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From forgotten intranet to successful wiki

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From Forgotten Intranet to Successful Wiki: Best Practices for Implementing an Academic Library Staff Wiki

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Abstract

Communication within an academic library can be challenging. The collective nature of wikis and their ability to allow multiple people to edit them have made wikis an ideal technology to help address communication issues within organizations. A successful wiki implementation can help to improve communication issues, but only if staff adopt the new technology.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) libraries implemented an internal staff wiki in 2007 to replace the staff intranet. Information routinely stored on the wiki includes meeting minutes and committee work, policies and procedures and training materials. This paper illustrates the implementation process by providing an overview of the transition with a focus on what went right and what pitfalls were encountered. Best practices will be presented to illustrate how to successfully implement a wiki that library staff willingly reference and edit, concluding with recommendations for maintaining the wiki after implementation.

Introduction

The UNLV University Libraries is a large academic library with a main library and three branches. The libraries served a student population of 29,069 during the Fall 2009 semester, seventy-eight percent of which were undergraduates. There were 110 Libraries staff members in 2009, not including student workers or part-time employees. Communication can be challenging with such a large staff. In 2005, a Staff Website Working Group was formed to create an intranet to provide a new communication channel in order to make the exchange of information easier. The result was a password-protected set of web pages stored on the Libraries' web server. Over the years this group continued to enhance the site based on feedback from employees, but staff found that it was not as effective as everyone desired, especially because only certain people could edit information on it.

In the mid 2000's, wiki technology started to become popular. Wikis are groups of web pages interconnected through links and allow "any authorized user to edit content and add new pages, using nothing more than a web browser and an HTML form" (Chawner and Lewis 2004). Wikis keep track of the history of the page, allowing contributors to compare versions and also to revert back to previous instances of the page if needed. Wikis are often used for collaborative purposes because they are so easy to use and allow multiple people to edit them.

Since many wikis were freely available as remotely hosted solutions, several groups in the library began to experiment using them. The Libraries Technology Division, the Web Management Committee, and individual liaison librarians all created wikis and were spreading the word throughout the Libraries about the benefits of using them. The Staff Website Working Group began to realize that a wiki had features that might eliminate some of the problems with the current intranet and in 2007 started to create buy-in for moving the intranet to a locally hosted wiki.

Wikis and Libraries

The collaborative nature of wikis made them an ideal fit for a staff intranet used by librarians who needed to share and manage information. Although many libraries have implemented wikis, literature regarding best practice implementations in libraries is limited. Some of the available literature provides an overview of wiki use within libraries. For instance, Samuel Kai-Wah Chu's article *Using Wikis in Academic Libraries*, explored the use of wikis at 60 university libraries. He found that the most popular reason cited for the use of wikis was to improve the sharing of information between librarians (Kai-Wah Chu 2009, 172). Matthew Bejune (2007) also investigated the use of wikis in libraries. He found that 31.4% of the time wikis were used for collaboration among library staff (Bejune 2007, 33).

Another aspect of wikis covered in the literature is their use for knowledge management. Administration is often looking for ways to gather information that is not formally stored anywhere except in the knowledge of an individual staff member. Turnover of staff and other personnel issues can mean that institutional knowledge is lost (Greenfield, 2007, 44). Wikis enable those with no technical knowledge of web page creation to produce, organize and share content via the internet (Glogowski and Steiner 2008, 88). Anyone can become a potential creator with a wiki (Clark and Mason 2008, 129). When policies and procedures and training information are shared via a wiki, staff within and outside of the department can understand how their work affects the organization, which can be helpful for management decisions and analyzing work flow.

A third aspect of literature often covered relates to the wiki implementation process in a single library. Although some of the experiences pertain only to the individual library, by reading several of these articles universal themes and best practices begin to emerge. Georgia State University librarians shared the many uses they have for wikis, but also commented on the lessons they learned during implementation and what they would do differently (Glogowski and Steiner 2008). The process of implementing a hosted wiki was shared by librarians at Antioch University, who also provided ideas and suggestions to make the implementation process easier (Clark and Mason 2008).

Wiki Implementation at the UNLV Libraries

Libraries sometimes try to use technology to solve problems. However, technology alone cannot overcome most problems. As new technologies are rolled out, it is important to remember who the users of the technology will be and include them during all phases of the implementation. This lesson and many more were learned as the UNLV libraries began transitioning its intranet to a staff wiki. Although some of the experiences are unique to our institution, by reflecting upon our experiences and by examining library literature, more universally applicable best practices for wiki implementation were able to be extracted.

To get staff involved in the potential move to a staff wiki a presentation was given entitled *Wild World of Wikis*. This presentation provided an overview of wikis and why a wiki would be a good fit for the library. Touted benefits included the ability to limit the wiki to internal staff use, the capability for everyone on staff to author content, the addition of tools to make collaboration easier, the capacity to keep the look and feel of the old intranet, and the ability to track the history of changes on the site. The overview did not simply focus on the good points of a wiki, but it also included potential drawbacks and how the Libraries could avoid such pitfalls. Time commitment, organizational issues, staleness, and wiki vandalism were all discussed as potential problems. This informational meeting helped to inform libraries staff and allowed them to voice their concerns and needs. Enough buy-in resulted from the meeting to move forward with the conversion of the intranet to a staff wiki.

The initial decisions about the new wiki were made by the Staff Website Working Group, although they did get some guidance from library staff through feedback gathered from the initial all staff meeting, from surveys, and also from collaboration with the Libraries Technologies unit. The group decided that the wiki should be a locally hosted solution, downloaded onto UNLV library servers to provide more security for the content stored on the wiki and to lessen the chance of having down time due to technical problems on

someone else's server. The software chosen was *MediaWiki*, the same software package used to run Wikipedia. Because the out of the box view would not allow a look similar to our current intranet, we created a skin using the vbGORE software. The results were a wiki that included an A-Z list on the front page, highlighting certain categories of information. Content from the intranet that was up-to-date and relevant was moved over to the wiki by the staff website working group, so that users would not have to move their data.

Benefits and Challenges

In August of 2009, UNLV library staff was surveyed about their opinions of the wiki. From the responses it was clear that staff do make use of the wiki, with 82.5% of staff saying they used the wiki for internal communication. In fact e-mail was the only type of internal communication channel that staff preferred to use more than the wiki. The fact that a product that was introduced only two years before had so quickly become part of people's daily lives illustrates the success of the wiki.

Staff have now become accustomed to checking the wiki to find information, and cited its usefulness for finding committee meeting minutes, policy information, and departmental information. The wiki has also become a place for archiving documents used in daily operations of the Libraries. Committee chairs and administrators can be frequently heard saying, "you can find that document on the wiki," or "check the wiki for more information," since so much organizational information is now stored there.

While the wiki has become part of the work-flow for most staff, there are still challenges that still need to be addressed. One of the primary obstacles is the belief that it is difficult to post information on the wiki. A WYSIWG (What You See is What You Get) editor was added to the wiki about a year after implementation to make contributing content easier. The WYSIWG editor has helped people to get content online, but uploading and downloading documents is still sometimes a challenge. A more intuitive interface can increase the amount of people contributing content. Because of these barriers, library staff use the wiki more often to view information than to post to it. Another complaint with UNLV Libraries wiki implementation is that remote access to the wiki is only available to those people who have set up a virtual private network to connect with the library web site, which most staff have not done. Otherwise the wiki is only available to staff computers inside of the Libraries internet protocol (IP) address range.

Another problematic area stems from the fact that wikis have no built in organizational structure. Without an inherent structure, it is easy for wikis to become disorganized and make it difficult to find needed information. The A-Z style of the old intranet was used to organize the new wiki, with new categories being added to the A-Z list as needed. This type of arrangement has some benefits, by placing what is considered to be the most important information all on the home page of the wiki. However, this style of information architecture can also be overwhelming to the novice wiki user because there is no emphasis on any one pathway and it can also bury information not considered important enough to be placed on the A-Z list.

Although the organization has continued to champion the wiki as a place where people should automatically look for information, there is still a number of staff who are resistant to using it. Often they will e-mail or call to obtain information which is already available on the wiki. Usually they are simply rerouted back to the wiki, but this adds to people's work load and the time it takes to find the information. Compounding this problem is the fact that some departments utilize the wiki more than others. So people cannot always anticipate what information will be available and what will not. Those departments and committees that have made the largest amount of contributions to the wiki seem to also reap the most rewards from it.

Best Practices

Through the experiences at the UNLV Libraries and from a review of the literature, best practices were discovered. Below are 10 tips for a successful wiki deployment.

Evaluate Your Intranet

Before you do anything else, evaluate what is missing in your current intranet. Determine which features of a wiki can overcome the problems of the intranet. It is a good idea to generate a “wish” list of criteria for the wiki. Define and document clear needs and justification for the change.

Choose Your Wiki Editor Wisely

The choice of a wiki editor is very important. Some wiki editors are more technical in nature and require the use of a wiki language, which is an easier version of HTML. If most of the staff that will be using the wiki are not technically savvy, try to choose a wiki that uses a WYSIWYG editor. By keeping the editor simple, users will find the wiki easy to use and thus increase their contributions.

Create a Wiki Structure and Pre-Populate Content

Create guidelines and templates for common content types. Produce a basic menu to guide users to the information they need. Designate one primary staff member to answer questions and fix problems as they arise. Avoid too many rules because you want to establish a culture of trust. Enlist in a core group of people to be responsible for adding content, at least until the wiki is more fully adopted in the organization. Create different spaces on the wiki: committee work, departmental, project, and allow users to create their own areas as needed.

Carefully Consider Hosted vs. Locally-Installed Wiki Solutions

Locally-installed wikis offer more security and the ability to customize look and feel, but require some local expertise for configuration. Hosted solutions do not require up-front expertise, but have some drawbacks. Content will be stored on the hosted solutions server and if they go out of business or have a technical malfunction you could lose all of the information stored on the wiki. Security options may also be less customizable and it may not be possible to exclude people outside of your organization from seeing your wiki. Free hosted solutions also may require the display of advertisements on the wiki.

Evaluate Potential Access Issues

How easy is it for staff to get to the wiki? If your wiki is behind a firewall, teach your users how to get there. Train users to understand that what is accessible on campus may not be as easy to get to from off-campus. If needed alert them to any passwords that they might need to access the wiki from home or have a session on how to use virtual private networking (VPN) if that is how off-campus access is provided. Provide clear instructions on how to access the wiki, from on-site to off-site.

Plan for Gradual not Abrupt Change

Wikis can be implemented quickly, but it is important to build some extra time into the process to allow staff to adjust to the change. Creating time for training, communication, and evaluation helps to get people comfortable with the idea of change and explains how their work processes might change. Abrupt change often brings upheaval to the organization, while a slower, more intentional implementation of a wiki can avoid unnecessary staff stress.

Involve Staff in the Change

Often implementation of technologies fails not because of problems with the technology, but because of the resistance to change within the organization. To combat this problem it is important to create buy-in for the wiki early on and involve the staff at all phases of the project. At the beginning of the project staff should have a chance to become familiar with the concept of a wiki and to be involved in providing ideas and feedback. Maintaining communication during the implementation phase of the wiki, keeps staff in the loop with time lines for deployment so they will not feel like the implementation is being forced upon them. It also keeps people updated if deviations from the initial plan have to be made. Continuing communication after deployment helps to ease people into using the new wiki and can encourage collaboration and community building. Even after the wiki has been in place for awhile it is important to keep staff involved by continuing to encourage their use of the wiki for both retrieving and posting documents.

Training

Training is an important piece of the implementation process. Although some wikis are easy to understand and use, it is still important to have initial training sessions to get people familiar with the technology. Creating an alternate wiki for practice and training allows staff to experiment without the fear that they are going to damage the official wiki. Since people often will only post to the wiki occasionally, having online instructions available for routine wiki functions, such as uploading a file, is necessary. Once the initial implementation has been completed, does not mean the need for training stops. Staff will need continued instruction for new features of the wiki and many will need refresher sessions for information that they forgot from earlier training. New staff members will also need to be trained to use the wiki and instructed on its importance as a communication tool within the organization.

Evaluate, Reevaluate, and Make Needed Changes

Once the wiki has been implemented provide time for staff to experiment with and evaluate it. Often features you think will work well can end up causing problems. Address concerns by fixing issues that have a solution and by providing training to work around problems that cannot be changed. To give staff a voice to report problems and provide suggestions make sure to have a contact person in place after wiki implementation. Keep up-to-date with advances to the wiki and roll out new versions when needed. Use of the wiki will change over time and new features and updates should continually be explored.

Try to Keep the Momentum Going

Once implementation is complete it is important to continue to champion the use of the wiki. Following the “build it and they will come mentality” will often lead to a stagnant wiki that is not very useful. After implementation it is important that participation is continually encouraged. Getting buy-in from administration and asking that they encourage and model use can be very helpful. As staff get used to checking the wiki for administrative documents, such as leave forms, it helps to get them comfortable with using the wiki and begins to form the habit of looking for documentation on the site. Formalizing the use of the wiki by mandating its use for committee information and meeting minutes can also help to encourage use. As people become accustomed to using the wiki, make sure to acknowledge their contributions and highlight to the organization any unique or valuable uses of the wiki.

Conclusions

Wikis can be an effective communication tool for libraries because they are flexible and simple to use. Like many libraries the University Libraries has embraced the collaborative nature of wikis. It has not been without trial and error, but after taking some time to gain acceptance the staff wiki has become an indispensable tool for the Libraries.

Although many other libraries have written about wikis, there is little information in the literature that distills the more universal issues that could impact any library that wants to implement a wiki. By uncovering the themes present throughout the literature and turning them into best practice, other libraries who have just begun to embark on wiki implementation can avoid some of the challenges that are likely to occur. Using best practices when implementing a wiki within an academic library will increase the success rate of staff adoption and hopefully shorten the path to a successful wiki implementation.

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