



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Program Management of Content Development Projects

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### Abstract

The program management in content development industry is very challenging because of the low budget projects. Retaining content contributors is a major challenge program managers' face in this industry. This article discusses the content development program planning, make or buy decisions, coordinating between content development projects, content development project life cycle, relationship management, challenges in content development programs, and the benefits of executing content development programs. The success of the content development program depends on the *successful project management*. The program manager has to have exceptional people skills in this industry.

### Introduction

Content development is one of the emerging areas in global economy. With the advancements in technology, mergers and acquisitions, innovation, changing learning styles and needs, growing education sector are the sources of new projects in content development.

With the changing publishing styles in devices such as Tablet, Kindle, E-book, Smart Reader, Smartphone and other smart devices, the content is getting customized across the globe. There are many success factors for content development projects such as absence of plagiarism, timely delivery, relevance to current, specific to the requirements, detailed in approach, richness in content, variety in content such as figures, diagrams, images, tables, graphs, etc., and uniqueness in content. All these things should be possible in the given budget. There are many challenges in executing content development programs both in industry and academia.

This article highlights the uniqueness of content development projects, the conceptualization and planning of content development program, selecting content development projects, make or buy decisions, coordinating between different content development projects, maintaining relationship with vendors, and discusses the challenges and benefits of content development programs.

### What is So Special about Content Development Projects?

The content development projects are unique. No two content development project products are same. However up to some extent of overlap is possible in content development project products. That is, some sections or figures or diagrams can be same in two or many content products. This has to be dealt with *reuse* approach. Content development projects also have time limits. The very special character across the world in content development projects is these projects are highly low budgeted projects. It is the challenge of both the program manager and project manager to get the things done on time, in budget with acceptable quality without plagiarism.

Also the content development skill remains with majority baby boomers in academia in many countries. However there are few X and Y generation individuals in content development industry. You may rarely find the Z generation and millennials in this industry (This group is more active in social media rather than formal content development). This trend brings in many human resources challenges to the program and project managers.

The content development project also starts with set of requirements, goes on into literature review, industry product reviews,

domain specific reviews, review of author experiences, perspectives from content development team, and reviewers, operations

and production team and finally the learners or readers. The content development project life cycle is shown in following Figure 1.

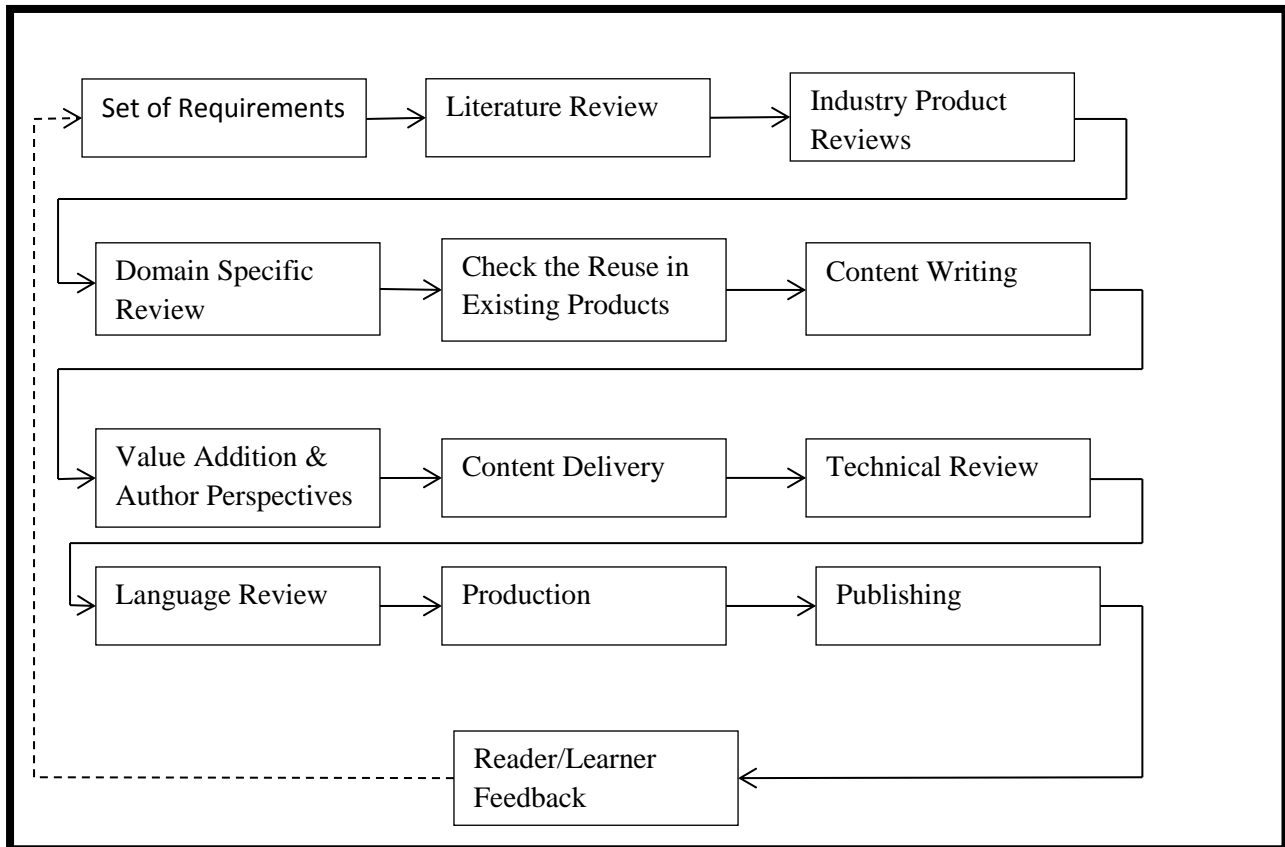


Figure 1: Content Development Project Life Cycle

## Content Development Program Planning

Usually content development goes as program in any academic institution or industry. There are multiple related projects getting executed simultaneously.

There are dependencies in schedules and costs between projects within the program. For example, a program of content development in an academic institution starts with curriculum development for a specific program such as MBA, Post Graduate Diploma, Diploma or a Certificate Program. This curriculum development itself is a group task if you are planning to develop content in advanced or niche areas. This team consists of very specialized researchers, academicians and industry experts. The academic program curriculum consists of different courses or subjects to which the actual content has to be developed. The curriculum also under goes both internal and external reviews.

The program manager of content development team has to take the curriculum

as input for the program. It is nothing but the set of requirements for content development program. Each course/subject content development is treated as an individual project having specific budget and timelines. This individual project further can be decomposed into content blocks and in turn content blocks can be decomposed into individual chapters or Units.

## Identifying the Content Development Projects

For each course, it is very rare that the content development program manager gets an individual subject expert for the entire course content development. It happens that a team can contribute for a single content development project. Also the team members can be internal to the department, external to the department but within the organization and external to the department.

The unique characteristic of content development program is individual project domains are much diversified and it is difficult to identify the subject experts.

However the development process of a content development project can be repeated and reused. The first decision the program manager has to take for an individual project of content development is to decide whether to make to buy.

### **Make or Buy Decisions**

It depends on the program schedules and dependencies. If he decides to make the content by their own organization, he has to deal with many resource related issues such as allocating office space, recruiting subject experts, meeting rooms, desk top facilities, and library (both online and offline). He has to draw an individual project plan within the framework of a program plan and kick off the projects.

If the program manager decides to reuse the content from existing products in the organization, accordingly the individual project schedules are to be adjusted. If the program manager decides to buy the product from outside, he has to deal with vendors and content development companies.

Another model of content development is outsourcing. That is, the program manager decides to outsource certain blocks or units of the content to individuals outside department (but within organization), individual and companies outside organization. Then the vendor management and relationship management plays major role here. It is very difficult to continue the relationship with vendors keeping the low budget constraints.

### **Coordination between Different Projects**

Once multiple stakeholders are involved, it is the challenge for the program manager to coordinate between different content development projects. Different individual project may start at different begin dates. However the content development for the entire program has to be completed by the program completion date.

An object oriented approach can be followed in content development. That is, *reuse* up to some extent is possible in content development projects. The components or sections can be reused across different content development projects. This saves lot of time and money for the project and also time of content research community is saved.

The main point of concentration is *coordination*. It is best practice to allot a project coordinator or project manager for individual project. It is the responsibility of the project coordinator to communicate with both internal and external subject experts, get the content, add value, integrate and deliver. Otherwise, it becomes unmanageable for the program manager to deal with 50+ internal and external subject matter experts. Based on the commonality in the content, the common components are to searched or developed first for the reuse purpose. Then specific components are to be developed for the individual project.

### **Relationship Management with Vendors**

The real people management and relationship building skills of the program manager come out in managing vendors in this industry. The program manager mostly looks for the ways to attract, retain, and motivate the talent in non-monitory ways. In current economic scenario and life styles, motivating individuals in this way is the major challenge. However, the program manager has to maintain professional relationship with both internal and external stakeholders such as subject matter experts, researchers, operations, printing staff and learners. Relationship management is very much required in outsourcing model as well.

### **Challenges in Content Development Programs**

Different content developers have different styles of writing. Getting the uniform structure for different units of the content development project from different content developers is a major challenge. One challenging area of review is the structural issues in the content. Other challenges include conceptual ambiguity, unwanted stressing of specific content and following 80-20 rule. That is, one challenge is 80% of the content by the developer concentrates on 20% of the requirements. This rule should not be applied to content development. There should be uniformity across all topics in the requirements.

There may be many surprises to the program manager while execution such as the external experts drop out of the program in the middle because of several reasons or their own tight timelines. It is also likely the external subject expert is not good in allotted

area. However he is good in different areas which cannot be currently used.

The major challenge in the content development industry across the world is the plagiarism. The program manager has to have his own set of tools and techniques to deal with it and improve the quality of content. The program manager has to maintain cordial relationship between content developers and reviewers. Other challenges are possible delays in the deliveries. Sometimes the outside contributors are busy and they leave the content partially developed and then it becomes responsibility of the project coordinator to fill the gaps.

### **Deriving the Benefits and Value to the Stakeholders**

The actual benefits of the program are achieved after the satisfactory feedback from the learners. The program meeting time, cost and quality parameters, satisfactory feedback from content developers, reviewers, operations team, program management, top management and finally the learners can be a successful program. The return on investment can be increase in sales, repeat sales, and bulk sales of the content products.

### **References**

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It is very clear and program performance can be measured at any stage. This is not like software, where product is not visible physically. The traditional program tracking and evaluation techniques can be applied to content development programs.

### **Conclusion**

Program and project management are tools to implement the organizational strategy. The program manager has to have the skills of estimations, planning, decision making, problem solving, negotiation and political skills. The program manager makes use of both internal and external resources in planning and executing the content development programs. Relationship management, continuous tracking, right decision making, and right interventions are required in making content development program success. This is possible through successful *project* management.

(This article is written based on the author's experience in program management of content development projects, curriculum design and content development at an Indian University in Hyderabad, India).

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