

Wikis are gaining rapid adoption with organisations at present, driven in part by the very visible success of Wikipedia, and other similar sites.

While organisations are still learning how to use wikis in practice, it is clear that they can offer considerable benefits.

Wikis can be used in many different ways, and this briefing will suggest that there are two broad categories of use: ‘wikis as collaboration tools’ and ‘wikis as intranets’. These are two distinct situations, and should be managed in very different ways.

Wikis as collaboration tools

Wikis are first and foremost collaboration tools, designed to meet the needs of groups, teams or other local activities.

There are many situations where wikis can potentially be of value, including:

- supporting team or project collaboration
- creating a knowledge base for a specific group of staff
- providing a home for collaboratively-created documentation or technical support information
- offering a place for brainstorming or other creative processes

In these cases, a group of people are using the wiki as a common area to contribute ideas or information. Easy ways to create and edit content make wikis very suitable for this kind of use.

When used in these ways, wikis should be managed like any other collaboration tool. This includes having a clear group of users and a defined purpose.

For more on this, see some of our past articles:

- *Successful collaboration requires support*
- *Start by ‘gardening’ collaboration*
- *Collaboration is about people*

The WikiPatterns site (www.wikipatterns.com) also provides valuable suggestions and tips for using wikis as collaborative tools.

Wikis as intranets

Going beyond local needs, some organisations are using wikis to implement (or replace) the whole corporate intranet.

Wikis offer a number of benefits in this situation:

- publishing is comparatively easy
- the whole organisation can contribute openly to the intranet
- the flexible structure of the wiki allows it to easily adapt to changing needs
- the site can grow organically, based on local and global needs

While wikis offer some unique benefits, they are really just acting as lightweight content management systems (CMS). In other words, the wiki provides a simple publishing mechanism for getting new content up onto the intranet.

While wikis can certainly be used as intranets, the end result is still an intranet in the traditional sense, managed as an intranet.

A wiki allows more staff to contribute to the intranet, which is very valuable. Content will not, however, organise itself. We also know from long experience that staff will struggle to keep their sections of the site updated without some support and governance.

Wikis can be used to encourage staff to think differently about the intranet, and this difference in ‘branding’ can be very valuable in building a sense of ownership and participation.

Beyond that, however, all the approaches and strategies for managing corporate intranets still apply. This includes having a central team to set the overall direction of the site, and an effective information architecture (site structure) for the site as a whole.

Like every intranet, a balance must be found between global structure and local participation.

For more on this, see our previous articles:

- *Three fundamental purposes of an intranet*
- *Why staff visit the intranet*
- *ABCD for intranets*
- *Exploring the Intranet Hive (parts 1 & 2)*