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Domino and Notes User Assistance: Helping the customer

Interview by
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If you've visited [The Documentation Library](#) on Notes.net, you're probably familiar with the Domino and Notes User Assistance group. They're the documentation professionals responsible for all the Notes and Domino Help databases and printed documentation. In this interview, they discuss the changes and improvements made to Help for R5, the importance of customer contact and feedback, the Documentation Library Web site, and some of the ideas and plans for future releases of Notes and Domino.

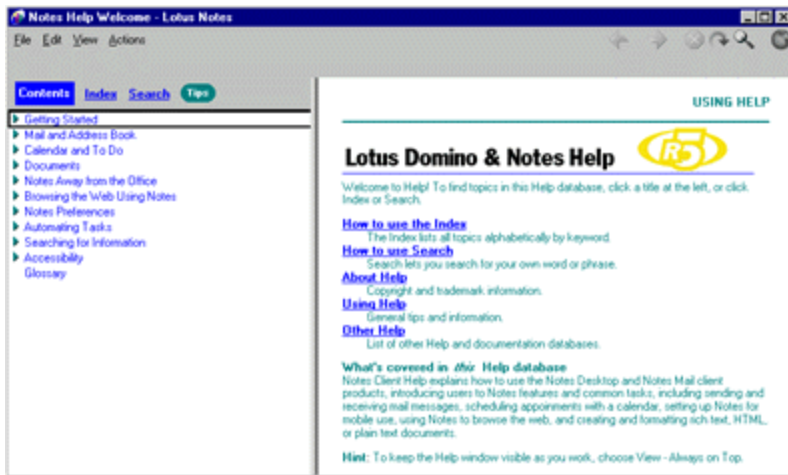
You can also see the archived discussion with the User Assistance team in the [Developer Spotlight](#).

R5 Help looks a lot different than in previous releases. Why is that?

[Kyla Town](#)

First of all, it launches in a separate, sizeable window, which can remain on top of your workspace so that you can reference the documentation while you work. You can change this setting by selecting View - Always on Top.

We also made improvements in navigation, modeled after help systems like Microsoft HTML Help. One example is that the table of contents, index, and search moved to the left frame, where it displays a clear hierarchy of the contents in the database. It functions more like the navigation frame of a Web site, so clicking on a topic causes it to appear in the right frame. The state you're in doesn't change unless you change it, so you always know where you are.



Another navigation change is the action buttons at the top of the left frame so you can easily switch from the table of contents to the index or to search. Also, backward and forward navigation has been redesigned to work more like a Web browser. There are back and forward buttons in the upper right corner of the screen that take you backward and forward through the history of topics you've visited in a session.

Besides the new look-and-feel, what are other improvements?

Kyla Town

We have much better context sensitivity, commonly known as F1 help. For example, if you're working in the text properties box of a mail message, you can click on any of the tabs and press F1 to launch the help database to a topic related to that part of the interface. The same applies to Domino Administrator and Domino Designer. For example, in Designer, context-sensitive help is available for all of the LotusScript and Java classes, properties, methods, and events as well as the formula @commands and @functions listed on the Reference tab. This puts the syntax and usage information of a LotusScript or Java class, or a formula at your fingertips while you're working.

[Robin Rouse](#)

In previous releases, the F1 "hooks" [places where context-sensitive help is available] weren't there in the actual code. The hooks were broad -- we knew you were in a view, or a form, or a document. There were obviously many things you could do within that form or document. One of the things the Iris developers were committed to in R5 was giving us more hooks, so that the hooks became much more granular. Our Help redesign committee worked with Iris to put as many of those in as possible.

Kyla Town

Help also benefits from the search improvements made to all of R5. Two examples, which can be used when you have a full-text index, are word variants and fuzzy search. With word variants, you can search for forms of words without having to type out each variation. For example, if you type in the word "write", the results could include write, writing, rewrite, overwrite and so on. Fuzzy search includes words or phrases that are similar to the ones in your search. For example, searching for the phrase "disable role" in the Designer Help database will return documents containing disablerole, but it will also return documents containing the phrase "Disables a role."

How did User Assistance decide on these changes?

Kyla Town

Much of the new design you see in R5 Help was arrived at by carefully reviewing feedback from customers. To date, we've gotten a tremendous amount of feedback and suggestions, and have tried to incorporate the best ones into the documentation for R5. These range from relatively small and specific -- better descriptions for changing letterhead or creating a person record, for example -- to broad and sweeping -- such as more context-sensitivity and better examples.

Where can customers submit their feedback?

Kyla Town

Click the "Feedback on Help?" link at the bottom of any topic in online help, or go to the Documentation Library Web

site and fill out a [feedback form](#).

Robin and Jack, you recently represented Domino Designer User Assistance at Lotus DevCon99. What did customers have to say about the documentation?

Robin Rouse

Overall there was just such positive feedback for the documentation. People really found the documentation to be useful. One thing that we were pleased about was that, as Kyla said, we have made a lot of changes based on customer feedback. What we were heard from customers at DevCon was we made the right changes. For example, in the 4.6 release one thing that was well-requested was more index entries. We did a lot of work to improve the Help indexes and we got feedback from DevCon that the new indexes are great.

[Jack Allen](#)

One longtime user said how each version had gotten just so much better. He felt that we were pretty much complete, although we also asked people if they found anything missing in the documentation. If people couldn't think of anything right then [at the conference], we encouraged them to use the feedback form. Because when you're thinking of it is the best time to send it in, whether it's a missing index entry or topic or whatever.

Robin Rouse

As a documentation department we're always struggling with whether or not to continue to invest in print, because I think there's a trend in our industry to get rid of print. And yet, what we heard at DevCon doesn't confirm that. Customers really want print. And I think it's important that we're in touch with the customers in that regard.

Tell us about the Documentation Library Web site

[Derek Bambauer](#)

The Documentation Library grew out of our efforts to make the extensive Domino and Notes documentation available online. We had a small site on Lotus.com that we migrated to the Library over a period of a couple of months. The UA Web team designed the architecture of the site and we worked with [Stormship Studios](#) to give it a distinctive "look and feel" within the framework of the Notes.net style. Basically, the Documentation Library is a "one-stop shopping site" for documentation -- we have all the Domino and Notes documentation going back to before Release 4.5, including documentation for tools, drivers, and related products like Sametime and Domino Web Content Library. Users can browse the documentation online, download in formats such as Notes database (.NSF), Adobe Acrobat (.PDF), and HTML help (.HTM), and can even order printed copies online through the [Lotus store](#). We update the content constantly -- as soon as new or revised documentation is available, you'll find it in the library.

So there's more documentation on the site besides just Notes and Domino Help files?

Derek Bambauer

We host a wide variety of products related to Domino and Notes -- from Sametime to LSX, Media Connection Services to the Java/CORBA toolkit. Add-on products such as the ISDN and SNA drivers or the X.400 MTA complement the administration offerings, and there is extensive documentation to help application developers -- the Java Programmer's Guide, LotusScript Data Object (LS:DO) guides, C and C++ API information, Best Practices manuals, Global WorkBench references, and more. Our focus is not only on providing the most up-to-date versions of the Domino and Notes Help, but on providing the information people need to be successful with a Domino and Notes system.

And the Documentation Library is a pure Domino Web site?

Derek Bambauer

Absolutely. It's a Notes database application, and it looks the same whether you access it from a Web browser or from a Notes client. Some users even replicate the database to their desktops so they can always have the latest help available. We use some JavaScript on the front page just to show off the capabilities of the R5 Domino Designer. Notes makes it easy -- we have people adding content to the site who don't know HTML or have Web authoring experience. We depend on Domino's ability to render Notes databases for browsers -- it's how we make the major Notes and Domino help systems, such as Designer and Administration Help, available over the Web. I set up the database very quickly using Domino Designer, and the entire team can add content and information without being aware of the underlying architecture. Designer and Domino really helped us get running quickly, and they make the day-to-day maintenance of the site easy.

What can we expect from User Assistance for the next release of Notes/Domino?

[Peter Orbeton](#)

Overall, we're looking to continue in much the same way as R5, and that is make 100 percent of the documentation available online and downloadable, and put a printed subset of that in whatever media boxes are shipped. Increasingly as you're doing business on the Web, the "hardgood" becomes less relevant, but we have heard, particularly from administrators and designers, that they want access to hard copy. We are making all the [Yellowbooks](#) available for sale, which has proved to be a very successful endeavor.

We've also talked with customers about third-party books, and we're going to continue to work with publishers to engage them in writing books about Domino and Notes. I managed that program for R5 and I found that the editors and authors I worked with were anxious to do whatever they could to put books on the shelves.

Will there be any Help design changes in future releases of Notes?

[Susanna Doyle](#)

We've developed Help as a Domino/Notes application for many years because, up until R5, the Notes client was available on a large number of platforms such as Windows, Macintosh, and UNIX. Using our own product was the simplest way to ensure a consistent method of delivering Help on all clients.

Since R5, however, our client platforms are now only Windows and Macintosh, and help delivery tools on these platforms are maturing rapidly. We're therefore researching the feasibility of providing native platform help: Microsoft HTML Help for the Windows platform, and a similar HTML-based solution for Macintosh.

Because R5 Help is designed to resemble Microsoft HTML Help, as Kyla talked about, we don't expect a great deal of change to the basic navigation design if we convert to platform help systems.

What are the user benefits of moving to "platform" help systems?

[Susanna Doyle](#)

If we make the change to native platform Help, that will allow us for the first time to take advantage of the burgeoning number of tools and techniques developed by third parties for Microsoft HTML Help and many other HTML-based Help systems. We're looking into several possibilities.

At the top of the list is some sort of "natural language" or "expert" search enhancement, such as AnswerWorks from WexTech for the Windows platform. We may be able to provide something similar on Macintosh using Apple's Sherlock search capability.

As for wizards and other special features, we're excited about taking advantage of dynamic HTML (DHTML) where possible, to provide more customized help. Specific designs will have to wait until we make the decision to go ahead with native platform help, but we're studying lots of ideas.

Besides possible Help design changes, what else can we expect from User Assistance in the future?

[Peter Orbeton](#)

One of the things that we understand is our customers, when they need assistance, don't just necessarily think of the documentation as the only place to go. We know from a variety of feedback that often times they don't even look in the documentation. Think about all the places you can go to get an answer in addition to Help – for example, Notes.net, Lotus Support, or discussion forums. What we're investigating is a way to make all this related material coherent in some way and present that to our users.

We are, of course, working with the assumption that not everybody is connected to the Web, so such a "portal" does have to be designed to provide, at a minimum, the level of documentation we have in the Help databases. However, we do expect that connectivity is going play an increasingly essential role for our target customers.

It will also be interesting to think about how we can tie together some of the [LearningSpace](#) offerings that will be forthcoming to provide distance-learning possibilities to our Help -- we'll be exploring that.

To wrap up, what is the state of User Assistance?

Peter Orbeton

Our Web site has been very well-received. We plan on enhancing that in the months to come. We are very successful with the venture we have going with Lotus Education – that's the Yellowbooks that are available, both as doc packs and individual books, from the [Lotus Education store](#). Finally, the feedback we receive, from the link we have at the bottom of each Help topic, we look at those comments carefully. The analysis of that feedback showed that there was work we needed to do for the R5 documentation set that we took quite seriously and we will continue to look at feedback to improve future documentation.