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Wikis: Taking Content Collaboration to the Next Level

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Wikis offer individuals and teams Web 2.0–style collaborative work environments for easy and quick content authoring, sharing, publication, and feedback capture. According to IDC's 1Q07 AppStats survey, nearly a quarter of the 258 U.S. respondents reported that wikis are already in use at their organizations.

The following questions were posed by Socialtext to Mark Levitt, program vice president of IDC's Collaborative Computing and the Enterprise Workplace research, on behalf of Socialtext's customers.

Q. What are wikis?

- A. Wikis are Web sites whose pages contain content that is quickly and easily created and edited by groups of people. Wikis emerged to address the difficulty people face in coordinating teams and projects involving content collaboration.

Before wikis emerged, team workspaces were the primary places where structured content collaboration occurred. However, these tools continue to face obstacles to adoption due to a tendency to focus on providing rich functionality for power users instead of ease of use required for wide adoption. In addition, a per-user licensing model for most team workspace products has limited participation to a select few teams. Wikis provide a similar type of content collaboration but in an easier-to-use and less costly package that is therefore more readily adoptable by a wider audience.

Q. What business benefits can wikis provide?

- A. By encouraging broad participation in content collaboration, wikis do an effective job of tapping into the collective knowledge, insights, and creativity of communities of people both inside and outside an organization. The key benefit of this type of "crowd-sourcing" process is generally faster creation of higher-quality content. Information created in this manner tends to be more insightful and relevant than information created by fewer people, either an individual or a small team.

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia is a great example of a wiki at work. Although most people visit Wikipedia to find information, others participate by voluntarily sharing their knowledge in editing or creating articles in Wikipedia.

This highly successful example of a public wiki providing Web users with a valuable knowledge base can serve as a proof of concept that is transferable to content collaboration in a business context. For example, a company developing products can use a wiki to enable its engineers and its marketing, sales, and customer care workers to create a description of the ideal product or to discuss the lessons learned from older products. By inviting current or prospective customers to participate, a company can leverage a broader community's insights and experiences.

When wikis are used internally, they can provide a better place for people to share and find information. For example, wikis can be used for managing a project. Most project management applications are designed for individuals, and their biggest constraint is that groups of people find it difficult to share the latest information and to coordinate project activities. Project leaders often end up emailing the project spreadsheet to the project team. In between these manual updates, members of the team have little visibility into what is happening. By contrast, wikis can help manage projects by encouraging people to go to one place to share their ideas, comment on other people's ideas, and correct content if they believe something is incorrect. That way, the information in the wiki is the best possible real-time representation of the collective knowledge of the group.

Another key benefit is that wikis provide a place to find and access information faster and easier. For typical workers, information resides in many different places, and often they don't have a universal search tool that will search everywhere for the information needed. A wiki can help make it easier for people to review information and edit it, but it can certainly be a place where information can reside, too. When people start thinking about the wiki as being a primary repository for information relevant to a particular project, a particular group, or an organization, they'll find that information more readily.

Q. How are wikis being used by companies today?

A. We see wikis being used in many different industries, including manufacturing, financial services, and media. In many companies wherever there are information workers — people who create and manage information as part of their core responsibilities — wikis are being used to address the need for better creation and management of information involving teams of people from one or more organizations.

Ad agencies, for example, go through numerous steps to work with a client to create and deliver an ad campaign. These steps include identifying who should be involved; determining what specific deliverables are required and when; and creating, reviewing, and approving the ad content itself. For many years, these activities have been handled by phone, email, and in-person meetings. To provide more structure for and richer participation from workers and clients located in different places, some agencies use project or team workspaces. We are seeing ad agencies choosing wikis for ad campaign content collaboration. This is happening for two primary reasons. First, using a wiki or workspace addresses the fact that people are tired of the ping-pong type of information exchanges they get from voicemail and email. Second, wikis address the need to accommodate people on the team who may not be technologically savvy and who wouldn't participate if asked to use a tool that was complicated or intimidating.

We also are seeing wikis used in creating corporate content that is published on internal portals (aka intranets). Instead of relying on one person to create and update content with input from others via phone or email, wikis are being used because they enable anyone who sees that information is incorrect, incomplete, or out of date to change it, and everyone benefits with better, more up-to-date information. Wikis help to decentralize the responsibility for creating and managing content, and that better reflects the model of how many organizations prefer to work.

In various types of organizations, IT departments have embraced wikis to manage PC, server, network, and application deployments and upgrades. The decentralized way that wikis enable content updates fits well with the often decentralized way IT departments operate, involving staff in different locations completing tasks that are part of a broader, enterprisewide initiative. Providing access to wikis enables IT departments to easily capture the status of deployments or upgrades, as well as share best practices that cut time and other costs in the future.

Q. What are key features of best-of-breed wikis?

A. Ease of use is the number one feature of wikis, because there are other tools out there that support content collaboration. The primary reason why wikis are being adopted is that they make it incredibly easy for someone not only to passively view information but also to take an active role in editing information.

A second key feature of wikis is integration with other tools such as email. If people don't have or want access to the wiki directly, they should still be able to email content into the wiki to be available for other people to view and edit. Notifying people either via email or instant messaging or with an RSS feed when new content is posted or changes have been made is important to keeping people up to date and to monitoring wiki activity. In addition, wikis should support integration with corporate directories. People shouldn't have to enter 50, 100, or 1,000 people's names and email addresses before inviting them to participate in a wiki. People should be able to tap this information that already exists in the corporate directory.

A third key feature is the ability to view the information in a wiki in different ways. A current popular model for viewing content is a Web log, or blog. A blog is different from a wiki because, instead of having group ownership of content where anyone posts and edits content, one person typically acts as the owner of the blog and can post content on which other people can comment. Combining the wiki approach with blogs can combine the best of both worlds. There can be subject-matter experts for certain topics, and they can have a blog integrated with and searchable from within the wiki space. This alleviates the need to decide whether to implement a blog or a wiki. In addition, the same content may be viewable in chronological format of a blog or in the latest version format of a wiki page depending on the viewer's preference.

Q. What does IDC recommend to companies considering wikis for their enterprises?

A. Companies should look for business processes focused on content collaboration where wikis can make a real difference in how information is created and shared. Wikis should be viewed by both line-of-business and IT workers as a part of their companies' enterprise information infrastructures. Whether the wiki is sold as a standalone piece of software, a hosted service, or an appliance, it needs to be seen and treated as an extension of corporate email, directories, and other content platforms and applications.

In choosing a wiki, companies need to match their needs with product features. They need to ask themselves the following questions: What are the types of information sharing, content collaboration, and coordination that our workers require? Will a standalone wiki product or embedded wiki functionality best address those needs? Will software, an appliance, or hosted software as a service provide the most cost-effective solution for our workers and IT staff? Answering these questions will help organizations select a wiki that can take content collaboration to the next level.

ABOUT THIS ANALYST

Mark Levitt is responsible for driving IDC's collaborative applications research, which includes integrated collaborative environments (ICEs), team collaboration, conferencing, enterprise instant messaging, unified messaging and communications, and email applications software and hosted services, as well as email usage and spam volumes.

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