By the Time You Read This: Lessons Learned on Using Wikis to Keep Content Current

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Dear ACLEA Conference Attendees,

By the time you read this, I'll be different. Between now and when you look at this report, things will happen that change me, influence me, and make me newer. Unfortunately, the paper version of me will never reflect that. Although, I've waited as long as possible, and included the latest information, research, and articles, there will be newer information by the end of January, when this paper gets distributed.

If only there was a way to write, edit, and publish up-to-the-minute information and have a medium that would allow everybody to read it. If only people had devices that could receive and display text, images, and videos instantly. If only there was some worldwide network that could pass this information around, and the technology to make the whole process simple! If only...

Perhaps someday, we'll find a way.

Sincerely,

The Paper-Based Version of Brian Chick's ACLEA Paper

PS – Updates will continue to be made to this paper, online at http://aclea.left-button.com

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Introduction

While I write this in December 2010, I'm going to look ahead to the distant future: January 2011. I foresee a time when people are going to steer away from paper-based information sharing because it's wasteful and inefficient. By then, I think everybody will have access to a complex world-wide network of information, and be able to view this information from laptop computers, cellular telephones, or a variety of other devices. Lastly, future-humans are going to want their information to be on-demand and up-to-date. Dangerous prophecy, I admit, but I stand by these bold predictions.

All sarcasm aside, the world is changing. In the last 15 years, the Internet has evolved from a fringe technology that some people used to send emails and browse webpages, to a robust tool that enables access to information, commerce, community, and communication in unprecedented quantities. Simultaneously, the devices used to access the Internet have become more accessible, portable, and usable, and the populations comfort level with these technologies has risen as a result. Today, most people use the internet in some capacity several times daily.

This access to technology and information has spawned a generation of students, graduates, and employees who rely on it heavily in their day-to-day life. The "Net-Generation" loosely includes anybody who was born after 1980 and refers to the earliest wave of kids who "grew up" with the Internet in their lives. In the early 1990's, services like Prodigy and AOL allowed kids to start playing,

chatting, researching, and becoming familiar with the World Wide Web. As the Web evolved, so did the folks who were using it most.

Today, the Net-Generation (and the second wave of Net-Geners), see the Internet as a necessity, wants their information on-demand, and above all, it needs to be current. If they can't find it, they'll look somewhere else for it, and you've lost their interest or worse, their business. Net-Generations live online, contribute to digital communities, and develop huge networks of Internet-contacts (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn). They've been empowered by sites like YouTube and Wikipedia to become content producers, not just consumers. This trend has been dubbed "Web 2.0" and the Internet is no longer about delivering information, it's about the communities who use that information, the content they create, and the networks that form around them. While the oldest Net-Geners are just turning 30 years old, the rest of the world has caught on to their content-producing, on-demand lifestyle and has learned to rely on the Internet for instant information, entertainment, or communication.

In short, all the technology exists. The audience is asking for it. Continuing to rely on paper books for reference material is not a sustainable business model. How can you keep up as a content producer? For starters, get your content online. Second, make it accessible through mobile devices. Third, allow real-time editing from a community you trust to keep your content current.

In 2009, Jennifer Flynn (from the Legal Education Society of Alberta) and I gave a talk in Salt Lake City about wikis being an alternative means of content delivery. This session will be a recap, and update, and a look at what lessons were learned since then, and how we can address those moving forward.

The Technology

While Wikipedia (or perhaps WikiLeaks, these days) is probably the most famous wiki, the term can apply to any website where a community of users have the ability to edit the content, add new content, or create new pages. In the context of Legal Education, users with an account can update a policy, re-word a paragraph, or create a link to discuss a particular relevant case. Articles can also link to useful forms and sample, which can be downloaded.

The word “wiki” comes from the Hawaiian word for “fast,” and that it part of the reason that the technology is so useful. If a user comes along and finds that a section needs to be updated, one click allows him/her to change the offending sentences instantly. Changes are made in seconds, and the next person who reads the article sees the proper information (without waiting months or years for the next paper edition of the text).

There are thousands of wikis on the Internet. There are wikis dedicated to certain sports, games, or TV shows. There are wikis dedicated to hobbies, computer programs, and song lyrics. There are multiple Star Wars wikis (one of which is called Wookieepedia), a few devoted to the Hobbit world of J.R.R. Tolkein, and a bunch dedicated to the exposure and discussion of government conspiracies and cover-ups. While any passionate community can make use of this kind of site, there are many businesses that have also instituted wikis as a communication tool (Google, Nokia, CBC).

A wiki can be tweaked to hold any sort of information from text to video, images to downloadable PDFs. Pages can link to other relevant pages, and to external websites. If a user doesn't find the page he's looking for, he can create it, and the community will fill it in over time. The benefits are obvious. First of all, the information has the potential to be up-to-the-minute. For an example, look at YouTube for a something called "Wikipedia: London Bombings." In a five minute video, we see a 24 hours worth of edits to the Wikipedia entry on the July 2005 bombings of various subway stations in London, England. There were literally thousands of edits in a matter of hours, each adding and editing more up-to-date information. There is a similar video for the entry on the Virgina Tech Massacre of April 2007. Both of these videos demonstrate the organic entity that a wiki page can become in the hands of a passionate community.

Other benefits include portability. Legal manuals tend to be heavy books or three-ring binders with hundreds of pages weighing down briefcases and file boxes. The wiki is accessible from any computer with an internet connection (depending on security arrangements). Furthermore, many mobile phones or Blackberries have the ability to browse and search these pages.

Also, these pages can be searched and linked. Instead of shuffling papers, browsing indexes, and cross referencing pages, now it's as simple as a few clicks. It takes a couple seconds to find exactly what you're looking for, and if that page should reference another one, the link is provided straight to it.

Not all Wikis are the Same

As stated above, there are a number of wikis for a variety of functions. Some are maintained by large communities, others by small groups. There are a number of different software solutions that perform wiki functions and many customizable options and features for each one.

Regardless of the wiki, there are certain similarities among them all. It is generally a shared, open, knowledge base, that is open and editable by members of the community. Wikipedia articles are open for edits by anybody in the world, and the community has created a resource that is organic and self-correcting. WikiLeaks takes submissions from different sources and uses a wiki to publish those documents openly. Both of those wikis run a software called MediaWiki, which is a free, open source, community built and community maintained program. There are other wiki software solutions, but it is safe to say that MediaWiki is the most popular.

With all the different options among wikis, comes the ability to customize your installation for your specific purpose. In the Continuing Education World, this can serve many purposes. Wikis can be used as a shared platform for content authoring, as changes are tracked step by step, and each revision attributed to an author. In an office situation, it can be a shared "scratchpad" for your colleagues to make notes, comments, and leave information on relevant projects. Wikis can include templates, charts, images, and links to other pages, both internal and outside the wiki.

In a pilot project (discussed at the 2009 ACLEA Conference in Salt Lake), the Legal Education Society of Alberta decided to move its paper-based practice manuals to a wiki-based format. By providing practice manual content in this way, the community of users could—in theory—update the material more quickly, efficiently, and comprehensively than is possible using the existing model. For the pilot initiative, LESA selected its Alberta Residential Conveyancing Guide ("Guide"). This manual, which is nearly 800 pages in length, was a comprehensive source for conveyancing practice in Alberta. The Guide includes practical information, commentary, checklists, references to legislation and case law, and hundreds of pages of sample documents. Since the completion of this project, LESA has gone forward with moving more material into wiki formats. Lexis Nexis also undertook a similar pilot project, and is looking for ways to maximize the impact of the technology moving forward.

In a corporate environment example, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation instituted a wiki to use as a technical knowledge base for it's massive broadcast center in Toronto. Details about the eight different studios, control rooms, network addresses, broadcasting equipment, emergency contacts, procedures, common problems and fixes, etc. were all documented, and frequently updated by the technicians who worked there. While they often worked off-hour shifts, and may not have been around when a certain problem began, there was a clear repository of information about the details of the situation that was current, easily accessible, and open for new information.

There are several examples, both public and private, of how wiki technology is being used successfully to publish accessible, real-time content.

The Lessons

After implementing several wiki installations, certain things started to become clear. The point of this article is to share some of those lessons.

Change in Philosophy

The biggest thing that users need to realize when using a wiki is that this is no longer a resource attributed to a single person. A wiki is based on a group's involvement and participation, not an individual who is an expert. Before, when we discussed the Net-Generation, we talked about their involvement in online communities and their affinity for producing content. When they become involved in a network, they're happy to be a part of a group that has a common interest, goal, or project.

Wikipedia, for example, works because people like sharing their knowledge. No individual authored it, but it has since become one of the most robust information sources in history. When academics scoffed at Wikipedia, saying it was an unreliable source, Wikipedia asked their community to attribute their contributions to a notable article, page, or publication. Today almost every Wikipedia article has a footnote section with links to a number of relevant, reliable sources.

The point is, the Wikipedia users want to be a part of building a resource that is correct, and useful. Not because they want their name on the cover of a volume, but because they feel empowered by contributing and may earn the respect of some peers by sharing some new information, or tidying up an old page. There is no money or fame, but the opportunity to contribute within a community.

When this came up in Salt Lake City, somebody mentioned that the authors of each manual probably wouldn't like this model because people could modify their work. While this may be true, the manual would likely be improved by the eyes and edits of hundreds of peers, the updates of users and policies change, and the addition of certain information that may have resulted from a certain court decision. The authors may not like it, but the resource would be greatly improved, not always instantly, but certainly before the next paper version was due to be printed.

The wiki model is based on the mantra, "All of us are smarter than one of us." With few exceptions, the knowledge in a group will trump that of an individual.

A Wiki Is Not A Book

While this seems like a very obvious statement, a wiki is not a book. It is a collection of information, often with charts and pictures, footnotes and references, but it not a book. When migrating your content from one to the other, there will be a number of adjustments that need to be made.

For example, many articles will reference different sections of the manual by page number. On the wiki, there are obviously no page numbers, but instead, linkable page names. Taking time to develop a plan for updating the page numbers to links will save a series of headaches later on in the process. Regardless of if you do it before it's in the wiki, or flag it, and fix it after, there needs to be a solution. Being aware that it is a necessary step before you begin, will save frustration later on. Likewise, there are no longer "chapters," but there may now be categories or sections.

Again, this is not a book. It doesn't look like a book, or read like a book. You now have the opportunity to include links, audio, video, and other digital content. At no point in a paper book, can you push a button to watch a real-life example play out in a video scenario. With an online resource, this is not only possible, but would add some life to your content. You can include links to other sites, relevant cases or laws, and other information. Using the technology to its full potential will encourage your users to get the most out of your resource.

Organize Your Content

The nice thing about putting your content on a wiki is that it is easy to search. With a few keystrokes and a click of the mouse, you're delivered a list of results relevant to your search query. That beats flipping through hundreds of pages, tables of content, and indexes! With a little effort (hopefully your users help with this), you can cross-reference useful material with hyperlinks and link relevant pages to one another.

Before the wiki is even built, it is important to think about how you're going to organize your information. The different software solutions each have some options for creating "categories" or "groups" of pages. Some of them have options for glossary terms, while in other cases you can just link to a page created for a definition. If you do have cross referenced material in your paper volume, it's wise to develop a plan for identifying that and making sure those references turn into links where possible.

Although people are ideally going to search for the page they're looking for, giving your wiki a bit of structure will help make the user experience a little easier. If things are displayed in a logical manner, the navigation of the site seems a lot more natural and people will be happier to use the new resource, instead of the familiar old book.

Do Your Research (CMS)

As previously stated, there are many kinds of wiki software. While MediaWiki is the most popular, there are hundreds of other options. PBWorks, PHPWiki, Sharepoint, Swiki, and WikiSpaces are just a few, but a quick internet search would yield many more.

One thing to consider though, is that depending on the desired outcomes of your project, a wiki many not be the exact best solution. There are other Content Management Systems with similar capability (quick publication, up-to-date material, mobile browser support), that may be more appropriate. For example, if you wanted to put your information online, without making it editable to the public, you could use MediaWiki with certain account restrictions, or a CMS like Joomla, Wordpress, or Drupal.

Some companies may already have Microsoft Sharepoint installed. This is a CMS that allows modular installations of calendars, blogs, messaging systems, and of course, a wiki. It might be worth the effort to discuss the options with your IT team, as they'd know best what systems and services are already in place, and easiest to incorporate.

Regardless of who chooses, it's wise to do your research about what each solution offers. There are companies who specialize in such things, so consultants are available as well.

Enlist the Help of Curators

Once up and running, the idea of the wiki is to have your membership contribute to the collection of information by adding and editing content as real-world application dictates. While in a perfect world, each of these changes would be well researched, well written, and universally accepted, in reality, this is obviously not the case. Fortunately, these changes are easy to track.

With the help of a Curator (or Champion), it is a simple task to review modifications to a particular page. A user can receive email updates to be notified when a page changes, and then click a link to see exactly what was changed about that page. By enlisting a curator to help, you can put that person in charge of a series of pages to moderate cultivate and organize the changes happening within those pages. Some organizations call these people superusers, or mods, but regardless, they're the people who will look after sections of the wiki to make sure that information is added and edited when appropriate. In some cases, they may be the one to make the edit. If something needs changing, and nobody else takes the initiative, the curator should be the one who addresses that.

Depending on the size of your resource, you may need several curators to help manage the updates. If it's a small wiki, perhaps it could be left to one or two people. Having individuals committed to help the

growth and evolution of the wiki is critical to enlisting the efforts of your users, building the community, and ensuring that the resource can take full advantage of the knowledge contained within the group.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that there's a rising demand for content to be delivered online, regardless of the industry. Continuing Legal Education is no exception. As the Net-Generation permeates the workforce, there now exists a group of tech-savvy individuals who not only require information to be online, but up to date. They also relish the opportunity to contribute and be part of a healthy online community.

Turning your published materials into a wiki is a fairly in expensive way to address all of those issues. Often, for the cost of producing one version of your manual, you can cover most of the cost of developing a resource that will outlast several printings. Paying attention to the lessons listed above will help you avoid some pitfalls in building that resource, and hopefully our experience will help other community members move ahead with their own wiki projects.