User Attitudes Toward Corporate Style Guides: A Survey

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SUMMARY

Little information is known on user attitudes toward corporate style guides (CSGs). A national survey shows that an overwhelming 93% of users and 85% of non-users advocate CSG usage primarily to generate consistency in documents, to save time generating documents, and to create a professional look in documents. As corporations face the future by restructuring, usually by downsizing, and by competing more in a global economy, CSG usage will be more prevalent in corporate America, as the results of this survey indicate that CSGs are an economical quality tool that benefits both the user and the corporation.

Who uses corporate style guides (CSGs)? Do users consider style guides a help or hindrance? Who develops CSGs? Answers to these questions can help define the purpose and audience of CSGs, and thus help developers create the best CSG possible for their situation. Yet little information is known on user attitudes toward CSGs.

Abundant information on CSGs is available in the form of case histories, usually based on the author's personal experience. These "how we did it" accounts are beneficial because they expose problems and offer solutions, but the information is limited because a case history describes only one particular situation at one location during one period. Thus, stipulating that the findings from a single case history can apply to another situation at another location in the future is debatable.

Acquiring information primarily from personal experiences, as commonly seen in case histories, has been compared with folk medicine (MacNealy 1992). In contrast, modern medicine bases its therapy on empirically conducted tests. Likewise, information acquired by empirical research on user attitudes toward CSGs can be used by future style guide developers to help define their purpose and audience. For example, if empirical research indicates that the majority of users have a negative attitude toward style guides, the developer can introduce an interim style guide that addresses only immediate needs, and then ease in additions in periodic updates. Therefore, future style guide developers everywhere can benefit greatly through access to CSG information generated by empirical research.
METHODOLOGY

To gain insight into user attitudes toward CSGs on a national scale, a printed questionnaire was mailed to 200 randomly selected attendees of the 40th Society for Technical Communication (STC) annual conference held in Minneapolis in 1994.

The questionnaire was developed using well-known surveying strategies to maximize the response rate (Plumb and Spyradakis 1992):

- The questionnaire was limited to two pages of mostly closed-ended questions, making the survey less tedious.
- A self-addressed, stamped envelope was included for ease of return.
- A postcard follow-up was mailed 3 weeks after the initial questionnaire distribution as a reminder to those who had not responded.

The sample size of 200 resulted in a confidence limit of ± 6.4% (Lauer and Asher 1988). This means, for example, if 60% of the respondents indicated that they use a CSG, then this result is reliable for the entire population between the confidence limits of 53.6% and 66.4%. For this survey, ± 6.4% is an acceptable confidence limit, considering that, for example, adding 100 more names to create a sample size of 300 would be a financial and time burden while only decreasing the confidence limits to ± 5.0%, a mere 1.4% reduction.

Responses to the survey provided quantitative data for the following previously unknown information on CSGs:

- User opinion as to possible benefit or hindrance of a CSG
- Desire for use of a CSG among technical communicators not presently using one
- Predominant sections found in most CSGs
- Identification of who develops CSGs
- Identification of who uses CSGs

A respectable 57.3% response rate (114 of 199; one survey was returned as unmailable) provided a sufficient amount of valuable data to analyze. However, four of the returned surveys were not usable because they were not completed properly.

In addition to answering the survey's closed-ended questions, most respondents included thought-provoking personal opinions by answering the open-ended questions and writing various extraneous comments in the margins of the questionnaire. Opinions were analyzed by classifying them into categories and then calculating for central tendencies. To validate the findings, a colleague was asked to independently sort the opinions into categories. The agreement between the two analyses was 87%. The discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

RESULTS

Survey respondents advocate CSG usage for a variety of valid reasons. Common among these reasons is that CSG usage allows the corporate writer to produce more professional, user-friendly documents in less time without conflict. Whereas some of these ideas may not be new, the results of this survey verify for the first time that these benefits are indeed realized by a vast majority of CSG users in the U.S.

What Are the Perceived Benefits of CSGs?

Of the 69 survey respondents (62.7%) who use a CSG, an overwhelming 92.8% perceive their style guides as a benefit to fulfilling work responsibilities. This survey indicates that users advocate style guide usage for eight principal reasons (see Table 1). As expected, the primary reason (80.0%) advocated by users is to create consistency in documents. On one returned questionnaire, a style guide user emphasized this reason by using an underline and capital letters: "Without a style manual, we would have NO consistency." Other users indicated that CSGs allow writers working independently on the same

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Users (%)</th>
<th>Non-Users (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generate consistency in documents</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save time</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create professional look in documents</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve corporate image</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use as a training tool</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End documentation disputes</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve customer satisfaction</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect trademarks and logos</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous others</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages add to more than 100% due to multiple responses.
document to be consistent throughout the entire document.

Closely aligned with consistency in documents is a professional look in documents, which is the third (tied with improving corporate image at 18.5%) most common reason users advocate CSG usage. However, consistency and a professional look are two separate issues because both reasons frequently appeared on the same completed questionnaire. One respondent aptly replied, “It’s important for all our documentation to have the look and feel of our company.” Another common reason (tied for third at 18.5%) that users promote style guide usage is to improve the corporate image. A quality document facilitated by a CSG “helps position [the] firm and its product within the market,” proclaims one respondent. Because a written document can be the first means of contact with a customer, a professional presentation in documentation is vital to help create a new sale and maintain repeat business.

Although consistency and a professional look in documents are very important benefits, they are no surprise to technical communicators who read the literature on this subject. On the other hand, the benefit ranked second (27.7%) by the respondents to this survey has not received much attention in the literature: saving time (Allen 1995). Today’s technical communicator, like so many other modern corporate employees, is hard-pressed for time. So any tool, such as a style guide, that helps the technical communicator better maximize time is valuable. For example, one respondent commented that the company’s style guide “reduces the time spent discussing formatting issues—we have no choice, so no talk.” Another respondent claimed, “... time savings [are realized] by not having to answer the same questions multiple times, or forgetting previous style decisions.” These two blunt assessments indicate that much time can be wasted at the workplace in settling or recalling style issues by consulting with others when no written guidelines exist. A CSG provides these needed guidelines, and thus wasted time is reduced. Although published case histories on CSG development do not discuss the fact that style guides save time at the workplace, this finding is one of the most important revelations from this survey because saving time equals saving money in corporations.

The fifth most common benefit (16.9%) of CSG usage is their role as a training tool: a new employee may learn company policy by consulting the CSG. In fact, using a style guide as a new employee handbook actually saves time, also, because less time is needed for direct supervision.

Among other reasons mentioned on more than one questionnaire are the following:

- End documentation disputes (12.3%)
- Improve customer satisfaction (6.2%)
- Protect trademarks and logos (4.6%)

One respondent happily states that “petty arguments over style issues can cease,” thus ending documentation disputes at the workplace. Other respondents advance CSG usage in documentation in order “not to infringe copyrights, as well as protect our own.”

Amazingly, technical communicators who do not use a CSG, but wish they did, value the same benefits that are realized by style guide users in the very same order of predominance! Note that the frequency of response for every benefit listed in Table 1 among non-users is less than the frequency of response for the same benefit among style guide users. This implies that use of a CSG may increase awareness of its benefits. Thus, positive user attitudes toward CSG usage and its corporate benefits may be enhanced by the use of a style guide at the workplace. If so, adoption of a CSG at any technical document-generating workplace may be warranted because both the user and the corporation benefit more than anticipated from style guide usage.

Furthermore, a sense of frustration apparent in some non-user respondents could be alleviated by CSG adoption. For example, statements such as “All the documentation looks different and it’s very unprofessional” and “It’s frustrating to see some of the communications materials produced by a large corporation appear in such nonprofessional, archaic, unfriendly format and usage” speak of a dire need for the type of help that CSGs can deliver.

What Are the Perceived Disadvantages of CSGs?

Of the 5.8% who don’t see their CSG as beneficial, their negative opinions seem to be a complaint toward their company’s style guide, rather than negativity toward CSGs in general. These respondents perceive their style guide as a hindrance predominantly for the following reasons:

- The style guide is inadequate.
- The style guide is not updated due to the lack of time and money.
• The style guide is not used by every writer.

These predicaments can be internally rectified by spending the time and money to initially develop (or redesign) and then maintain an adequate style guide and by promoting use of the style guide. In such cases, these currently dissatisfied CSG users most likely would view their style guide as a benefit to fulfilling job responsibilities, instead of as a hindrance.

Of the 41 survey respondents (37.3%) who do not use a CSG, only 14.6% are currently satisfied and do not want a style guide adopted at their workplace. Half of these respondents believe that CSG usage would reduce or eliminate creativity in their writing. Since most of these respondents who objected to CSGs as inhibitors of creativity had used a style guide at a former place of employment, perhaps the CSGs used at previous workplaces were badly designed or did not meet the needs of the users. More research into the relationship between creativity and CSGs is needed to resolve the issue. Also this research could define the nature of creativity in technical documents.

The other reasons to maintain the status quo that were given by employees not using a style guide are similar to the reasons why some dissatisfied users want to eliminate their style guide:

• The style guide would be too expensive to maintain.
• The style guide would not be accepted universally.
• The style guide would be developed with little user input.

Again, these predicaments could be internally rectified.

Who Develops CSGs?

Over 78% of the survey respondents who use a CSG work in their company’s technical publications department. Are these employees empowered to regulate the “look and feel” of their company’s technical documentation by participating in the development of their CSG? Or do they have little input into the style of their company’s technical documentation and merely generate or review documents against a CSG that was developed by a higher corporate authority or an outside consultant?

The results of this survey indicate that technical publications department employees do indeed regulate much of the “look and feel” of technical documentation because nearly 74% of the CSGs used by the survey respondents were either fully or partially developed by technical publications employees (see Table 2). In fact, 62.3% of the CSGs used by the survey respondents were completely developed by technical publications employees. Additionally, 11.6% of the CSGs used by the survey respondents were developed by a committee consisting of technical publications employees and others, such as subject matter experts, marketing professionals, or legal specialists. However, survey respondents commented that most of these style guides were developed within the technical publications department, with employees outside the technical publications department acting merely as advisors.

Table 2. Who develops corporate style guides?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department Employees</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical Publications (TPD)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>62.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee (TPD and others)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Communications</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside contractor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client(s) of company</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Sum of percentages does not equal 100% due to rounding. 

Only 11.6% of the CSGs used by the survey respondents were developed by a higher authority, such as a department of corporate communications. However, all but one of these respondents perceive their style guide as a benefit to fulfilling job responsibilities, and no negative supplementary comments were included on these questionnaires. This revelation helps to dispel the notion that a CSG is unwelcome if developed with little user input, which is a fear among skeptical non-users.

Surprisingly, only 4.3% of the CSGs used by the survey respondents were developed by outside consultants or contractors. Whether these were developed under the auspices of the technical publications department or a higher authority is unknown, but given today’s busy corporate environment and the length of time it takes to develop a CSG, this negligible percentage is lower.
than expected because many modern corporations contract out supplementary, labor-intensive projects.

**Who Uses CSGs?**

As expected, responses to this survey disclose that if a CSG is available, every technical publications department within a company uses one. It is not surprising that many technical publications departments use a CSG because its usage would be a “hard-sell” to other document generators if the technical publications department did not use a style guide itself.

What is surprising is that 35% of the respondents use a CSG both solely developed and solely used by technical publications department personnel. This revelation prompts the following workplace possibilities:

- Do these technical publications departments generate all corporate technical information?
- Are these technical publications departments corporate “islands” that realize the benefits of style guide usage, but are unable to stimulate usage outside the technical publications department?
- Or do the technical publications employees accept information in any format from a writer and then modify it to the corporate style?

The survey results cannot definitively suggest the predominant possibility; however, the difficulty of universal CSG acceptance is evident in the following respondent comments (emphasis added):

- “[style guide] supposedly applicable to other departments”
- “others are starting to follow it”
- “[style guide usage] theoretically company-wide”
- “[style guide usage] spreading to other departments”

Nevertheless, some optimism for future universal CSG usage is also present in these statements. About one of every three CSGs used by the survey respondents is used not only by technical publications employees, if applicable, but also by all information generators. Why does only a minority of corporate information generators use a CSG? Are information generators outside of the technical publications department simply not compelled to use their CSG? The answer to this dilemma is unknown.

Interestingly, though, 14 (58%) of the CSGs used by all information generators within the corporation were entirely developed by technical publications employees for use by all information generators, a fact which indicates reliance on the knowledge and assistance that technical publications employees can offer to information generators companywide.

**What Are the Main Components of CSGs?**

The sections covered in the CSGs used by the survey respondents parallel the benefits perceived from style guide usage (see Table 3). Just as consistency in documents and a professional look in documents rank as two of the top three CSG benefits, document formats (81.2%) and language usage (75.4%) are by far the two most common sections in CSGs. The third most common style guide section is document generation steps (36.2%); this section can help save time, the second most common benefit realized from style guide usage. This correspondence verifies that most CSGs do contain information to meet the needs of the users and that most users accurately perceive the benefits of style guide usage.

**Table 3. Components of corporate style guides**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document formats</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language usage</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>75.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document generation steps</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company policies</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trademark and logo usage</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Templates</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation formats</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printer specifications</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language Translations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-house computer instructions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication distribution lists</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages add to more than 100% due to multiple responses. n = 89

**Implications of the Survey Results**

Results of this survey clearly indicate that CSG usage benefits both the user and the corporation. But will corporations in the future continue to reap the benefits that today's CSG users reported in this survey? Absolutely, and even more so than today. This is true primarily for two reasons:
• American corporations are restructuring by eliminating levels of management and also by eliminating specialized roles, resulting in organizations with fewer employees performing more diverse responsibilities.

• American corporations are now competing in a global economy to make up for losing domestic marketshare to foreign competitors and to take advantage of new customer bases resulting from free enterprise economies in former communist bloc countries.

The following two sections describe how a CSG can help a corporation save time and money while downsizing and competing in a global economy.

How Can CSGs Help Restructured Corporations?

Why are corporations restructuring? First, new technologies and fast changing markets cause companies to develop and manufacture a new product in less time than ever before (Hirschorn and Gilmore 1992). For example, a computer with a 286 microprocessor, which was state-of-the-art just 8 years ago, is now a technological dinosaur. Since then, computer manufacturers have developed three upgraded models of the old 286 microprocessor. Thus, today’s marketplace demands a rapid development cycle for new products that is not feasible in the old corporate structure of many layers of management and specialized roles of individuals. Second, demographics indicate that by 1997 there will be 7 million fewer workers between the ages of 18 and 24 compared with 10 years ago (Odiorne 1987). So corporations sensing a shrinking workforce are planning now for this reality by restructuring, usually by downsizing.

As a result, to be effective in a downsized organization, employees are required to develop additional competencies (Stewart 1992). One method by which an employee can develop new competencies is by cross-training in other departments. A CSG can facilitate cross-training for novice or temporary technical communicators. In fact, one survey respondent’s employer is already implementing cross-training: “As workloads increase, periodically technical writers may need to do a marketing project and vice versa. Documented procedures [in a corporate style guide] should allow that at a certain level.” In the future, more companies will be cross-training after downsizing their workforce, and a CSG is an ideal tool to help cross-train new technical communicators.

An unfortunate aspect of downsizing is that technical communicators themselves may be eliminated in a restructured organization. In this event, corporations may rely more on outside contractors to generate documents, a possibility corroborated by one survey respondent. However, much time and money can be saved when an outside contractor consults a client’s CSG during document generation because contractors commonly bill on an hourly basis; a CSG could allow the contractor to generate a client’s document faster as opposed to relying on repeated verbal consultation with the client regarding stylistic issues.

Another unfortunate aspect of downsizing is that the workload of technical communicators can significantly increase when the workforce is reduced. Commonly, the same volume of work is expected to be completed by fewer employees in a downsized organization. However, as one respondent suggested, besides helping technical communicators generate documents faster by serving as a handy resource on stylistic issues, a CSG allows the writer to focus solely on the writing, not on the style. By being able to concentrate solely on composing, a limited number of technical communicators can generate high-quality documents with a quicker turn-around. All in all, CSGs will become an ever-increasing benefit for tomorrow’s restructured company that will most likely require an increasing number of documents generated by fewer technical communicators.

How Can Style Guides Help Companies Compete in a Global Economy?

The era when American corporations could manufacture and sell almost anything has ended. For example, in the past, American manufacturers monopolized the automobile market to the extent that automobile design was based on what American manufacturers were willing to make and not on the consumer’s desires. Subsequently, foreign manufacturers captured significant marketshare by offering automobiles designed to meet consumer desires. So to compensate for lost domestic marketshare, American corporations are seeking more international customers.

How can a CSG help a company compete in a global economy? Corporations using a CSG to help generate more effective documents in other
languages, such as product manuals and instruction sheets, will have a competitive edge over corporations not using a style guide. A style guide that includes a “preferred” word usage list can facilitate more reliable translation of product manuals into other languages. Certain words and phrases have different connotations in different societies, so a “preferred” word usage list in a CSG can help a technical communicator avoid a potentially catastrophic translation in documents intended for foreign audiences. Also, a “preferred” word usage list in a CSG can help a technical communicator avoid jargon, which usually does not translate well into other languages. This foreign language translation benefit from CSG usage will become more prevalent in the future as more corporations compete internationally.

CONCLUSION

CSGs are here to stay because they help companies generate high-quality documents while saving time and money. The benefits of CSG usage revealed in this survey, such as achieving consistency in documents and saving time generating documents, can convince more information generators that a CSG is definitely a help, not a hindrance. For economic benefit alone, more corporations should develop and maintain their own style guides, and company executives should mandate that all information generators in every department consult a CSG when generating documents.

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REFERENCES