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## Too Many Inputs Freak Out the Technical Writer

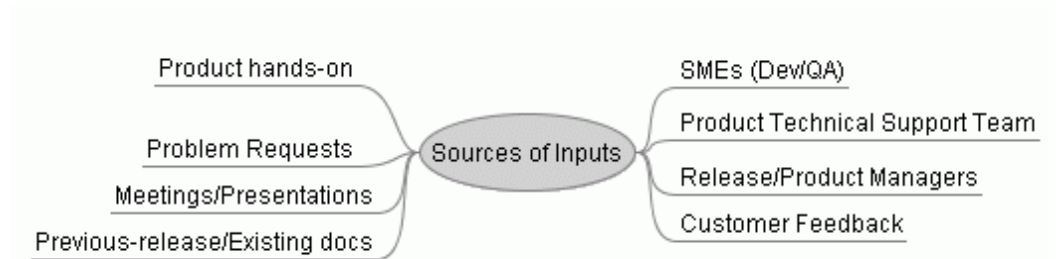
### How to track and address inputs from multiple sources

— Sridhar Machani

### Sources of Inputs

No, this isn't the case of 'Too many cooks spoil the broth' – because the technical communicators are not supposed to 'spoil the broth'. They're expected to accept, make sense of, and use information at all rates of traffic, and by all means. Figure 1 gives you an idea of the various sources of inputs.

Figure 1: Sources of Inputs



Accuracy, quality, and sometimes, speed are non-negotiable. In such a scenario, this article presents some of the practices that have helped me track and address inputs effectively – regardless of their volume and importance.

### Get Organized

Technical communicators have no control (well, almost none) over how and when the inputs are received. However, they can exercise complete authority over how and where the inputs are organized. Most inputs manifest in the form of e-mails (messages, attachments), files hosted on community sites, discussions (meetings, presentations), or ad hoc notes.

For quick and easy access, identify, separate, and mark the inputs as and when they arrive. For example, in Microsoft Outlook, the e-mails could be moved to exclusive PST folders. The files and notes could be stored in a single folder (with sub-folders for each project or

source) and a shortcut to the folder placed on Desktop or Quick Launch. The intent is to consolidate the inputs in as few places as possible (2 or 3) and to know how to access them - eyes closed (you know what I mean!).

## Get Your Act Together

Before working on the inputs, it is imperative to understand your deliverables and their scope. Question your manager, project lead, and the subject matter experts (SMEs). Ask a lot of questions; never assume. Find out if you are expected to include information from all the inputs. If there are seemingly ambiguous, conflicting, or unimportant inputs, get clarifications. Ensure the right expectations are set and stakeholders are on the same page. At this point, any unusable inputs are fairly filtered out.

The following lists briefly describes the key actions to process the inputs systematically, so you neither have to remember nor forget to work on any of the inputs.

### Think - Be creative

- Group similar tasks.
- Seek and negotiate (where possible) specific deadline and priority for each group of tasks. If needed, re-group the tasks to reflect the agreed deadlines/priorities.

### Plan - Mark tasks for actions

- Don't try to remember anything – the deadlines, priorities, or groups of tasks. Use tools such as Microsoft Outlook (or an Excel file).
- Categorize the groups of tasks. For example, in Outlook 2007, you can mark a high priority group with red category. Groups that can wait could be marked yellow. Inputs that are not sure to be useful could be marked purple.
- Set reminders for each group. For example, in Outlook, you can create a new Task and set a reminder. It could also act as a place holder for collecting any particular information to be used at the time of documentation.

### Execute - Focus, and work without distractions

- At the start of each day, be clear what you're going to work on. Work in sessions of not more than an hour each. As you finish or wait for clarifications and review of each task, mark it as completed (clear the category) or waiting (mark it to blue category). Move on to the next task in the queue.
- Take breaks between sessions. Research or learn for 30-60 minutes on topics of professional development. Participate in communities. You get the satisfaction of doing your work, and more.

## What Works for You

The suggestions in this article might not work for you. However, you do get an idea of dealing with tons of input and how not to miss any of them amidst tight schedules. Choose what works best for you and your deliverables.

Of course, in the real world, there are more unplanned activities cropping up than you may wish to deal with. Accept and endure them. You made a choice to be a technical communicator, so you better get organized!

## About the Author

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