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You will find many enthusiastic voices, echoing the marketing material from vendors and busy conference floors, proclaiming wikis to be the ultimate solution to a wide range of information management problems. These problems include unmotivated editors, poor documentation, the high cost of training, and everything in between.

According to “The 2007 Global Intranet Strategies Survey,” a benchmarking analysis published by intranet expert Jane McConnell of NetStrategy/JMC, wikis are the most common and the fastest growing social media tool. The 2008 survey will likely bring more evidence to support this (as of this writing, that was due out October 2008).

In contrast, back at the office you hear worried concerns from within the enterprise that introducing a wiki means letting go of control, chaos in general, and poor information quality.

So how do you know if a wiki will bring positive change to your organization? In this article, we will attempt to untangle enterprise wikis, offer our advice on how to get started, and share some lessons learned from our recent interviews and client engagements.

WHAT A WIKI CAN AND CANNOT DO

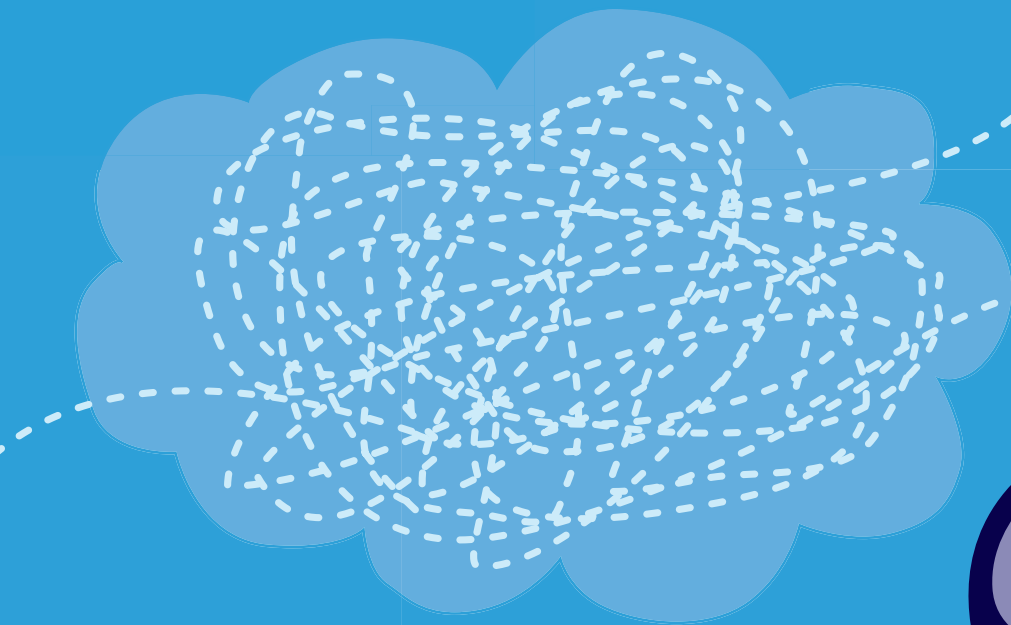
In essence, the unique aspect of wikis is the co-creation of content: As a collaborative workspace where users can easily create, edit, and link pages, a wiki presents a bottom-up approach to working with information. In other words, wikis allow for sharing work-in-progress.

From our research for “Wikis in the Enterprise” (April 2008), we found several examples of wikis put to successful use, including these:

- *Encyclopedia, e.g., information resource for new employees*
- *Manuals and guidelines*
- *Opening for all to edit on some existing intranet pages*



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WIKIS



- Project collaboration, e.g., innovation projects or on daily tasks
- Project management for events
- External communication on specific projects or topics

The co-creation may take place in a well-defined, more regulated manner, as in the encyclopedia model known from Wikipedia, where there is a set model for the type of entries. Co-creation may also take place when sharing notes in project collaboration, where both the structure of the wiki and the type of content are up for discussion.

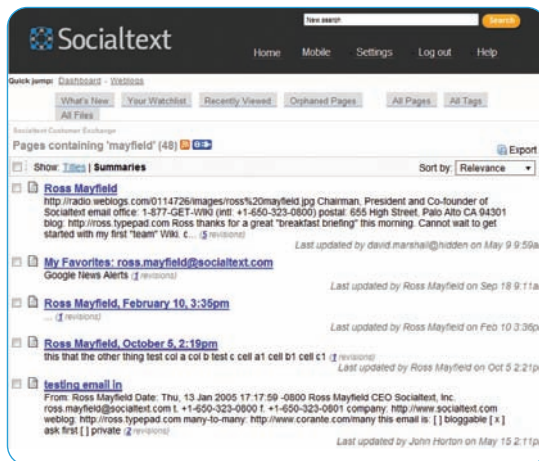
Not surprisingly, our research also found several examples of less successful wiki projects. Some organizations were surprised to learn that a wiki could not fulfill their—perhaps too hopeful—expectations. The fact that content is always evolving can be a difficult new way of working if you are used to sharing only authorized, well-documented, and well-managed information.

Before we dive too much into the lessons learned from those with large, complex, and global wikis, let us first go through the initial planning.

A WIKI BUSINESS CASE?

If you are looking solely at bottom-line improvements, a wiki may be hard to justify. It can be hard to put a value on increased flexibility and support for processes that are more ad hoc, and as with any other tool, there will be actual costs in installing and implementing the product. Few, if any, wikis bring in additional revenue or direct cost savings. In other words, creating a hard dollar business case for your wiki initiative may not be an easy task.

By now, you may be tempted to extrapolate timesavings into real money. Consider that 5 minutes saved by all employees every day will surely add up to a large sum. In reality though, the financial gain from timesavings tend to be more mythical than anything else. That is, unless you



Search results in most wikis look far from the usual Google search results. This example from the Socialtext Customer Exchange shows results based on a search on the last name of its CEO. Depending on your requirements, you might need to plan time and budget to customize the search results or alternatively plug the wiki into your existing enterprise search initiative.

actually plan for the wiki to enable you to reduce the head count and then save money on salary.

A more realistic objective is that a successful wiki may save you and your colleagues some time and free it up for other tasks, but is this a good enough justification for you and your management?

A PART OF THE TOOLBOX

When formulating your business case, it may perhaps be wiser to consider wikis as a part of a larger web toolbox alongside other tools such as blogs, newsletters, and search. You can then look at overall costs and create a sensible business case for the toolbox as a whole.

While a wiki is indeed flexible, it does not replace the need for other tools, such as a web CMS or an enterprise search engine. Defining the relationship between the wiki and the intranet can be a difficult exercise, with the two sometimes in competition with each other. Implementing a logical relationship between the two

includes integrating the wikis into the intranet navigation and making the purpose of your wiki clear. For example, a wiki will have trouble meeting the requirements for an HR intranet with self-service.

Just like wikis, blogs are also tools for ongoing dialog and collaboration, and it may not always be easy to decide whether your new content is really better suited for a wiki page or a blog posting. Blogs let people add comments, but each post is a separate article controlled by the author. In a wiki, there is no such control as each page can be edited and linked to other pages by anyone. Blogs emphasize discussion through comments linked to individual posts, while wikis emphasize co-creation of content and structure, in perhaps a very large, ever-growing, set of pages.

SELECTING A WIKI

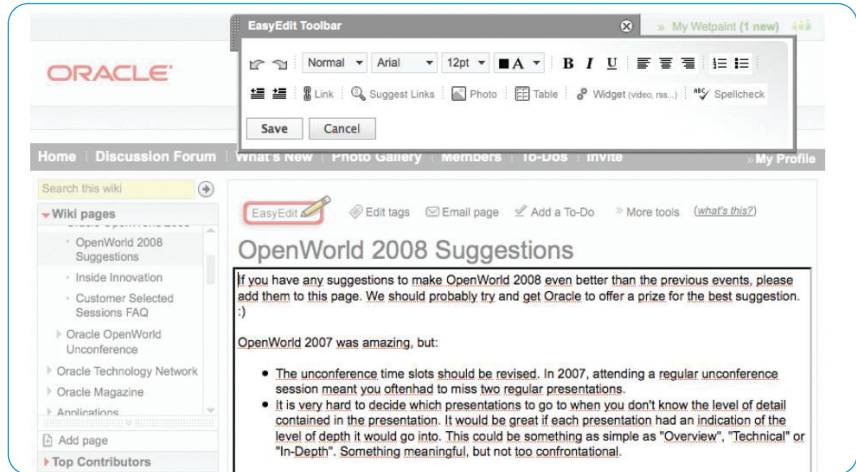
The wiki marketplace is a crowded one. Pure-play wiki vendors are working hard to stand out from the crowd, while larger software companies, including IBM, Oracle, and Microsoft, have been busy including wiki functionality in their products.

As with related marketplaces, e.g., web CMS, start with a critical review of your requirements and how they match with a shortlist of vendors. While closely evaluating vendors for the “Enterprise Social Software Report” (CMS Watch; June 2008), we found significant differences among the wiki solutions. Some, e.g., Mediawiki (the engine behind Wikipedia) require more technical skill than others do. In



Don't overreach for what your wiki will accomplish; it should be part of your larger toolbox.

While Wetpaint (here used by Oracle) calls its rich text editor EasyEdit, you will probably still need some time to get used to it. A training session should at least cover basics, e.g., how do I upload a file?



general, handling attachments in an efficient way is also a problem in most products. Search is another frequent problem that came up as an annoyance in many products.

The good news is that generally it is easy to get up and running. Most vendors offer either a simple download or a hosted option so that you can easily and closely evaluate the products yourself. If you plan to get external help, e.g., for changing the layout or training, experienced help may not be easy to come by, depending on your location or your need for somebody to come on-site.

Unfortunately, there are no standards and little help for migrating to another wiki later on, so make sure to allow enough time for due diligence before making your decision.

ENSURING ADOPTION

Once you have selected the right wiki, the really hard work begins. Even though the features of a wiki may seem simple and few, you should not leave out training. Do not expect everybody to find the wiki easy and simple to work with. In reality, a wiki requires a shift in perspective when working with content. For some, it is a dramatic shift in mind-set to be sharing one's work in progress and potentially allowing everyone to make changes to it.

Adding to this are the usability issues. Many nontechnical users have problems with the use of technical and proprietary markup. Without training, many employees never discover useful features, such as email notifications of recent changes or instructions for working offline.

Our key advice for ensuring adoption is to start with a wiki with some content in it. Before launching, populate the wiki with information and basic structure for employees to further develop themselves.

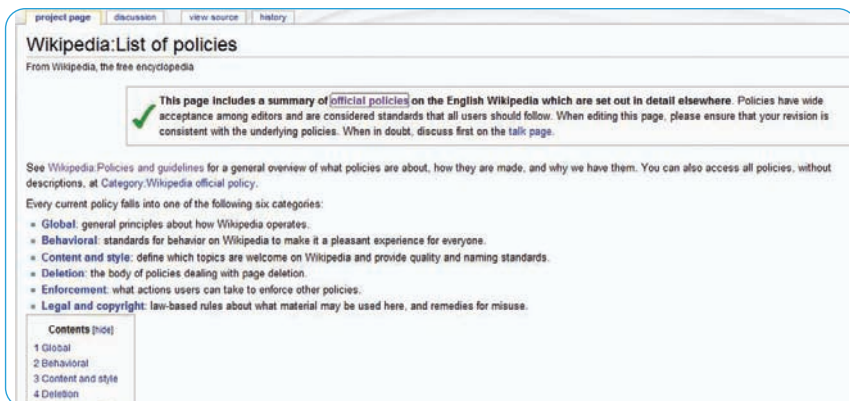
SETTING UP GUIDELINES

Beyond training and a successful launch, you will need some guidelines down the road as the wiki grows. Consider Wikipedia, which has strict guidelines and policies in place. This carefully documents everything from the overall purpose of Wikipedia to how to name a page. Even if your wiki is significantly smaller in scale, the lessons learned by Wikipedia may be a helpful inspiration for your wiki initiative.

The simplicity of adding new pages and linking them together often causes any attempt at information architecture to run wild. Managing a wiki requires finding the right balance between keeping the flexibility of the tool and introducing some form of control, e.g., in the form of guidelines.

As an example, consider the naming of pages: How do you avoid redundancy in pages on the same topic? Project names may be obvious, but what about subject matters or time-related material, e.g., how do you link an agenda for a meeting next week? To avoid chaos, you should at least document a standard for how to name pages. Also, you may or may not want to allow everybody to edit the front page.

Similarly, while a wiki stresses flexibility by not enforcing templates, developing some agreed-upon guidelines for templates can help contributors work more effectively. One such guideline can be to use a table of contents on the top of every page to help readers scan long pages more easily.



THE WIKI MANAGER ROLE

A consistent piece of advice from those with wiki experience is to appoint a wiki manager. To support sustainable development of a wiki you need a

Wikipedia has an extensive list of policies and guidelines regulating the use of the tool. It is worth looking at both the specific policies and the categorization of guidelines, which include for example "Behavioral" and "Content and style." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines for more information.

gardener-type person, who does regular general quality checking of content added by different contributors. Besides monitoring the use of the wiki, the person should also provide assistance in using the wiki the “right way” by following the established best practice and guidelines.

Your wiki manager could report to the online communications manager or intranet manager, if you have one. It may not be a full-time position but rather a role integrated into the job profile of a wiki evangelist. A good managerial challenge for the wiki manager is to follow up on your measurable success criteria for your wiki.

It can also be useful to appoint individuals responsible for subareas of the wiki, as they have the contextual knowledge to ensure quality content. To help keep the content quality high, it is good practice to keep encouraging employees who find mistakes in the content to either correct it themselves or report it to the person responsible


for the content or, alternatively, to the wiki manager.

TAKING THE NEXT STEPS

Apart from such practical guidance, you also need to establish policies on a more strategic level. Interestingly, according to the “2007 Global Intranet Trends Report,” organizations are regulating the choice of Web 2.0 tools, including which wiki system to use, much more than they are traditional tools.

The success of your wiki project is probably more dependent on the trust level in your organization than technology. Employees must feel comfortable making themselves and their work visible. In an organizational culture that values internal competition and sees withholding information as a source of power, making one’s work public and available for criticism is controversial. For a wiki project manager it may be difficult to change this situation. What the wiki manager should try to do is create a

supportive culture. Show those participating in the wiki that there is room for making mistakes and later corrections.

Having successfully maneuvered through the initial stages of your wiki project, you may see more or less serious requests for new wikis from different groups within your enterprise. One way to handle these requests is to ask the wiki manager to provide qualified guidance to new projects, including helping to identify needs and asking critically why a wiki is necessary. A team with knowledge of the entire web toolbox will be able to help determine which tool is best suited in a particular situation and, in some cases, it may actually be a wiki. 

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