

Are you satisfied with your  
**DITA solution?**

[www.precisioncontent.com](http://www.precisioncontent.com)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Hanna co-founded Precision Content in 2013 to change the way writers approach structured authoring. Having spent more than decade helping organizations move to component content management he realized that, to be successful, organizations need to take a step beyond technology and expert consultants. Without fostering the necessary standards and skills to work in this new media, organizations would continue to stall in their attempt to move to structured authoring. With this knowledge, he developed the Precision Content® methods, tools, and training. Today, Rob and his team of experts help Precision Content clients make the move to structured authoring.



## ABOUT PRECISION CONTENT AUTHORIZING SOLUTIONS INC.

Precision Content is a full-service solution provider to medium- and large-scale organizations around the globe seeking help to better understand and solve their content challenges. Our core services involve designing and implementing innovative, scalable, and sustainable solutions for authoring, managing, and publishing high-value content.





# ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH YOUR DITA SOLUTION?

*By Rob Hanna*

*President and co-founder of Precision Content Authoring Solutions, Inc.*

If your answer is “No” then you are not alone according to a 2017 survey of more than 250 technical communication professionals conducted by The Content Wrangler. The DITA Satisfaction Survey<sup>1</sup> indicates that 62% of respondents using DITA are—to varying degrees—dissatisfied. As many as 10% of that group were very dissatisfied reporting that their DITA implementation is experiencing ‘big’ challenges. It’s not surprising that there’s significant dissatisfaction amongst those who have adopted DITA. After all, moving to DITA is a seismic shift in technical writing; a big change with many opportunities for things to go wrong.

The good news is that most DITA users don’t see their problems as insurmountable. Many just need a little help getting to where they’d like to be.



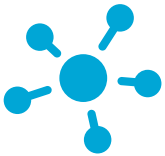
## Breakdown of the issues

The Content Wrangler DITA Satisfaction Survey asked respondents to rank the top 10 issues facing DITA users. These issues fit into three major categories including



### Part-1: Skills Development

This problem area is far and away the most pressing obstacle for a successful DITA deployment. Too often authors are left to figure out how to adapt to writing for DITA on their own.



### Part-2: Technology

We often hear about the failure of the technology as it relates to performance or complexity. While technology may seem the most likely culprit, it is often not the root cause of the problem.



### Part-3: Management

While these issues appear to be of least concern to many survey respondents, they are most likely to form the root cause of all other issues identified in the survey. This points to a general lack of awareness as to the role management should be playing in collaborative, structured authoring solutions.

The DITA Satisfaction Survey Aggregate Results revealed little spread between the ranking of the issues indicating that respondents likely faced more than one issue of concern.



## Part 1: Skills Development

The top-ranked reported issues fall under the category of skill development and training. These include

How do I create DITA content?  
Ranked 8th by 56% of respondents.

Where can I get DITA training?  
Ranked 3rd by 64% of respondents, and



How do I reuse content? Ranked 1st by 75% of respondents

How do I make DITA do what I want it to do? Ranked 2nd by 69% of respondents

This problem area is far and away the most pressing obstacle for a successful DITA deployment. Too often authors are left to figure out how to adapt to writing for DITA on their own. Organizations will normally invest in tools training—and may even opt for a short training course to learn about DITA—but they rarely make the effort to train writers how to author modular, structured topics of content designed for reuse. It is easy to overlook this training aspect and assume that writers will naturally adapt to this new way of writing. But, those assumptions can lead to big problems.

In a poll conducted in a recent webinar<sup>2</sup> where half of the participants indicated they were already using DITA, a full 70% indicated that they had no formal DITA training. Of those participants, nearly 60% were self-taught while the others had no training at all. It's no wonder that dissatisfaction is the norm.

## Selecting the best training for your needs

There are many training options available to learn about DITA. Selecting the best training for your team entails examining what it is you need to learn. Most DITA training courses cover the features and walk you through the structures and mechanics of the standard. These courses demonstrate how to markup content, but will often not teach you how to rethink and restructure your content to take advantage of DITA's features. Consider the differences between structured writing and structured markup.

Structured Writing		Structured Markup	
✓	Coined by Robert Horn in the 1960's as a means of analyzing, organizing, and presenting information for optimal human consumption	✓	Allows authors to markup words, phrases, and sections of content for presentation and for meaning for consumption by machines
✓	Promotes patterns for format and syntax that become easily recognizable and predictable	✓	Is validated using standard sets of rules that specify consistent and predictable patterns
✓	Relies on consistently labelling and chunking information into easily scannable text	✓	Specifies what content goes where but does not limit or restrict how the content is written
✓	Introduces universal information typing based on intended reader response	✓	Provides a rich underlying metadata layer for capturing properties related to the content

Table reproduced from "Driving Enterprise Productivity from the Front of the DITA XML Train".<sup>3</sup>

## Continuous collaborative learning

Organizations that wisely invest in comprehensive training for their writing teams also recognize the importance of continuous learning and recurring training. To stay on top of knowledge sharing in your team, consider the following collaboration activities:

- ✓ Schedule regular checkpoints where your team discusses what they've learned with other members of the team.
- ✓ Assign different members of your team to research and present best practices at regularly scheduled lunch-and-learn sessions.
- ✓ Attend webinars and seminars on best practices as a group and then debrief together to discuss aspects that should be incorporated into your day-to-day work.
- ✓ Review and update your content standards regularly as a team to keep your procedures and guidelines current and relevant.
- ✓ Pair up senior members of your team with new or junior members for regular mentoring and coaching.

## Precision Content® Structured Author Training

Precision Content has many years of experience teaching organizations how to write better structured content. Our inhouse, instructor-led training courses run from 1 to 5 days depending on your needs and cover the gamut of tools and techniques needed for successful structured authoring. Learn more about our DITA training. Or contact Precision Content to find out more about how we can address your specific training needs.



## Part 2: Technology

The second highest ranked reported issues fall under the category of technology. These include

01

Our technology doesn't meet our expectations. Ranked 4th by 62% of respondents

02

Our publishing capabilities are limited. Ranked 5th by 60% of respondents, and

03

We have challenges with content localization. Ranked 10th by 35% of respondents.

We often hear about the failure of the technology as it relates to performance or complexity. While technology may seem to be the most likely culprit, it is often not the root cause of the problem.

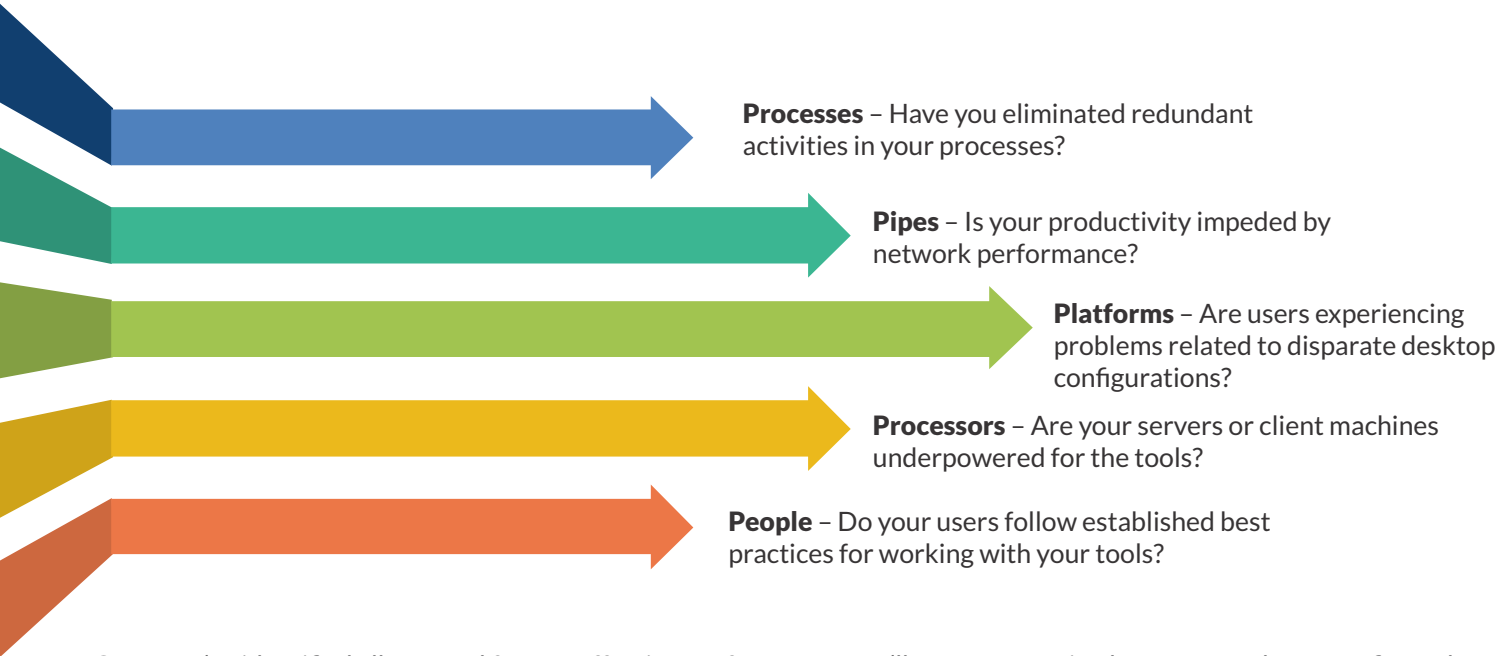
The good news is that you have invested in an open standard and your systems likely make it possible to lift your content—and much of your metadata—out of your existing system and put it into an entirely new system with relatively minor disruption. Or if your entire system isn't the problem, you can often replace components of your solution with components from other vendors to achieve a better result. Lastly, because your content is in XML, it can often be refactored to correct problems that have accumulated in your content over time.

Before we look at changing your technology, we should examine some of these problems to see if we can identify a more appropriate root cause.

## Performance problems

Common complaints regarding performance include observations that processes take longer or systems are slower to respond than they were before the move to DITA. Part of this observation may be related to aligning to different expectations. You are working with a lot more parts and potentially with many more people to get the job done. Some parts of the process will naturally take longer. These perceived issues will appear worse when you are required to collaborate with writers, editors, and other team members across great distances.

If the overall time and effort does not significantly improve over the course of 2-3 production life cycles of the content, then there may be some other issues at play. You'll want to examine your



Once you've identified all external factors affecting performance, you'll want to examine how your tools are configured and deployed. There may be alternative features, configurations, or components that will greatly improve system performance. Your tool vendors or service providers should be able to help you examine your options.

## Complexity problems

Finding the correct balance of complexity versus utility is one of the biggest challenges we face in DITA deployments. The problem may not be that your tools are too complex, rather that too much complexity is exposed to the wrong group of users. The best-architected systems attempt to push the most complexity onto the shoulders of the fewest number of people. As much as possible, let the software handle most of the heavy lifting.



It's important to note that collaborative, structured authoring is always going to be more complex than traditional desktop publishing. Despite attempts to simplify the technology around content authoring, content itself is not getting any simpler. Joe Gollner of Gnostix Research believes that content development practices and technology are following trends we see in other related industries. His predictions are that content development will continue to become much more<sup>4</sup>



To strike the proper balance between complexity and utility you need to consider how the technology decisions you make now impact the viability of your content in the future. Will simpler structures, semantics, and metadata cause significant rework in the future to attain your goals? Or, will postponing certain complexities increase the likelihood for adoption and pave the way for early wins? The only way to answer these questions is to map out your long-term goals and assess the steps you will take to get there.

## Steps to address complexity

The first step to understanding your needs is to assess your level of process maturity against industry benchmarks. There are a few models to choose from including the DITA Maturity Model<sup>5</sup>. Once you've determined your current state, you can decide upon your timing to achieve your target state and map out the steps to get there.

The second step is to develop a content strategy and roadmap that speak to your goals and capabilities you need to achieve over the next two years. Your strategy should align with your business goals and direction. Plan for a minor review every 6 months and a major review each year to determine your funding requirements to stay the course with your roadmap.

By understanding your plan and getting sign-off from stakeholders, you will be able to determine whether you should

- ☒ Eliminate certain elements that are unnecessarily complex
- ☒ Hire more staff to assume responsibility for some of the more complex tasks
- ☒ Invest more time and money in training to compensate for complexity
- ☒ Invest more money in tools that better mask the complexity, or
- ☒ Re-engineer certain aspects of your processes.

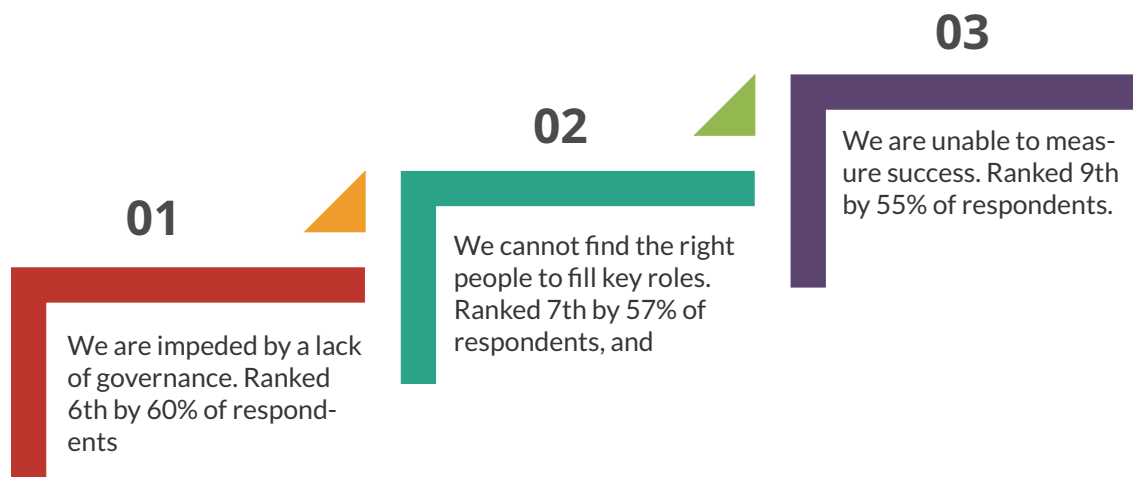
## Precision Content<sup>®</sup> Health Check

Before making any moves to replace your current technology stack, let us work with you to assess your needs and review the current state of your deployment. We may be able to discover areas for improvement and extend the usefulness of your existing technology. If you need new tools, we can help you with that as well. Sometimes we all just need to stop throwing more technology at our content problems. Learn more about our workshops.



## Part 3: Management

The lowest ranked reported issues fall under the category of management. These include



While these issues appear to be of least concern to many respondents, they are most likely to form the root cause of all other issues identified in the survey. This points to a general lack of awareness as to the role management should be playing in collaborative, structured authoring solutions.

Organizations that lag in management of their structured authoring solutions often put technology ahead of process; or worse, they embark down the road of content management without any intention of actually managing content or the people who create it. “We cannot tell our writers how to write,” is a common excuse for failing to manage content and govern content creation efforts.

Organizations that see DITA as a magical fast-path to the bleeding edge of technology—or a panacea for multichannel publishing—are most likely to fail. Organizations that understand the importance of planning, experimentation and governance are more likely to experience success.

## Planning strategies

Planning starts with a solid understanding of the issues your organization faces that point to structured authoring as a possible solution. This involves research to determine pain points and gather baseline metrics that will help you to measure success. This research forms the basis of your business case.

Good planning means that you understand how this initiative will impact your current staff and possibly increase headcount to ensure you have the right people in the right roles. If you have absolutely no ability to affect headcount—or reassign staff—than you will find yourself seriously hampered in the early stages of your DITA deployment.

Ten years ago, it wasn't uncommon to see attrition rates as high as 30% when technical publication groups transitioned to topic-based, structured authoring from more traditional desktop publishing<sup>6</sup>. Today these numbers have come down as more technical writers adapt to their changing environment and demand for qualified DITA authors increases<sup>7</sup>.

Understand that planning is not something you do once and move on. Planning needs to be iterative allowing you to roll out a minimum viable solution as early as possible and then add on increased complexity and sophistication over time as needed. Your needs will change; sometimes quickly.

## Experimentation strategies

The importance of planned experimentation and how it plays into the growth of your structured authoring solution cannot be understated. Your experimentation begins with your first proof-of-concept (PoC) to demonstrate the advantages of structured authoring and validate your business case. Here it is important to keep your costs low and workplace disruption to a minimum. The success of your PoC should validate the costs for proceeding to the pilot.

Second phase of experimentation occurs with the design and execution of the pilot project. The pilot will rely on high-level use cases and target objectives determined during the PoC. This is still only an experimental stage. You may not want to be locked into any long-term commitments to one software vendor. Where possible, consider using subscription pricing and a hosted solution at least until the pilot has proven to be successful.

Once in production, consider conducting regular experiments on a staging server that remains isolated from your production systems. These experiments should examine new product features, validate new releases, and verify patches and fixes. Use experiments to test new authoring techniques and publishing solutions before going live with them to production.

## Governance strategies

Good governance is the key to scalability and sustainability of your program. When moving to a sophisticated, collaborative authoring solution, you need everyone playing by a common set of rules and guidelines. You need a strategy that addresses the needs of the business while catering to the needs of the team members responsible for carrying out the work. Governance needs to fit into the overall corporate strategy for managing its information assets. If executed well, you should see benefits<sup>9</sup> such as a



01

Stable technology stack for authoring and publishing

02

Stable funding for skills development

03

Better opportunities for leveraging content from other departments

04

Better opportunities for others to reuse your content, and

05

Better opportunities for improvement and innovation.

In 2015, Precision Content commissioned a study with AIIM.org entitled Innovating Content Creation and Reuse<sup>9</sup>. This study polled more than 300 organizations from around the world about their content creation practices and technology. When respondents were asked about content standards in place to manage content creation, 16% indicated there are strict standards in place, while 47% acknowledged there is something there, but not strictly followed. For 37% the indication was that there is little to no use of standards in any form.

Information Governance is the rocket fuel that empowers effective collaboration within and across teams and departments. Its purpose is to give everyone a voice in the future of the program and manage change across the enterprise. Good governance can be an important differentiator for your company.

## Precision Content<sup>®</sup> Information Governance Workshop

Let Precision Content help you build your governance strategy to engage both upper management and your team in a comprehensive, coordinated plan for moving forward with your structured authoring program. We'll help you to assess your maturity on the governance spectrum and lay out a path to a sustainable program. Working with our partners at AIIM, we will bring in industry-leading training and certification for your company to ensure success.



## Conclusion

Don't let dissatisfaction derail your DITA project. Your greatest advancements in information management still to be achieved may not lie in the technology you use to manage content but in the content itself. Hundreds of companies have been working with structured authoring practices for producing intelligent content for more than a decade and found ways to reduce many of barriers to adoption including cost and complexity. You need not look too far to find practical advice and leverage lessons learned to bring their success into your organization. While this journey may seem daunting, it is one that should be taken seriously with a focus to begin with one element, and grow it out from there. The experts at Precision Content Authoring Solutions Inc. are pleased to support your journey and to share their knowledge. Call us today to help ***Unlock the Knowledge in Your Enterprise™***.

## RESEARCH

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- 1 DITA Satisfaction Survey published by The Content Wrangler on May 31, 2017. Listen to an analysis of the results by Rob Hanna, Keith Schengili-Roberts, Mark Lewis, and Scott Abel and download a copy of the results today from BrightTalk at <https://www.brighttalk.com/webcast/9273/259775>
- 2 The Cognitive Science Behind Intelligent Content presented by Rob Hanna on July 21, 2016. See <https://www.brighttalk.com/webcast/9273/214245> for details.
- 3 Driving Enterprise Productivity from the Front of the DITA XML Train presented by Rob Hanna and Doug Gorman at DITA North America 2017 in San Diego, CA.
- 4 Collaborating Across the Enterprise using DITA XML and Microcontent presented by Rob Hanna at DITA North America 2017 in San Diego, CA.
- 5 The DITA Maturity Model Whitepaper by Michael Priestley and Amber Swope, 2008 <http://dita.xml.org/wiki/about-the-dita-maturity-model->
- 6 Preparing for Successful Content Management presented by Rob Hanna in May 2008 at the 55th Annual STC Summit in Philadelphia, PA. <https://www.slideshare.net/rhanna/preparing-for-successful-content-management>
- 7 10 Million DITA Topics Can't Be Wrong presented by Keith Schengili-Roberts in December 2016 at the Content Wrangler Virtual Summit. <https://www.slideshare.net/IXIASOFT/10-million-dita-topics-cant-be-wrong>
- 8 Information Governance Equals Information Opportunity presented by Rob Hanna in May 2017 at the Information Development World conference in Menlo Park, CA.
- 9 Innovating Content Creation and Reuse underwritten by Precision Content and published by the Association for Imaging and Information Management (AIIM.org) in January 2016. <http://www.precisioncontent.com/whitepaper-innovating-content-reuse>.

# Precision Content Presents

## DITA Publishing Tools for the Enterprise

You spend a lot of time, money, and resources creating DITA content. Our publishing solutions make it possible to surface and share your DITA content across the enterprise in Microsoft® Word®, PowerPoint®, SharePoint®, and WittyParrot™.

### DITA inPrint™

DITA inPrint is a design and publishing tool that makes it easy to create templates that conform to corporate styles. It enables users to easily publish DITA/XML content with those templates to fully styled Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF documents.



**DITAinPrint**  
GET THE WORD OUT

### DITA onPoint™

SharePoint® is everywhere. A 2016 study, revealed that 63% of organizations use SharePoint as a main, secondary or legacy enterprise CMS, or records management system. DITA onPoint™ makes it possible to deliver your DITA XML across the enterprise using SharePoint.



**DITAonPoint**  
ENTERPRISE PUBLISHING

### DITA forShow™

Whether sales, marketing, compliance, or training, departments across the enterprise use PowerPoint® to communicate. Ensuring presentations include accurate, up-to-date information is critical. DITA For Show™ allows authors to publish DITA content to PowerPoint



**DITAforShow**  
PRESENT YOUR CONTENT

### WittyDITA™

WittyDITA™ plugs into standard DITA publishing systems to connect to the WittyParrot platform. WittyParrot then makes accessing your information easy with just a few clicks. More than a file sharing and storage solution, it enables you to discover, classify, assemble, deliver, and track all the content you need to work more efficiently.



**WittyDITA**  
SHARE YOUR CONTENT

Call us today at +1 (647) 265-8282 to schedule a product demonstration or write to us at [publishingtools@precisioncontent.com](mailto:publishingtools@precisioncontent.com) and *unlock the knowledge in your enterprise.*



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