

RECONSIDERING WIKIS IN THE ENTERPRISE

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The wiki technology is mature enough to pass the test before your CIO. But the following question remains: will the deployment of YOUR wiki be a success? From my own experience I know that just putting 28 students in a class room does not lead to a structured discussion particularly well. Today the same holds when introducing wiki technology in a class room. The technology alone does not make students forget their lifelong training of not modifying each other's work and it doesn't help them forget the need for credits. Actually, sharing information and knowledge has been a tough nut to crack for enterprises since the dawn of knowledge management and the introduction of wiki technology doesn't change this. With the introduction of a new technology comes the responsibility to solve the deployment issues just as well as the technical issues. Just stating that wikis work on The Internet is not enough for successful deployment in more controlled environments like class rooms and enterprises.

ESSENCE OF GOOD WIKI CONTENT

The first thing to decide is: is wiki the right tool for the job at hand? Make sure you don't use it only because it is hot, but because this hammer fits the nail. Is the content quality you need achievable within a wiki environment? Even if you have a closed user community for your wiki: anybody can edit anything in a wiki. So announcements from the board of directors on a wiki may not be a good idea. Sure you can see who edited what and retrace the changes, but that is beside the point. Information that is published on a wiki should require editing by authors unknown prior to publication. That is the essence of good wiki content.

WIKI SPIRIT

Do you have requirements for completeness, consistency or timeliness that can be met within the freedom of the wiki spirit? People often consider only the authors of the wiki as end users, but of course there are also people who need the information that is published. From intranet research it is known that a source that does not contain all the information needed is disregarded in the future. To the end user the cup is not half full, it is completely empty. And rightly so: would you keep using a site to look up information if half of the products you sell just are not there? It is even worse if the information is untrustworthy. You cannot rely on the correctness. The decisions you take will cost your company money. The communications you send out to your customer will shape your company's image. This information is very valuable so you need to make sure that the decisions that you base on it match the information quality.

COMMON GOAL

Do you have a shared content topic or a shared goal for your collaboration purpose? People will only start publishing if they see a common goal. With Wikipedia this is the goal of a free online encyclopedia. A goal that is large enough to attract people, but the individual participation can be as small as the author wants: there are clear

boundaries that are induced by the metaphor of the encyclopedia. Wiki is not a synonym for an encyclopedia. Actually, an encyclopedia of everything your company knows is not particularly interesting. This is returning to the idea of externalizing all knowledge available, a phase in the KM practice that has proven to be unsuccessful in the last decade or so. You need a more focused and challenging goal. For a consultancy firm this could be an overview of who is working with which customer. Any consultant can include as much information as they want on the project he or she is working on. And the information others publish is bound to be of interest to the authors as well.

CONTENT MANAGEMENT PROCESS

How about the process requirements? Within a wiki it is hard to enforce a predefined formal workflow, so if your business requires it e.g. because you are ISO certified or need comply with SOX, HIPAA, BASEL II, or other compliancy legislation then wiki is not the correct tool.

If knowledge is specialized so much that only one person knows the ins and outs, than wiki is not the right solution since wiki is about collaborating with multiple authors on the same content. Sometimes people introduce wikis because any user is also an editor automatically, but this is fundamentally different from any user can edit anything which is the wiki way of working. Other tools may have a better fit in this case. A companywide blog comes to mind.

THE CULTURAL THING

Your organization needs to have an open culture towards knowledge sharing. Collaboration needs to be appreciated and rewarded. Often on is preached, but the financial structure does not provide a backup. If you have your own financial targets to meet, then it is not in your interest to 'share' customers with your colleagues.

Some enterprises core business is about being right. This is especially so when split second decisions are all in a day's work. This always is reflected in the culture amongst the employees: if being right is core, then being wrong is not accepted. And not knowing everything or insecurity is not freely communicated. A wiki being thrown into this company will lead to publications that have been worked into perfection before ever reaching the broader community.

Editing material of another author without prior notice is often perceived as criticism. So a wiki needs an environment in which people feel save to criticize another's work. Companies that are very hierarchically organized may hinder free editing of each other's text.

Ok, so you took the first hurdle and decided wiki is indeed the right tool for the job at hand. Your project meets all the criteria. Now, how do you go about deployment of your wiki?...to be continued...