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Conference for Software User Assistance
Daily News

The end of RoboHelp?

by Chuck Martin

Conference Director Joe Welinske yesterday predicted everything but the end of RoboHelp at the opening session of the 2005 Conference for User Assistance. Saying that no one was left on the RoboHelp product team at Macromedia, that the company had "sunset" the product, Welinske claimed that within two years, Robo-Help would no longer be "in common use."

The bold prediction drew a noticeable response from the assembled crown of about 400 user assistance developers, from gasps of surprise to scattered applause.

Mike Hamiltion, who was a longtime RoboHelp Product Manager at eHelp and held the same position when that company was purchased by Macromedia in late 2003, was one of the last vestiges of the

RoboHelp team at Macromedia, and he left Macromedia early this month. Hamiltion has joined a new company, MadCap Software, which is promising "a revolutionary new XML-based authoring tool that promises to be the new industry standard in Help authoring,"

Meanwhile, the Macromedia RoboHelp booth in the exhibition was unstaffed, a lonely table piled with untaken demo CDs.

The MadCap booth was swamped at the breaks with conference attendees thoroughly curious about the new venture and the soon-to-be new product. MadCap is aiming for a fall 2005 release for its new flagship product, which it's calling Flare.

With no one staffing the Macromedia booth, the future of RoboHelp is yet unconfirmed, although the evidence to-date does not bode well for those who have invested heavily—or recently—in RoboHelp.

Fortunately, other authoring tool vendors are willing and ready to step in. Today is the last day of the vendor exhibition, so if you're a RoboHelp user who may be shopping for a new tool, now's the time to gather the information you'll need to make an informed decision.

Meanwhile, we're trying to contact Macromedia to get some official word on Robo-Help's future. You'll see it here if we can get that word. Stay tuned.

Getting information at the conference exhibition.

Evaluation Raffle Winners

The following people were raffle winners yesterday. Thank you to all for filling out your session evaluation forms, which are all entered in today's and tomorrow's raffles.

- Dan Mullen, Intuit, AuthorIt Enterprise
- Bill Rohaly, The Northern Trust, ComponentOne Doc2Help 7
- Tom Woolums, Microsoft, Free registration to LavaCon
- Debbie Peebles, Micromedex, Arbortext sweatshirt
- Josie Armstead, Websense, buffet dinner for 2 from WritersUA
- Todd Williams, buffet dinner for 2 from WritersUA
- Drew Hilling, F5 Networks, 2 comedy Shop tickets from WritersUA

MadCap Software's Mike Hamilton in new duds.

Tuesday Forecast

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Enjoying the Monday Mixer.

A large crowd gathers around the MadCap Software booth after the Monday morning session where it was predicted that RoboHelp was being "sunset" by Macromedia and that former eHelp/Macromedia product manager Mike Hamiilton is now part of MadCap.

Tuesday Notes

Speaker Replacement

In the Smart Authoring Strategies for Reducing Translation Costs session at 1:00, Carol-Ann Veale is being replaced as speaker by John Fisher, also of ITR.

Product Demo Replacement

Vantage Software Technologies will be exhibiting today in Hawaiian Room 4 in place of Convivo.

Product Demos Today

Product demonstrations (AuthorIt, ComponentOne, Vantage Software Technologies, Help Server, Human Dynamics, and Scriptorium) are today from 4:15-5:15. Check your Conference Program for rooms.

Exhibition Last Day

Today is the last day of the Product Exhibition in the Caribbean Ballroom, so if you have any questions for any vendors, find them before the end of the day.

Lunch

Lunch today is not provided by the conference, enabling you to try out the many find eating establishments nearby.

An Early Start

Reminder that tomorrow's sessions begin at 8:30am.

Peer Showcase

The Peer Showcase is Wednesday morning from 9:15-10:45 in the Caribbean Ballroom.

Session Evaluations

Please remember to fill out your session evaluations and drop them in the boxes by the door.

Hawaii Bound?

Stop by the ProSpring/LavaCon booth today and enter a drawing for a free trip to Hawaii.

Already decided to attend LavaCon in September? Pick up a WritersUA discount registration form as well.

Newsletter Staff

Chuck Martin: Writer, editor, photographer, layout, production

Mike Hamilton: Vegas Freebies

Vegas Freebie

Every evening, a water and music show plays again and again in the spectacular fountains filling the quarter-mile-long lake in front of the Bellagio.

Monday Session Summaries

User Assistance Trends Panel, Paula Stern, Matthew Ellison, Char James-Tanny, Tony Self, Joe Welinske

The panel predicted the future in 3 categories: Trends in IT World, User Assistance, and Trends in Tools & Technologies. Among the predictions was a blockbuster, the prediction by Joe that within 2 years, one of the biggest authoring tools, RoboHelp, would "no longer be in common use." (See the story on the front page.)

Among the other predictions:

- Paula: Interaction with customer service is replacing help.
- Char: In 5 years, English will no longer be the lingua franca of the web.
- Joe: "Economic equilibrium" will slow documentation outsourcing within 3 years.
- Char: Structured authoring will be big. People who can take advantage of XML and who can do the structured authoring will find it easier to stay employed.
- Tony: HAT's will disappear as a separate software category. Replaced with add-ins to mainstream XML editing tools.

Structured Authoring 101, Alan Houser

Alan walked an audience of about 100 attendees through the basics of structured authoring, with examples in FrameMaker. A big buzzword here (as it probably will be throughout the conference) is XML, as in the format (or container) in which content will be delivered.

One point that Alan made is that it can be useful to start with a smaller pilot project when moving to structured authoring before making an enterprise-wide commitment. Such an approach will allow you to learn about the concept and the process for when you deploy fully.

A Successful Structure for Crafting Products to Improve User Performance, Thom Haller

Thom brought up the concept of intuitive models vs. feedback-driven models, which lies in how the image of the user is built. Feedback models are derived from real people, not a designer's imagination. The approach is to focus on what people want to do, not how to get work done by a release date.

XML for Help Authors, Tony Self

XML isn't a language, as Tony pointed out, it's a set of rules for writing languages. So you don't write in XML, you write in an XML. An XML is known as an XML application.

But more than just tell session attendees about XML applications, he created a small one to show how it works: DogML, and XML application to store information about dogs.

More from the Monday Mixer.