Working in a Wiki: A Tool for Collaboration Among Virtual Teams

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Abstract: A wiki can be a useful collaborative Web tool for managing virtual teamwork. Although a wiki is easy to use, the challenge comes with enlisting team members to adopt a wiki for collaborative projects. This article describes uses of a wiki, challenges to maintaining virtual teams, and five recommendations for implementation by universities, agencies, and institutions.

Collaborative Web Tool

A wiki is a collaborative online Web tool that can help Extension professionals work more effectively. Wikis are useful for collaborating over long distances and can serve as a repository for materials shared among a virtual team. Specifically, wikis provide online space for editing and storing documents, maintaining schedules, posting Web links, storing email announcements, and conferencing capabilities. Wikis reduce the need for mail and phone charges to collaborate with other group members and provide a stable place for document storage that is accessible from any computer with Internet access, at any location, at any time. They allow for customization of a collaborative workspace that resides online in a place where all invited members, or the public, can access stored materials.

Advantages of Using a Wiki

Wiki users have the opportunity for the organizer to control privacy settings. The wiki can be established as a private area where individuals can be invited to participate in the virtual team, or wikis can be public where anyone can access the information (i.e., Wikipedia). Members can easily be invited to join the team and given various levels of permission, from read-only capabilities to administrative responsibilities.

Materials on the wiki are available to team members from any location at any time of day. Team members can access materials from any computer whether they are in the office, traveling, or working from home. In most cases, team members receive an email notification when changes have been made to the wiki, facilitating communication among group members even when members are working on different schedules and in different locations.

When a team creates a document repository in a wiki, members can avoid confusion by ensuring that everyone is reading the same version of a document. Large collaborative projects often involve multiple editing phases to documents and a need for archiving project documents (e.g., monthly progress reports) in chronological order. A virtual document repository is a great place to provide accessible storage.

Many programs available for developing wikis, such as PBworks <www.pbworks.com> or Wikispaces <www.wikispaces.com>, provide page templates to help build and develop the space to suit the needs of a team. For example, the organizer can develop a team member page with contact information or a calendar with pertinent scheduling information.

Challenges of Maintaining Virtual Teams

There is always a learning curve when it comes to using new technology tools. Understanding and applying new tech tools takes precious time out of our already packed day. Taking the first steps to learn the mechanics of using a new tool makes the task at hand simple. Once a virtual team is familiar with using a wiki, the work may flow more easily.

Getting started may be challenging, particularly if the group contains members who are not familiar with the advantages of wikis. Just the term itself may be enough to scare people away! One or two members need to take initiative to create and act as primary caretakers for the wiki. In many cases, this may be most effective if the team or project leader is also the wiki organizer. The team leader should stay in contact with members throughout the process, but most important, early on in the start-up phase. The team leader should explain the advantages of using a wiki to the team, as well as encourage participation and help members adjust to the virtual team environment.

Some people are resistant to new technologies and unwilling to invest time learning the tool. In an effort to ensure success, it may be best to start the first wiki with a team of people willing to take a chance on using an online tool. Keeping the first wiki group small can ensure greater success for first-time users.

Five Recommendations for Collaborating in a Wiki

How can universities, agencies, and institutions use a wiki in their collaborative work? Below are five suggestions for leaders and members of collaborative groups:

- One motivated team member should take the plunge and create a simple wiki by uploading documents pertinent to the team's work.

- Each team member should receive detailed instructions for accessing the wiki, editing documents, and uploading materials and resources. Team members need to be encouraged to check the wiki on occasion, and use it to share documents and hold discussions.

- Prospective leaders should consider online organizations, such as PBworks, that offer a basic private wiki site at no cost. While many universities maintain their own online system similar to a wiki program (e.g., Sakai, Scholar) that can be used for internal groups, this may not be feasible for mixed groups of university scholars and members from other agencies or institutions. Leaders of more detailed projects or those that require large amounts of storage space may decide to purchase a membership plan with an online wiki organization such as PBWorks or Wikispaces.

- The wiki should be for as much communication between the group as possible, including sharing and editing documents, posting meeting agendas and minutes, schedules, progress reports, and group member contact information. Team members can visit the site to review progress, view earlier documents, and communicate with other team members.

- Leaders should continually solicit feedback from team members and troubleshoot any technical problems that arise to ensure that the group collaboration process runs smoothly.

Summary

Wikis are an excellent platform for team collaboration, especially in today's climate of distance learning, transcontinental collaboration, and busy schedules. Although the new technology may be challenging to learn and apply for some people, wikis offer many amenities for collaborative teams, such as document repositories, directories, scheduling capabilities, and meeting documents. These amenities ensure that all team members have access to the group's documents and information in one location, but also allow the user to designate the wiki as a members-only forum to ensure privacy.

Wikis provide an opportunity to improve effectiveness of teamwork between Extension professionals and university-agency collaborative projects among other groups and are widely available through university-purchased programs and online wiki sites. However, encouraging widespread adoption is still the primary challenge.

References

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