

“Help for the Web” Initiative

Press Release – August 4, 1999

Wouldn't it be nice if all Web-based applications included online help that was intuitive, easy to use, and truly helpful? Imagine how innovative ideas about user assistance might combine with recent technologies to produce a help format that's universally accepted and used across the Web. If such a concept fires your imagination, the “Help for the Web” initiative would like to hear from you.

What is the initiative?

The Help for the Web initiative is a volunteer effort organized by Help professionals with an interest in using their knowledge and experience for improving the World Wide Web. Volunteers pool their unique expertise and resources to evaluate user assistance systems and available technologies in the hope of formulating standards that are easy to use and acceptable for a broad range of Web-based applications. The group hopes to promote Help standards by working with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), a global consortium of member organizations that studies, develops, and adopts Web-based standards. Among the standards under consideration is the development of a Help Markup Language (HelpML), an XML Document Type Definition (DTD) that specifically addresses user assistance requirements. Other recommended models will also be considered, including Resource Definition Format (RDF), which provides XML metadata, and DOM (document object model).

Volunteer organization and operation

Volunteers face the challenge of developing Help models while simultaneously attaining support among W3C members. A number of current W3C member organizations, such as Microsoft, Oracle, Sun, and IBM, have already expressed great interest in the subject. To further its efforts, the Help for the Web initiative has formed working committees in the areas of communication, recruitment, and research and design. The Research and Design committee is responsible for developing help standards, identifying desirable behaviors and potential technologies, providing examples and prototypes, and recommending conventions and practices. The Communication committee will manage an official website and publicize the initiative by providing information and updates to newsletters, trade publications, meetings and conferences. The Recruiting committee will solicit the involvement of developers and other key persons at W3C organizations as well as recruit new volunteers for the committees. There is also a Management committee charged with overall management of the initiative. All committees welcome volunteers who can offer their time, effort, and expertise.

Possible recommendations

Following are some of the items under consideration for recommended standards or guidelines:

- Quick access definitions for text, graphics, and form objects. These quick access definitions are not limited to the familiar help popup format.
- Full-site navigation with hierarchical (contents) and alphabetized (index) lists of links.
- Other user access links, such as site maps and FAQs (frequently asked questions).
- Link previewing that enables the user to ascertain the identity and orientation of a link's targeted destination prior to selecting the link.
- Ability of users to identify themselves based on pre-defined user profiles (such as novice, intermediate, or expert) and access information tagged for those profiles.
- Implementation of a Help Markup Language (HelpML) and other W3C-recommended technologies for supplying user assistance elements.

For more information

The success of the initiative hinges on the quantity and dedication of motivated volunteers. For more information on the initiative or to participate in a committee, contact one of the committee leaders listed on the Help for the Web website. Visit the website at <http://www.winwriters.com/helpweb/>