

ENTERPRISE STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS

Intranets

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Wikis Meet Reality

JANUS BOYE

Wikis are increasingly gaining popularity in the enterprise and are being deployed for many different types of projects, in particular for team collaboration. While doing research at the beginning of 2008, I found that wikis had recently become ubiquitous in many organizations.

Join me for a quick review of some of the common myths about wikis coupled with best practices for wikis inside the enterprise.

ENTERPRISE IMPACT

Often oversold on simplicity, large and small vendors alike have been aggressively pushing the benefits of wikis. If you carefully examine sales materials or listen to a sales pitch, you will find that the marketplace is still very young. Unlike other intranet initiatives, technology may be less of a problem with wikis, but they do still introduce a new way of working that requires training and governance to avoid chaos. Organizational culture is critical to ensuring successful adoption, as wikis tend to have a wide-ranging effect felt throughout the organization.

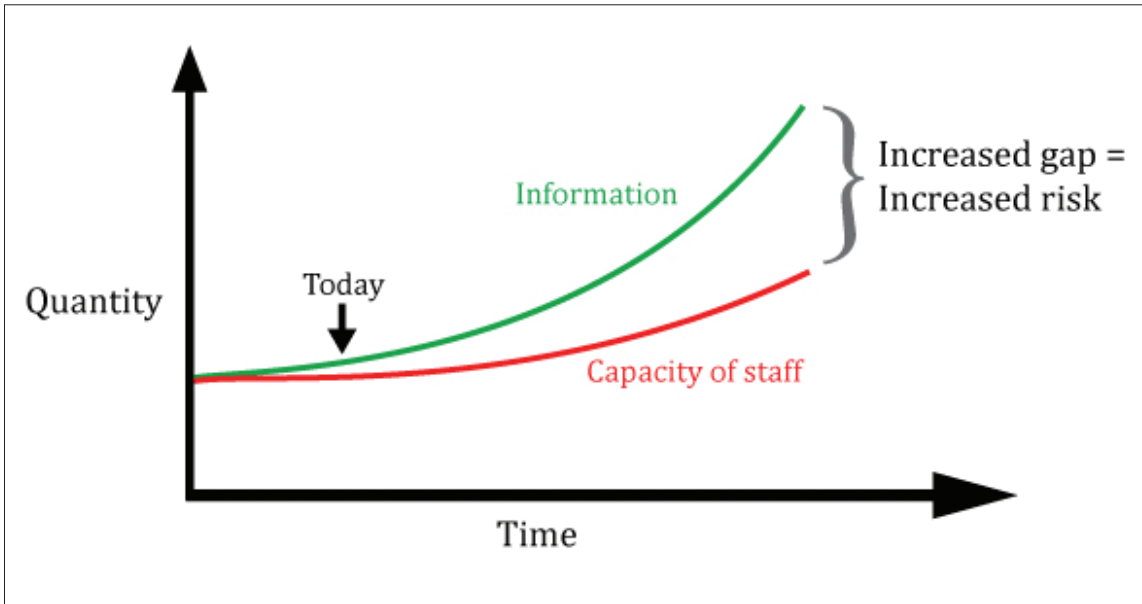
At the strategic level, wikis can be a real challenge with their openness, transparency, and lack of managerial control. This can translate into explosive information growth far beyond the management capacity of your organization. Also, users who are unfamiliar with wikis may not find them as easy to work with as the wiki evangelists expound. They require a significant shift in perspective for those contributing, and usability remains hampered by a lack of standards.

NEW WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Despite what you might hear from vendors and eager consultants, a common theme from the many interviews we conducted while researching “Wiki in the Enterprise” (April 2008) was that a wiki is first and foremost a potential fit for online collaboration and basic knowledge management. It is not a good fit as a project workspace with attached files (e.g., Microsoft SharePoint), not an HR intranet with self-service

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a Wiki page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Discussion Forum, What's New, Photo Gallery, members, 10-1005, and Invite. A search box is present on the left. The main content area is titled "OpenWorld 2008 Suggestions" and contains a text box with the following text: "If you have any suggestions to make OpenWorld 2008 even better than the previous events, please add them to this page. We should probably try and get Oracle to offer a prize for the best suggestion. :)". Below this, there is a section titled "OpenWorld 2007 was amazing, but:" followed by a bulleted list of suggestions: "The unconference time slots should be revised. In 2007, attending a regular unconference session meant you often had to miss two regular presentations." and "It is very hard to decide which presentations to go to when you don't know the level of detail". An "EasyEdit" toolbar is overlaid on the top of the page, showing various editing tools like font selection, bold, italic, underline, link, and spellcheck. The Oracle logo is visible in the top left corner of the page.

While Wetpaint.com, Inc. (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 the basics, e.g., how to upload a file.



If you don't create guidelines and processes for managing information, a wiki will grow exponentially beyond the management capacity of staff. This potential gap between information and capacity is a risk to the enterprise as it translates into the right information not being found and the potential creation of redundant information.

(e.g., time tracking, application for leave), not a sales dashboard, and not a managerial dashboard. Even something as basic as group discussion may not be ideal inside a wiki, as the discussions tend not to be threaded, making it hard to follow any serious conversation. As always, depending on your exact requirements, you may be better off considering alternatives. A wiki positioned as the “New Working Environment” surely sets expectations that may easily be out of reach for any project.

Having said that, and with openness and flexibility as the guiding principles, in most organizations wikis do represent a clear change. However, most people are surprised to learn the level of training that is necessary to benefit from wikis—and they’re even more surprised when a wiki becomes a source of conflict, typically with concerns about quality and confidentiality of information and allowance for criticism. These factors put a damper on the motivation to contribute; however, all of these factors are also essential for maintaining quality control and accuracy of content.

The problems lie not only in how content is created, but also how organizations sometimes approach wiki projects, as if usual and well-established common sense about project management does not apply. A wiki will have a much greater chance of staying useful if it has the clear

purpose of supporting a defined group (e.g., a smaller department) while focusing on specific content.

To the surprise to those familiar with wikis, it is actually not obvious and logical to a casual user to create new content. For example, consider navigation: A wiki requires contributors to consider links before they create content. This may sound like a small detail, but it is a brand new perspective for editors and requires practice. In other words, if you would like to create a wiki page about project planning, you need to first consider where the page will be linked from. Due to the flat structure of wikis, you also need to consider naming to ensure that the page name is unique. That means you will run into problems if you just call your page “project plan,” as nobody will know to which project the page refers.

With the “edit” button on all pages for all to use, content is always evolving. However, in some cases information needs to be authorized, well-documented, and approved in order to be published. A frequent concern mentioned in our interviews was whether information on a wiki would be reliable. Without a change in this perception, contributions will be lacking and the wiki could end up having a negative impact on information sharing in the larger organizational setting.

A NEW INFORMATION SILO

The ease of getting started and the inherent flexibility of wikis create new challenges for enterprises as the amount of content soon grows beyond the capability to manage it. With multiple wikis (sometimes even from multiple vendors) being used across the organization, they often become information silos, where valuable information cannot easily be found or re-used. People simply lose track and forget about the project wiki hosted externally from last year’s important HR project.

To complicate matters, searching in wikis is still a young discipline, with no best practices. Search results sorted by the last edited date may be helpful if you want to find something new, but this is less helpful with thousands of search results. Also, unless you want multiple search engines, you need to integrate the wiki with your intranet search results and find a way for the crawler to be aware of the frequent edits. In general, wiki search results bring back memories of a time before Google came along and raised user expectations.

On a positive note, a wiki can work particularly well as a collaboration space for a smaller group or a well-knit department, but it will often be difficult to share the information with other groups. This is due to its flexible nature, as the wiki

will reflect the context of the particular group when it comes to structure as well as the wording and tone of voice. As such, the wiki will be useful for group members who will know exactly where to find important information, as their shared work context serves as a common frame for handling and interpreting this information. However, other employees from outside the group will have difficulties in navigating and generally making sense of the content.

Consequently, some organizations now deny requests for wikis as closed workspaces for groups in an attempt to focus the attention in their organization on wikis as tools for cross-organizational communication. Others decide to set up wiki teams to provide qualified guidance to those departments requesting new wikis. Ideally, the qualified guidance includes helping to identify needs and asking critically why a wiki is

necessary, as well as education on how to handle information and maintaining a useful structure in the long run.

PLAN AHEAD

With new pages being easy to create but harder to find, it will often seem easier for employees to just create a new page instead of finding out if the relevant page already exists and adding their contributions there. This combined with orphaned pages, different naming schemes for pages, and pages with the same content that are not linked means that a wiki can easily run amok.

Face reality and avoid the problems by defining a practice for ensuring structure, objectives, and goals from the beginning, especially when the task of creating wikis is delegated. Before deploying a wiki, assess the commitment actually required, both from management and co-workers. To tackle problems with structure running wild and

quality of content, employ training, guidelines, and dedicated wiki managers.

I remain enthusiastic about wikis, and I am among the top contributors to our own internal wiki. For me, receiving the notice about "Recent Changes" is almost addictive. I have also learned that the processes of using a wiki offer their own set of lessons learned that offer value to any organization considering making its intranet more collaborative. If you do not provide wikis in your enterprise, it might push co-workers to create wikis outside and beyond your control. This might be worse than the issues I have mentioned, so a good place to start is by deciding who should be in charge of wikis. Another task for the intranet manager? **!**

JANUS BOYE is an analyst on enterprise portals and social software. He is also co-author of the recently released research on "Wiki in the Enterprise," published in April 2008, from which this article is excerpted. The research is available at jboye.com.

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