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A Wiki Way of Communication

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In 2007, the Douglas County Library System began using wiki software to create an electronic depository of documents. The wiki has grown into a communications hub for the library system. We currently use the wiki to disseminate information, create and store electronic documents, track problem tickets for technology and cataloging questions, host staff discussions around various topics, summarize conferences and workshops, and track usage of equipment, vehicles, and meeting rooms. The wiki is open to all library staff from any staff computer throughout the library system. Basic tutorials on using the software are available to staff as well.

For those of you less familiar with the concept of a wiki, it is a Web site that allows users to create, edit, and organize pages with a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editor and other content management tools. You do not need programming skills to use a wiki. We use the TikiWiki software for our staff wiki. TikiWiki (<http://tikiwiki.org>) is one of the many available wiki software packages and comes with a variety of functions, from wiki pages to forums. The software is an open source project first developed in 2002 and has a group of 200 volunteer developers actively working on new features and fixing problems.

The majority of our procedures are on the wiki and available for everyone to view and edit. We began by allowing everyone to edit documents, and it has worked well for our library. For example, I can create a draft procedure page and delegate the testing and finishing of the procedure. Or I can delegate the entire procedure to someone, watch while it is being created, and later add to it.

We create documentation as we need it, update it instantly, and easily remove material when it becomes dated. We can monitor pages to see who edits what portion of the pages. If someone makes a mistake, we can go back to the page before it was edited by looking at its editing history. This function serves as an instant backup copy.

Anyone can monitor the page for changes. For example, in the circulation procedure manual, branch staff can monitor any pages that interest them. When changes are made, they are alerted via email. Each division manager is also able to use the wiki in different ways, allowing for adaptation to the communication methods of each manager and their staff.

This past year, we started using a table of contents function that allows pages to be organized by subject or function, providing easier navigation of the wiki. For example, this spring we created a group of wiki pages called “public computing” and gathered together information on our public computers (see Figure 1). We also gathered pages on Library2Go, Cybraryn, known problems with our public PC hardware and software, etc. This table of contents provides a first stop information source on common tech support questions and gives staff the ability to find answers before they report problems to technical support staff.

All of this information is linked to a set of wiki home pages for our branches and central library. Once at the home page, staff are only one or two clicks away from the information. This functionality allows us to think of these home pages as central repositories of information, reducing the amount of time someone needs to find a page. The wiki can also be searched directly by keyword or phrase. In the past three years, we have created several hundred wiki pages, and finding one with a common word becomes laborious. Again, the table of contents structure can be monitored by staff for updates.

Our library director uses an internal blog on the wiki to disseminate information on the budget, policies, and rumor control. Library staff can comment on any of his blog entries and interact with him. This provides him with a platform to test new ideas among staff and publish ongoing information about next year’s budget reduction. It provides direct access to





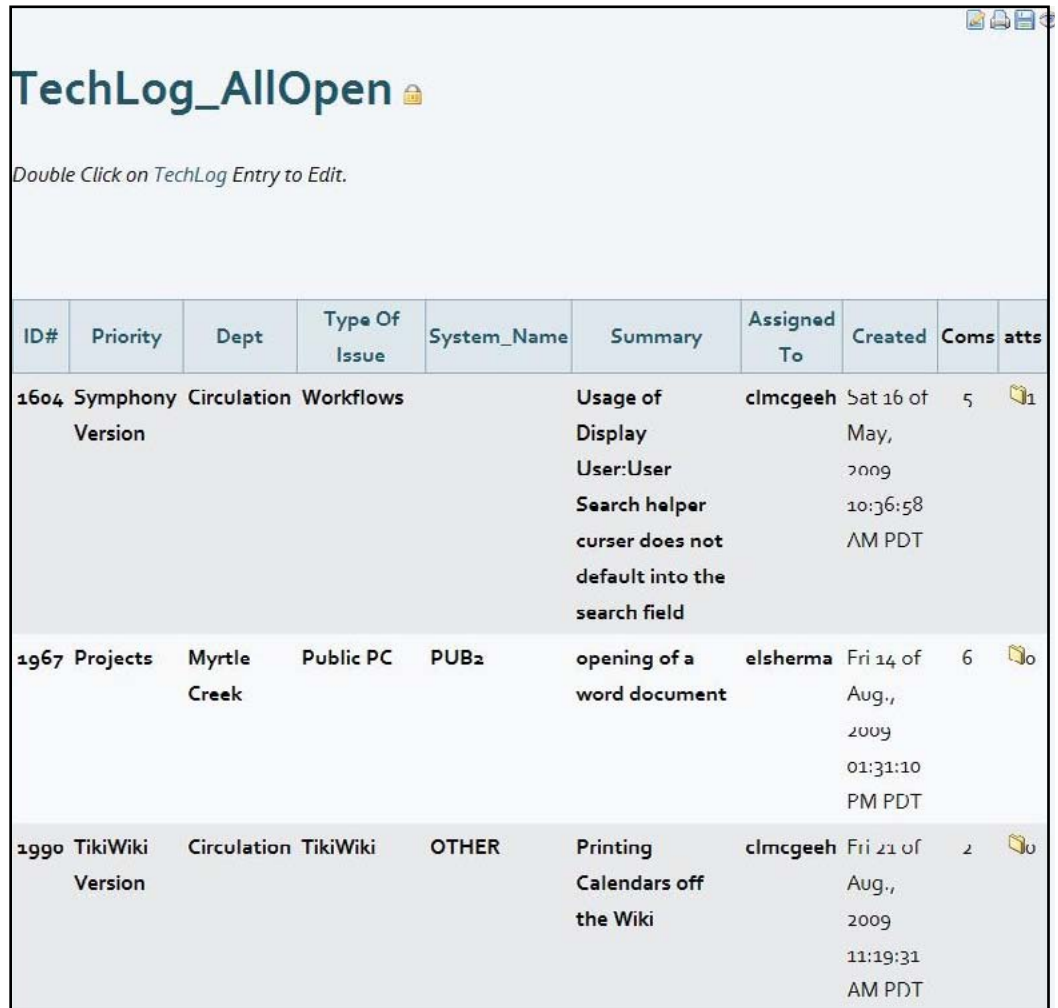
Figure 1. The table of contents for the public computing section of the wiki.

the library director and gives him the ability to communicate instantly with us.

We provide discussion forums on a variety of topics, such as the public catalog, cost-saving ideas, and staff training. I use the public catalog forum to discuss new ideas and provide information about changes in functionality. Our “Economies” forum gives staff a place to suggest how to save money or ask questions, such as whether turning out the lights saves money. It also provides a place to post links to information as we find it. People are still able to watch the conversation if they prefer not to participate. Unfortunately, the discussion forums are not used as much as they could be.

One of our more popular functions is the tracker. This is essentially a spreadsheet function with an HTML form to log technology-related problems (see Figure 2). The form gathers information from library staff about the problem, its priority, where it is happening, and information on who logged the issue. The form is programmed to pull information about the submitter from the wiki login, including username, group to which they belong, and email address. Any notes or questions are sent automatically back to the person who logged the question, creating a conversation about the issue. The tracker function allows us to know which problems are outstanding, for how long, to whom it is assigned, and any notes we wish to keep. When the problem is solved, we then have a support database of open and closed logs to search using the basic wiki search function.





ID#	Priority	Dept	Type Of Issue	System_Name	Summary	Assigned To	Created	Coms	atts
1604	Symphony	Circulation	Workflows		Usage of Display User:User Search helper curser does not default into the search field	clmcgeeh	Sat 16 of May, 2009 10:36:58 AM PDT	5	1
1967	Projects	Myrtle Creek	Public PC	PUB2	opening of a word document	elsherma	Fri 14 of Aug., 2009 01:31:10 PM PDT	6	0
1990	TikiWiki	Circulation	TikiWiki	OTHER	Printing Calendars off the Wiki	clmcgeeh	Fri 21 of Aug., 2009 11:19:31 AM PDT	2	0

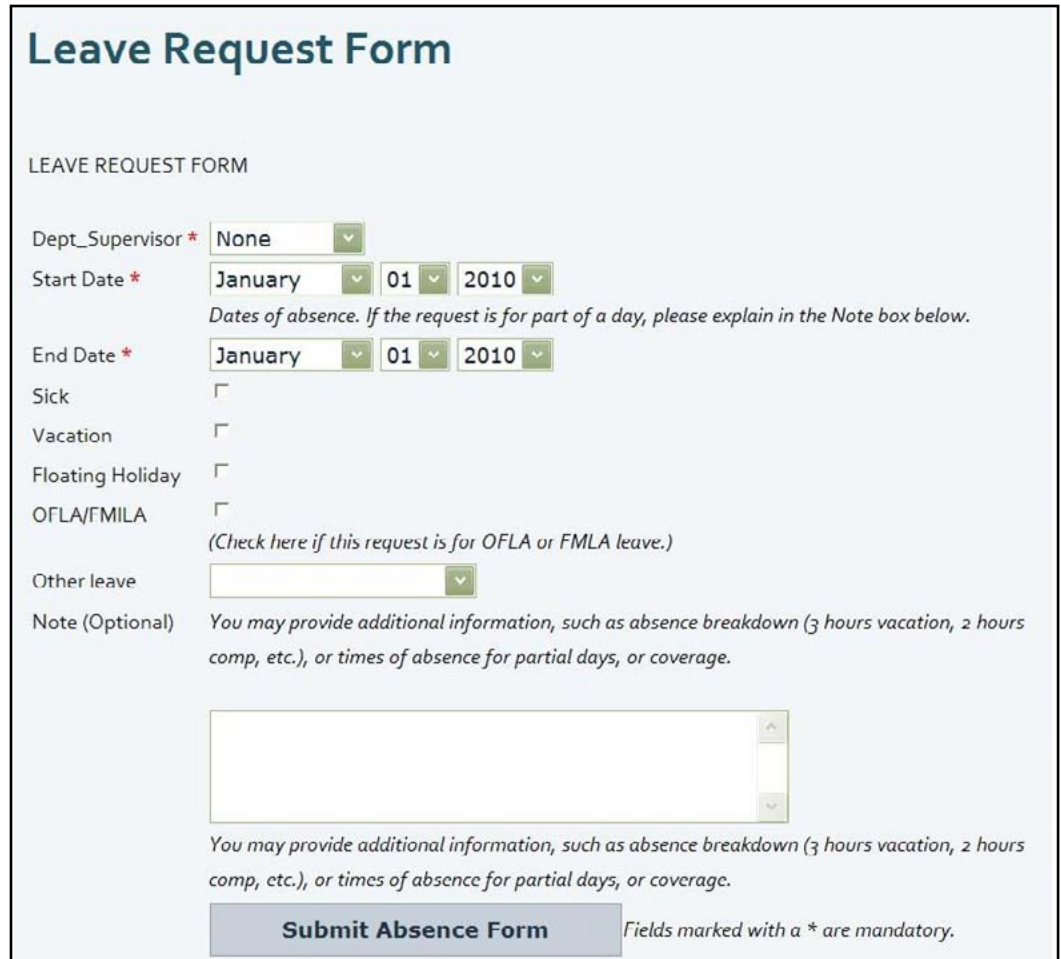
Figure 2. Open technology trouble tickets as seen on the wiki.

We have a default wiki page which everyone who logs into their account sees first. This page is used to provide system-wide information not provided in the library director’s blog. Here we post information on scheduled downtime for computers, new services being added, grants awarded, safety information, and more. The person posting the system-wide information can choose to send an all staff email alert when posting.

There is also a calendar function within the wiki that we use to track equipment loans to staff, vehicle usage, meeting rooms, and vacations. For example, we have a staff laptop and projector. Staff can go to the calendar for equipment and sign up for the laptop and projector on a specific day and time. Tech support staff monitor the calendar and receive an email with information on where and when the equipment is needed. They then either set it up or ship it out to a branch library.

This year we automated the leave request for sick and vacation time (see Figure 3). Once a leave request is approved the information is posted to the leave calendar by administrative staff, and we can see who is out on any given day.





Leave Request Form

LEAVE REQUEST FORM

Dept_Supervisor *

Start Date *

Dates of absence. If the request is for part of a day, please explain in the Note box below.

End Date *

Sick

Vacation

Floating Holiday

OFLA/FMLA

(Check here if this request is for OFLA or FMLA leave.)

Other leave

Note (Optional) *You may provide additional information, such as absence breakdown (3 hours vacation, 2 hours comp, etc.), or times of absence for partial days, or coverage.*

You may provide additional information, such as absence breakdown (3 hours vacation, 2 hours comp, etc.), or times of absence for partial days, or coverage.

Submit Absence Form *Fields marked with a * are mandatory.*

Figure 3. Staff can request sick and vacation leave on the wiki.

I've left the best for last. Our wiki provides the user with a personalization feature named MyTiki, empowering everyone to create a personal wiki site. You can create bookmarks and add additional functionality, including your own color theme.

Over the past three years, as we use and experiment with the wiki, we find better ways to communicate with our coworkers. Responsibility for communication is shifting, and employees no longer need to wait for information to come from their supervisors; they can find it for themselves, and help others find it. We provide the tools for them to create information, and this is the true power of the wiki. It provides better management of staff time, changing work processes throughout the organization. It allows more delegation and acceptance of responsibility for staff. And it provides a means to see how staff are contributing to the organization.

The wiki is a public place, and many of us are not used to having our information reside in an open environment even though we work in a public organization. It is a good first step in social networking for anyone still sitting on the sidelines. 🌿

