentation Portal can also be a place to provide release notes, product announcements, a community forum, FAQs, videos, and eLearning.
- **Support Portal.** Online Documentation can be provided as a part or an extension of your Help Desk, CRM, or customer support portal. You can integrate a customer support contact widget or chat widget right into your Online Documentation.
- **Embedded.** Embedded Documentation refers to task-based information displayed in the application interface itself either as a popup, a help panel, or even a dynamic lay-over where users can get a tour of the application and dynamic help while never leaving your application.

Developing an Online Documentation System

Online Documentation needs to work with the software's user interface and fit into the overall documentation set for a particular software application. However, once it is decided that the users of an application or interface would benefit from an Online Documentation system, it is best to coordinate the development of the Online Documentation with the development of the user interface, the interface design, and the documentation plan, rather than producing it in isolation or as an afterthought to the project.

The basic steps involved in developing an Online Documentation system consist of the following:

1. Analyze the audience.
2. Create high-level and detailed specs.
3. Perform a task analysis.
4. Create a content-development plan.
5. Coordinate with the development team.
6. Write and review the Online Documentation topics.
7. Build and test the Online Documentation.
8. Deploy or integrate the Online Documentation with the application or to a webserver.

Beyond Software Applications

Online Documentation is not reserved for software documentation. Consumer products, manufacturing, and industrial companies are moving from online PDFs and paper-based manuals to Online Documentation. Companies are seeing that users increasingly prefer digital content – both text and video – and that they can provide more effective, current documentation online than on paper or PDF. Additionally, companies can reduce or even eliminate printing costs by moving their content online.

The Benefits of Good Online Documentation

There are three over-arching benefits that arise from the implementation of an effective, well-designed Online Documentation strategy:

- **Higher customer satisfaction.** A product or application that is easy to configure, use, or administer will be perceived as having greater value than would otherwise be the case. Your documentation is a reflection of your product and your company.
- **Better user experience.** Online Documentation typically will reduce the amount of time end users spend looking for information or answers related to their use of the product or application.
- **Lower customer support costs.** An Online Documentation system can reduce the number of inquiries received by the customer support organization responsible for supporting that product or application.

» How to Get Started

Online Documentation gets the right information to the right people as effectively as possible. Determining the type of Online Documentation system that is right for your application requires that you consider the needs of your users as well as your company. You must analyze how your customers use your product, what information they need, when they need it, and how you will deliver it, but also how to configure your Online Documentation environment so that you efficiently can manage, update and publish the documentation to maximize your return on investment.

Implementation decisions are influenced also by your schedule and budget because of the effort and planning involved in developing the various types of Online Help systems. Simple Online Documentation systems can be developed quickly and fairly easily using the right tools. However, realizing the full range of features available in Online Documentation systems requires extensive experience in the requisite design and development methodologies as well as the involvement of subject matter experts for the associated product or application.

About Contiem

Contiem is unlike any other company. As the only all-in-one, global content development and management provider, we have a world-class component content management platform—RSuite—and a suite of authoring and publishing tools. We also create the technical documentation, eLearning, online help, visualizations, training materials, translations, and other types of content required to compete at the highest level.

Many companies unnecessarily struggle with creating product and support documentation. Scaling content is critical to any company's success. We solve content challenges and build ecosystems where hundreds, thousands, or hundreds-of-thousands of documents can be efficiently created, organized, searched, updated, synchronized, translated, and published without the headaches that so many companies endure. When you need a solution that can dynamically scale and manage every stage of a document's lifecycle, Contiem is your competitive advantage.

To learn more about how Contiem can customize a solution for you, contact us at:

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