# Notes from DITA Listening Session #2

June 8th 2016, Littleton, MA

* Stan Doherty, representing OASIS, organized this; Keith Schengili-Roberts also attending in-person as an OASIS representative
* Contributing remotely: JoAnn Hackos and Bob Thomas
* Meeting space provided by IBM
* 16 people attending in person (including Keith and Stan)
* When the question was asked “how many are using Agile?” the vast majority in attendance raised their hands (maybe 3-4 people not using Agile); there was also some grumbling (“some technical writing candidates will run and hide when Agile is mentioned during an interview session); one of the people in attendance (Marni Nispel) is working on a book about Agile and DITA.

AutoDesk (Patty Gale)

* Her group has moved from FrameMaker to SDL LiveContent and XMetaL
* Is also concerned about “siloing” of DITA within tech writing sector
* Her work at AutoDesk is very decentralized; doesn’t know how many writers there are in the whole organization
* Her division translates content into 12 languages, other divisions do more
* Struggled with the task topic type, found it *too* structured
* DITA implementation is run by a different division in California; can take as long as 6 months for them to “listen” to our needs for tools/formatting changes; feels hampered by the output format that California group can do; also would like to get workflow between product lines.
* Updating output transformations *has* to become easier.
* Would like to see something “not yet envisioned” by OASIS
* If it takes another 5 years for the next DITA standard to appear she feels that her team will likely move on to something else
* Content needs to be easy for readers to scan, so look and feel *is* important
* Wanted – more information about DITA 1.3 features  
   -- Local events that allow people to share their experiences and help in another   
   -- DITA webinars – great  
   -- DITA TC to focus on providing support for personalizing content IN the product  
   interface

EBSCO (Scott Farrar)

* With EBSCO Publishing
* EBSCO is highly diversified; he works with health division content but the firm has many other division covering a very wide breadth of content
* He produces docs for health equipment
* He represents the Health division within the firm; has over 100 writers, will likely go to 200 when including outside contractors
* Have been using a home-grown CMS and implement their own reuse mechanisms; using a version of a Medical documentation standard that they have customized at the moment
* Their focus on developing medical products and in submitting regulation documents  
  to regulatory agencies means that they rely on a lot of metadata (derived often  
  from library ”Mark” standards.
* DITA has become one of his “new favourite things”; his team are moving to DITA and to DITA 1.3 (cross-book linking is a big draw for them). Been in DITA two years or so.
* Will be using SDL and oXygen; have been using oXygen for a while now already

HP (Shubhangi Vajpayee)

* Originally started with Vertica, which was acquired by HP in 2011
* 20 writers; 19 in Cambridge, 1 in Pittsburgh
* She used DITA when she was working at Symantec in India
* She is not working in DITA at this point in time
* They are currently using Flare, and as they grow she believes they are likely to need to move beyond its capabilities
* Back in India 6-7 years ago, DITA was seen as something useful for would-be technical writers to learn and know
* Is thankful for this get-together and hopes for more like it in the future (this led to a discussion about re-starting the local DITA Users Group)
* Very interested in getting business case ROI information to bring back to her team and peers.

IBM (Zoe Lawson, Jennifer Latour)

Zoe:

* first started with DITA 10 years ago at Unica, firm which was later bought by IBM
* Now using oXygen, were previously using Arbortext and made her unhappy (“it didn’t show the code!”)
* She deals with some interesting legacy issues, including documentation for products that are older than she is.
* IBM dealing with 3500 products.
* Similar to Autodesk’s situation, IBM has a centralized unit dedicated to processing/tools, which has its good and bad sides
* They are mostly on DITA 1.2, but because they have access to Robert Anderson’s work in the tools division and so have access to DITA 1.3
* If a team has someone who is tools-savvy and can build customized plug-ins locally, decentralized teams can experiment more
* Dumb things done in the early days: they believed that DITA had too many tags and so “restricted” them, which ended up being a bad idea
* Her group translates content into 10 languages, some do up to 28 languages
* Would like to see JSON output, likes the “guided tour” inline help; swagger is all JSON based; if there was a way to get that “it would be crazy useful”
* Would love some bridge between DITA, JSON, and Hopscotch (<http://jsfiddle.net/plainkeyman/JZqWF/>; http://linkedin.github.io/hopscotch/)
* Noted that she cannot currently use conkeyref in their current implementation, and she wishes that she could; problem centers around consistent tagging of legacy content

Jennifer:

* was working with DITA previously, but is now primarily working in Word (eliciting a general groan from audience)

NxStage Medical (Robert Johnson)

* Main product is kidney dialysis machines for both home and diagnostic purposes
* Stated that he was “incredibly jealous” of other people in the room doing “cool things”; as best he can hope to do is produce PDFs, but this has much to do with the highly regulated environment of his company’s sector
* There are two other writers on his team plus a manager; producing PDFs mostly
* Translate to 8-12 languages depending on product
* Conversely he is not hung-up on “ugly formatting” mentioned by others in the group, though he notes that other people in his company are
* Vasont is their CCMS; trailing their needs
* He was hired at NxStage to help implement DITA
* Would love to use DITA 1.3, but CCMS does not support it; would like to use release management and troubleshooting in particular
* Would like to see a DITA medical device user group to share similar issues specific to the industry; would like to see more local meetings
* “On Wednesday mornings when the DITA North America conference ends it feels like I am saying goodbye to all of my equally geeky friends” ;)

Oracle (Steve Jong, Mary Martyak)

Mary:

* 10 writers in her group, currently not using DITA, wants to learn more about the process and how to implement it
* Her group translates content into 12 languages
* Her company has many different publications groups; some are using DITA, some not

Steve:

* Originally worked at startup that got bought by a company that got bought that in turn was bought by Oracle
* second company was where started using DITA
* working environment: DITA 1.2, Vasont, XMetaL Enterprise, Apache FOP (the latter of which “is free and worth every penny”)
* mentioned TL 9000 standard (http://www.tl9000.org/ ) similar to ISO 9000. So “everything we write ties back to this”, use otherprops extensively to reference which part of TIL 9000 standard is being referenced
* His team does not currently do any translation
* They do handle extremely large and complex docs and likes the fact that DITA “just works” (he has worked with tools that do not)
* They have enormous ditaval files consisting of hundreds of lines; it is easier to simply leave old things in than to remove them but this slows things down considerably (mentioned that Vasont may not have envisioned anyone using ditavals this way)
* He wants to be able to indicate changes but finds that they have to tag the whole topic rather than specific portions within a topic, which is what he would like to do
* There are conceptual problems with DITA; task is deeply typed, and this makes it harder from a learning perspective for those new to DITA
* He cares deeply about format; but for a generation now we have been told not to worry about it; that wasn’t true then, and it isn’t true now (comment from Adrian who mentioned an older colleague who found that the aesthetic pleasure of creating documentation is gone); online help is dying in part because of absence of images, “all you get is grey text”; when contrasted against the rich web experience it is harder to make the case that content is not about look and feel;  
  with bland DITA output, you are just “asking to be ignored”
* WANT – more discussion about and support for embedded user assistance
* RoboHelp did a good job in providing interface that allowed individuals and teams to customize their output. Didn’t need to be an XSLT or CSS guru to produce non-embarrassing output.
* DITA is brilliant; some of the support tooling is useless or unavailable.
* Discussion – RoboHelp made money because it required a license for every user. DITA toolsmiths would never make any money if they can’t put something equivalent on each person’s desktop. Different financial challenge.

Progress Software (Rhonda Fitzgerald, Daniel Rose, Adrian Garbacz)

Adrian:

* An observation: noticing grey hairs while scanning the room, and commented that years ago we all started out in the industry we were using tools that worked with tags, then we all moved to WYSIWYG, now we are all back to back to tagging
* Believes that technical writing has begun to suffer, not as good as it once was (he didn’t say if this was DITA-specific or a more general malaise affecting the industry as a whole)

Rhonda:

* She wears many hats at Progress, works as a technical writer but also something of a toolsmith and XSL person
* She has been using DITA since 2010, the genesis was a product line containing several similar but distinct products that required extensive content reuse in order to make the documentation for it possible
* Moved from unstructured FrameMaker to DITA
* Purchased IXIASOFT DITA CMS in 2011
* oXygen is their editing tool
* Currently working with DITA 1.2
* Hired Comtech to do their stylesheets; she has had to learn XSL in order to tweak things
* Also tried to create their own WebHelp solution (this was an early “dumb thing” that they did); this was dropped and now they use WebWorks ePublisher which they are happy with. Leverage its ReverbHelp transform (http://www.webworks.com/Documentation/Reverb/).
* Have about 20 writers, also have writers in Bulgaria (who are not using to DITA yet); one group is using Markdown, another is using HTML, and would like to know more about how to get from there to DITA
* on the production end of things this has gone well, they can now auto-generate nightly doc builds; have a grand total of 41K topics, 642 maps, 12,400 images in the IXIASOFT DITA CMS (she realizes that this is likely small when compared to some of the other companies in the room, but she considered it a real milestone from their perspective)
* the promise of reuse is elusive: as it is a lot harder to do than it sounds; within a single deliverable it is easy; less so between product lines
* they cannot get rid of xrefs; she is still learning about how to implement keys; feels that they really need someone who is dedicated to learning about these sorts of features within DITA and then come up with a plan to implement it
* WANT – practical guidelines/whitepapers about reuse strategies, updating legacy DITA sources, topic reuse without cloning)
* Discussion – pointed people to Radu’s CIDM talk

Schneider-Electric (Jacqueline Lehr)

* grown by acquisition, which is how she joined (started with APC, which was bought in 2007)
* started writing in DITA in 2009, just for one product; this is still the case today
* would love to convince other groups that DITA is the way to go
* much of the firm is firmly with FrameMaker and “that is where they want to stay”
* People don’t understand the value of DITA; “give me my FrameMaker and go away”
* The FrameMaker group is translating to 36 languages (general comment around the table that “that must be expensive”)
* one group moving to Confluence Wiki as that group has gone to Agile; difficult to persuade them that DITA isn’t out-dated technology
* her DITA output is outputted to Confluence Wiki; this doesn’t work so well
* there is another group in the firm that is using DITA; they are using PTC tools, “it is efficient and looks good”
* she needs to maintain two sources in parallel; she believes the Confluence wiki will fall and crash one day and she wants to be ready for that
* ability to round-trip to/from wiki and DITA would be a great thing to see
* would like to see an easier way to manage the DITA-OT; “if there was a GUI it would be nice”
* PDF will never die within her organization
* Do not normally have text in their graphics, mainly do callouts
* WANT – round-trip DITA-Confluence-wiki support – BIG DEAL for enabling her to stay in DITA and advocate for it
* Does some crowd-sourced localization (https://www.getlocalization.com/)

SimpliVity (Marni Nispel)

* she started as a sole writer and then her company was bought by PTC; wanted to eat own dogfood; she had a great experience as the developers for the DITA tools were next door
* the next company she worked at also used DITA, this time using oXygen; were generating PDFs out of nothing but transforms; adoption issue is still huge, and convincing upper management about adoption and conversion is still a tough sell
* they were using Madcap Flare but have hit its limits; it does teach modular writing though, which makes it a good stepping stone, but is not a CMS and cannot easily handle very large amounts of content
* they have a requirement to go to MindTouch (general groans from audience)
* From day one we were told by CEO that we would not be a silo, so they work extensively with engineering, and DITA has held up very well in this environment; “engineers like DITA like kittens love milk”

Also have engineers working with Markdown; content is considered to be an asset for the entire company

* Real interest with Lightweight DITA; use Markdown -> Swagger -> DITA
* When you are trying to convince engineering VPs as to the value of DITA, there are people out there who have already done that and can help make the business case, and you can tap into this larger community and encourage partnerships with other groups (marketing, support, etc).

VCE (Colin Ferguson, Noel McDonagh)

Colin:

* VCE is a fast-growing company
* Dell has recently purchased the company, so everything is up in the air; his job centers mainly around the tools
* used to work at IBM, where he got his feet wet with DITA
* originally came from a RoboHelp shop and was happy with it, then came to IBM in part to learn more about this “DITA thing” that he had heard about; he then moved to another company that worked with RoboHelp and found that returning to it “was kind of a downer”
* It was painful going from RoboHelp to DITA, but had significant managerial approval and migration was less painful as a result
* adopted SDL LiveConent and XMetaL at VCE; helped to sell the writing staff on DITA and that it would be good for them career-wise
* is concerned that DITA has not spread further than it has outside of the tech writing community; concerned that maybe he is in a niche that is not evolving
* would like to see a tool that helps makes formatting content easier to shape
* moved to SDL LiveContent 2013 about 3 years ago; mainly due to the fact that one of the parent firms was already using it extensively (LiveContent 2013 DITA 1.1 with leanings towards DITA 1.2); use non-strict tasks; output Eclipse help and PDF, also use SuiteSolutions WebPortal
* Used Stilo to migrate from RoboHTML to DITA, which produced fairly clean DITA
* SDL LiveContent “is a mess of a tool”, very powerful but very complex; early decisions that are made about usage gets baked into the tool; but on the whole he considers that it has served them well
* Feels that overall that their documentation has improved in terms of quality; structure means writers have to think more about how to write their content, but output result is still ugly (formatting)
* Would like to see more about the inner workings of the DITA-OT; he finds it buggy and difficult to troubleshoot and that it is a bit of a black box; thinks it is a major drawback to wider adoption; holding DITA back
* OASIS: would like to see a meta-task type standard; process that includes tasks within a larger procedure; something that could construct “super tasks” and would like to see more control over that; Keith later mentioned the idea (from Chris Nitchie at Oberon) about dynamic maps that could poll the user/product and deliver different, customized content based on results from poll and using if/then statements to direct content specific on demand. Colin liked this idea.
* Would also like to see a rapid prototyping and specialization creation toolkit; Stan mentioned that Lightweight DITA appears to be heading in this direction

VMware (Richard Curtis)

* Was at the previous listening session last week
* “We need to bring in many more people to the document development process; engineers just want to write it in Markdown”; see GitBook (https://www.gitbook.com/)
* Hopes that Lightweight DITA and some additional tooling will help make this possible
* “We are seeing evolutionary pressure on DITA and I am not sure that the people who are driving DITA are driving it fast enough. I find that there are things appearing in the DITA specification that does not solve the problems that we are facing”
* Give us an answer to the critics pushing us out of DITA
* Need to open up DITA to things like Markdown; the pressure he is under to do this he feels is similar to the pressures that his team to adopt DITA years ago
* WANT – detailed use cases about the flexibility of DITA in Markdown and other collaborative  
   environments; ammunition  
   -- realistic, non-simplistic examples in the spec (many existing ones avoid the difficult  
   use cases)  
   -- use cases that are written for multiple audiences, e.g. technical, managerial, financial
* SUGGESTION – release DITA in a more Agile fashion, i.e. greater frequency, fewer features