

## How Wikis Enable Enterprise Collaboration

White Paper

## Overview

While Wikipedia has garnered headlines and generated tremendous mainstream awareness of wiki technology, wikis may have their greatest impact within the enterprise. Unlike previous knowledge management and collaboration tools, wikis 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 the enterprise 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, ranging from writing a collective online encyclopedia to building personal Web pages.

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

Small wonder that enterprises are rapidly adopting wikis as part of their standard business processes. 33% of enterprises are already using wikis and another 32% plan to do so within 2 years (Economist Intelligence Unit survey, January 2007).

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## Why Wikis?

Wikis have three key characteristics that make them ideal for enterprise 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 the typical enterprise.

### **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.

Intranets indeed have their place as publishing platforms for official information, but they are poor collaboration tools.

### **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. As one knowledge management specialist Natalie Laderas-Kilkenny puts it, "Like most Microsoft tools it works in theory - the theory that all human beings act and interact with tools in the same darn way." Rather than adapting to your workflow, you have to adapt your organization to the software's operating principles.

There are certainly cases in which highly structured knowledge management is appropriate, such as running clinical trials of a new drug, or the use of CVS for software development, but the majority of real-world enterprise uses tend to be ad hoc and informal, and therefore require a more flexible approach.

### **File Sharing**

Another popular approach to collaboration is file-sharing, also known as the "forest of folders." File sharing is extremely easy— users simply drag and drop documents from place to place—but provides little in the way of collaboration or flexibility. In practice, the main benefits are to reduce the usage of file attachments in emails (see below), and to gather related documents in a single folder.

Once a particular document has been finalized, placing it within a hierarchical file structure makes sense, but when collaborating on living documents, file sharing performs poorly.

### **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.

While email is permanent (if not deleted), it is a poor medium for storing information. Only the recipients have access to it, and it is generally disorganized and unsearchable. Yet because email is a critical part of our professional lives, it becomes the collaboration tool of first and last resort.

## **Wikis**

Wikis address the shortcomings of previous collaboration tools and provide complementary functionality. Indeed, their very flexibility allows them to help “glue” various tools and platforms together.

Like email and file-sharing, 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 within the enterprise, 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 and file sharing. Wikis may be used for anything from planning a departmental pub night to documenting a sensitive M&A transaction.

You can even use a wiki to document the tribal knowledge of how to best use your other collaboration solutions. For example, your wiki might list the contact information for your intranet administrators, contain documentation on how your particular organization uses SharePoint, describe the hierarchy of your file structure (with direct links to key files), and provide guidelines on how to use email.

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 enterprise, 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 (including a number of free, open-source solutions), on-demand wikis are the better choice for the majority of users and uses.

As we have seen, one of the keys to why wikis achieve success in the enterprise is their ease of adoption and use. Low barriers to entry will help encourage your users to experiment with wikis and ease of use encourages them to keep exploring new uses for the wiki. This incremental approach allows organizations to adopt wiki technology informally and from the bottom up, rather than requiring a major top-down effort to re-engineer the enterprise.

Introducing a new software package into the datacenter generally rules out the informal, bottom-up approach. Instead, it is necessary to trigger your organization's standard procurement and review process. Rather than being up and running in a matter of minutes, it may take weeks or even months to obtain the necessary approvals and resources from corporate IT (assuming that your request is approved in the first place). By the time you're done, the original reason for introducing the wiki might have disappeared.

By contrast, your team can start using a hosted wiki solution immediately, without waiting for your IT department.

Even the standard arguments for hosting in-house—security and reliability—have been addressed by on-demand vendors like PBworks. Hosted wikis provide high-grade

encryption, redundant data replication, and full access controls. Additionally, because on-demand vendors focus solely on wiki hosting, rather than treating it as a single project within the IT portfolio, they generally deliver better performance and reliability. PBworks delivers 99.9% uptime to its millions of users, including 1/3 of the Fortune 500 and 24 out of 25 of America's top law firms.

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## 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 projects, share knowledge, or simply document how your business works, wikis offer a collaboration solution that people will actually use.

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## About PBworks

PBworks is the world's leading provider of hosted collaboration solutions. Leading companies and organizations like FedEx, Bracewell & Giuliani, and the FDA choose PBworks to collaborate with employees, customers, partners, and vendors. We host over 800,000 workspaces, serve millions of users per month, and 94% of users would recommend PBworks to a friend. Over 50,000 businesses have chosen PBworks to implement knowledge management, extranets, project management, and a host of other business processes and workflows. PBworks' investors include Mohr Davidow Ventures, Seraph Group, Sippl Investments, and Ron Conway.

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