

**BRIEFING
PAPER**

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Keep
Going
Well,
Keep
Going
XML

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Introduction

The percentage of people in digital publishing old enough to remember the golden age of motoring is probably low enough that a few words of explanation are in order. Oil company Shell ran cross-border advertising for years that carried the jingle, "Keep going well, keep going Shell, you can be sure of Shell."

Of course such a promise handed journalists and pundits an easy target any time the company's reserve estimates had to be re-assessed or one of their forecourts charged a penny over the odds for a gallon of four star but most will agree, immediate ups and downs accepted, people seek to align with that on which they can be sure.

In publishing terms, Extensible Markup Language ([XML](#)) offers certainties. We'll come back to the features momentarily, but in terms of infrastructure you can be sure of XML for consistency of structure, ease of styling, linking and chunking, conversion to multiple outputs. Most important of all for many people, XML offers future-proofing against technology fads and fancies.

Once the initial decisions have been made and style options set, XML tagging starts to become more of a measurable science than a black art; hence budgets and timescales can be accurately forecast.

Where the approach really comes into its own is at the point of publishing.

Whether educational materials, industry standards, operation manuals, procedural or technical reference "bibles" and nowadays books, XML brings structure, productivity and flexibility to the smallest or largest publisher's table.

Applied XML

In the 1990s [Edinburgh Business School](#) launched what has become the most internationally distributed distance learning MBA course in the world. Students demanded choices; some wanted quality printed materials while others would have nothing but online. Between the extremes was PDF and CD published options – not just in English but in Spanish, Arabic and Chinese.

Such was the challenge and opportunity a company emerged, named after the production process that was used to meet these requirements – Capture Author Publish Deliver and Manage – CAPDM.

Harnessing the power of XML all of the above has been achieved using one single master – revised, updated, adapted and dissected many times over in every way possible but always the "single source" remains intact – a treasure chest in the form of an XML repository.

Not every application is as wordy and cross-referenced as an MBA programme.

In some ways, smaller markets benefit more from XML in that the levels of flexibility offered overcome the lack of economies of scale.

Take a professional association with members divided on how "CPD" training materials should be delivered; online or in printed form. How much more important for niche publication is it that only one master, and all the work put into it, can be carried over to multiple outputs?

What about the publisher of tax updates – constant revisions, whether subtle or significant and multiple outputs – all requiring an audit trail and a quick turnaround. Whether to meet demand or to offer a selling point, these can be offered in client-specific styling to several clients, all from the one source.

Why do we cheer-lead XML? Perhaps even before that question is answered, what is XML and where did it come from?

XML was developed by an XML Working Group formed under the auspices of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) in 1996. It was chaired by Jon Bosak of Sun Microsystems with the active participation of an XML Special Interest Group. You can read all about it on www.w3.org.

A subset of SGML, Standard Generalised Markup Language, anyone who grasps the concepts of the hierarchy and tagging used in internet applications will soon get it when it comes to XML.

The design goals for XML are:

1. XML shall be straightforwardly usable over the Internet.
2. XML shall support a wide variety of applications.
3. XML shall be compatible with SGML.
4. It shall be easy to write programs which process XML documents.
5. The number of optional features in XML is to be kept to the absolute minimum, ideally zero.
6. XML documents should be human-legible and reasonably clear.
7. The XML design should be prepared quickly.
8. The design of XML shall be formal and concise.
9. XML documents shall be easy to create.
10. Terseness in XML markup is of minimal importance.

XML is open source. Heavy duty users can license productivity tools and automation processes but XML itself is fee-free and 'open' to all.

XML is also independent of ultimate delivery vehicles, whether these be learning environments or output media from web portals to iPhones, printed manuals to talking books.

Why XML
has the X
factor

While Shell's famous slogan has its place in the advertising hall of fame, times have moved on. Progressing reliably doesn't quite match 21st Century expectations so V-Power and Ferrari images have been introduced as Shell declares itself the fuel that's "Made to Move."

Publishers leave the moving element to content. The tax auditor will no doubt welcome and appreciate the choice of media on which rules and updates are now available, but it will be the delicious words and figured contained therein that truly moves him/her!

Likewise movie clips, diagrams, formulae, links and references – all made to move – feature in today's content-rich publications at work, in education and in leisure "reading."

Editors and creative colleagues have much to gain when their publisher utilises, indeed exploits the power of XML, and their evolving aspirations need not worry the team who have to deliver at the publishing sharp end.

Unless you've got yourself down a dead end, in which case XML could be the sure fresh start you need, just about all tools and technologies used by professional publishers and in-house producers of niche publications will lend itself to populating XML-structured content.

Increasingly available solutions via software-as-a-service arrangements, offer an excellent hybrid for those who are serious about publishing but don't have big budgets. One topical example can be viewed on www.courseworker.com.

Now is the time to take advantage of the efficiencies on offer, match the ever-rising standards demanded and find the security so desired in investments.

So the message for publishers combines the old with the new, "Keep going well, keep going XML. You can be sure of XML...for content that's made to move!"

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