

# DITA Isn't for Everyone (And Here's Why)

KEITH SCHENGILI-ROBERTS AND JOSH ANDERSON

CONVEX CONFERENCE, APRIL 26-28, 2021



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content

# Agenda

Introductions

The Business of DITA

DITA and its Discontents

Questions

# Who is this guy?

Keith Schengili-Roberts

Senior Content Strategist at Precision Content

Member of OASIS DITA Technical Committee

Chair of DITA Adoption Committee

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The “Writer” behind DITAWriter.com

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# Who is that guy?

Josh Anderson

Associate Information Architect at Precision Content

Master of Information from the University of Toronto

Speaker at World IA Day events in Okinawa and Toronto

Member of DITA Adoption Committee

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# About DITAWriter.com

Industry blog started +10 years ago

Over 385,000 views (not bad for a niche website)

Have regularly updated info on DITA Conferences, DITA Books, Companies Using DITA, DITA CMSes, DITA Editors, other DITA Tools, and DITA Consulting Firms

News and views on DITA use

Also features interviews with those making a difference in the world of DITA

The screenshot shows the DITAWriter.com website interface. At the top, there is a dark navigation bar with links for ARTICLES, NEWS, INTERVIEWS, WEBINARS, DITA CONSULTANTS, SAMPLE DITA FILES, and ABOUT. A hamburger menu icon and the word 'CATEGORIES' are on the right. Below the navigation bar is the website's logo, which includes the text '<di t a>Writer' and a circular seal that says 'STRATEGIST'. A secondary navigation bar contains links for DITA CONFERENCES, DITA BOOKS, COMPANIES USING DITA, DITA CMSes, DITA EDITORS, and DITA TOOLS. A search bar is located on the right side of this bar. The main content area features a large article titled 'The Future of DITA' with a sub-headline 'THE FUTURE OF DITA' PRESENTATION'. The article includes a photo of a man in a suit looking through binoculars and a small bird logo. Below the title, there is a short excerpt: 'Late last year I did a presentation for the Boston DITA Users Group on the Future of DITA. December 2019...'. To the right of the main content is a sidebar with two sections: 'FOLLOW ME ON TWITTER' with a link to 'My Tweets' and 'RECENT POSTS' with a list of five article titles, each preceded by a right-pointing chevron.

EContent  
2018 2019



THAT MATTER MOST  
IN THE  
DIGITAL CONTENT  
INDUSTRY



“Build trust in  
your content.”



Your partner in ...

# Structured Authoring

Writing



Conversion



Training



Content  
Strategy

Consulting  
& Support



# Content Management

Your partner in ...



Your partner in ...

# Publishing Technologies



Information  
Architecture



DITaInPrint  
GET THE WORD OUT



DITaonPoint  
ENTERPRISE PUBLISHING



WittyDITA  
SHARE YOUR CONTENT

# We Believe in Evidence

What Josh and I will be talking about today touches on the future of DITA and technical communications in general. And I want to emphasize that our conclusions and opinions are based on evidence, and not anecdotes.

What John and I hope to do with this presentation is to survey what we currently know, and highlight some real industry trends

That's not to say that what we predict will necessarily come true, despite the evidence. If the past couple of years has demonstrated nothing else, it's how unpredictable things can be



# Explaining the Title for this Talk

I definitely think that DITA is not for every organization or company that could use it, and I will be talking about some of the business factors that appear to be necessary in order for DITA to thrive

Josh will also be examining what I think could be called “DITA and its Discontents” looking at the darts that have (largely unfairly) been thrown at DITA over the years

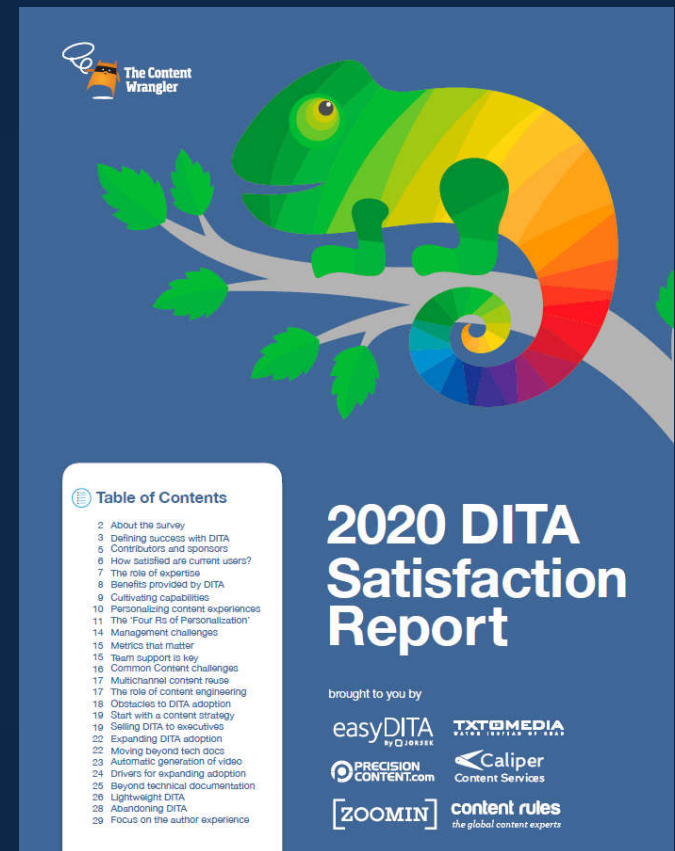
DITA is ultimately a niche market, *but what a niche!*



# 2020 DITA Satisfaction Report

A significant amount of the data used in this presentation comes from the recently-issued *2020 DITA Satisfaction Report*

It is available for free via the Precision Content website at:  
<https://www.precisioncontent.com/resources/white-papers/>



The Content Wrangler

## 2020 DITA Satisfaction Report

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**Table of Contents**

- 2 About the survey
- 3 Defining success with DITA
- 5 Contributors and sponsors
- 6 How satisfied are current users?
- 7 The role of expertise
- 8 Benefits provided by DITA
- 9 Cultivating capabilities
- 10 Personalizing content experiences
- 11 The 'Four Ris' of Personalization
- 14 Management challenges
- 15 Metrics that matter
- 16 Team support is key
- 16 Common Content challenges
- 17 Multichannel content reuse
- 17 The role of content engineering
- 18 Obstacles to DITA adoption
- 19 Start with a content strategy
- 19 Selling DITA to executives
- 22 Expanding DITA adoption
- 22 Moving beyond tech docs
- 23 Automatic generation of video
- 24 Drivers for expanding adoption
- 25 Beyond technical documentation
- 26 Lightweight DITA
- 28 Abandoning DITA
- 29 Focus on the author experience

# The Business of DITA

# So Who is Using DITA?

This is using the latest DITA on the number of firms known to be using DITA

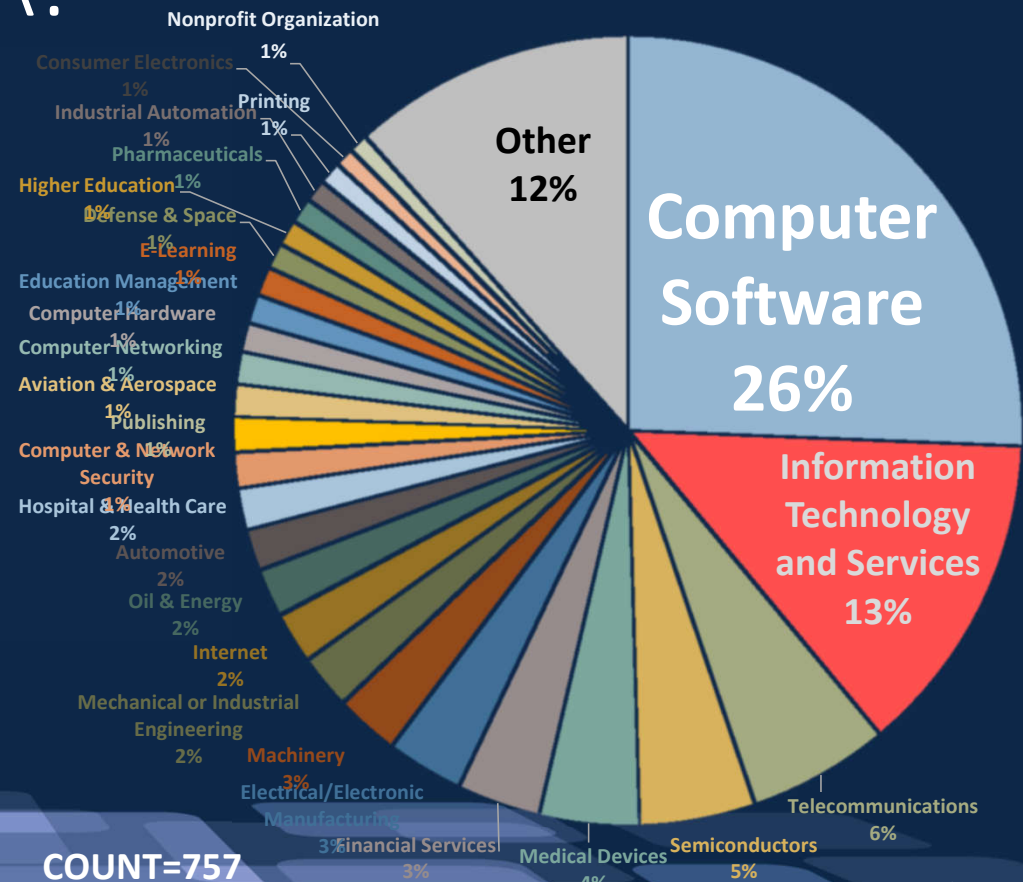
DITA started in the software sector, and it is still the single largest group of DITA users

- Worth noting that many of the other industries mentioned here are also using DITA when documenting their software

Despite that, DITA use is widespread, and still appears to be growing

- “Other” in particular keeps growing, emphasizing widespread deployment of the DITA standard

## DITA USAGE BY INDUSTRY SECTOR, Q1 2021



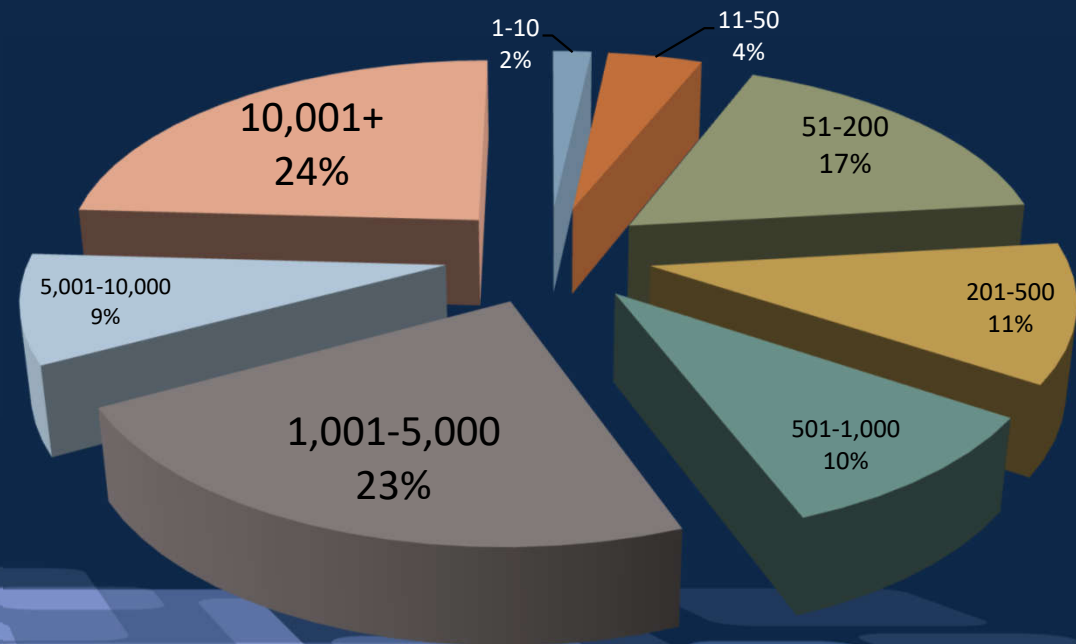
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# Advantages for DITA Appear to Come at Scale

Here's another look at all of the same data, but in this case looking at the size of the firms in terms of the number of people they employ

While there are a lot of slices to this pie, the bigger slices represent larger companies

**Size of Companies Using DITA  
(By Number of Employees) as of Q1 2021**

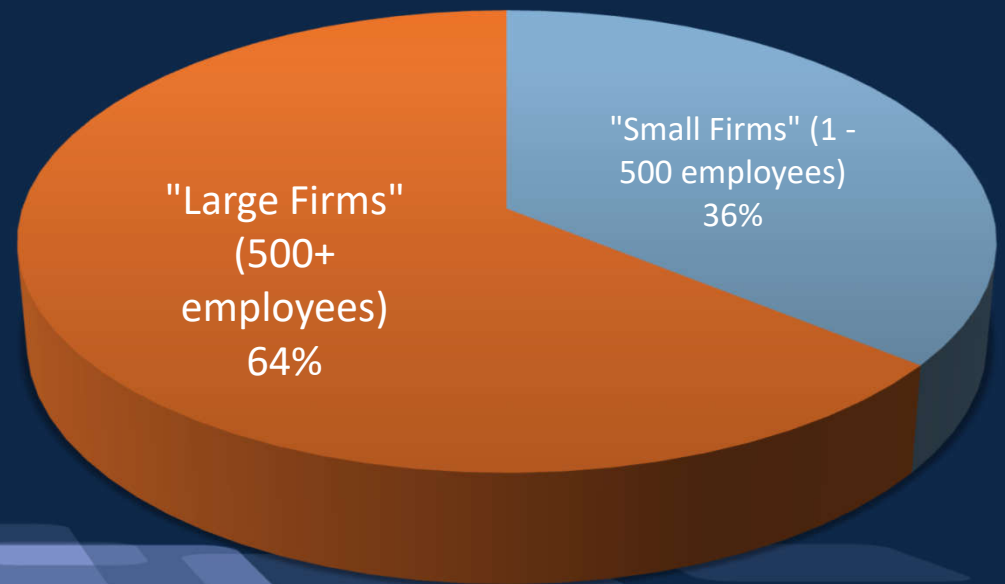


# Advantages for DITA Appear to Come at Scale

Here's another look at that data, but this time looking at the difference between "large" and "small" firms (at a cutoff point of 500 employees)

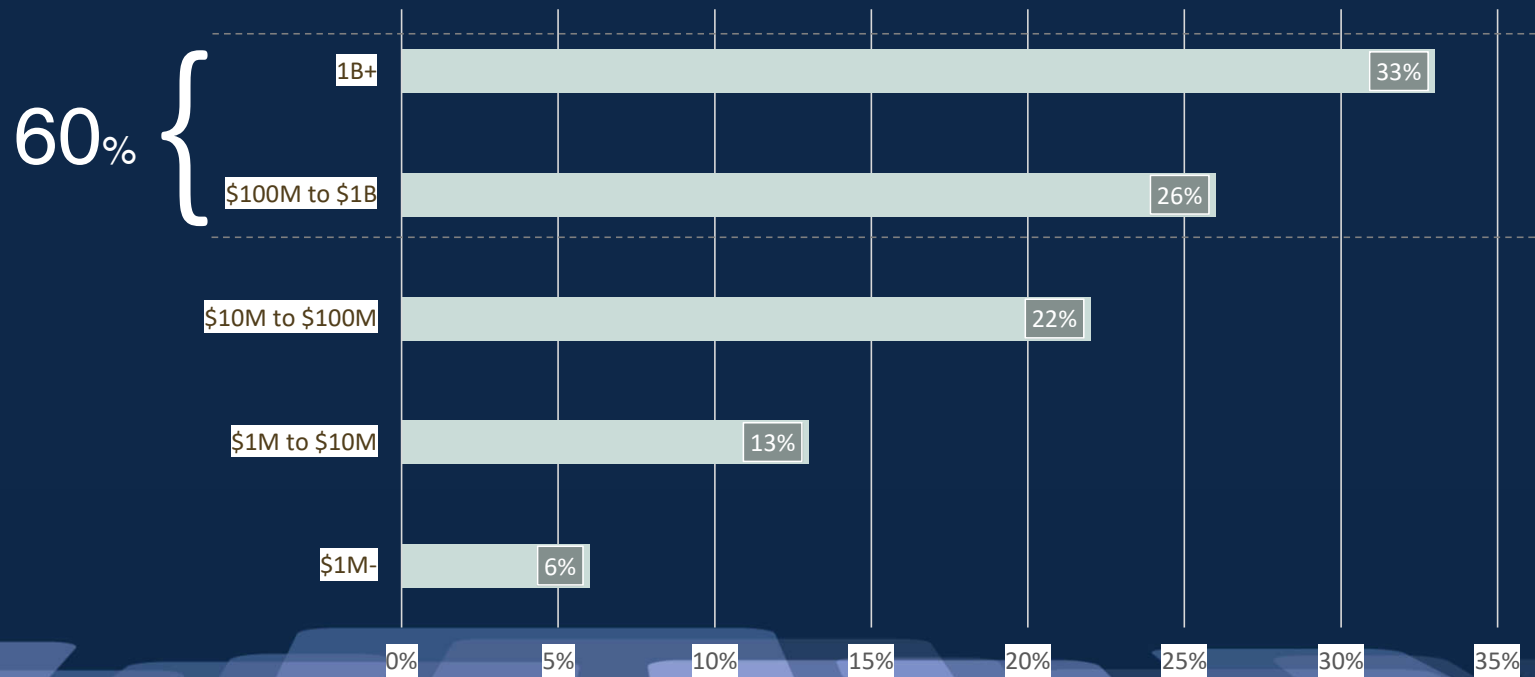
The types of efficiencies that DITA brings work best at scale (more on that later)

**Size of companies Using DITA  
(By Number of Employees) as of Q1 2021**



# So How Large is “Large”?

Sizes of Firms Using DITA by Annual Revenue



# DITA's Primary "Superpower": Content Reuse

The design decision to make DITA content reusable ended up being of the standard's "superpowers"; none of the other major XML documentation standards (DocBook, S1000D) emphasize this

I'd argue that this has enabled the success of DITA from a business perspective



# Chief Business Strengths of DITA

DITA  
CONTENT  
REUSE



These are the reasons that most people with even a passing familiarity of DITA will know about:

- Content Reuse
- Lower localization costs
- Content/Formatting separation
- Multi-channel publishing

Less  
Time  
Spent  
Formatting



# Brief Focus on Localization

R.O.I. makes sense especially if you localize to many languages; basically, the more languages, the better the R.O.I.

Arguably it is larger companies who have worldwide distribution that get the most “bang for the buck”

Years ago when I was managing the localization budget at a semiconductor firm, the yearly max. spend could be US \$1M (though that cost was significantly reduced over time due to DITA + CCMS)



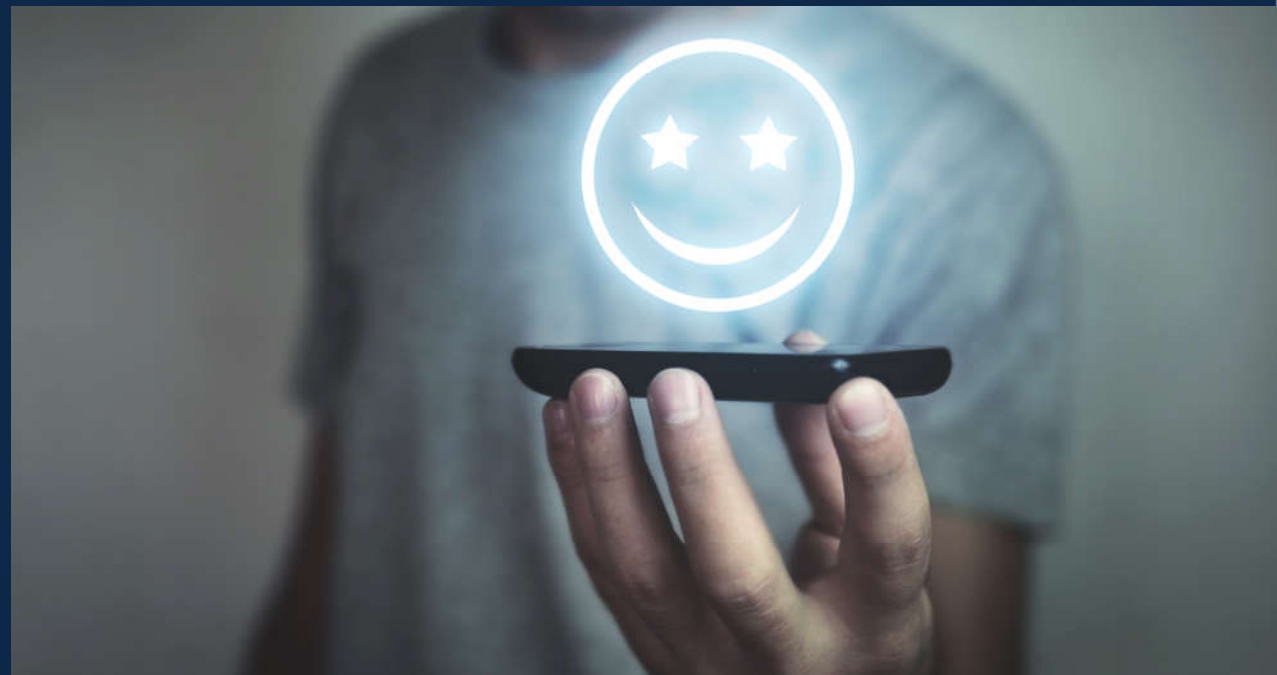
# The Less Obvious Benefits of DITA

In addition to all the things DITA was designed for, when done right, it can also do the following:

- Advance product SEO
- Provide a better ~~user~~ customer experience
- Topic/semantic structure works well with emerging systems, like chatbots and AI (like intelligent document extraction platforms (IDEPs))

# Customer Experience Has Become a Business Imperative

- Before the digital transformation, key business interactions with customers happened in the physical world
- But then our customers moved online. And we moved what had formerly been physical content online as well.
- Technical documentation has come to the fore, since it often contains targeted info customers are looking for



# DITA Topics Target Two of Google's Four User "Moments"

The infographic consists of four vertical panels, each with a photograph at the top and a colored background with text below. The panels are: 1. Blue: A man looking at a smartphone. 2. Red: A woman looking at a smartphone outdoors. 3. Yellow: A man and a child looking at a tablet. 4. Green: A woman crouching in a store aisle. A callout box with a green border and tail points to the first two panels.

Moment	Image Description	Text
I-want-to-know moments	Man looking at smartphone	of smartphone users turn to their phones to look up something they saw in a TV commercial. <sup>3</sup>
I-want-to-go moments	Woman looking at smartphone outdoors	of smartphone users use a search engine when looking for a local business. <sup>3</sup>
I-want-to-do moments	Man and child looking at tablet	hours of "how-to" content have been watched on YouTube so far this year. <sup>2</sup>
I-want-to-buy moments	Woman crouching in store aisle	increase in mobile conversion rates in the past year. <sup>9</sup>

**DITA-based technical documentation often matches these two categories, and these "moments" are what Google optimizes its search results for**

# Enter: Chatbots and Artificial Intelligence

- This subject has been getting a lot of interest in marketing and technical documentation
- We are still in the early days, but it is likely to become another facet in the overall customer experience journey

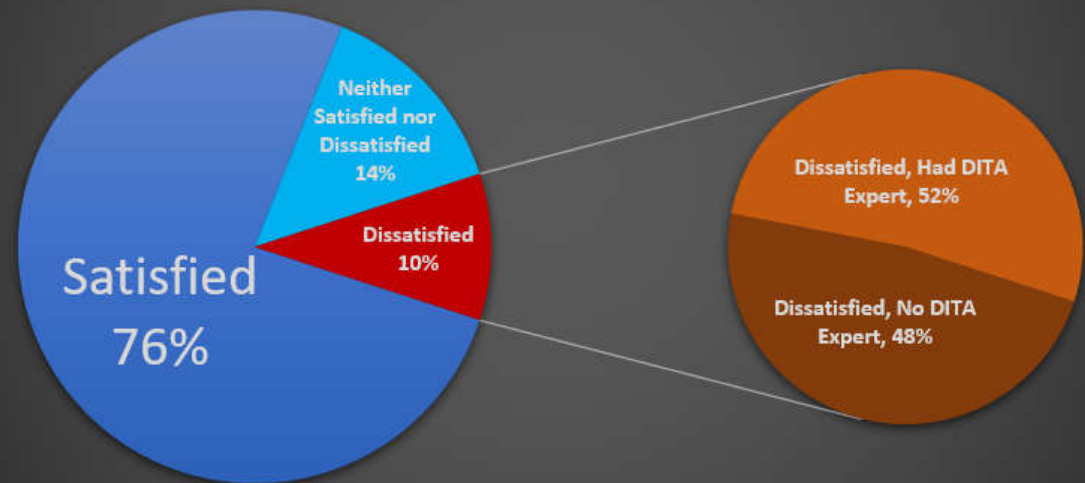


# DITA Users Are Generally Pretty Happy

One key difference in the DITA Satisfaction Survey from 2017 to now is the growth in satisfaction of DITA users with their implementation (more than three-quarters of those asked)

Interestingly, of those who expressed dissatisfaction with their DITA implementation, 48% did not have a DITA expert to help

## ARE YOU SATISFIED OR DISSATISFIED WITH YOUR DITA IMPLEMENTATION?



A dense field of red roses, filling the entire frame. The roses are in various stages of bloom, with some showing the characteristic spiral pattern of the petals. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the petals and the vibrant red color. The background is a dark, almost black, which makes the red roses stand out prominently.

# DITA and its Discontents

Things are not so clear cut as we are suggesting, so we don't want to imply that the future will be a bed of roses for DITA. There is serious discontent with DITA out there, despite the benefits...

# Who is *Not* Using DITA?

Structured content requires an investment of time and money

- Benefits are worth it, but may not be apparent/obvious at first

Smaller firms

Many firms also adopting a hybrid approach

- Rare to find a large firm that is using DITA exclusively



# Common Obstacles to DITA Adoption

- 83% of survey respondents encountered obstacles to DITA adoption
- “Most of the obstacles to DITA adoption can be avoided or mitigated by a well-designed, fully documented content strategy.” - Val Swisher, Global Content Strategist at Content Rules
- "On cost, don't assume that a DITA solution is expensive." - Mark Lewis, Content Engineer at Caliper Content Services

Percentage	Issue
61%	Incoherent content strategy
50%	Cost of adoption (insufficient budget/resources)
41%	Inability to adequately prove return on investment (ROI)
38%	Technology and software selection and implementation

# The Most Commonly Reported DITA Content Challenges

- There's a clear link to the most common obstacle to adoption, which was an incoherent content strategy
- These challenges also suggest a need for better DITA tools

Percentage	Issue
41%	Inability to effectively repurpose and reuse content
29%	Inability to publish output as desired
29%	Inability to adequately control the formatting of DITA content
26%	Content delivery difficulties (multi-channel publishing)
48%	Training of technical communication team members
19%	Difficulty creating DITA content
15%	Problems related to translating and localizing DITA content

# The Most Commonly Reported DITA Management Challenges

- Again, we see content strategy development as a major pain point
- Content strategists, especially those with DITA skills and experience, are valuable assets
- Management issues are "most likely to form the root cause of all other issues identified in the survey." - Rob Hanna, President & Chief Information Architect at Precision Content

Percentage	Issue
63%	Content strategy development difficulties
52%	Inability to accurately measure content performance
49%	Inability to collect actionable business data
48%	Finding the right people (staffing)
48%	Training of technical communication team members
47%	Difficulty finding staff with requisite experience
47%	Controlling naysayers and laggards (obstacles to success)
46%	Lack of content governance
39%	Inexperience selecting the right tools and technologies
24%	Lack of leadership

# Tech Doc Groups Abandoning DITA?

In the Data 2020 DITA Satisfaction Report, one in four technical documentation teams reported that they have discussed abandoning the standard in favour of something else

Percentage	Issue
42%	Counterintuitive software with outdated user interfaces
39%	Attractiveness of alternatives that appear easier to adopt/use
23%	Inaccessible to non-expert content contributors
11%	Distrust of software vendors
10%	Challenges making content reuse work as expected

# Most Content is Unstructured

Unstructured content is thought to make up roughly 80% or more of all enterprise data

And what is the world's most popular technical writing tool? Word.

So structuring content is the solution to making unstructured content more usable, right?

The path is not so clear cut



# Unstructured Content Has More “Structure” than You Might Think

MS Office applications have been using their own form of XML since at least 2003

While it does not separate content from formatting per se, as you can see from this early example it does contain a semblance of structure

Similarly, image and video files come with a substantial amount of metadata content

This provides useful information on when, where and who created it

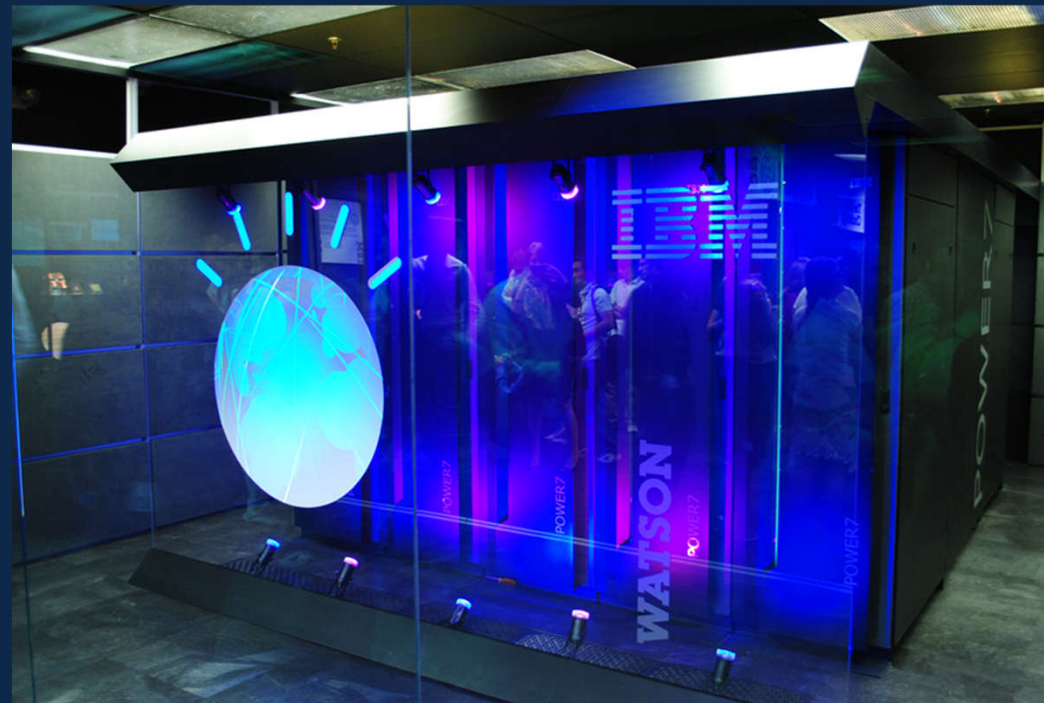
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  xmlns:wx="http://schemas.microsoft.com/office/word/2003/auxHint"
  xmlns:o="urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office"
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# AI is Being Applied to Unstructured Content

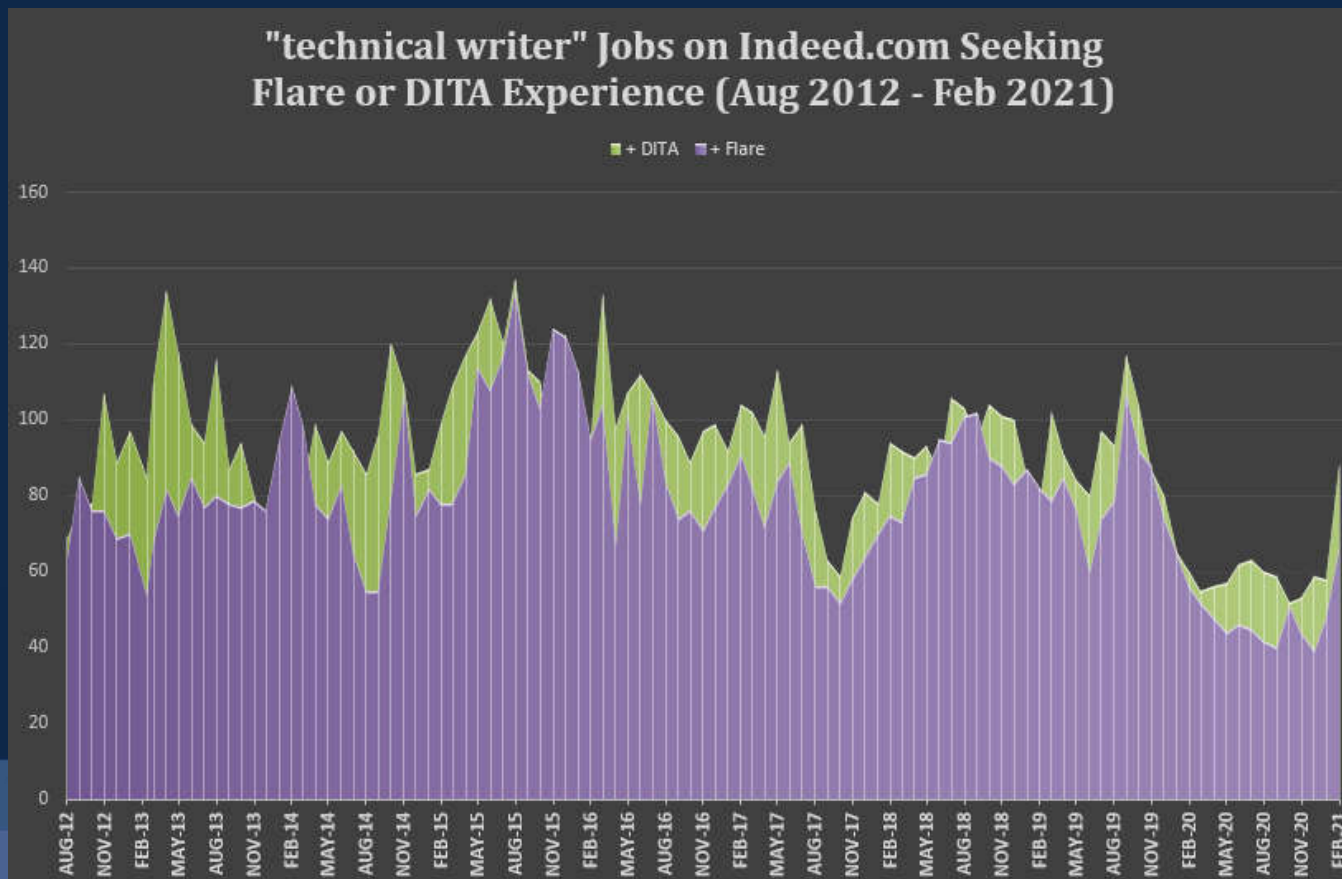
IBM Watson can be applied to unstructured and structured content

- IBM calls AI “the key to making unstructured data useful”
- Microsoft, Google, Amazon and others are all producing tools for analyzing unstructured content, images, and audio data

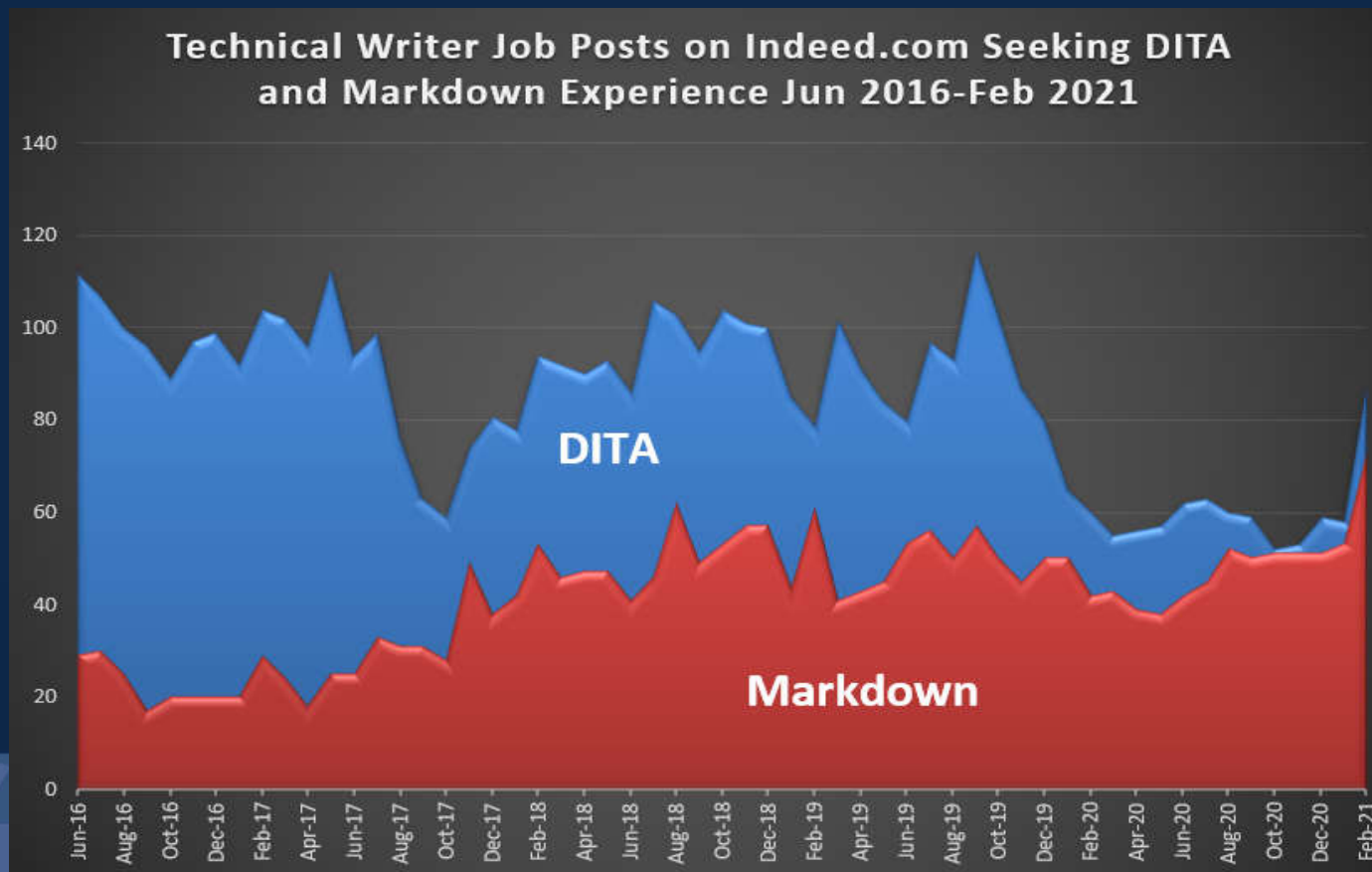
Still early days, but worth noting that AI (and chatbots) are not being used exclusively with structured content



# DITA is a Niche Market



# The Rise of Markdown



# One Reason: SMEs are Producing More Upstream Content

When it comes to API documentation, programmers are expected to provide much of the content. This is often framed and put into context by technical writers.

The advent of Agile documentation processes in small software development teams means that, in some circumstances, SMEs had to write content.

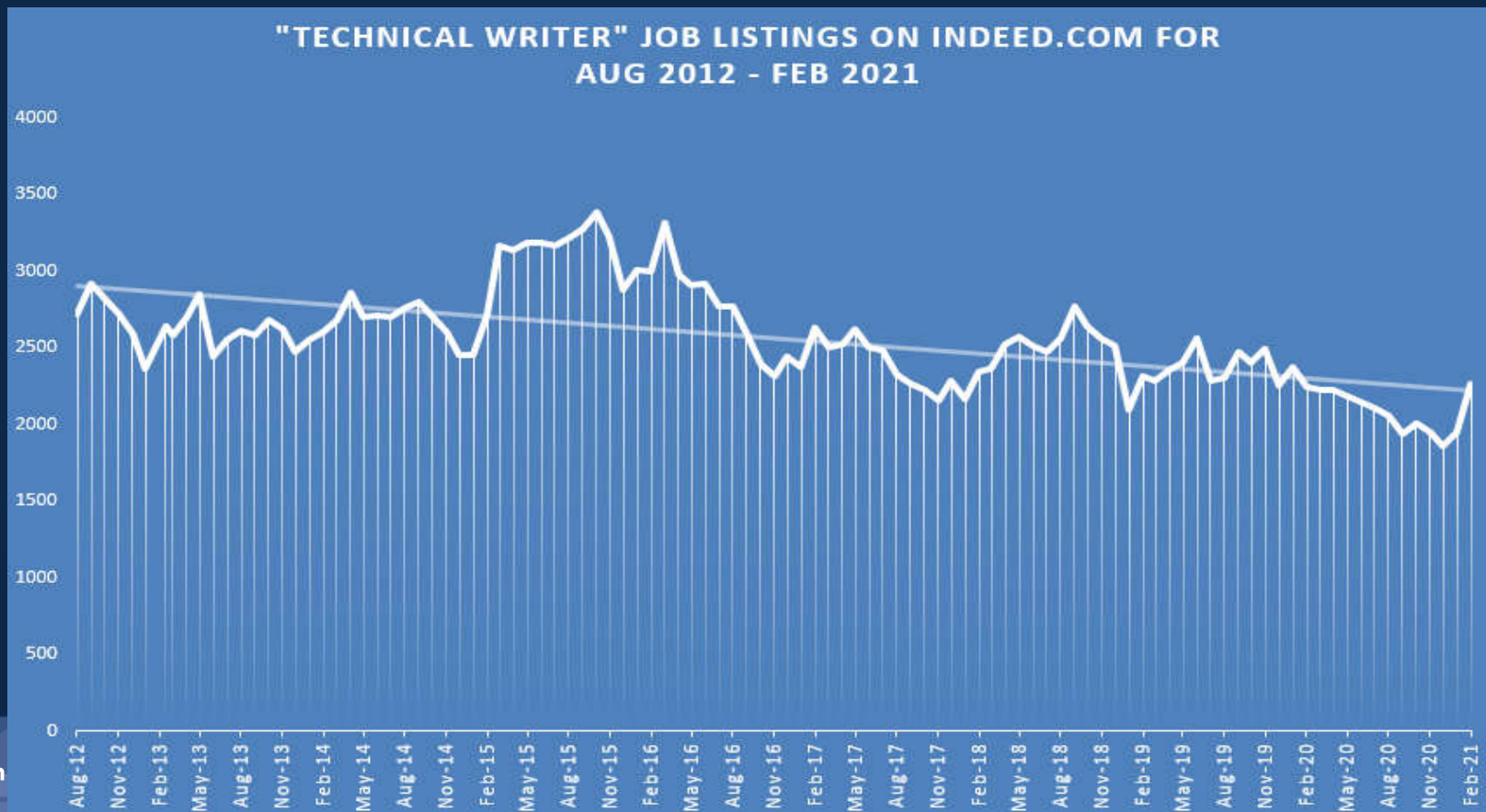


# The Other Reason: The Role of the “Technical Writer” is Changing

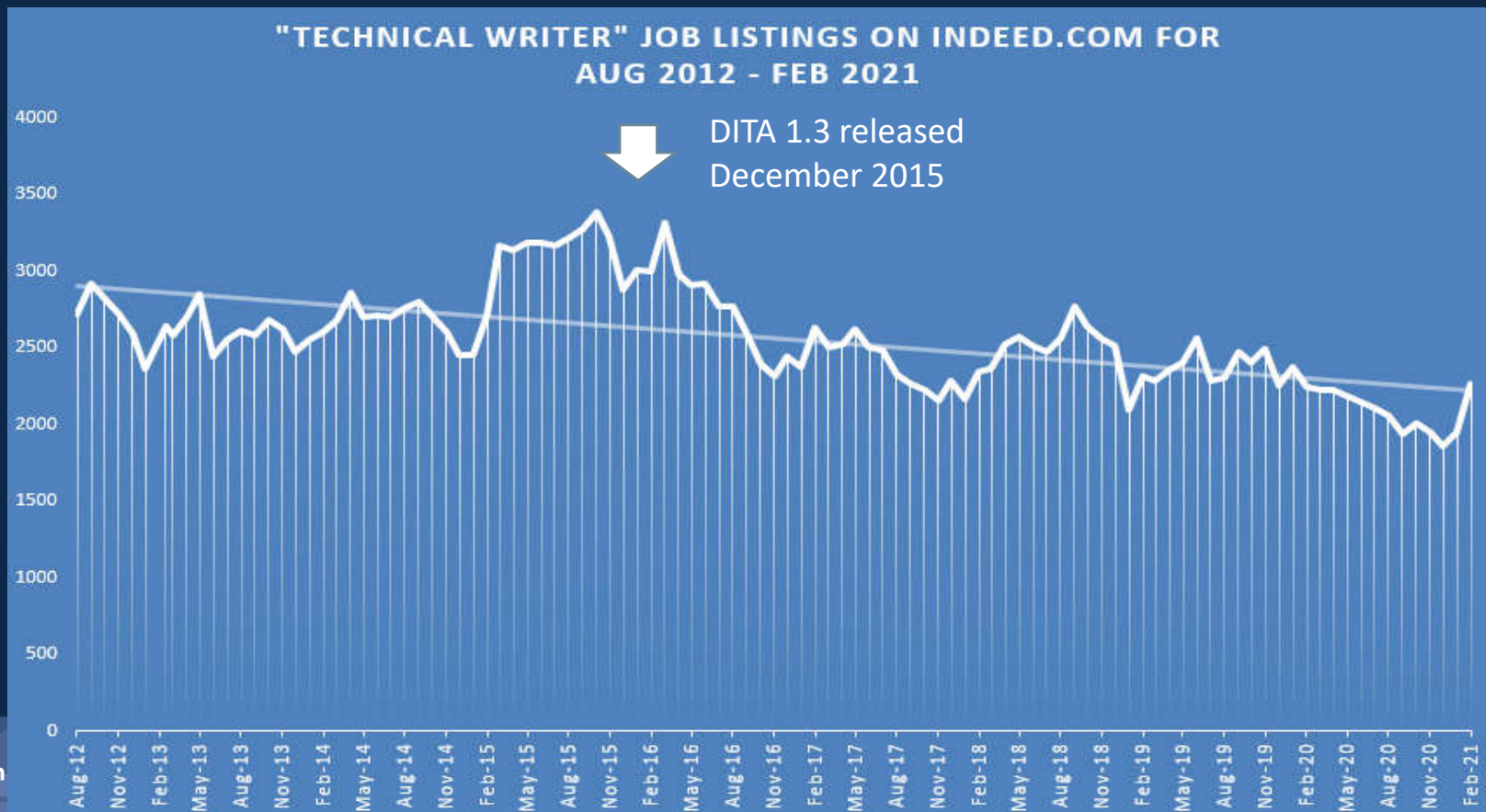
In a survey Keith did of 1,500 LinkedIn profiles where people claimed to be using DITA, **66%** were not employed as traditional technical writers; some selected job titles:

- Applications Engineer
- Chief Information Architect, UX Analyst
- Consulting Content Strategist
- Content Architect
- Content Developer
- Content Management Specialist
- Content Strategist
- DITA Architect
- DITA Content Strategist
- Information Architect
- Information Developer
- Information Experience Manager
- Knowledge Architect
- Lead Information Developer
- Localization Program Manager
- Manager, XML CMS and L10n Systems
- Principal Content Experience Developer
- Principal Information Developer
- Project Manager and Documentation Engineer
- Senior Content Developer
- Senior Content Strategist
- Senior Documentation Tools Developer
- Staff Information Architect
- Team Leader Technical Documentation
- User Assistance Development Architect
- UX Designer
- XML/DITA Coordinator

# The “Technical Writer” Job Landscape is Changing...



# Peak DITA Job Postings and DITA 1.3

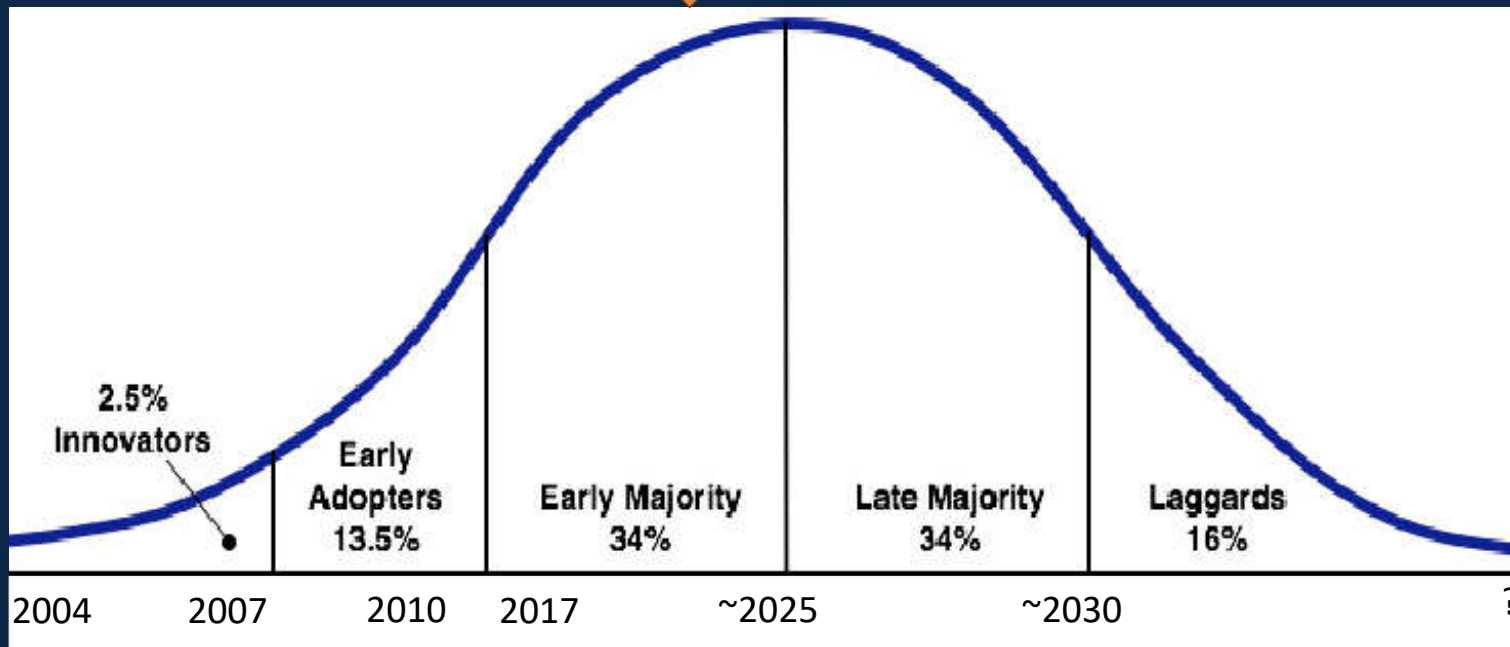


# Lightweight DITA

- Fewer elements
- Simplified schema for structuring content
- Tighter content models
- Simplified specialization architecture
- Three authoring formats: XDITA, HDITA, and MDITA, based on XML, HTML5, and (GitHub Flavoured) Markdown, respectively

"I think one of the most important developments in DITA's future is [Lightweight DITA](#). Companies are looking for solutions that still allow others to use simpler, more familiar markup, like Markdown or HTML, and Lightweight DITA will enable these all to work together more easily." - Dawn Stevens

# Where Is DITA on the Technology Adoption Life Cycle?



# DITA is Here to Stay...

- We are entering middle-stage DITA maturity
- It's not enough to promote the benefits of DITA; it must be defended against other competing standards.
- "Even if we are in the late majority of the adoption curve, this still means that only 50% of the ultimate adopters have made the move [to DITA]." - Dawn Stevens

# ... And DITA Must (And Will) Evolve to Meet Unaddressed Needs

- OASIS DITA Adoption Committee is discussing a shift in focus towards "advocacy" over "adoption."
- Precision Content is building tools to make it easier to publish DITA documents in PDF, Word, and other formats.
- Precision Content also has its own version of DITA (PC-DITA), with included writing standards.
- LwDITA presents alternative authoring formats.
- DITA 2.0 is still being developed.
- Evolution is an inherent part of the DITA paradigm. (D for "Darwin")

# Questions?



**Thank you**

Reach out to us at  
[more-info@precisioncontent.com](mailto:more-info@precisioncontent.com)