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No Rest for the Wiki

The online tools for building collective info banks are making deeper inroads in corporations and rewriting the rules of collaboration

by [Rachael King](#)

In late 2005, Intel engineer Josh Bancroft needed a tool that his colleagues could use to share company information, from historical highlights to progress of internal projects. Inspired by Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia assembled by users around the world, he devised Intelpedia, an internal Web site that draws on the input of employees companywide.

Although it ruffled feathers—some employees don't like being edited by colleagues, especially those further down the org chart—Intelpedia caught on. In a little more than a year, Intelpedia has amassed 5,000 pages of content and garnered 13.5 million page views. "Employees can be frustrated that somebody else edited their work," says Jeff Moriarty, collaboration technical architect of Intel's information technology group. "It's a disruptive capability—it shakes things up."

Welcome to the world of corporate wikis. The sites that make it easy for people to add and edit information have revolutionized encyclopedia creation, evidenced by the growth of Wikipedia (see BusinessWeek.com, 6/7/04, "[Wikis' Winning Ways](#)"). And though they've been used by corporations for a few years, they're making deeper inroads lately and are gradually rewriting the rules of collaboration at companies as varied as Sony ([SNE](#)), Xerox ([XRX](#)), Disney ([DIS](#)), and Microsoft ([MSFT](#)). "If you did a comprehensive survey of Fortune 1,000 companies, you would probably find some sort of wiki in all of them," says Andrew McAfee, a Harvard Business School professor specializing in technology and management operations.

OPEN TO ERROR

Sony's PlayStation team uses a wiki to help keep executives informed about products in various stages of development for the video game console. "The marketing people can get a sense of what's coming their way, as well as the finance and legal people—anyone who needs to know the one-page overview of what's going on," says Ned Lerner, Sony PlayStation's director of tools & technology. And because the company needs to keep information on unreleased products under wraps, the wiki includes tight security features.

Companies use such protections to avoid the pitfalls suffered by Wikipedia, where entries can easily be changed by virtually anyone and are subject to pranks, vandalism, and libel (see BusinessWeek.com, 12/14/05, "[Wikipedia: 'A Work in Progress'](#)"). Just this month, Wikipedia said it would step up efforts to verify contributors' credentials after one frequent contributor lied about being a professor of religion.

A range of enterprise wiki software from Atlassian, Socialtext, CustomerVision, MindTouch, Traction, and others gives companies much-needed security and access control features. In 2004, Sony PlayStation chose Atlassian's Confluence wiki software to help product development teams collaborate with external partners such as video editors,

technical writers, and musicians. In addition, the company carefully monitors access and security for each of those wikis.

RELUCTANT CONTRIBUTORS

Aside from project management, companies use wikis for wide-ranging activities such as tracking industry news, setting meeting agendas, posting corporate policies, and even creating strategy documents. Because there are several freely available open-source software packages like MediaWiki and TWiki, it's easy for employees to start one without even alerting the IT department. TWiki is used by companies such as Motorola ([MOT](#)), Yahoo! ([YHOO](#)), Amazon ([AMZN](#)), Google ([GOOG](#)), and Nokia ([NOK](#)), according to a report by Ann Majchrzak and Christian Wagner created for the Society of Information Management.

Even employees convinced of the usefulness of wikis aren't necessarily comfortable with them, especially when their work may be seen and tinkered with by colleagues from across the company. Some companies let employees take a more passive role, for instance with wikis that track industry news or update employees on quickly changing rules and regulations.

Investment-advisory firm Manning & Napier uses a wiki to track news in specific industries, such as life sciences. For Manning & Napier, the benefits of using a wiki were made plain recently amid the debate over universal health care in states such as California and Massachusetts. The wiki helped alert employees quickly to a trend affecting the fortunes of many hospitals, helping shape the company's investment decisions.

SPEEDY DECISIONS

"One day there were six articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other places all about this topic," says Jeff Herrmann, co-director of research at Manning & Napier. "We might not have seen it visually, and we might not have seen it as clearly without the wiki, because we're all busy and have a lot of things on our minds."

Similarly, Enel North America has begun to track developments in the U.S. energy market to effectively communicate news with the parent company in Italy. Enel ([EN](#)) employs about 56,000 people worldwide and is one of the largest utilities in Europe. It puts a large emphasis on renewable energy. Now instead of collecting news stories in a Word document and e-mailing them to a distribution list, the U.S. subsidiary can post news in a timely manner using wiki software.

"We're able to make decisions quicker," says Ernest Kayinamura, information and communication technology manager at Enel. "The response from business-development managers has been very positive, as this has reduced the amount of time needed for due diligence to close a deal."

REDMOND EXTENDS ITS REACH

Wikis play a more integral role at IBM ([IBM](#)). IBM's WikiCentral, installed about two and a half years ago, has grown to 125,000 users from 10,000 users just a year ago. Given the rising popularity of that tool, it seemed natural to use a wiki last year when IBM wanted to focus on intellectual-property issues.

The company assembled a worldwide community of 50 IBM experts in the fields of law, academia, economics, government, and technology to collaborate on the wiki. The result of that project is a collaboratively written intellectual-property manifesto that also serves as the foundation of IBM's new patent policy.

As employees use wikis internally, the next step for some companies is to create wikis that engage partners and customers. In June, 2006, Microsoft began a wiki for partners who wanted to help with the documentation for Visual Studio, a software development product for computer programmers. That effort has since been moved to Microsoft's main library, which covers more than 500,000 topics.

So far, community content has been added to about 2,000 of those topics, with about 1,000 unique contributors. That effort has helped Microsoft expand into Brazil, because community members created documentation for Visual Studio in Portuguese. "It's allowing us to enter new markets where the market isn't large enough to localize documentation," says Molly Bostic, program manager of developer content for the international team.

TOO COMPLICATED?

Last June, eBay ([EBAY](#)) began its own community wiki project, eBay Wiki, a place where buyers and sellers can share knowledge about all things eBay. "There are lots of online communities, but only ours can boast such a huge diversity of passions, interests, and expertise from antique fans to digital photography, from Spielberg movies to Ford Mustangs," Bill Cobb, president of eBay North America, said in a speech at the eBay Live conference in Las Vegas in June. The site boasts useful articles on topics such as how sellers can get the best shipping rates and how buyers can guard against fraud.

"The big barrier is getting traffic to the wiki and convincing customers to get involved," says Ann Majchrzak, professor of information systems at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. That hurdle hasn't stopped Motorola, HTC, and Deutsche Telekom ([DT](#)) subsidiary T-Mobile from creating customer wikis for certain mobile devices. The idea is not only to create community among users of these mobile devices but also to keep the user guides up-to-date, as people discover new uses for their smartphones and PDAs.

As helpful as wikis may be, much of the software on the market could stand improvement, users say. Google, for instance, uses wikis internally for a broad range of tasks, from storing notes to posting product information. "One of the things I don't like about wikis is that it's like learning a new language," says Jonathan Rochelle, product manager for Google Docs & Spreadsheets. Some vendors are addressing this problem, but Rochelle says many Google employees have instead begun using the company's Docs & Spreadsheets product, which lets groups of users make modifications and track alterations. The product is like a wiki but more intuitive to use.

CULTURE SHOCK

Over time, as wikis begin to get a critical mass of information, they tend to sprawl and become unwieldy. "You need some kind of person who sees the long-term consequences of not organizing," says the Marshall School's Majchrzak. Most often, individual contributors are not the people who will restructure existing content. Instead, that task is left to someone Majchrzak dubs the shaper—an employee who is willing to take time synthesizing information so it's easy to read. Executives need to encourage shapers as much as individual contributors. Otherwise, the wiki can become so unwieldy that nobody will use it, she says.

Others question whether large corporations are ready for wikis. "Most people and most companies don't really have a culture of collaboration and never have had one," says Alan Pelz-Sharpe, principal at CMS Watch, a research firm in Silver Spring, Md. "If you don't have it, all the software in the world won't give you one."

Intel's Moriarty says the tools themselves can be the catalyst for change. Intelpedia, for instance, is bringing people together and slicing through a ton of bureaucracy. "People are working on things independent of what they're told to work on," he adds. "It's connecting people globally." That's the best outcome possible in the wiki world.

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