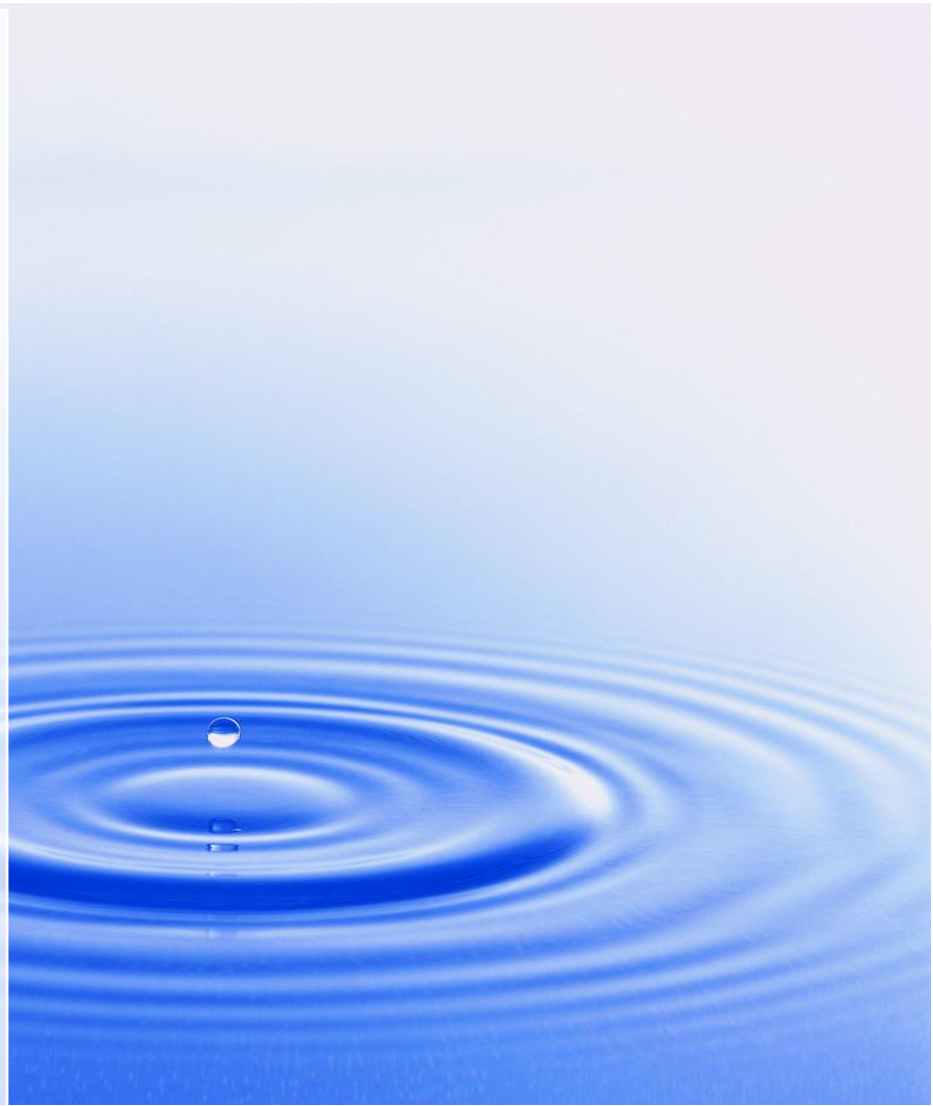


WIKI's do not work

Jan A. Jensen

2007



WIKIs are not for companies – they work well in the open source environment but a corporate use is out of the question, or is it?

Z-Solutions GmbH
Lufingerstrasse 13
8185 Winkel
Switzerland



Why WIKI doesn't work

When talking to managers about concepts like WEB 2.0 or Enterprise 2.0 I am often confronted with comments like "Yes, we tried that but it did not work" or "Our employees do not want to use it" or "We already have a process management team which document all of our internal processes".

So it must be clear to everyone that WIKIs don't work and this will be the shortest knowledge paper I have ever written.

No, fortunately it is not as simple as that. Many corporations have deployed excellent WIKI's providing valuable information to the corporations they serve.

Some companies have actually been seriously surprised about the amount of WIKIs they actually had, but did not know about before they actively went to look for them.

WEB 2.0 technologies are often deployed from the edge of the company and not from the center. Different departments see the value in sharing information but the company as a whole has not yet realized the value.

Another part of the problem is the fact that it is being end-user deployed, and when the end-user leaves or is reassigned their PC running the WIKI is removed or even decommissioned with the resulting loss of knowledge (No one dares to tell IT about the underground WIKI running on that PC).

This causes a number of problems for the organization trying to deploy a WIKI. The big idea behind a WIKI is collaboration, which is defined by Wikipedia as:

Collaboration is a process defined by the recursive interaction of knowledge and mutual learning between two or more people who are working together, in an intellectual endeavor, toward a common goal which is typically creative in nature.

But often all of the focus is on deploying the WIKI and not on the purpose of it. Questions like:

- What are we going to use it for?
- Are we ok with work time being used to author WIKI articles
- How do we manage the content?

Does it take time to collaborate?

Yes, it takes lot of time to collaborate. You will have to get your very best ideas out and put them on paper. You will have to put it on the table (the WIKI). You will most likely have a number of revisions of it before you make it public to others and then you will also have to discuss it with other people including receiving their ideas, feedback and suggestions.

Is it hard work to collaborate?

Yes, it is hard work. You have to put a lot of energy into it and that too is hard. Especially because your normal work does not go away while you are collaborating.

Is it painful?

Yes, it is painful to the ego for me to come up with my very best idea and put it on the table. It is painful when others have a look at it and give feedback (criticize it) which have to be taken into consideration. But it actually make the idea better and kicks off a new dimension of idea development.

Will collaboration result in better and sustainable business results?

Yes, and that is actually why it is worth it, but it should be clear by now that it does not come free of charge.

It must however be clear that no one creates and delivers value all by themselves. It is team work, people working together as a group or as partners. The CEO of a big corporation does not deliver the products or services alone. He is a part of a team.

What you need to know:

Implementing a WIKI is going to be hard work. Not only because of the implementation of the tool itself but because of the change in peoples' heads that have to be accomplished as part of the project.

Encouraging people to pour their knowledge, which many people consider their capital or job guarantee, into an online tool for everyone to see and comment on is difficult. Getting them to receive feedback and improve their idea, text or knowledge can be even more difficult.

Finally, working with a tool like WIKI is very different to what employees' are used to. The flow of information is mainly through e-mail and maybe occasionally through a FAQ in the company Intranet. Using a WIKI is a completely new way and much more interactive than what they might have been used to.

The WIKI is a wonderful tool which can be used to gain almost real-time information about the outside world. Companies are deploying WIKI's with information about what the competition is doing including information about upcoming products,/solutions and rumors about what they have in the pipeline, upcoming legislation that will influence the company, hot trends in their industry gained from industry specific magazines, conferences (presentations made available on WIKI) or personal meetings with clients etc.

The collected information is not made available on the WIKI but also pushed to all relevant employees using RSS Feeds.

What you need to do:

Be clear on the fact that you are about to change the culture from knowledge protection over knowledge sharing to knowledge development – corporate knowledge that is.

Make it clear to the team that knowledge sharing and capturing will be an integrated part of everything the company or department does in the future. Getting a great idea and getting help from someone else whereby turning it into a paradigm shifting idea requires team collaboration.

Teams that collaborate on all levels are generating business value at a much higher level than people cooperating because cooperation is simple a group of people splitting up a certain amount of work, then departing to their workspace and doing the work. No idea's are

developed and no collaboration on how to do things better, faster, cheaper, smarter etc. takes place and no business value is increased.

You need to start small to ensure that you can push the team to performance. Do the following:

1. Define your desired knowledge or content – what would you like to store?
 - a. Write down a description of the type of knowledge you want to work with - whether you are or not right now.
2. Clarify the desired outcome (what is there to gain by capturing this information – value)
 - a. What are the most important outcomes you want to achieve
3. Narrow it down to the two or three highest priority outcomes that you can actually help to improve, reach or realize
4. Gear every decision towards improving those outcomes
5. Be boringly consistent and innovative in the way you do it
6. Revisit often to see if you are on-track

Expand the selection as you get going and the culture starts changing from knowledge protection to knowledge sharing or narrow the selection if you find it difficult to get going. Success is not in the number of values you are able to pursue but in the knowledge sharing.

Keep an eye on who produces knowledge and who doesn't. Those that doesn't should be coached and helped. Don't go with the wrong assumptions and think they are bringing no value. More than once have statements like "Jones over in the other department knows but he keeps it to himself" been made and shows that the knowledge sharing organization has not yet been achieved.

Summary

Going from protecting ones knowledge to sharing it with everyone in a team, department or company can be an awesome experience but it can also be a very exhausting one. Starting small and working on changing the culture towards becoming knowledge sharing instead of focusing on the tool are the first steps to success.

Being consistent while investing the heart blood, sweat and tears necessary in getting it going is the route to success.