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The growth of DITA in the UK

Keith Schengili-Roberts looks at how and why DITA usage has taken hold in the UK.

20% of all DITA users within Europe reside within the UK.

Large firms using DITA within France include bioMerieux and Schneider Electric, and Infineon and SAP within Germany.

DITA XML is the fastest-growing standard for structured content, and my research (published on ditawriter.com/companies-using-dita) has shown it to be in use by over 650 organisations worldwide employing thousands of technical writers. Since DITA was launched back in May 2005, it has changed the way many organisations undertake their own technical documentation, along with the discourse focusing on how structured content can better communicate consistent messaging in an efficient and cost-effective manner. With its origins in North American software and hardware firms, it should come as no surprise that North America has seen the fastest adoption rates. My research shows that over half of the technical writers claiming DITA knowledge and experience are based in North America. But within Europe, my research has found that the highest DITA adoption rates are within the United Kingdom. This article briefly examines how and why the UK has become a leader of DITA adoption within Europe.

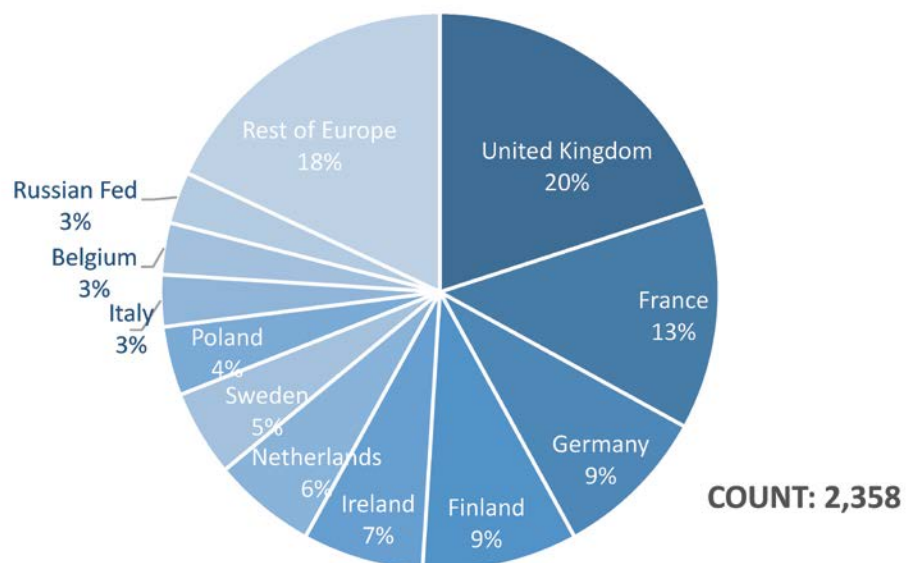### Absence of a language barrier

While much of the world uses English as the *lingua franca* for business, it is not universal. There is little doubt that the English-centric focus of DITA—including the names comprising its elements and attributes—does not make it easy for non-English readers to learn. The DITA 1.3 technical content edition of the specification—all 866 pages of complex, highly technical content—is written in English. While it is aimed primarily at programmers having to implement its features and not technical writers, it is still significant since software, training and other support material for DITA is provided in English before appearing in any other language.

As a result, DITA adoption within Europe has been and is still led by those in the UK, where English is the native tongue. Judging by recent (December 2016) LinkedIn CVs of English-speaking technical writers claiming DITA experience, roughly 20% of all DITA users within Europe reside within the UK. This is followed by France (13%), Germany and Finland (9% apiece), Ireland (7%), The Netherlands (6%), Sweden (5%), and lower percentages within the rest of the continent. The ability to understand DITA in its "native language" clearly provides a significant benefit to those seeking to adopt the specification.

Previous research that I presented during the DITA Europe 2014 conference originally demonstrated a high correlation between English literacy within a country and DITA adoption rates, but this has changed as there has been significant adoption of DITA within France and Germany in recent years. Both countries have a strong industrial base and export market, and consequently a need to provide documentation in multiple languages.

LINKEDIN USERS CLAIMING DITA XML EXPERIENCE DECEMBER 2016

United Kingdom 20%
France 13%
Germany 9%
Finland 9%
Ireland 7%
Netherlands 6%
Sweden 5%
Poland 4%
Italy 3%
Belgium 3%
Russian Fed 3%
Rest of Europe 18%

COUNT: 2,358

This is an area where DITA provides proven cost-savings, providing a further compelling point for its adoption. Examples of large firms using DITA within France include bioMerieux and Schneider Electric, and Infineon and SAP within Germany. While English literacy has been a key factor for DITA adoption in the past, this factor appears to be diminishing over time.

DITA early adopters helped spread DITA usage in the UK

As DITA took root with early adopter firms in North America, it also began to take hold within the technical writing departments in the European branch offices of those same firms. There's no better example of this than IBM, where DITA originated. In the UK there are at least five branch offices—located in Bristol, Portsmouth, Farnborough, Winchester and London—whose documentation teams work with DITA. From here it is easy to chart where DITA initially spread within the UK, as former information developers from IBM migrated to other companies over time. I have been able to discover about 20 former IBM technical writers based in the UK who have subsequently gone on to work with DITA at other organisations in the country. In some cases these people were hired to work in a technical writing environment where DITA had already been adopted, but in at least a few instances it appears as though firms were deliberately seeking people with DITA experience to help launch their own internal adoption.

Home-grown DITA use in the UK

While firms such as IBM acted as early incubators for DITA within the UK, DITA usage has spread significantly since then. The highest use of DITA occurs within the software and information technology sectors, but DITA has made its way into just about every other significant industry sector there is: telecommunications, education, financial services, automotive, insurance, defence, and many other manufacturing and business segments where technical documentation is key.

I have discovered just over 40 firms in the UK where DITA is being used. This list includes firms that have branch offices located in the UK where the parent firm is using DITA, much like the IBM example. This includes Akamai (a software firm based in the US), Anritsu (an electronics firm based in Japan), and Qualcomm (telecommunications firm based in the US). But there is an increasing number of UK firms that independently adopted DITA, such as ARM (semiconductor), Dovetail Systems (information services), dunnhumby (marketing), Edwards Vacuum (electrical manufacturing) and BAE Systems (defence) among others.

The widespread hiring of technical writers with DITA experience not only bodes well for those with DITA experience seeking future employment, but it also implies that technical writing best practices tend to migrate over time as people working at early adopter firms are snatched up by other firms. A recent search (9 January 2017) on Indeed.co.uk revealed that about 9% of "technical writer" job postings mention DITA. This is a higher overall rate than within North America (which is roughly 4%). These jobs also paid significantly more, on average about £5,000 over that of a generic technical writing position.

While DITA usage in the UK is far from ubiquitous, it appears as though there are more and more firms that recognise the process efficiencies and cost-savings of DITA. The UK will continue to be a growth market for DITA for the foreseeable future. **C**

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