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A Revived Future for RoboHelp

By Joe Welinske, President of WritersUA

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There has been a surprising turn of events with respect to the RoboHelp technology. This popular Help authoring tool had appeared to be heading for obsolescence but now may have new life. Developments with the RoboHelp product in recent weeks indicates that the product may be around for awhile.

The Macromedia purchase of the RoboHelp product from eHelp appeared to have it set for planned obsolescence. As described in an article I wrote in April of last year, Macromedia had eliminated the entire RoboHelp development staff, eliminated high-end product support, and declined to make any announcements regarding future releases. In late April of 2005, Adobe made an offer for the purchase of Macromedia. The result was six months of quiet time during which parties for Macromedia or Adobe would not comment on the RoboHelp situation.

Shortly after the acquisition became official, in January of 2006, I made inquiries at Adobe and was referred to Karl Matthews. Karl is Group Product Marketing Manager for a number of Adobe products. He indicated he was building a team for the future development of RoboHelp and would have an announcement for the upcoming WritersUA Conference in April.

Present with Karl Matthews at the conference were six other representatives from Adobe including Michael Hu, the Senior Product Marketing Manager for FrameMaker, RoboHelp, and PageMaker. Attending from Adobe India were Vivek Kumar - engineering manager for RoboHelp and Vipul Bansal- the senior product manager. From the San Diego office were Jeff Booher and Raul Ramos who have worked on RoboHelp since the days when it was owned by eHelp. Also attending was R.J. Jacquez - evangelist for FrameMaker and RoboHelp. R.J. previously worked for eHelp and Macromedia as the RoboHelp for FrameMaker product manager.

Adobe served as a sponsor of the WritersUA Conference Reception. Karl Matthews and Michael Hu expressed Adobe's strong support for the product and indicated that a new release would be available in the Spring of 2007.

During the conference, the Adobe staff met with attendees and discussed their plans. A long-time trainer and consultant in the user

assistance arena - John Daigle - was hired by Adobe to lead a private forum for RoboHelp customers. The purpose was to gain information from RoboHelp customers about their needs and feelings about the product.

Adobe made a similar appearance at the annual conference of the Society for Technical Communication in May. They are also sponsoring the upcoming European Online Help Conference in Manchester, UK.

This activity by Adobe is clearly a major turn-around from the Macromedia position of 2005. While attendance at these conferences does not guarantee product viability, it definitely is an indication that there is renewed support for RoboHelp.

As Adobe moves forward with RoboHelp, the product faces significant challenges. The current version, X5, will be approaching five years old by the time the 2007 release appears. Products such as AuthorIT, Doc-to-Help, Flare, and WebWorks Publisher have taken direct aim at the RoboHelp user base over the past year, tapping into the feeling of uncertainty. In addition, the design of user assistance has changed over the past few years. The use of Windows HTML Help format has diminished in favor of cross-platform web-based standards.

In the area of cross-platform web-based Help, RoboHelp's WebHelp has been a popular choice. However, the trend is increasing to break out of the Help window paradigm and develop a custom UI for the delivery of Help information. This includes embedding helpful text in the UI, increasing the use of wizards, and links to online knowledge bases.

It is unclear how RoboHelp will be affected by the recent announcements from Microsoft regarding the discontinuation of support for WinHelp and a likely discontinuation of the effort to develop a Help standard for Vista. Those developments leave both new opportunities and a loss of potential revenue for all Help tool makers.

Other Views

Matthew Ellison, Matthew Ellison Consulting, prominent UA consultant and certified RoboHelp Trainer: "Adobe appears very serious about their commitment to the future of RoboHelp. I am impressed by the time and energy that they are currently devoting to researching the future needs and wishes of their customer base. It may be relatively easy for them to make the necessary code changes to ensure that WebHelp works correctly with the latest versions of Firefox, Opera, and with the forthcoming IE 7.0. However, moving RoboHelp in the direction of true single-sourcing of print and online output, and richer opportunities for content re-use, may well require a radical overhaul of the product, including potentially a switch to XML-based authoring. This is not the kind of change that can happen overnight, and RoboHelp users will need to be patient if the next version is to meet their future needs in a substantive way.

Neil Perlin, HyperWord Services: "After watching Macromedia apparently bent on killing RoboHelp, it's good to see Adobe talking about

bringing it back. Competing products benefit users. However, the fact that Adobe has said little about release dates and almost nothing about features is, in my opinion, a mistake, even if it follows Adobe's policy of not commenting on future releases. Judging by the listserv traffic over the last year, RoboHelp has suffered from a rise in confusion and a drop in credibility. Adobe needs to stem both if it's going to bring RoboHelp back as a fully-credible product."

David Locke, WordSmith LLC: "As users and consultants, we can only welcome wider choice in authoring and knowledge management tools. But if Adobe truly intends to market an authoring tool called RoboHelp in 2007, it faces at least two challenges-in the user base and the code base. Macromedia's stewardship did little to improve the RoboHelp technology-its aging kadov-laced HTML editor, the tack-on functions (some 12 years old) and a WebHelp output that's like the bumblebee: it's a miracle it flies. And as for the users-we know that story from several directions. A reasonable expectation is that a RoboHelp revival would require rebuilding both bases-code and user. Adobe's conference appearances, its solicitation of user input-these are commendable. But in addition, the user community needs a degree of trust, which in turn requires more specific commitments in terms of functions, features, and timing than Adobe has made available."

An Interview with Adobe

I recently conducted an interview with Michael Hu about the future of RoboHelp.

JW: Michael, why did it take so long for Adobe to announce renewed support and development for RoboHelp?

MH: Although the acquisition was first reported in April of 2005, the deal was not finalized until later that year and the acquisition did not close until the fourth quarter. This was followed by a period of planning for integration of the Macromedia products. It was only just recently that the Adobe and Macromedia web sites were updated and merged onto one common infrastructure.. Adobe will ultimately replace the Macromedia brand name when new versions of the products are released.

JW: What sparked the big turnaround in support of RoboHelp? Every indication from Macromedia was that they either didn't understand the product or appreciate the market.

MH: It became clear to the integration team that combining the Macromedia and Adobe products offered a compelling suite of solutions for technical authoring and eLearning. We saw an opportunity to duplicate the success we had with other bundles and products like the Adobe Video Bundle and Creative Suite.

JW: There is a widespread feeling that the FrameMaker product has been somewhat of an orphan in the Adobe family in the recent past. If that product was not high profile why should users expect the support for RoboHelp will be any different?

MH: Over the past seven years the Adobe focus has been on building out the Acrobat and Creative Suite franchises. Now we are reallocating resources to products like FrameMaker that have been under resourced. Also, the support for XML is a big feature of FrameMaker that was a bit ahead of its time. We waited for the XML market to mature and become popular. Technical publications is where the promise of XML will be greatly realized. We've increased resources on FrameMaker significantly.

JW: There have been some reports that RoboHelp service contracts have been cancelled.

MH: During the acquisition, certain services and contracts had to be restructured to accommodate Macromedia products within the Adobe line. We had to decide which model do we use. This will become more clear in the future.

JW: Will your dev team be able to handle possible upcoming compatibility issues with IE 7?

MH: We have a company-wide pool of knowledge for browser support at Adobe. It is something we deal with all the time and in a timely fashion. The development team is aware of IE 7 issues. There is definitely a learning curve, but we have had a team involved with RoboHelp since acquisition. We are confident we can deliver a new release by applying a lot of resources to it.

JW: How do you see RoboHelp's position with respect to MadCap Software's Flare?

MH: We have a wealth of knowledge about RoboHelp. We aren't starting from scratch and trying to figure out what to build first. Looking at Flare, you need to know what you are investing in. Adobe is a brand users know they can trust. Migrating to another tool also affects productivity and requires a lot of new training.

JW: What do you think about Microsoft's announcement about deprecating WinHelp in Vista?

MH: I can't comment on Microsoft's position but I believe we need to provide some sort of support for WinHelp in Vista.

JW: Macromedia shelved the RoboHelp for FrameMaker product in 2004. Since you own FrameMaker it would seem to be a natural candidate to be revived.

MH: We continue to endorse the products from Quadralay as the best solution for FrameMaker users. Quadralay also has excellent consulting support and training. That being said, Adobe will respond to customer needs and will evaluate the opportunity for RoboHelp for FrameMaker.

JW: What about RoboPDF?

MH: I don't know of any new plans for RoboPDF.

JW: Thanks Michael.

*Joe Welinske is the president of WritersUA, formerly known as WinWriters. WritersUA is a company devoted to providing training and information for user assistance professionals. Joe has been involved with software documentation development since 1984. Together with Scott Boggan and David Farkas, Joe authored two editions of the popular and pioneering book *Developing Online Help for Windows*. He has also taught online Help courses at the University of Washington and UC Santa Cruz. Joe received a B.S. in Industrial Engineering from the University of Illinois in 1981, and a M.S. in Adult Instructional Management from Loyola University in 1987.*

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