



Corporate Collaboration with Wikis

Overview

While Wikipedia has garnered headlines and generated tremendous mainstream awareness of wiki technology, wikis may have their greatest impact within corporations. Unlike previous knowledge management and collaboration tools, wiki provide an easy to use, flexible tool that can enhance existing workflow and processes, rather than requiring re-engineering. As such, wikis present an opportunity to revolutionize collaboration within a company much as email has revolutionized communications.

Wikipedia defines a wiki as “Computer software that allows users to easily edit, create, and link web pages... a defining characteristic of wiki technology is the ease with which pages can be created and updated.” This broad functionality allows wiki users to create and utilize wikis for nearly any purpose.

Within a corporation, wikis may be used for knowledge management, document management, project management, documentation and more. Unlike most previous collaboration tools, wikis are simple enough to use without special training or a large degree of tech-savviness.

Why wikis?

Wikis have three key characteristics that make them ideal for corporate collaboration:

- Wikis are inherently collaborative
- Wikis are extremely flexible
- Wikis are easy to adopt and use

While previous technologies have had one or more of these characteristics, none combined all three in a single simple package. Let's look at some of the collaboration tools you might find in a typical company.

Intranets

Intranets provide incredible flexibility, but fail in terms of collaboration and ease of use. Intranets operate on the standard Web publishing model, which means that only a limited number of administrators have the power to make changes. This makes usage difficult and collaboration awkward, especially for the general user, who cannot create or edit content on their own.

Knowledge Management Software

Specialized knowledge management software such as Microsoft SharePoint provides a means of collaboration, but falls short on flexibility and ease-of-use. Tools like SharePoint are designed from the ground up for file and project management. The problem is that their very specificity makes them difficult to modify or use in real-world situations.

Email

Email is probably the most important and widely used form of collaboration technology today, though most don't think of it as such. Email is extremely easy to adopt and use, and lends itself very well to certain types of collaboration. When a limited number of people are attempting to collaborate asynchronously, email is usually the best solution. However, email is too ad hoc and informal to serve the long-term purposes of collaboration.

Wikis

Wikis address the shortcomings of previous collaboration tools and provide complementary functionality.

Like email, wikis are extremely easy to use. As Wikipedia has demonstrated, anyone can use a wiki without any special instruction or training. This comes in handy with a company, especially for informal collaboration, where limited time and resources preclude a formal training program.

Like intranets, wikis are extremely flexible. Nearly anything one can do on a Web page, one can do on a wiki page. It is this flexibility that distinguishes wikis from less flexible collaboration tools such as knowledge management software. Wikis may be used for anything from planning a departmental pub night to documenting a sensitive M&A transaction.

Unlike intranets however, wikis allow any authorized user to collaborate on creating and editing information. This frictionless collaboration increases the likelihood that the wiki will be used and maintained.

Wikis on Demand

Once you've made the decision to use wikis within your company, you must decide whether to run your own instance of wiki software or choose a hosted, on-demand provider.

While there are certainly many viable choices in wiki software that your organization may run in its datacenter, on-demand wikis are the better choice for the majority of users and uses.

Your team can start using a hosted solution immediately, without waiting for your IT department to set-up, test, and have to continue to maintain.

Conclusion

Wikis represent a strong solution for enterprise collaboration. Their flexibility and ease of use make it easy to take a bottom-up approach in which your users can start small and add incrementally and steadily to their wiki usage. You can enhance, rather than re-engineer, your existing workflow and processes.

Better yet, rather than installing and managing wiki software, you can achieve greater reliability and performance by choosing the right on-demand vendor.

Whether you're trying to manage project, share knowledge, or simply document how your business works, wikis offer a collaboration solution that people will actually use.