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Winter 2010

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Content strategist Eddie VanArsdall shares his typical day as managing editor of a US federal website

I've been writing and editing many types of content for more than two decades. I embraced the web as a writing and publishing medium when it first surged to prominence. So when the subject of web content strategy began bubbling up in blog posts and online conversations, I became keenly interested in it.

In early 2010, I was offered the opportunity to take on a full-time role as managing editor and content strategist for a US government website. I couldn't resist.

Fast forward eight months

I now work for Ironworks Consulting, a web solutions organisation. I serve as managing editor of eBenefits, a joint project between the US Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense.

eBenefits is a web portal that serves US veterans, service members, their family members, and their caregivers. The portal enables users to search for, manage, and track benefits information. It also enables them to apply for benefits.

I'm part of a user experience team that supports site design and content integration. I work closely with two information architects, an art director, and a front-end developer. Since my role is new and experimental, I'm the sole person responsible for content development and oversight. I handle most

of the writing, all of the editing, and the strategic content initiatives. We also have a content manager who handles content requests and troubleshoots issues with our content management system (CMS).

Our user experience group is one of several sub-teams comprising a project team of around 35 people. Other teams include project managers, requirements analysts, software developers, configuration and release managers, and QA testers. We are distributed among three cities, and we hold many meetings by conference call. Despite the distance, we maintain a collaborative, supportive work ethic.

Routine? What's routine?

My day can hardly be described as routine. Our software development team follows the Agile methodology, so our daily status meeting is the only predictable aspect of the workday. Each day we cover the ever-changing list of features created by our own team and our partner developers. We determine what's in and what's out.

I'm constantly interrupted throughout the day by meetings, questions, status requests, and unexpected issues. In between, I weave in and out of a content development process.

For each site release, I determine our content needs by reviewing approved use cases and wireframes. Our site features typically require a brief promotional mention on the home page, a help section, and user interface content (labels, descriptions, and instructions).

Other content requirements surface from specific needs. For example, we sometimes need:

- Overview pages for new processes or technologies being introduced on the site
- FAQs for users and for the staff who take their calls
- Help guides for specialised processes and procedures.

I write most of our site content in an HTML editor. To prepare it for review, I attach a custom style sheet, display the output in a browser, and convert it to a comment-enabled PDF.

After the content is approved, I submit the finalised mark-up to our content manager for input into the CMS. I then participate in two phases of testing and identify any problems before content is approved for release.

And then there's the strategy

I'm also responsible for a number of

long-term, strategic site initiatives. I juggle them with my daily responsibilities.

I'm leading an initiative to integrate our site with a catalogue of links from another site. We're in the planning stages, so we meet often to sort out the conceptual and technical details.

I'm developing an Editorial Style Guide. It covers the tone of voice used on the site, as well as conventions for use of language.

I'm working on an initiative to standardise user and error messages. This requires identifying all messages, cataloguing them, establishing patterns, recommending standards, and working with the developers who own the various messages to implement the changes. This initiative is a work in progress.

I collaborate regularly with my UI designer colleagues. Some of our collaboration is planned. We schedule meetings to discuss designs and work together to ensure that UI elements have clear labels and communication.

Other collaboration happens spontaneously. The art director may unexpectedly ask me to look at a design he's working on and provide content ideas. This often leads to spontaneous brainstorming and soon results in an interactive prototype.

I conduct periodic audits to get a snapshot of the current state of our content. This task always reminds me that the site has a significant amount of content that needs revision for alignment with our style standards: another item to add to my checklist.

Oh, and I maintain a shared editorial calendar and enter every content request in a tracking database. Periodically, I also manage to clean up my flooded e-mail inbox and perform triage.

Yet, I still sleep

My work is intense and fast-paced, but my hours are relatively regular. I do sometimes work extra hours for planning and catching up on certain initiatives, but overall my schedule is manageable.

Best of all, I feel that I'm an integral part of work that is making a life-changing difference in people's lives. That makes it all worthwhile. **C**

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