

SecureDoc – Results of the survey

In February and March 2003 a survey on quality, usability and user-friendliness of instruction manuals for technical consumer goods was carried out. The survey was part of the project SecureDoc which is realised with the support of the European Commission. One of the project partners, the Zentrum für Wissens- und Informationsmanagement of Donau-Universität Krems (Austria), was responsible for the creation of a questionnaire and the evaluation and documentation of the results. For more precise and less general results, a distinction was made between different types of consumer goods: household appliances, consumer electronics, do-it-yourself equipment, communication equipment and computer hardware.

Around 30 000 questionnaires were sent out with a German magazine for house-wives and men. The questionnaire was also put on the web sites of the project partners. 233 questionnaires were sent back to Donau-Universität Krems.

Among the 233 questionnaires that were filled out and sent back, around two thirds (63,1%) came from Germany, one fifth (18,0%) from Finland, 10,3% from Sweden and 6,0% from France. Some more, but not as many, came from the UK, Belgium, Austria and the Netherlands. Women were clearly over-represented: 75,5%, whereas the share of men amounted only to 24,0 %. The average age of those who answered the questionnaire was relatively high: Almost half of them (46,8 %) were more than 60 years old; 17,2 % were between 51 and 60 years old. The share of those between 41 and 50 years, those between 31 and 40 years and those between 21 and 30 years were around 10 % each. There was only one single person under 20 years who replied.

One of the most fundamental questions made in the questionnaire referred to the importance given to instruction manuals by the users. The results show clearly that the users consider as very important the instruction manuals for all the types of products referred to in the questionnaire. According to the type of product, between 88 and 98 % of the users stated that instruction manuals are very important or important. This demonstrates that despite the tendency to produce “self-explaining” products, instruction manuals are far from being redundant!

A closer look at the results shows that most users consider instruction manuals as very important when they have to deal with consumer electronics (78,1 %),, that is to say as slightly more important than for telecommunication equipment and for computer hardware. Less indispensable but still important are instruction manuals for household appliances and do-it-yourself-equipment: 67,4 % of the responding persons consider them as very important. This is obviously due to the fact that household appliances and do-it-yourself-equipment are less complex and therefore less difficult to handle than video recorders, DVD players, mobile phones, organisers, laptops etc. We have probably also take into account that most of the responding persons have familiarised themselves with these appliances at a relatively advanced age.

The survey shows that instruction manuals play an important part for the user. But how are they used? Around two thirds of the responding persons usually read the complete manual before they start using the device. This is particularly often the case when the user has to deal with consumer electronics and telecommunication equipment, but also with household appliances: between 66,1 % and 69,5 % of the users. Instruction manuals for do-it-yourself equipment are read completely before using the device by 59,2% of the users and those for computer hardware by 57,9 %. Between one fifth and one third of the users approach the instruction manuals in a more selective way: They only read the manual when they have to look up something which is new for them or when they have a specific problem. Very few stated that they never read the manual: 6 % when using household appliances or do-it-

yourself equipment, 3,4 % when using consumer electronics or telecommunication equipment and only 2,1 % when using computer hardware.

In the questionnaire there were different statements, describing the ideal instruction manual, the responding persons could fully agree or not agree with. The most important criteria which were chosen in most of the cases (up to 93,1%) were the following:

- There is a separate resume of the most important functions and a detailed manual.
- There are illustrations which explain clearly the functions of the device.
- The symbols used in the manual are clearly explained.
- The wording of the manual is clear and understandable.
- The manual is easy to handle.

Most of the users also appreciate when they know where to turn to in case they need help. Between two thirds and three quarters of the responding persons wish contact points or be pointed out in the manual or hot-lines they can call in the moment when they have a specific problem. A relatively small number of user, however, expect to find help on the Internet.

Around two thirds of the users would be happy with self-explaining devices – at least with respect to the basic functions. It may seem surprising that not all the users wish to have self-explaining devices. This might be due to the fact that many users think the best way to approach a device is to read the complete manual before they start using it (as mentioned above) or that users are aware that modern devices have more and more functions and are therefore more and more unlikely to be self-explaining.

The survey also aimed at finding out about the most common and most resented problems users have with instruction manuals. The responses show that manuals for consumer electronics, telecommunication equipment and computer hardware have similar deficits. The following statements were confirmed by more than 50 % of the responding persons:

- The instruction manual is not written understandably.
- When I look for the solution of a specific problem I can't find it.
- There are too many technical terms.
- The manual is a bad translation of the original version.
- The great number of different language versions is confusing and annoying.
- The manual is stuffed with irrelevant information.

Manuals for household appliances and do-it-yourself equipment are less often criticised. The most annoying problems with these manuals are the great number of different language versions, bad translations and the difficulty to find out which information is relevant when the manual refers to different models of the device.