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**The Value of Adding Images to Technical Documentation**

**By V. Berba Velasco Jr.**

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It's cliché, but true—a picture does paint a thousand words. This is an important message to remember when writing any sort of user documentation, such as an installation guide or an instruction manual. A document that makes judicious use of images and diagrams will be much easier to understand than one that is composed entirely of text descriptions.

I observed this first-hand years ago, when a junior programmer at one company was asked to update the software installation manual for their machine controllers. One of the first things he did was to strip away all the screen capture images, reducing the entire document to plain text. "These images are just silly!" he said. "They take up space, and they're just not necessary. I trust that anyone who reads this document will be smart enough to figure it out."

This turned out to be a huge mistake. The technicians who had to use the manual had a difficult time making sense of its instructions. They had to repeatedly ask for clarification, and one of them told me that the pure text descriptions were just too cumbersome to follow. They were fearful of using these instructions at all, knowing that a single misstep could lock the controllers into an irrecoverable state. It was a ugly situation all around.

The problem was that this programmer didn't try to make things easy for the users. For one thing, he failed to consider that some technicians were not native English speakers, and that they might struggle with the wording. More importantly though, this programmer expected too much from his audience. He wanted to reduce these instructions to their bare essentials, thinking that would be adequate. He failed to consider that even an intelligent, otherwise careful reader might be tempted to jump over instructions, or would gloss over some critical detail. This is a common pitfall when time is short, and when the users are confronted with pages and pages of bland text.

A few carefully chosen images, with suitable captions, can go a long way toward preventing that. When I saw that the junior programmer was stripping away all the screen capture images, I cautioned

him against that. "These images may not be strictly necessary," I said, "but they help clarify a lot of details. For one thing, they show the user exactly which button to push, or which window to select. This makes the instructions much easier to understand, and reduces the likelihood of a human error." To this day, I wish that he had heeded my warning.

Were the users intelligent enough to understand the manual, as he claimed? Certainly—but intelligence is no guarantee against human error. Could the images have been construed as talking down to the user? Perhaps—but in my experience, sophisticated users seldom respond that way. Rather, most of them seem to understand the value that these images bring to the table. Perhaps it's because most of them know what it's like to be frazzled and pressed for time, and how easily important details can be lost in the text.

So remember—a picture paints a thousand words, and a single screen capture can be worth more than a dozen pages of text. It's a lesson that's worth learning.

V. Berba Velasco Jr. has a doctorate in Electrical Engineering and has been practicing his trade for nearly a decade. During that time, he has repeatedly found that good technical writing skills are almost as critical as good engineering skills. Dr. Velasco currently works as a senior electrical and software engineer for Cellular Technology Limited (

), a biotech company in

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### **What Are The Benefits Of Outsourcing Your Technical Writing To India?**

**By James Marriot**

You know that you need the help of a technical writing service when you don't have employees with technical documentation experience, when your in-house technical publications group is overloaded and understaffed and you don't have the time to hire and train new technical writers, and when your engineers don't have the time to write customer-focused end user documentation in addition to creating your products. In such a situation, it's only inevitable, not to mention sensible to hire the services of a technical writing service.

And since your documentation is the first thing that visitors to your organization will scrutinize, you need technical documentation that reflects the organization's quality and compliance activities. And unlike other pieces of writing, in technical writing of any documentation the use of words play have an important role. Technical writing is not the same as creative writing where use of action verbs and colorful adjectives and imagistic metaphors are encouraged. So, you need a good technical writing service to help you out of the tight spot. And, now you have the option of outsourcing technical writing services to India.

And there are many benefits to outsourcing technical writing services to India. Technical Writers in

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India are trained for clarity of presentation and materials, thus making the information more easily understood and processed. Also, if you get many people to write your technical documents for you, there's bound to be inconsistency. Some technical writers will be better than the others and so different documentation will show different levels of quality. But, a technical writer in India can prepare or edit documentation to ensure consistency among the processes.

Also, a paper trail of documented events allows you to monitor and improve your processes, products, and services. And, technical writing in India includes the preparation of forms and other documents related to the completion of work. And finally when you employ a technical writer to prepare or edit your documents, you'll have more time to spend on your job or with your clients.

However, if you're not sure whether to trust a technical writing service with your valuable documentation or not, then you can just hire the technical writing service for a small project and see how it works out for both of you. And if you've a large project, you can first ask the writer to write on some small topics for your software for free, as a part of the proposal.

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