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Analysis: DITA Cuts the Cost of Content Reuse

By [Doug Henschen](#)

Switching to XML-based management for multichannel content reuse brings long-term savings, but in the short term it can be an expensive and time-consuming journey akin to building a house from scratch using a pile of lumber. Getting there using the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) is more like building with prefabricated modular components that can be quickly assembled into a suitable structure.

This analogy, offered up by Frances Gambino, director of documentation services at Information Builders Inc., is typical of the user feedback building around DITA, an open XML-based architecture for planning, authoring, managing and publishing technical content in print and on the Web. Developed by IBM and recently approved as a standard by [OASIS](#), DITA promises huge savings for any organization that publishes user manuals, maintenance documentation, catalogs and other content for Web and print publication.

Information Builders adopted DITA as its standard for documentation more than a year ago. "Many of our software products share components, so we might have the same chapter in two or three different software manuals," says Gambino. "DITA takes a topic-based approach, so we can share chapters, subsections and paragraphs in two or more manuals."

In contrast to older print-oriented standards such as DocBook, DITA was developed specifically to promote multiformat reuse, including Web-based formats such as help menus and knowledgebases typically organized by topic. DITA is also hierarchical and includes built-in support for industry- and company-specific customization (or "specialization," in DITA parlance), so it's easy to bring new content into existing DITA-based document type definitions (DTDs).

"Companies often spend tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars developing custom DTDs, yet they often turn out to be inflexible and costly to maintain," says consultant JoAnn Hackos of [Comtech Services](#). "DITA promises enormous cost savings because it provides a ready-made set of DTDs that offers all the advantages of a standard."

In a merger scenario, for example, Hackos says two companies embracing DITA would have a much easier time merging information by exploiting the standard's hierarchies and specialization features. And for manufacturers that purchase subcomponents from myriad suppliers, standardizing on DITA would enable compliant content from those suppliers to be ingested, rebranded and delivered without the cut-and-paste tedium that's common today.

The OASIS standards initiative had support from publishers of technical documentation, including BMC, IBM, Intel, Nokia, Oracle, Sun and the U.S. Department of Defense, as well as from content technology vendors ArborText and [Idiom Technologies](#). The buzz on DITA is spreading, however, and scores of other users and vendors are now adopting and supporting the standard.

Information Builders has implemented DITA using software from Idiom that also integrates with the vendor's WorldServer content management, translation and localization system. "Once a DITA-based DTD is developed for English, there's little additional work to move it into localization," says Gambino, adding that the implementation has potentially saved "years of work" over the DocBook-based approach the company was considering two years ago.