



Your Wiki Isn't Wikipedia:

How to Use It for Technical Communication

BY STEWART MADER

What Is a Wiki?

A wiki is a website that can be edited right in a web browser. On the Internet, the most well-known example of a wiki is Wikipedia, but wikis are quickly growing in popularity and use inside organizations. The latter is the focus of this article.

Your Wiki vs. Wikipedia: Differences in Quality, Accuracy, and Community

On Wikipedia, the goal is to attract as many people as possible to contribute information about topics with which they're knowledgeable. As a result, the site has no restriction on what content a person can and can't see. Anyone can create an account to edit pages, and sometimes strong conflicts can break out between people who have differing opinions on topics.

This can lead to employees becoming concerned about all wikis being a free-wheeling, potentially anarchic mess. People look at Wikipedia and think they don't want that within their organization. But wiki use inside an organization and Wikipedia are two completely separate worlds.

Inside an organization, the audience is much more stable and easily identified; it usually consists of employees, business partners, and, in some cases, customers. Therefore, the need to have a wide-open, publicly accessible site to attract users isn't necessary. The more important considerations inside an organization are: interoperability with other business tools; ability to organize content by department, team, or project; and the ability to assign read-and-edit permissions to the appropriate content for each person.

Breakdown Barriers to Collaboration

Wikis give teams the opportunity to aggregate and organize their work in a centrally accessible place. They can choose to keep certain information private and

accessible only to team members (and they should, when necessary).

More importantly, they can keep some pages in their wiki space accessible to the larger organization to share information they want others to have access to. This allows someone to find information they need about a project or service without sending you an email (thus helping control inbox overflow) or calling a meeting (which costs too much time relative to the value it provides).

Project Management

A wiki is ideal for managing projects, such as building documentation, because it provides a central hub to:

- Organize everything in one place so people can see an entire project.
- Streamline workflow and reduce reliance on email and documents that can easily get lost and confused with older versions.
- Inform everyone about the progress of the project, so people don't have to worry about whether it is on schedule.
- Involve everyone. This speeds up the overall process because it's easier to incorporate feedback in the flow instead of after the fact.

In all types of businesses, there are plenty of documents that need to be delivered as finished, polished products. Product brochures, white papers, data sheets, product manuals, and support documentation are several examples. The challenge is in gathering the right content from the right people in an efficient and streamlined manner.

A wiki is the ideal platform for gathering this information. A team of people can use a wiki workspace to draft the content, make revisions, and produce a high-quality finished product that incorporates a wide range of input, with minimal email and less time spent in


lengthy meetings. This is where a wiki really demonstrates its value. Instead of trying to keep up with an endless trail of email and attachments, people can simply subscribe to receive updates from the wiki via RSS or email, and visit wiki pages when they need to add information, review content, or edit a page.

As people spend time in the wiki, editing pages and carrying on threaded discussions about the content they're working on, the need for lengthy review meetings diminishes, and meetings become shorter and more focused on just the topics or areas where it becomes clear that in-person discussion is needed.

When it's time to make these available to customers, analysts, the media, etc., content can easily be exported from the wiki in traditional formats such as Word documents and PDF files, and some wiki tools even enable content to be exported as XML, which can then be used in page layout programs like Adobe InDesign and Quark to produce printed documents that match an organization's branding and style guide.

Wikipatterns

I wrote my latest book, *Wikipatterns*, using a wiki. To keep the content private, I gave only the editors and production staff at my publisher access to the wiki space. Throughout the process, the editors could see my progress on chapters, offer feedback as I finished the draft of each chapter, and easily export the finished content as XML for print production.

These are just a few examples of how wiki use can improve everyday work processes, and you'll soon discover that a wiki is one of the most versatile tools you can use. Once your employees understand the benefits of using a wiki, they'll wonder how they got along without it. 

Stewart Mader (smader@gmail.com) is a noted wiki consultant and author. Visit his blog, Grow Your Wiki (www.ikiw.org), for more information on wiki uses, adoption tips, and his consulting services and workshops.