

Chapter 9

Cocreating Corporate Knowledge with a Wiki

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ABSTRACT

Wikis have a growing reputation on the open Internet for producing evolving stores of shared knowledge. However, such democratic systems are often treated with suspicion within corporations for management, legal, social, and other reasons. This article describes a field study of a corporate Wiki that has been developed to capture, and make available, organisational knowledge in a large manufacturing company as an initiative of their Knowledge Management (KM) program. As this approach to KM is a controversial and rapidly changing phenomenon, a Q Methodology research approach was selected to uncover employees' subjective attitudes to the Wiki. Activity Theory was used to provide a deeper interpretation of the findings of the Q-study. The results are enabling the firm to more fully exploit the potential of the Wiki as a ubiquitous tool for successful tacit and explicit knowledge management as more employees are encouraged to participate in a process of cocreating the store of corporate knowledge. The article also demonstrates how meaningful and rigorous research on this new democratic direction of corporate KM should continue.

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet, through the use of social technologies such as Wikis, is enabling data, information, and knowledge to have a ubiquitous quality where people take for granted their ability and right to access, and contribute to, the global knowledge repository that is the World Wide Web. This is transforming the knowledge culture from one where control rests with established authority and power to one where knowledge repositories continually evolve being created and maintained by society as a whole. Within corporations, knowledge management (KM) initiatives strive to collect organisational knowledge to be available as a strategic resource, but corporate cultures are often not well disposed to the sharing of knowledge in the open, participatory manner afforded by a Wiki (Warne, Hasan, & Ali, 2005). Organisational KM initiatives usually incorporate the development of formal knowledge management systems (KMS) that support employees in regard to knowledge processes (Jennex, 2005). Some enlightened, learning organisations (Senge, 1990) are now seeking the capability to cocreate such open knowledge repositories where all workers are motivated and empowered to take responsibility for their own KM processes. Emerging from the social arena into the corporation, the Wiki is, however, bound to challenge management authority by attempting to engage the knowledge worker in a more participatory KM capability and environment. Even with traditional KMS, it has often been difficult to determine what factors contribute to their success and to know that they have succeeded (Jennex & Olfman, 2005). As a new, emerging phenomenon, corporate Wikis pose an even greater challenge in this regard.

This article critically examines the prospects for Wiki technology to be a tool to successfully support a contemporary, yet challenging, view of corporate KM that is participatory, holistic, collective, and contextual. The research described here involved a field study of a pioneering case

where a corporate Wiki was developed to capture, and make available, organisational knowledge in a large manufacturing company as an initiative of their KM program. The study aimed to tease out the range of attitudes of employees to the Wiki and determined perceptions of Wiki attributes that influenced their willingness to contribute to it. Due to the ground-breaking nature of the topic and this case, innovative research techniques were adopted that would allow issues to emerge from the participant employees, rather than predetermined by the researchers. The results of the data analysis are re-interpreted in terms of critical success factors (CSF) or KMS success.

The article begins with an overview of changing user perceptions of KM through the use of a Wiki, and creating receptive environments for a Wiki in organisations. The Wiki is defined and lessons from unsuccessful corporate Wiki projects are presented. The context of the field study of the Wiki implementation is introduced together with an outline and justification of the Q methodology approach adopted for the data collection of the study. Activity Theory is also introduced as a richer framework for understanding the topic. Findings from the Q-study on employee attitudes to the Wiki are presented and Activity Theory is then used to interpret them. The results of this analysis and their implication for an expanded use of the Wiki are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge and Wikis

A Wiki is an open author system for a conjoined construction and maintenance of Web sites (Fuchs-Kittowsk & Köhler, 2002). Technically, a Wiki is a collection of interlinked HTML Web pages and has cross links between internal pages where each page can be edited, keeping a complete record of such changes. Thus a Wiki can be accessed from any Web browser and no other special tools are

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