Library Hi Tech News

TMI: using a library staff wiki to manage information and improve communication

Katherine Stiwinter Patricia R. Jordan

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

TMI: using a library staff wiki to manage information and improve communication

Katherine Stiwinter and Patricia R. Jordan

Introduction

Spartanburg Community College (SCC) has seen major growth in the past decade – the student population has grown significantly, and the physical presence of the college has expanded from one campus to five, scattered throughout a three-county service area. Along with the college, the SCC library has moved to a larger building and established three branches at other campus locations in addition to the central campus. With this expansion in service, the library staff became increasingly aware that they needed a more expedient and sustainable way to share information. Because the library's staff was relatively small, staff members shared many of the same duties at the library's service desk; they therefore needed to be kept up-to-date on all aspects of the library, particularly reference and circulation.

Previously, the library staff had used email and word of mouth to share information among the staff; however, as the staff became more spread out, the inevitable drawbacks of these methods became obvious. Word of mouth rarely reached the entire staff, and if it did, it was not in a timely manner. Email quickly became lost in archived or deleted items – difficult to easily retrieve when needed. The library needed a reliable, organized way to store information for future use so that it was able to be recalled in a timely manner while assisting a student. After researching the available options, the staff chose to create a library wiki. This article will cover the SCC Library's selection of a wiki platform, the initial setup and implementation of the wiki, including establishing policies and procedures, the maintenance and upkeep of the wiki for ongoing success and the wiki's impact on the library staff.

Wiki selection

Because there are many available wiki platforms, the first step was to evaluate the available products based on the library's needs. Products were evaluated for ease-of-use, cost, functionality and stability. After reviewing several options, Wikispaces (www.wikispaces.com) was chosen as the best match for the SCC library. Wikispaces was an established company, and so it had stability and was unlikely to disappear overnight. The free version offered enough features to meet SCC's needs: unlimited users as long as the wiki is not private, 0.5 GB of storage and a maximum file size of 10 MB. To put these numbers in perspective, after four years, the library had created 241 pages and files and only used about 3 per cent (498 MB) of its available storage. In addition, uploaded files are generally PDF or Microsoft Word documents, but even with PowerPoint files, the library has never hit the 10 MB maximum file limit. Wikispaces was also extremely easy to use both to create and then later retrieve content. Unlike some wiki products, Wikispaces provided a WYSIWYG interface with a very familiar basic text editor bar at the top of the edit screen. The user did not have to know any special coding (markup language) to use the wiki, which was very important to the staff, as knowledge of the code would create a barrier to using the wiki; this also increased the ability to update the wiki quickly, which was important with the staff's busy schedules. It also stored content in a way that was both easy to browse or search, with a list of content pages and a search box on the left side of the screen. The search feature was tested and worked well, finding plural forms of a word when the singular form was searched and visa versa. An additional feature that the library looked for in a wiki product was the ability to set up email notifications. The library feared that without email notifications to keep staff informed of updates and changes to the wiki, the wiki might become forgotten in the daily work routine. With email notifications, the staff would not have to remember to check the wiki for content updates; the update would appear in their email and integrate better with their workflow. Then, when information was needed, the staff member would know to go to the wiki and search for the desired information. Staff would also receive email notifications when content was updated so they could stay up-to-date.

Successful implementation

Though all these characteristics of Wikispaces set the library wiki on the path to success, it was not enough just to have a good product. After five years, the SCC library wiki is still in constant use and extremely valuable to the library staff. From this experience, there are several recommendations the authors can make for the successful implementation and use of a staff wiki.

To ensure the wiki's continued use, the library appointed a "wiki manager", someone who would take the lead on updating and using the wiki, as well as assisting and encouraging the rest of the staff to do the same. The library felt that without a manager, the wiki would eventually fall out of use. Staff would slowly not update it as much; then once it was not updated regularly, it would stop being as useful and staff would decrease their use further; it becomes a self-reinforcing cycle.

As part of the implementation process, the wiki manager assisted staff with creating accounts – invitations were sent, accepted and accounts were registered – and setting up email

notifications. The wiki manager also provided staff with training to familiarize them with the wiki, encourage their participation and explain how the library planned to use it.

The wiki manager then led the library staff in making some basic decisions about how the wiki would be set up. One big decision was to choose whether to make the wiki public, private or protected. "Public" meant that anyone could view and edit the wiki, which was not desirable because the library did not want non-staff members to be able to edit the wiki's pages. "Private" meant that the staff would have to log in to the wiki just to view its pages, which was not ideal because it created a barrier to using the wiki in the sense that it slows down the process of recalling information, making it a less useful tool. The library chose to go with the third option, which was "protected"; this meant that anyone could view the pages without logging in, but only invited and registered members of the wiki could edit the pages. There was some concern that the public would be able to view in-house information, but the wiki manager mitigated this by turning off the option to have the page indexed by search engines. The library hoped that if the wiki did not appear in search engine results, traffic on the wiki would be limited to those who knew the Web address and were looking specifically for it (i.e. library staff). The library also would not advertise or give the URL for the wiki to any external parties, such as students or faculty.

Next, the library had to decide who to invite to the wiki and what their role would be. Wikispaces' wikis can have two types of users – Members and Organizers. An Organizer has administrator-level privileges with access to every aspect of the wiki, whereas a Member can create and edit content but they neither have access to the wiki's settings, nor can delete pages/files or invite people to the wiki. After consideration, the library decided to invite both full- and part-time staff to the wiki, but only the full-time staff would be Organizers. This was done primarily so that they could delete content; however, a different option

would be to have the wiki manager as the only Organizer.

Another decision that had to be made was how often to back up the wiki. The library decided to back up the wiki once a semester. In Wikispaces, the entire wiki can also be exported in PDF format; this could serve as a type of backup or as a manual for new employees.

In addition to these initial set up decisions, over time, the wiki manager also outlined policies for the wiki concerning what content to add to the wiki, who would be responsible for adding content, the naming conventions the library would use and formatting guidelines.

Policies and procedures

After the initial setup, one of the first steps the wiki manager took was to define the scope of the wiki. For the SCC library, the scope was rather large – any information the library staff should know at either the reference or circulation desks. There were four main categories.

The first category was information about the college, such as where students could find the 1098-T tax form the school issues every year or where to find syllabi on the college's Web site. The second category was information about the library. This was primarily not only for tasks that do not come up much, such as deleting on the fly records from our library management system (LMS), but also for more general information like opening and closing procedures for the library. The third category was computer/technology information, including campus systems (email, learning management system, etc.), Microsoft Office programs and troubleshooting issues with the various technologies in the library.

The final category was information about research assignments – requirements for the assignment, tips, search hints and any good resources for the assignment. This aspect of the wiki has been invaluable to library staff. It saved time and effort among librarians, who did not have to start over each time a new student came to the reference desk with a common research assignment. Librarians could also pool

their ideas together so that over time, the wiki contained a robust set of notes on an assignment that could be recalled the next semester. The assignment information has also really helped the staff at other branch campuses to be included in the information sharing, as well as helped our paraprofessional who work the reference desk feel more confident in assisting students with research. Their feedback has been extremely positive; they love having a librarian's notes to guide them even when no librarian is available.

Once the scope of the wiki had been established, the library found it useful, over time, to loosely outline who was responsible for adding content to the wiki to keep it up to date. Even though the idea of a wiki was that anyone could add content (and they could), roles gradually evolved that have worked well at SCC. As one might suspect, the wiki manager has always added the bulk of the content, especially in the beginning; however, increasingly, the library's computer specialist adds not only the computer/technology information, but also the basic college/school information. Because the public services librarian is also the wiki manager, she takes the lead on adding the bulk of the information about research assignments, with the other librarians adding information as it comes up at the reference desk. Then, the technical services librarian adds information specific to our library management system. The rest of the paraprofessional staff could certainly add to the wiki if they desired, but experience has shown that they tend to use the information in the wiki more than they add information to it.

As the wiki grew, the structure of the wiki entries became more important, and the wiki manager had to make decisions on how information would be organized. The wiki could have been organized in two possible ways. Each and every topic on the wiki could have had its own page, which would have resulted in a lot of pages, or topics could be sorted into categories, and each category would then be a page. At SCC, the library opted for the latter option primarily, although there are exceptions. The wiki manger set up large category pages for the most-needed research assignments and

classes, as well as the different technologies on campus. Also, one "computer troubleshooting" page was set up with a long list of issues rather than having each issue listed on a separate page. This avoided any confusion with issues of naming. The wiki alphabetizes the pages in the left hand menu, so it helped the staff members to know that the computer troubleshooting issues were on one page rather than having to guess or remember the title of the page. For instance, for directions on how to embed a YouTube video in a PowerPoint presentation, should a staff member look under "e" for "embed", "v" for "video", "y" for "YouTube" or even "h" for "how to [. . .]?" This issue is avoided if staff members know there is one page in the wiki for PowerPoint and all the different issues concerning PowerPoint could be found on that page.

Also, as the wiki grew, it was very helpful to have naming conventions – for the same reasons stated above. Is PowerPoint alphabetized under "PowerPoint" or "Microsoft PowerPoint?" It became harder to find things as the list of pages got longer and longer. The wiki manager came up with some basic guidelines, and the manager enforces these (i.e. renames pages) when they are not followed. As an example, for research assignments, the SCC Library uses the course abbreviation instead of spelling out the name of the subject – so Abnormal Psychology is PSY 212.

In addition to naming conventions, formatting guidelines became useful as pages got longer. To ensure that pages were clean and easy-to-read, SCC utilized headers, bullets and numbering and avoided long paragraphs of text. Also, the table of contents widget was used for long pages; the widget automatically populates based on a page's headers. All these actions helped ensure that the content could be quickly scanned by staff while helping a student. The wiki manager also set up a template that appears when a member adds a new page, so that the staff had a basic format to start with as a guide to help enforce the desired format.

The final policy outlined by the wiki manager involved information that should not be added to the wiki. Because the wiki was technically viewable by anyone, SCC's policy (enforced by the wiki manager) was not to include passwords or any personal information, such as staff cell phone numbers. In addition, the entries should remain professional at all times; for instance, staff should not include personal opinions or critical comments about an assignment, instructor, students, etc.

Maintenance and upkeep

Just as important as the setup of the wiki was the continual maintenance required to keep the wiki relevant and valuable. The wiki manager took on most of this responsibility. These duties included making sure user accounts were up to date as employees left the library and new ones were hired, occasionally checking to make sure email notifications were still working for everyone, as well as continued encouragement for staff use of the wiki. When a staff member emailed information to the rest of the library staff, the wiki manager would often email them back to ask them to add the content to the wiki. The wiki manager enlisted the help of the computer specialist to keep information about technology up to date. Assignment information was usually updated as questions were asked at the reference desk. The wiki manager also periodically went through the wiki's entries to delete or update information as needed.

Conclusion/impact

The wiki has been in place for over five years and staff feedback on its impact has been very positive. Based on a survey of the staff, most of them use it at least 2-3 times a week and several use it daily. It has become an invaluable repository of information for the library staff. The library staff now has a well-organized, easy-to-use storage facility for the day-to-day information of running the library, as well as for the unusual questions that may only get asked once every couple of years.

In addition to being a collective organizational memory, the library wiki has improved communication among staff and as a result increased the quality of service SCC students receive. Information is shared across the board between day and evening shift, between campus locations and between librarians and paraprofessional staff. The staff is more confident in serving our students now that they have access to this shared knowledge, and SCC students receive a more consistent level of service no matter which staff member is on duty.

Katherine Stiwinter (*stiwinterk@sccsc.edu*) is based at Spartanburg Community College, Spartanburg, South Carolina, USA, and

Patricia R. Jordan is Library Director at Spartanburg Community College, Spartanburg, South Carolina, USA.