

## What does a good operating manual for consumer goods require? Information on how to write instructions is now available in 11 languages

Do you want to be sure that your technical documentation fulfils all the relevant quality requirements? The *Usable and safe operating manuals for consumer goods* guideline provides you with checklists that tell you what the characteristics of user-friendly product information are and how you can write it efficiently.

Quality is a priority goal for everyone. However, in the context of daily work it usually depends on a range of parameters that have to be balanced: time, costs, resources and other circumstances. Nevertheless, we should not forget who we are writing for when we try to resolve this challenge. Therefore, the consumer viewpoint is essential and was taken into account in the guideline. According to a tekomp defined quality scheme, quality is the intersection between legal conformity, the efficient use of resources and customer expectations. As a result, the guideline is divided into three main chapters: "Legal issues and documentation", "Basics of user-friendly documentation", and "Process optimisation". The guideline contains practical checklists to help all those who are responsible for technical documentation. It includes lists of action points for each task, tips, references to national and international standards and EU-directives, and a list of useful links. The guideline is available in 11 languages: English, Swedish, Finnish, Dutch, French, German, Polish, Czech, Spanish, Italian, and Hungarian.

In the 4th European colloquium for user-friendly product information on 29 March 2004 in Brussels, the guideline was presented to the European Commission, industry, consumer organisations and all those who are interested. The colloquium presentations were focused on product safety, consumer rights, and quality. Industry associations as well as consumer organisations were invited to give statements and to engage in discussions with the delegates from the TC Europe organisations.

In January 2004, the revised EU-directive on general product safety was implemented. Erik Hansson of the Directorate General Health and Consumer Protection of the European Commission spoke about the impact on product information. Michael Fritz of tekomp showed how optimised processes create a balance between time, costs, and resources on the one hand and quality requirements by the customers on the other and how an optimum can be reached. In this case, quality is not a requirement that generates extra costs; rather, it is an investment that significantly benefits manufacturers and distributors in the long run because it reduces expenses stemming from the correction or compensation of errors. Legal conformity is indispensable to avoid these costs, which in severe cases can be very high. The legal expert of tekomp, Jens-Uwe Heuer, presented an overview of the legal requirements that operating manuals have to meet. The first chapter of the guideline therefore deals with the legal issue, covering all aspects from consumer rights, product liability, standards for translations, risk analyses, warnings, standardised safety graphics, potential hazards due to product misuse to content management on a global market.

A survey carried out in the first stage of the project by the partners and the consumer organisations — Deutscher Hausfrauenbund (Germany), Konsumentverket (Sweden) and Verein für Konsumenteninformation (Austria) — had shown that product safety is fundamental, but that consumers expect more than legal conformity. As a result, the second chapter of the guideline is focused on the "Basics of user-friendly documentation". It consists of sub-chapters on "analysing who you write for", "information you must include", consisting of all the stages of the life cycle of a product, and "basics characteristics of good documentation", ranging from completeness, structure and content, legibility and readability, accessibility, terminology to pictures and diagrams and the appropriate output media. Hanna Risku from Donau-Universität Krems, who presented the chapter in Brussels, emphasized how users receive and perceive information. Cultural differences play an important role and need to be taken into account when products are sold on the international market. In this context, Hanna Risku stressed the importance of user tests. For example, Donau-Universität Krems has a laboratory for such testing. Another example is the test lab of Konsumentverket in Sweden, where all product tests always include a test of the manual. These tests are important and worthwhile for manufacturers because deficient manuals can still be changed and corrected before the product is launched on the market.

To achieve high quality and user-friendliness within the set parameters of time and costs, technical writers need, apart from expert skills, training and modern technology, efficient processes and a smooth work flow. Project planning, project monitoring, standardised documentation processes and feedback processes

are described in the third chapter of the guideline. In Brussels, it was presented by Nicholas Hill, Chairman of the Finish TC organisation STD. The chapter is divided into two subchapters that contain action points related to the "management of documentation projects" and "support processes".

After the presentation of the guideline, Loucas Gourtsoyannis of the European Office of Crafts Trades and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises for Standardisation (NORMAPME) and Thomas Garbe of the European Committee of Domestic Equipment Manufacturers (CECED) gave statements on the guideline from the view point of SMEs and the industry. SMEs usually face the problem that they have to compete with large businesses, but with more limited resources. The guideline may help them comply with quality standards. The guideline could also be important for businesses in Southern Europe and in the new EU-member states where there are no formal training and qualification programmes for technical writers and where technical communication as a profession is mostly unknown. The final discussion made clear that the guideline is not a new standard and cannot replace existing standards. It is meant to give a brief and summarised overview on minimum requirements for safe and user-friendly manuals.

The publication, which is also known as the SecureDoc-guideline, is issued by the member organisations of TCeurope. Members of these organisations can download the PDF from their respective web sites.

Please contact the national TC organisations to get the language version you require:

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The colloquium presentations are available for download at: <http://www.tceurope.org/securedoc/news.htm>

The revised EU-directive on general product safety (GPSD) is available on the Web site of the DG Health and Consumer Protection of the European Commission on:  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/cons\\_safe/prod\\_safe/gpsd/index\\_de.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/cons_safe/prod_safe/gpsd/index_de.htm)