I’ve become accustomed to the curious looks I get when I try to describe my job as a technical writer for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. The first assumption most people make is that I’m a game warden. These conversations sometimes continue with my explaining that game wardens are no longer referred to as “game wardens” but as conservation police officers (to emphasize their law enforcement role) and always end with the question, “What does technical writing have to do with selling hunting and fishing licenses?”

It’s a fair question. After all, the agency is primarily responsible for the management of inland fisheries, wildlife, and recreational boating for the Commonwealth of Virginia. What many people don’t realize is how the agency’s conservation police officers, biologists, administrative staff, and the Information Management Section (IMS), where I work, accomplish this task. The IMS is composed of a project manager, business analyst, two testers, and six to seven software developers (or programmers) who develop and maintain the agency’s personnel, finances, and, yes, programs used to sell hunting and fishing licenses.

Dual Roles

As the testing and documentation specialist for the IMS, I play two distinct roles during the software development process. As one of the section’s testers, I test software programs and write test-related documentation for software with names like Game Check, Got Game, and the Hunting and Fishing License Point of Sale System. As the sole documentation specialist, I develop software user manuals, disk-based training, and online help. Although these roles are complementary most of the time, multitasking is often more reality than buzzword, and teamwork is essential to meeting deadlines.

Putting It All Together

There is no better example of the importance of teamwork than when the IMS partnered with the Virginia Information Technology Agency to develop the first statewide system for selling hunting and fishing licenses online. A pilot point of sale system was already in use by Wal-Mart and Great Lodge stores, but this project would extend the system to more than 300 remote locations. The project, referred to as “Money Manager,” consisted of the various subprocesses and programs necessary for remote vendors to accomplish online license sales. Each of Money Manager’s subprocesses and programs has unique testing and documentation requirements that had to be met before system integration and statewide implementation could occur.

Despite Money Manager’s scope, a reality of testing and documentation is that there is often more than one ball in the air. Money Manager provided several such balls. Another was provided by an unanticipated requirement to prepare user documentation for a program called the Assets Management System (AMS). AMS allows users to manage fixed assets such as buildings, equipment, and improvements. A team of external auditors required user documentation to evaluate the program’s functionality. Although the completion of Money Manager remained a priority, its approaching implementation conflicted with the deadline imposed by the auditors for the AMS user manual. Teamwork and close communication kept the projects from getting out of synch. At times, roles blurred. Developers assisted with testing and provided editorial oversight for testing and user documentation. Even the project manager lent her time (and voice) to a tutorial to assist new point of sale users. The willingness of each member of the section to contribute something extra resulted in the delivery of both projects on time. It was an effort that earned the agency a “Best of the Web” Digital Government Achievement Award after the online point of sale system was implemented.

Please Pass the Venison

Now, I must admit that it’s not all work and no play. At the end of successful projects like Money Manager, the IMS team usually unwinds with a potluck or, weather permitting, a barbecue. At the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, these are not your standard fare. After all, where else can squirrel, venison, and other wildlife show up on the menu without a single raised eyebrow? It is during these calmer moments, when project deadlines seem less daunting, that I can consider more carefully the question “What does technical writing have to do with selling hunting and fishing licenses?”

The answer is simple: Technical writing is part of what makes the agency a winning team.

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