for an answer sometime in the distant future, the bank uses wiki technology as a tool where users can search for the answers to common questions.

The bank uses a traditional website so the wiki technology is invisible to the end user. As a result, the bank is able to reduce the number of customer service personnel who are required to respond to repeated questions.

For sales-driven organizations, wikis are a boon because common questions about products or customer exchanges can be answered once but stored for future reference. Likewise, not-for-profits benefit because supervisors can preserve an answer to a common question in the wiki. Some wikis include a supervision feature so managers can keep tabs on staff members who are answering queries and those who are not.

"The wiki allows not-for-profits to buy back an expert's time," Rockwell says.

Intelligence gathering

Even within the contested field of intelligence, wikis are beginning to catch on. The Defense Intelligence Agency has Intellipedia, which permits users to post comments about a range of issues from language training to ongoing debates regarding intelligence gathering. The wikis and blogs are only accessible to individuals in the intelligence community who can access the Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communications System network.

Their use reflects the familiar divisions along generational lines about technology and learning styles.

"We have a culture that is comfortable dealing with facts," says Jenna Kuhns, the agency's branch chief for performance improvement. "There is a fear among some that wikis and blogs are wrought with bias."

Kuhns says many of the more devoted wiki users are under the age of 35. Senior employees tend to be skeptical about its productive value, viewing such activity as frivolous. She is attempting to reduce the anxiety some supervisory level intelligence officials have regarding their value. The entire organization will need to recognize its value. No one is ready to embrace the idea of citing any kind of comment or finding that is posted on a wiki.

"I don't know that anybody is sure how to present its value," she says.

Agency leaders have yet to establish an official policy for using wikis and are unlikely to do so, a decision Kuhns welcomes because she believes that placing any kind of restraints on discussions might discourage open debate. So far she has noticed that discussions on the wiki are spirited but careful as users tend to police their own accuracy.

Early adopters

Not surprisingly, the smaller technology-based companies are among the earliest organizations to embrace wikis for multiple tasks.

Harish Rao, CEO of EchoDitto, a Washington, D.C.-based online communications company, says his employees have been using an internal wiki for just eight months. Building momentum and use in stages, the company is entering the third phase whereby all staff members are encouraged to use and add content to the wiki regularly.

For organizations considering a wiki, Rao advises they should not focus initially on its appearance. The emphasis should be placed upon building awareness throughout the office. Two staff members at EchoDitto were charged with generating interest for the wiki. They promoted its use during staff meetings.

"There's no need to force a great design because it doesn't matter to initial users," Rao says. "Encourage early adoption. Once you reach a critical mass then invest in the design."

Turning the wiki into a universal tool requires a cultural change whereby staff members adopt a habit of entering content regularly. Any kind of shared content, such as notes from a staff meeting, should be put on the wiki, he says. If someone solves a vexing issue with a client, the solution should be entered into the wiki as well.

"It's not natural to write in a wiki," Rao says. "You have to encourage use."

Most clients he encounters have heard the term wiki, but their leaders could not describe its functions. Rao says his task is to "demystify" the wiki technology for potential clients. Most of the initial fears can be addressed because the wiki can incorporate some kind of password-protected access.

Most organizations with a wiki only have a six- to 12-month head start. Rao says one consumer products company is preparing to launch its internal wiki, which utilizes flash animation. The wiki includes a typical navigation tool and a "Did you know?" prompt that informs users of new updates. The company has used a wiki for about a year.

Another client in the household cleaning products field developed a wiki for creative management tools. Rao says the company wanted to share ideas about reducing everyday costs. He cautions that wikis are ideal for organizations that have collaborative teams who interact with clients on a regular basis. Organizations that are broken into individual units would not be well suited to the technology.

Skeptical eye
Many analysts cite resistance to the use of wiki technology because of lack of knowledge about its capability. Rick Nigol, a learning consultant with Vancouver-based eLearn Campus, believes that within just one year, wikis will be widely accepted to the point where organizations will consider them routine, forgetting altogether about their initial resistance.

"Adoption hasn't been great," Nigol says. "There is a little bit of paranoia if the technology is not purchased software that is securely loaded."

Most wikis only require an Internet connection and the ability to type. In fact, the simplicity of the wiki often works against greater adoption. As a simple page with text, it appears unsophisticated to the untrained eye.

Some clients who lack understanding about the wiki dismiss it as a useful tool. When Nigol describes its capability, a common response he hears is, "That doesn't sound very professional."

As a simple page with text, a wiki appears unsophisticated to the untrained eye.

Organizations are concerned that wiki technology, if allowed to grow, might not be consistent with the company's goals. Yet Nigol insists that the wiki can be custom designed.

"The barrier is no longer the technology," Nigol says. "The barrier is teaching and engaging people in the new environment."

Nigol is both surprised and amused by the level of fear expressed by some companies that proprietary information could somehow leak out into the public domain through a wiki. He responds to such fears by explaining that simple security features could be added to prevent the wiki from becoming publicly accessible. He consulted a number of not-for-profit organizations that have purchased expensive learning technology but failed to invest in staff or expertise to design an effective curriculum.

"They spend a fortune on learning technology and then there's nothing left for human capital," he says. "What they end up with is a curriculum that is just a static content dump."

Accidental wiki
The initial buzz of trendy outlets such as blogs and discussion boards quickly dissipates as contributors grow weary of posting regularly. It is too early to tell if wikis will follow the same trajectory. Yet in organizations where the wiki has taken off, users say they are racing to build greater capacity.

Just two years after launching it for internal use, Blackboard, a Washington, D.C.-based online software course management company, is expanding its wiki to keep pace with staff use. Jason Minkoff, Blackboard's manager of client

support, says the company stumbled upon wiki technology by accident when technical staff purchased a licensed wiki.

Initially Blackboard did not emphasize design, but in its current format, the wiki is much more sophisticated. Users of the company's wiki are aware that it is a company site because it includes logos and other corporate symbols. New employees are even trained with the wiki and are encouraged to use it regularly. The company is on the verge of launching an external wiki to handle customer inquiries. The company employs about 100 staff members in its main office.

"It's searchable, and it's easy to create articles," Minkoff says. "The cost is cheap, so it's easy to sell to management."

Instead of writing white papers, which must pass through onerous reviews, staff members can simply add content to a number of different channels such as client support. Access to some documents is controlled so some documents are "read only." Mistakes can be edited by experts when necessary.

The company is gradually consolidating all of its internal communication into the wiki. For Minkoff, there is no concern that it may soon become a burden or outdated to staff members.

"There's so much momentum the other way," Minkoff says of accelerated use. "Adoption is so fast. In the past, we had to create an incentive to write an article."

Even for organizations that are far advanced in their use of a wiki, no one expressed a desire to eliminate disk drives as they can still be used for individual or functional tasks that do not require collaboration.

If wikis gain wider acceptance as a collaboration tool, it will require a change in perspective from management. If an employee devotes a specified number of hours to adding content to a wiki, such tasks must be considered part of the work flow and not a freelance activity. Measuring productivity in most organizations is often based upon the volume of reports produced or units sold. The promise of the wiki is the ability to consult a single source for questions that seem to be asked repeatedly year after year.

"A lot of organizations struggle with getting all of the collective knowledge of a group into one place," says Bob Rice, product designer for Achieve Global in Tampa. "Instead of relying on the break room, we can rely upon the wiki."

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