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Leverage the Business Benefit of SharePoint Wikis and Blogs

*If you think wikis and blogs are just for fun,
think again*

The old cliché that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover isn't the easiest thing to live. Malcolm Gladwell exposes in detail how the first impression can be very powerful in his book *Blink: We are conditioned to make snap judgments about the world around us*. It's our primary coping mechanism for the overwhelming amount of information that we're taking in every day.

It wouldn't be surprising to anyone that there are features in the SharePoint technology family that scream out that they are for consumer use and not for business. Looking quickly at wikis and blogs, as an example, it might be easy to conclude that they have no place in business. But that initial conclusion may be wrong. Think about the potential amount of business information your company loses each year due to turnover alone. It's practically a crime not to seek out ways to help capture and retain information that's being lost today. That's precisely what wikis and blogs can do for your organization.

Enter SharePoint

SharePoint certainly helps with the problem of sharing Microsoft Office documents among teams and making those documents more accessible through search. However, there's more to enterprise information than just the structured data captured in enterprise systems and Office documents.

How many critical pieces of information are kept only in private e-mail storage? How many critical pieces of information are never even written down? Even in my own work, I realize that I keep critical information in e-mail and on my personal hard drive. I consult with organizations to encourage people to share information and leverage tools to improve information retrieval, yet I'm not perfect, and I'm not alone.

One of the challenges for most people who continue to retain information in their own private data stores is that there's an effort -- a sometimes Herculean effort -- to get the information in a place where it can be used by others. Our goal as SharePoint experts has got to be to reduce the amount of effort necessary to get the information in the places where it is shareable.

Wiki what?

A few years ago while at an advanced training session for a product line that I work with, I met a man who asked if I knew of a good wiki tool to run side-by-side with SharePoint. When I asked why he wanted to run a wiki the only response was, "My boss wants it." There was no problem definition, there was no expected result, just a desire to try it. With the success of wikipedia (judged in both entries and Web hits), the idea of a wiki isn't a bad one.

A wiki is essentially a quick way to capture and connect information. Creating links between content in a wiki is simple and creating new content is equally simple. Key in the title of the topic you want as the link and if the content doesn't already exist, you'll be allowed to create it when you click on the link. It's cool to be sure but what is it good for?

The less-than-obvious answer is that it's a good kitchen "junk drawer." -- you know, the drawer in the kitchen that holds all of the stuff that didn't have a real home. But, because a wiki is searchable, it's substantially more useful than a kitchen junk drawer. A wiki becomes a place where you put information that doesn't have a good home elsewhere, or that you don't have time to convert into a more public facing document. It's a place for you to scratch out notes to yourself and your team mates who might already have some context for what you're working on and therefore don't need a complete document.

wikis are appearing in development teams that need to capture the knowledge developed while building some specific feature, but whose knowledge might be applicable to more than one person. For instance, it might contain information about a ThreadAborting exception (you get one when you do a Response.Redirect in an ASP.NET application and choose to end the response.) It might contain information about the type of object returned from an enumerator of a dictionary (typically a DictionaryEntry.)

Information like this might not be structured, and it may not be something that everyone needs, but it might save someone else hours of debugging. In short, wikis are great placeholders for the kernels of tacit information the team captures. With greater frequency, these sorts of entries are becoming useful to me as I forget how I solved a particular problem or dealt with a particular situation.

Blabbering blog

While some blogs might sound more like a soap box on which people can stand, there are many other reasons why blogs might solve some problems for an organization. Of course, the same sorts of things that might end up in a wiki could also end up in a blog. My public blog has many of the kinds of things I earlier indicated might make good wiki entries.

In addition to the obvious benefits of sharing technical solutions, blogs can serve another purpose. Unlike wikis, which don't develop a "voice" very well, blogs tend to develop the voice of the author(s). It becomes possible to stay connected to others more closely by knowing what they're working on and struggling with. It isn't the same as an e-mail or phone conversation. However, it lets you stay connected with a relatively small time investment.

With large teams where maintaining that feeling of community is both difficult and expensive, encouraging blogs, particularly from the leadership, is an effective way to continue a sense of community without direct interaction. If you want to see this effect in your organization already think about the company newsletter and its "From the CEO's desk" column -- or whatever yours is called. It's designed to help employees feel connected to the CEO and the organization.

Just like wikis, blogs can play an important role in your organization. They help communicate in ways that just aren't practical in larger groups. So, now that you know wikis and blogs can have a purpose in your organization, it's time to see how SharePoint makes them trivially easy to create and use.

Implementing a wiki in SharePoint

Because wiki support is built into SharePoint, creating a wiki page library is easy:

1. From the Site Actions Menu, click on Create
2. From the Create page, Libraries column, select the Wiki Page Library option.
3. Enter a name and description for the wiki. Leave the option to display the wiki on the quick launch bar, and click on Create.

That's how simple it is to create a wiki. Now that you've created one, it's time to create a link to a new page and then a new page of content in the wiki:

1. Click on the Edit button on the tool bar in the upper right-hand corner of the page.
2. Enter new text. Include at least one wiki link by placing two sets of brackets around some text. For instance, you can create a link to Advisor Guide to Microsoft SharePoint by entering `[[Advisor Guide to SharePoint]]` in the text of your wiki page. Click on OK to save your changes.
3. Notice that your link has a dotted underline under it (figure 1). Click on that link.

You'll be taken to a page for editing your new wiki page. Enter your text and click on the Create button to create the page.

Just as it's easy to create a wiki (this is known as a wiki Library in SharePoint terminology), it's easy to add new entries to the wiki. If the entry doesn't already exist, you'll be taken to a page where you can create it.



Figure 1: Adding links -- Placing double brackets around text creates a link.

Implementing a blog in SharePoint

Although you can create a wiki in an existing site (there's also a template for them in their own sites), blogs require their own site:

1. From the Site Actions menu, click on Create
2. From the Create page, in the Web Pages column click on the Sites and Workspaces entry.
3. On the New SharePoint Site page, enter a title and a description (optional), and a URL. (As an example, you can just type in Blog. The rest of the URL will be pre-pended.) In the Template Selection section, collaboration tab, select the Blog entry and click on Create.

After a short delay on the Operation in Progress page, you'll find yourself on the default page of your new blog site. Now that you have the site, it's time to customize the categories and then post your first blog entry. Both of these are easy to accomplish:

1. On the blog default page, click on the Categories link at the top of the quick launch bar.
2. On the Categories page, click on the edit button and edit the categories until they match the categories you want -- or delete them. When you're done, click on the title of the blog in the breadcrumb trail to return to the blog's default page.
3. In the Admin links on the right side of the page, click on the "Create a post" link.
4. On the Posts:New Item page, enter a title and body. Optionally, you can include a category, and the publishing time. When you're done, you can click on Publish to publish the blog entry (figure 2).

That's all it takes to create your first blog entry. In a few simple steps, you've created a way to record progress, communicate with an organization, and leverage knowledge.

Call to action

Now that you have the background information on why both wikis and blogs are important and useful business tools, and you know how to create them, you have all of the tools that you need to start implementing them within your organization. You can communicate their value to the broader organization and encourage them to try to leverage these new features of Windows SharePoint Services 3.

Are you already publishing blogs and/or wikis via SharePoint in your organization? If so, you can share your experiences in the Comments section at the bottom of this article..

Team Site > Blog > Posts > New Item

Posts: New Item


Items on this list require content approval. Your submission will not appear in public views until approved by someone with proper rights. More information on content approval.

Save As Draft Publish Cancel

* indicates a required field

Title *

Body



Category (None) ▼

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Figure 2: Create a blog posting -- Fill in the fields and hit Publish. That's it!

About The Author

Robert Bogue, MCSE (NT4/W2K), MCSA:Security, A+, Network+, Server+, INet+, IT Project+, E-Biz+, CDIA+, is president of Thor Projects LLC, which provides SharePoint Consulting services to clients around the country. He has contributed to more than 100 book projects and numerous other publishing projects. His latest book is The SharePoint Shepherd's Guide for End Users. (You can find out more about the book at www.SharePointShepherd.com.)

Bogue has been part of the Microsoft Most Valuable Professional (MVP) program for the past 5 years. He was most recently awarded for Microsoft Office SharePoint Server. Before that, Bogue was a Microsoft Commerce Server MVP and Microsoft Windows Servers-Networking MVP.

Bogue runs the SharePoint Users Group of Indiana (SPIN, www.spindiana.com), and he is also a member of the steering committees for the Indiana Windows Users Group and Indianapolis .NET Developer Association. In addition to speaking at local and regional events, Bogue speaks at national conferences. He blogs at www.thorprojects.com/blog, and you can reach him at Rob.Bogue@thorprojects.com.