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The Wiki as a Time-Saving Mentoring Tool

Joanne Kinsey

Family & Community Health Sciences Educator
Atlantic County, New Jersey
jkinsey@NJAES.Rutgers.edu

Jenny Carleo

Agricultural Agent, Cape May County
carleo@njaes.rutgers.edu

Barbara O'Neill

Extension Specialist in Financial Resource Management
oneill@aesop.rutgers.edu

Nicholas Polanin

Agricultural and Resource Management Agent, Somerset County
polanin@njaes.rutgers.edu

Rutgers Cooperative Extension
New Brunswick, New Jersey

Abstract: An important step in the acculturation of new Extension professionals is a mentoring process that includes the input of experienced Extension colleagues. The wiki is a technology tool that can be useful by providing an online venue for Mentor Team communication and a place to share articles, curricula, and other critical tenure documents. This article describes the role of a wiki in the mentoring process and identifies four steps to establish a wiki that can enhance Mentor Team communication.

Mentoring New Faculty

New Extension professionals are expected to juggle many responsibilities, especially in states where county agents have tenure track positions and are expected to satisfy job expectations at both the county and university level. This task can be daunting if not overwhelming. Many states have formal mentoring systems to guide new faculty. Mentoring is a dynamic process during which the roles of the mentor and mentee (a.k.a., protégé) change with the professional growth and experience of the mentee. In the beginning of a mentoring relationship, mentors often provide specific instructions and closely monitor the performance of the mentee. As time passes, the role of mentors changes from an authoritative role to more of a facilitator and colleague as the protégé achieves professional growth and experience (Saathoff, 2003).

Mentor teams comprised of experienced Extension agents are often assembled to acculturate a new agent into the position. The mentor team is charged with providing timely assistance, reviewing required promotion and tenure materials, and educating the mentee about successful Extension practice and how to demonstrate

excellence with respect to university promotion and tenure criteria. Mentors and the protégé are expected to meet throughout the tenure track period for exchange of questions and answers, promotion and tenure document reviews, guidance, and timely advice.

Wikis and the Mentoring Process

The mentoring process can be time consuming for all parties involved. However, modern technology tools, such as a wiki, can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the mentoring process. A wiki is a Web site where anyone can edit documents whenever they want (Richardson, 2006). Basically, it is a place where those with proper access can visit and leave a document or message for other members. Users are invited into a wiki to share thoughts, comments, resources, reaction, and advice.

Wikis are often part of a university's online management tool package and are readily available. In addition, there are commercially operated wikis that can be found at sites such as www.pbwiki.com, www.wikispaces.com, and www.wiki.com. When searching for wikis online, users will find that they are usually free and easy to set up. A wiki allows users to organize files and documents on a single website that is available 24 hours a day.

Virtual Team Work

In the business world, employees in both large and small companies use wikis for communicating on project development by taking advantage of the Internet's speed and efficiency (Brown, Huettnner, & James-Tanny, 2007). Project team members can work together on the same documents, even when the team is miles or continents apart. Wikis save time and money for travel to meetings. This is especially attractive when tenure track Extension agents and their mentors are located at distant points around a state.

Another benefit of a wiki is the ease of editing. How many times have you sent or received a document through email and thought you saved the correct version only to realize you have an outdated draft? While e-mail is efficient at sending and receiving messages, distractions, time lags, and carelessness can result in mistakes about how and where documents are dated and saved. Wikis allow for efficient teamwork because team members are viewing the same document. There is no confusion about where the latest draft or edited document is located when communication is done through a wiki (Richardson, 2006).

Creating a Mentor Team Wiki

Mentor teams can collaborate using an online wiki tool that is managed by the new agent. In a few simple steps the wiki can be established:

Step 1—Create the wiki online. Start by creating folders that can be used to store similar types of documents that will be reviewed and updated frequently (e.g., the protégé's curriculum vitae). Keep the list of folders concise so documents and materials will be easy for members to locate. Then upload documents such as: curriculum vitae, required university forms, photos, curricula, evaluations, impact statements, abstracts, fact sheets, blogs, podcasts, and video links.

Step 2—The first meeting should be face-to-face with the Mentor Team and protégé to identify the roles of each team member, have everyone express their expectations of the wiki, and define the structure of the wiki, including types of documents to be shared and tasks to be completed online. The department chair may be invited to attend all or part of the meeting to provide necessary background and support. At this initial meeting, the agent managing the wiki can demonstrate how to access, open, download, and upload

documents. In many cases this would be the junior faculty member, to provide an asynchronous venue for mentoring by committee members. By the end of the meeting, all team members should be comfortable with accessing the wiki, opening documents, and making comments or edits.

Step 3—Formally invite team members to join the wiki. Usually an invitation e-mail message will be sent to all listed wiki users. It is best to keep the wiki private and shared by only the Mentor Team. A private wiki is only open to its members, therefore the team can go about their work without distractions from uninvited visitors.

Step 4—Confirm all team members by following the directions and links on the wiki. Team members usually receive an e-mail message notifying them of their permission to use the wiki. At this point the Mentor Team wiki is established and ready to be used.

Summary

A Mentor Team wiki will only be effective if documents and materials are updated frequently. The protÃ©gÃ© is responsible for keeping the team informed of document revisions and additions. All Mentor Team members should feel free to provide comments on the protÃ©gÃ©'s curriculum vitae and other documents, as well as suggestions for improved job performance.

The Mentor Team wiki should not take the place of all face-to-face meetings; however it can reduce the number of meetings. The team should communicate on a regular basis and meet periodically to ask/answer questions and provide comment. The team may also choose to take advantage of wiki chat rooms for informal meetings and conversations. In summary, effective use of technology can help reduce the stress associated with preparing for reappointment and tenure.

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