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The Wiki Way to Support Knowledge

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Using Wikis for Support Knowledge Management

Knowledge management is the most powerful way to make support organizations more effective. With best practices like knowledge-centered support (KCS), knowledge management isn't something done in addition to resolving customer issues: It *is* the way customer issues are resolved.

As it's typically implemented, though, KCS has a serious limitation: It restricts participation to only those inside the support organization. But expertise on technical topics isn't limited to the vendor. Often, the community of users, partners, and developers collectively knows much more than the traditional support organization.

KM 2.0: Combining Wikis with Knowledge

As wikis become part of the corporate mainstream, they're shaping the way that people think about creating and maintaining content. Wikis are working examples of many of the core principles of KCS: contribution of knowledge by the many, for the many, collective ownership of knowledge quality, and technology that keeps things simple for users. The success of wikis is a good example for people wondering how to best implement knowledge management.

In fact, wikis can be an ideal technology platform and social context for implementing a new, more collaborative version of knowledge management—"KM 2.0." When implemented properly, wikis combine the features required to enable knowledge in a way that's flexible and that engages customers more than traditional knowledgebase solutions.

Painless Capture

Ward Cunningham, the inventor of the wiki, picked the name because it is the Hawaiian word for "fast." He described his original wiki as "the simplest online database that could possibly work." The twin attributes of

speed and simplicity have been the design center for wikis ever since.

As a result, wiki pages are great for capturing knowledge in the process of delivering support. They're just as fast and easy as Notepad, the simple tool used (often surreptitiously) by support professionals for taking notes during a call. They can be pre-populated with a little bit of structure—for example, to separate the symptoms seen by the user from the root cause and the resolution. Most have WYSIWYG editing and a simple "wikitext" mode for those who want extremely rapid control over their knowledge. Categories and tags can be added rapidly, usually just by typing, or by selecting from a list of items.

In short, wikis eliminate the technology barriers to knowledge capture that may exist in more formal, structured knowledgebase or content management tools.

Culture of Collaboration

Wikis invite collaboration. We aren't encouraged to go to colleagues' servers and update their e-mails, Microsoft Office documents, or Web pages. By contrast, wikis put a prominent Edit button on each page. Easy roll-backs, watch lists, and comprehensive version histories make editors comfortable making changes because they know they can't cause any permanent harm; they make the original author comfortable because they can see exactly what's been done.

Continuous Improvement

A 2005 study by the journal *Nature* showed that Wikipedia is as accurate in covering scientific topics as Encyclopedia Britannica, although Wikipedia is maintained by volunteers and Britannica has a paid staff of 4,000 editors and fact-checkers. How can this be?

Wikis assume that some people will add incorrect information from time to time, whether out of ignorance or malice. That's acceptable, because other knowledgeable users will fix and improve the content as they use it. People with particular interest in a wiki page (such as the original author) can put it on a watch list, notifying them whenever it is changed. This "it takes a village" model of collective ownership of content quality is central to both KM and wikis.

Erasing Boundaries

Most knowledgebases draw a bright line between those who contribute content—subject-matter experts—and those who use it. Wikis take more of a Confucian model: "May the producers be many." Especially in high-complexity technical support, expertise is diffused in pockets throughout the organization. Wikis and effective knowledge management both eliminate the boundaries that exist between the so-called experts and everyone else.

Just Enough Control

Wikis are open, but wiki-based knowledge implementations aren't the

Wild West. A certification program makes sure that content can only be approved or published by contributors or users who have been certified after having demonstrated that they create quality content.

The Coolness Factor

Programmers would rather use Java than COBOL. Auto designers would rather work on a sports car than an econobox. Support staffers are no different: They want to work with the good stuff.

Wikis, like other Web 2.0 and social networking technology, are cool. It's much easier to get workers—especially younger workers—to work with cutting-edge technology than with dinosaur KM modules added as an afterthought to balky CRM suites. People who use IM, Gmail, and sophisticated game consoles are left cold by the clunky HTML interfaces offered by many older technologies. Wikis ease KCS adoption.

Going Beyond Knowledge-Centered Support

Wikis are great at supporting KCS. But they really shine when organizations embrace the aspects of wikis that support practices beyond pure KCS.

Customer Contributions

Many Web sites let customers provide feedback on content. What happens to the feedback is anyone's guess. A few companies make an effort to close the loop on customer comments, but usually the feedback goes into "the bit bucket."

What a shame! Customers who provide feedback feel ignored, so they're unlikely to provide feedback a second time. Worse still, other customers who might have benefited from the comments can't see them. It's a tremendous lost opportunity.

Wikis are built specifically to support user-generated content, so they naturally enable comments, discussions, and other customer-provided value-add in a way that adds value to, but won't be confused with, the "official" knowledgebase content.

Cross-Functional Engagement

Today, most organizations rely on informal personal networks or rigid information-request processes to get the information they need from product experts in other organizations. This approach leaves customers hanging as support staffers struggle to get their questions answered. Wouldn't it be great if the support organization had easy access to the information that product development and professional services teams possess?

The good news is, product and implementation teams are natural early adopters of wiki technology. Support organizations can benefit from access to these wikis. For example, they can index content in other teams' wikis with the same search engine they use to search the

knowledgebase.

But it's even more powerful to collaborate in the same wiki. The entire organization can work together without the barriers that stand in the way of delivering value to customers. The simple mechanism of a common information-sharing platform creates a powerful alignment across the organizations that need to work together to meet customers' needs.

Collaboration Is Creation

Support issues continue to become more complex. More issues cross multiple products and vendors. An increasing percentage of support issues are solved not by individual support engineers, but by experts working together.

As collaboration platforms like wikis become more available, they become the tool of choice for working together on complex customer problems. From the perspective of knowledge management, this is a big win: not only do people solve problems, but they create reusable knowledge in the process. Knowledge is captured painlessly as a byproduct of collaboration.

The SSPA's John Ragsdale poses the following question in his blog: "Will wikis replace the traditional knowledgebase?" The first word in his response is, "Yes."

Whether or not that's literally true, it's clear that support knowledgebases must embrace the inclusive and collaborative characteristics of the wiki to reach the next level of effectiveness. Support leaders whose organizations are creating and maintaining a knowledgebase would do well to insist on wiki-like levels of interaction from their knowledgebase vendor, or consider using a wiki directly.

About David Kay……

David Kay is principal of DB Kay & Associates, a consultancy advising high-technology companies on knowledge management, self-service, and Web 2.0 technologies. DB Kay customers include Cisco, Research In Motion, TI, Tektronix, Verizon Wireless, IBM, and Genesys. He is co-author of *Collective Wisdom: Transforming Support With Knowledge*, a book on knowledge management for high-tech support, and holds three patents in knowledge management technology. DB Kay manages the first KCS Verified open source free software project, osKCS, based on MediaWiki and Lucene. For more information, David may be reached at **dbkay@dbkay.com**.

Comments? Suggestions? We would like to hear from you. Please email the editor at **sspanews@thesspa.com**.

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