The Downsides to DITA

and How to Avoid Them

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Facts and figures

- Technical author for 20 years.
- Senior technical author at Altera for 15 years.
- Altera is an American semiconductor company.
- 40 technical authors on four sites (US, Canada, UK, Penang).
- Started out on DITA project in 2012.

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Revolting writers

For about 15 years, tech writers used FrameMaker and MSWord. They got very comfortable with them. Writers might use this new system for many years.

- Explain the benefits.
- Involve them in major decisions.
- Keep them informed of progress.
- If you get really stuck, tell them it will look good on their CV.

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Selling to customers

Your customers (both internal and external) will have to use your new output. That can be PDF, but might also include HTML and other formats. You cannot expect them to understand the new ethos without careful preparation of their needs.

- Run tutorials with all internal departments.
- Take and act on their feedback.
- Explain to customers the benefits they will start to see.

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Many DITA experts emerge

Invariably, every writer will have questions on how the new system works, how to solve errors, and the best way to present material.

- Nominate the information architect from the start: their decision is final. That job should be their only job.
- Some DITA experts are more expert than others.

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DITA systems require many more admins

If you buy a new content management system, new DITA editing software, and new (remote) servers, all require dedicated admin. The admin may not all necessarily be in Tech Comms.

- Nominate dedicated admins from IT or Tech Comms who know your systems inside out.
- Have at least one admin on each remote site
- Install mirror servers

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New systems offer new features

Many, many more features are available for management to track documents. For example, how long you've worked on a doc, what's in review, who has documents locked. Some of those features can be time-consuming and difficult to use.

- Never lose sight of your original vision, e.g. one-click publishing.
- Avoid complicated procedures that burden the writers and wipe out any gains from structured authoring.

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No table columns

Tables are made from rows and cells – in some software you cannot select a column to format it. You rarely get WYSIWYG.

- Ensure your generating scripts allow you to promptly check output.
- Specify software that gives you previews in various output.
- Use Word or similar to edit tables, then copy and paste before you put into DITA software.
- Carefully consider how much data is in tables or how you structure your table. Use other software to edit tables.

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Table cells merge and split give unpredictable results

You merge several cells in your table. When you look at the PDF, the table runs off the bottom of the page, as it does not split until the merge has finished.

- Avoid merging cells.
- Create several smaller tables with the title of the merged cells.

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Software features vary greatly

You decide to go DITA, but many different types of software are available to edit XML. Not all DITA software is created equal. Can your authors edit code? Some software searches work within the text code view; some within WYSWIG text.

- Make a features list.
- Be aware of the technical level of authors.
- For software designers, here is the Thames Valley ISTC group top five:
  - Stability
  - Autosave
  - Spell checks
  - Search and replace including clone case and match case
  - Customizable GUIs with high contrast options for older writers

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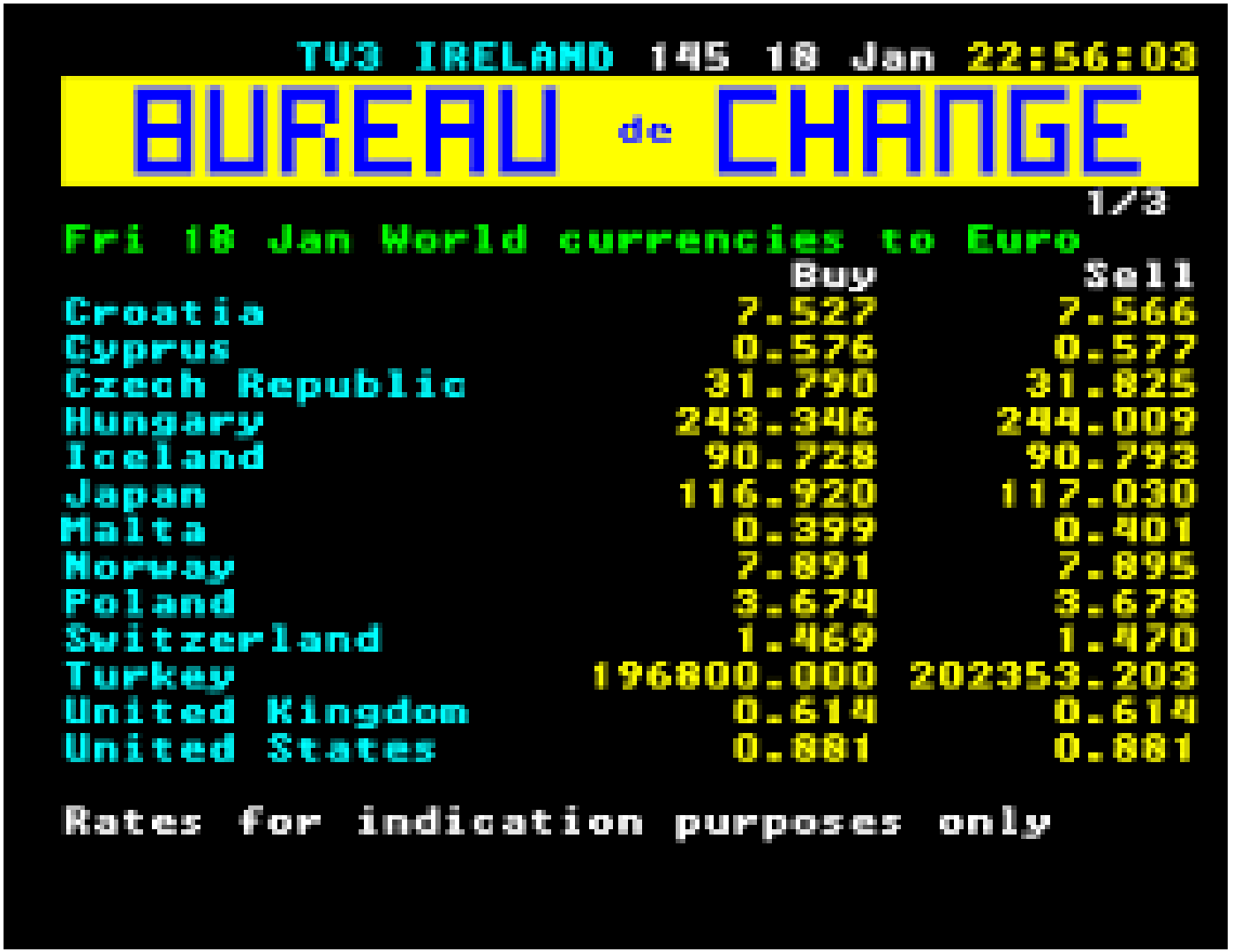

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To convert or not to convert?

Implementing DITA has been described as changing the engine while you are still driving the car. If you decide to convert old docs as well as work on new docs, it is like changing the wheels and the engine while still driving the car.

- Think long and hard about the pros and cons of converting old material.
- Conversions require a lot of time or cash.
- Even using agencies can leave you with a lot of tidying up on topics.
- Great job for junior writers

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Many, many more files to name

A typical old-fashioned document may contain anywhere from 5 to 500 topics.

- Set strict naming conventions.
- Use metadata.
- Be aware of duplicate topics.

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Reuse

Some new work lands on your desk. You have a feeling that some of it may exist in other publications. You really don't want to waste too much time working out if a topic has already been written.

- Establish tight naming conventions.
- Consider ownership.
- Use metadata.
- Establish rules for tweaking content.
- Ensure lots of reuse training.

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Summary – What we learnt

- Convince your writers.
- Sell to your customers.
- Nominate technical lead; employ a lead admin.
- Retain your original vision.
- Avoid complicated procedures.
- Choose software wisely (especially if you work with many tables).
- Decide to convert or not to convert
- Name your files methodically.
- Set strict naming conventions.
- Use metadata.

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Thank You

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