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Using Wiki Technology to Create Communities of Practice

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Keywords: community of practice, wiki, knowledge drain, knowledge management, technology

Background

The rapidly aging global workforce is considered by many to be the most significant business trend for the next several decades. 76 million Baby Boomers, who make up a third of the U.S. workforce, are poised to retire in large numbers by the end of the decade, potentially taking with them an immense volume of business-critical knowledge. Organizations that fail to understand the risks of this imminent knowledge drain to their competitiveness, in a marketplace that requires innovation and responsiveness, will suffer significant consequences (Foster, 2005).

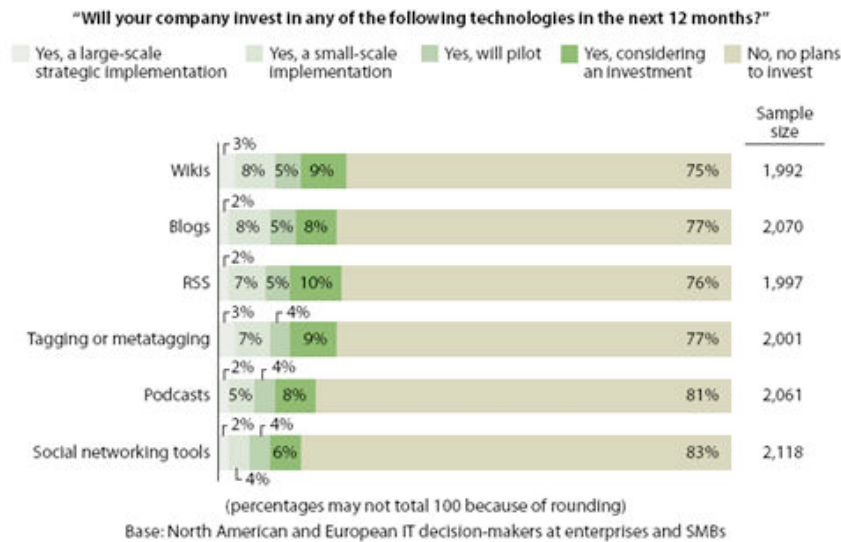
As HRD educators, we must help our students find creative solutions for capturing employee knowledge, such as developing communities of practice. A community of practice (CoP) is a collection of individuals who are drawn together by what matters to them (what they are passionate about) and, through interactions with one another, develop knowledge that not only enhances their individual capabilities, but consequently enhances the capabilities of the larger organization (Knapp, 2008). A CoP allows knowledge to transfer from employee to employee, preventing loss of critical information.

While the concept of a CoP is not new, technology-based tools to support them are just coming into vogue. Wikis are being used in business with increasing frequency

(Wei et al, 2005). Wiki is a type of server software that allows users to easily create and edit Web page content using any Web browser. It is unusual among group communication tools in that it allows users to edit both the organization of contributions and the content itself (Cunningham, 2008). This uniqueness, coupled with its ease of use, makes it ideal for supporting a CoP.

Organizations have begun adoption of Wiki technology to facilitate collaboration and as knowledge management platforms. Wikis have been adopted by organizations ranging from Fortune 500 enterprises to second grade classrooms. 25 percent of the small- to medium- sized business participating in a recent Forrester Research survey indicated they will invest in Wiki technology in the next 12 months (Young, 2008).

Figure 1: Company Investments in Technology (Young, 2008:4)



The same study predicts the market for Wiki technology will grow to approximately \$450M by the year 2013 (Young, 2008).

A 2007 McKinsey survey of 3,000 senior level executives revealed that tools like Wikis have become an important component of the technology portfolio, especially for knowledge development. One respondent stressed that Wikis capture unstructured and anecdotal information that would otherwise be lost. Another noted that Wikis are necessary because his organization has outgrown its ability to gather and share knowledge informally. (Bughin and Manyika, 2008:5).

In addition to supporting their organizations in finding creative ways to mitigate knowledge drain, HR practitioners must be competent in the application of technology to efficiently managing all aspects the human *capital* of an organization. They must be technically adept enough to lead implementation of tools, such as Wiki, to drive organizational change (Oliver, 2007). HRD *educators* must have first-hand experience with technology, such as Wiki, to guide student learning in an area that is gaining attention in those businesses they serve.

Session goals and objectives

Participants in this session will experience the use of Wiki technology as the basis for a CoP. At the conclusion of the session they will be able to.

- Describe the features of Wiki technology that support a CoP
- Identify effective design elements for a Wiki-based CoP
- Explain the benefits to HRD faculty of creating their own Wiki-based CoPs

Session overview and format

Participants will be invited to “join” a Wiki-based CoP created for this event and will have the opportunity to share comments and add content to it, in advance of and during the session. (We ask the conference organizers to either include an invitation to join the Wiki in their communication with registered participants, or provide to us with their e-mail addresses.) During the hour-long session, we will introduce the use of Wiki technology as the foundation for a CoP and review the specific application for HRD educators. We will demonstrate the Wiki-based CoP created for HRD faculty at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). The session will conclude with a “community of practice” style Q&A.

Conclusion

The HRD M.S. program at RIT has grown significantly in the past year, with increased U.S. based enrollment as well as at RIT’s locations in Croatia and Dubai, UAE. Sharing best practices among faculty teaching in three different regions of the world is challenging. We developed a Wiki-based CoP and found that we not only reduced the volume of e-mails and number of meetings, but actively engaged faculty in problem-solving and idea-sharing, leading to increased teaching excellence and improved student experience. We will share what we have learned and engage participants in uncovering opportunities for exposing faculty and students to Wiki-based CoPs.

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