

RoboHelp Office 9.1

Robert J. Boeri

Delivering knowledge about your company or products, whether within your company or to clients or others, is increasingly difficult. Product support and documentation must be available 24/7, on an ever-increasing variety of platforms and the Web, but at ever-decreasing costs. Online HELP is usually the solution. Keeping HELP-development costs under control requires a system that can derive multiple HELP products from a single-source HELP knowledge base. Add the need for full-text searching and the ever-increasing appetite for multimedia, and you've got your work cut out for you.

Now there's a tool tailor-made for the task. RoboHelp Office 9.1 provides an excellent solution. It goes beyond mere delivery of Windows help by offering an easy development environment for delivering knowledge bases for technical support, product demos, product documentation, and even general employee information on corporate intranets, extranets, Web sites, or local storage devices. Developing knowledge bases with RoboHelp feels comfortable from the start, like using a combination of Microsoft Word and your favorite Web authoring system. The result is a familiar book-topic metaphor, to a variety of proprietary or open platforms.

Add to these knowledge management challenges a need to enhance your ecommerce Web site, and you'll find that eHelp Corporation is building a surprisingly attractive vision for even more comprehensive knowledge management (see this issue's companion Information Insider column, p. 42-Ed.). RoboHelp, and the newly renamed eHelp corporation, have come a long way from the initial Windows HELP solution, their ancestor that debuted nearly a decade ago.

feature overview and system requirements

To test RoboHelp Office, I used a typical installation on both Windows NT 4.0 and Windows 95 systems. The installation instructions require a minimalist configuration: 486 processor, 16MB RAM (24MB recommended), any Windows 32-bit operating system from Windows 95 to Windows Millennium and Windows 2000, at least 110MB free disk space and an additional 64MB for optimal performance, Internet Explorer 4 or later (for HTML Help), Microsoft HTML Help (included and installed with RoboHelp HTML), and appropriate sound hardware to take advantage of multimedia HTML help delivery. Although Office ran a bit sluggishly at times on my vintage Pentium 200, it always performed acceptably. My test focused on WebHelp, eHelp's enhanced solution for delivering help via the Web.

There isn't enough space here to explain all the different capabilities and constraints of each Help format, but there are many. These range from reliance on Windows native features like ActiveX controls (not surprisingly, JavaHelp, Oracle Help, and even classic WinHelp do not support these), to the ability to integrate multimedia (JavaHelp and Oracle Help do not), to the ability to offer full-text searching (all do).

If you have existing materials in a variety of formats that you want to use with your HELP system, RoboHelp Office provides a powerful import function. Figure 1 shows options for importing HTML files, existing MS Word documents, Map files (often developed for classic Windows Help systems), or "What's This?" Help project files, generally built for C and C++ applications.

What makes using RoboHelp Office easy for developing knowledge bases is that it manages all those Help system idiosyncrasies behind the scenes, letting you focus on delivering knowledge via what it calls "topics" (similar to Web pages). Delivering the final Help system is as simple as "save as."

RoboHelp Office's "Single Source" feature also lets you create two classic Windows Help systems: WinHelp 3 (for Win 3.1) or WinHelp 4 (for the 32-bit Windows family, from Windows 95 through NT 4.0) from the same source file. Single Source also lets you use your compiled Help (HLP) file to create printable documentation, WebHelp, and Microsoft HTML-based Help. Still, there seems to be no easy way to get from one of the HTMLHelp outputs to Classic WinHelp, although that is likely not to be something often required.

A typical installation gets you both the core HELP development system for HTMLHelp and RoboHelp (classic), plus a set of "must have" RoboHelp Office tools, including debugging tools, HELP decompilers, an AVI capture

tool, multifile search and replace, and other support utilities. A look at the summary of features in this package shows this product is really a full-featured knowledge management system.

Each of these help systems uses the familiar book-page metaphor that most users now expect, including pop-ups, graphics, indexing, full-text searching, and the ability to integrate graphics, sound, and video.

web delivery

After going through the various, excellent tutorials that come with the product, I decided to try two things based on my belief that Web-delivered knowledge is the key value that products like this offer:

- Build a small, Web-delivered Help knowledge base
- Convert a legacy Windows HTML Help project to a Web-delivered version.

Moreover, since I believe enterprise uses of RoboHelp to do this are already committed to one of the major web authoring tools, I wanted to test RoboHelp Office's claim that it played well with others. That is, I developed my help project with Office but integrated and deployed it within my existing Web site using DreamWeaver 4.0. I did encounter one glitch that turned out not to be related to Windows and ZIP disks. When transferring my WinHelp project from a ZIP disk to DreamWeaver, the case of many of my WinHelp filenames changed randomly; this is a no-no when deploying to UNIX-based servers, as I did. You're best advised to develop on a hard drive (or at least "generate" the project on a hard drive) only to avoid this problem.

After jumping this hurdle, I easily designed, developed, and delivered to my Web site a help project that explains how to interpret a report I update monthly on World Wide Web Consortium standards. (To see this in action, go to <http://world.std.com/~bboeri/TRC/TRC-XML.htm> and click on help.) The RoboHelp interface was intuitive; its built-in HELP was (not surprisingly) first-rate. And I finished my project in record time. The result was a nicely packaged set of project files in a folder RoboHelp called WebHelp, containing all the complex Java, Javascript, HTML, graphic, cascading style sheets and other files required for platform-independent delivery. Could an experienced Web developer have created these files without RoboHelp? Yes, but only with a great deal of difficulty, and deploying to multiple HELP formats would be a serious challenge. And even with that done, it's hard to see how you could duplicate RoboHelp's other project management features.

My second test was to convert a legacy Windows HTML Help file (.CHM) system to WebHELP. The bundled HTML Help Studio tool easily extracted all the constituent HTML topics, graphics, style sheets (.CSS), indexes (.HHK), tables of contents (.HHC), browse sequences (.BRS), and glossaries (.GLO) with this tool. Reassembling these as a WebHelp system was not a completely automatic process, but being able to do this at all is quite a feat. During my learning and testing of this package, I needed to contact eHelp's customer service via email. In both cases, I received prompt, useful responses within one business day.

wish list

RoboHelp's decision to let you work in your familiar Web authoring environment was wise. It postpones the immediate need for a couple of features that I hope and expect will be available in future versions of RoboHelp Office. First, Office lacks direct support for streaming media and currently supports only Microsoft's AVI. AVI files quickly become too large for reasonable Web delivery and do not stream. I'd like to see native support within Office for the two major streaming formats, Real from RealNetworks and Windows Media from Microsoft. In the same vein, Office's support for HTML version 4 is excellent, but it is already time to move up to XHTML-XML for the Web-the new W3C standard for Web authors. Again, pick the right authoring tool (like HomeSite bundled with DreamWeaver), and you can produce XHTML directly or transform RoboHelp HTML files to that format increasingly accepted on non-traditional platforms like Ebooks.

As the list of available platforms and browsers grows, RoboHelp Office will have its work cut out for it to continue providing HTML-based help that is correct and effective. Still, this is definitely the best-of-show in its category, and, if any system can continue to provide multiple outputs from a single source, it is RoboHelp Office.