

Learning from testing

Tips for technical communicators from testers



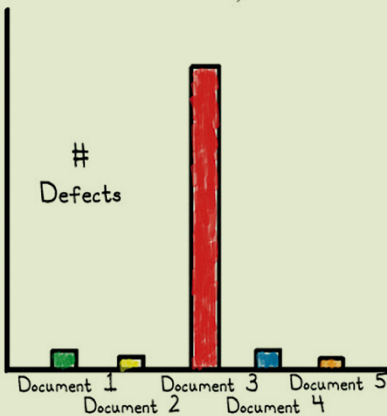
Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Spring 2016



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DocOps and the technical communicator

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Mike Mee describes what he does for a living.

I work in a team of four technical authors at CDL (Cheshire Datasystems Ltd) in Stockport, Cheshire.

CDL has been creating and supporting software within the insurance sector for over 30 years. It originally started in the spare room of the company's owner, using green-screen mainframe technologies and has now grown to a company with over 550 employees. The company now supports two main software packages, along with accompanying modules and sophisticated end-to-end websites, supplying them to some of the UK's leading insurance brands.

Within the Documentation Team, to give us our proper title, we tackle all manner of requests: from a simple 'can

you fix this?' through to 'we need a user guide creating'.

Back then and now

When I first started at CDL, there was just one other technical author, Steve, and he concentrated on the two main packages at that time. These were Classic (the mainframe version) and Strata - the emerging Windows-based update of Classic. My main job was to grab the Internet-based work and bring it up-to-date.

We would both be the main support for any Word (and some Excel) queries as and when they arrived, along with updating the hand-coded Intranet - ASP pages with a Microsoft Access back-end.

"We used to hand-code the Intranet, but today SharePoint powers it all"

These days, the other technical authors (Steve, Holly and Beth) work on the Strata and Classic updates. Strata now has a web-based interface (Echelon) for use by call centre operators in large insurance broker organisations.

CDL uses a six-week Agile Continuous Delivery methodology, which ensures that our software is regularly updated and reacts quickly to industry trends and changes in law. This includes all of the associated documentation, from the 'New and Changed Functionality', to the updated help text.

I am not involved with these updates as my work is (still) based around CDL's internet work, along with my Word/Excel/PowerPoint support,

including the macro side of things, and helping our sister company, My Car Check. I also proofread anything else thrown at me, from a simple one-page of text through to a group of documents that will form a tender.

"I have always used BASIC as my main coding language"

We, as a team, still update the Intranet, but this is now a SharePoint-powered one. The misty-eyed days of rolling around in a mud-fight with HTML and ASP code are long gone.

Back in 2009, the screen mock-ups moved from Visio across to a website prototyping tool, Axure, and that is what we have been using ever since. Axure allows us to create runnable prototypes of the various websites, from the stock ones for motor and household policies, through to bespoke policies for pet insurance. Using Axure, we were able to give the client a URL that hosts each prototype for them to look at and run.

These days, due to CDL's expansion, we now have a dedicated Internet Solutions Consultants team. They deal with the client liaison work, but I still keep the Axure prototypes and UDPs up-to-date ready for the ISC to request and use..

My Word Toolbox and other macros

Over the last few issues of the *ISTC Communicator* journal, you might have noticed my articles on learning VBA (Visual Basic for Applications) for Microsoft Word. Since my first

Are you an experienced technical communicator?



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introduction to computers with the ZX Spectrum back in 1983, I have always used BASIC as my main coding language. Although there was a minor dalliance with 68000 assembler coding back in my 'wasted youth' era on the Atari ST. You can search my Twitter handle at DemoZoo to see what I spent my late teens and early 20s doing!

Over the years, I have developed all manner of quick fixes based around Word, Excel and PowerPoint. I could list them all but this is a short article, so I will refer you to the main application that is my Toolbox, a Word add-in that runs on any version of Word, from 2007 through to 2016.

...cost me two days I will never get back

I have been developing this Toolbox for the last 18 months (on and off) and seen it grow from a random collection of separate macros, into a proper Word add-in. This has encompassed learning all manner of oddities when coding in VBA for Windows, including learning how to adapt my code so that the add-in features its very own ribbon-style interface.

Whilst I am not trying to blow my own trumpet (too much), there are a few technical authors / writers / communicators outside of CDL who now use my toolbox within their daily work. This could be, in part, due to the bundle of credit-card shaped USB drives I took to the ISTC conference in Glasgow last September ...

Recently, I attempted to port the Toolbox from the PC version of Word, onto the Mac. This was because the new Mac Office 2016 was 'bigger', 'better' and 'more compatible'! Let me say that, whilst the actual Word side of Office 2016 is a vast improvement on Office 2011, the back-end - that was Microsoft's attempt at reinventing VBA - was two days I will never get back. There are now even more white hairs in my beard as a result!

My Car Check

A lot of my work is for My Car Check and its associated websites and software. I am the technical author within the team who mostly looks after 'all things My Car Check'.

Over the years, our team has proofread everything!

The main raison d'être behind My Car Check is that before you think of buying a new (but used) car, you can do a background check on it to ensure that there's nothing 'odd' about it. Previously, the checks were to ensure it was not stolen and then recovered, but these days the most popular reason for checking out a vehicle's history are to ensure there is nothing dodgy about the finance associated with it.

The most common example is where the finance company still owns the vehicle, but the owner is trying to sell it on! If you had bought a vehicle like this, it would not be yours by law. The police could come and take it away and you would have lost your money ... and possibly helping the 'men in blue' with their enquiries.

This is not limited to the main website either. The data can be looked-up from numerous websites and smartphone applications, not all of them coded in-house. It all needs looking at, prodding, proofreading, testing, bug spotting (and logging) as well as the updating of the relevant manuals.

Over the years, our team has proofread everything! This has included every single article that appears on the website - going all the way back to 2005. This also includes the WordPress-powered blog, various web-based applications and APIs, the XML that forms the text messages inside the IOS and Android apps and even the text that describes these apps on the relevant app stores. I have even sorted out the proofreading of the stickers that we put onto the CDL trailer advertising My Text Check. We do it all! **C**

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W: <http://mikestoolbox.weebly.com> - my toolbox for Word 2007-2016 (the full source code is also available on the website).



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