

TECH SUPPORT

Wiki me this

Law firms are starting to embrace the use of this browser-based collaborative system for creating, editing, linking, and organizing information.

BY GERRY BLACKWELL

Technologies such as wikis, blogs, social and media networking — collectively known as Web 2.0 — have at least one thing going for them: buzz. Everyone knows the words. But is there more to it?

Absolutely. And a growing number of firms are beginning to understand the value, in particular, of wikis. Toronto-based Hicks Morley Hamilton Stewart Storie LLP, a 100-lawyer employment and labour law firm, is one.

A wiki — the name comes from the Hawaiian word for fast — is an easy-to-use set of browser-based software tools that allow a group to collaborate on creating, editing, annotating, and discussing a set of documents accessible to all, over a network. A wiki tracks changes and notifies participants when they've been made. And it provides tools for hosting discussion groups in which collaborators can exchange information and comments.

The most famous example, of course, is Wikipedia, the web encyclopedia with something like 85,000 contributors and over two million entries.

Heather Colman, a law librarian who joined Hicks Morley's four-lawyer knowledge management team last year, helped spearhead the introduction of wikis into the firm, overseeing creation of several and laying the groundwork for more. "It just seemed a quick and easy way to set up an [internal] web site and publish information," Colman says. "There's no programming required; it's easy to structure. I think the biggest draw is the ease of creating and editing content."

Connie Crosby, now principal in the Crosby Group consulting firm but until recently law library manager at WeirFoulds LLP, is also enthusiastic about the potential of wikis in law

firms. "They tend to be particularly useful for projects where people are trying to come to a consensus," says Crosby. "And wikis can also work as a lightweight intranet, especially in small firms where they don't have the money or time or technology background [to create a full-scale intranet]."

Crosby herself has used wikis with other law librarians to plan and manage a professional conference. She has mainly seen firms using them to disseminate administrative information, with projects usually pushed forward by a librarian. That may be a good place to start, she suggests, but with the idea of eventually getting lawyers more involved.

Hicks Morley is already doing that. Like many firms, it has an intranet — an internal internet. It was built using Adobe Dreamweaver, a sophisticated but expensive and relatively difficult-to-use software tool. Only a few people in the firm

have the program on their systems and can update pages, the result being they were rarely updated.

One of Colman's first tasks at the firm was to do an audit of the intranet and figure out ways to ensure it was kept up-to-date in future. Her solution: wikis.

The first wiki she helped create was for the firm's litigation group. It was intended as a practice group intranet, a one-stop shop for access to information the lawyers need frequently and, usually, quickly — including internal and external contact information, mediation procedures, motions, links to court feeds, rules of procedure, and judgments.

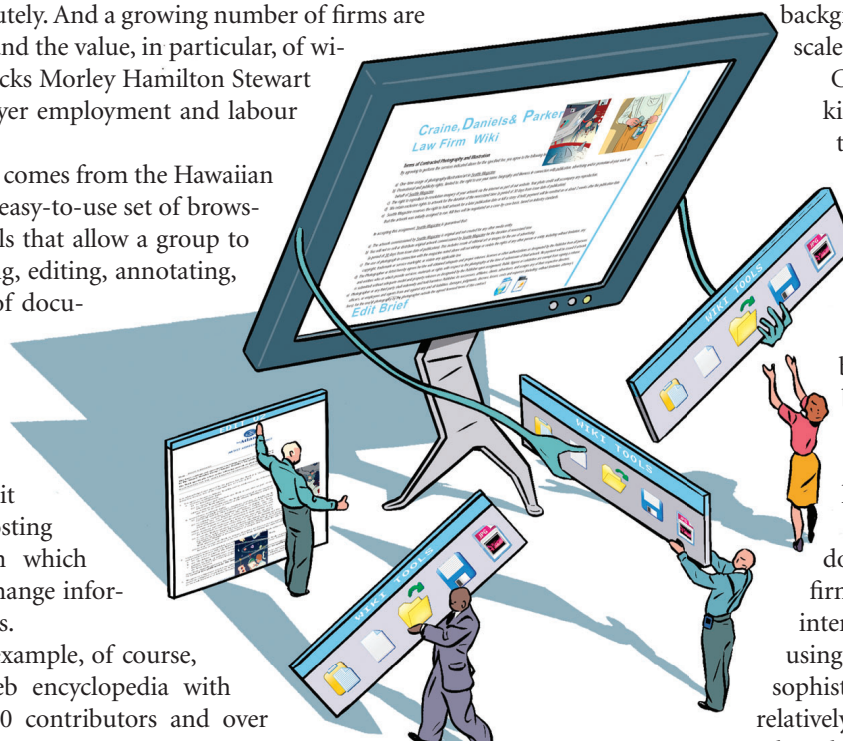


ILLUSTRATION: WWW.JASONSCHEIDER.COM

In the past, some of this information, such as collective agreements and arbitration awards, was stored on shared drives on the firm's network but wasn't always readily accessible.

"One of the biggest challenges was for other lawyers to find these documents afterwards," Colman explains. "[It] was usually accomplished via an e-mail request or by searching the shared drive. The wiki resolved this by providing direct links to documents if they were housed on client sites or by creating a document library on the wiki." Hicks Morley does not have a formal document-management system, she notes, so in this case wikis are also performing some of the functions of a DMS.

Another wiki was created for articling students with all the firm's electronic training materials in one place, along with a forum for students to post questions and partners and associates to respond with answers.

The firm started by experimenting with free DominoWiki software, based on IBM's Lotus Notes, and open-source programming tools and standards. Last summer, it assigned Colman to find a platform it could use for the future. There are two ways to implement wikis: install software on an internal server or use a software-as-a-service (SaaS) that provides browser-based software and hosting on a remote server. Many SaaS providers offer a free version with limited functionality and storage space.

The free wikis are a great place to start, Crosby says. She cites two: PBwiki from PBwiki Inc. (www.pbwiki.com) and Wetpaint from wetpaint.com Inc. (www.wetpaint.com). A third to consider is Clearspace X from Jive Software (www.jivesoftware.com/products/clearspace/clearspacex.jsp).

SaaS products are usually easy to set up, require little or no management by IT staff, and involve no capital outlay. But they are not fully under firm control and would be unavailable in the event of an internet service outage or problem with the host system. Service providers all promise ironclad security and reliability, but some firms will prefer to use internal server-based solutions. Hicks Morley is one. After looking at six or eight products last summer, it settled on ThoughtFarmer (www.thoughtfarmer.com), server-based software from Vancouver's OpenRoad Communications Ltd.

Colman is pleased with the decision. "One of the lessons we've learned is that it's really important to select a tool that's very easy to use. We did look at some products that had tons of features but we thought they would be too overwhelming [for users]. That's why we picked ThoughtFarmer — it's intuitive,

it has a nice clean look, and it's easy to pick up."

Colman also liked the Web 2.0 features that some other products didn't have, such as RSS (really simple syndication) as a mechanism for notifying participants of changes, and tagging, a simple way to group pages by subject or theme making it easier to browse a document base. ThoughtFarmer also lets individual Hicks Morley users set up their own personal wikis to store links and documents they use all the time. It also lets them search for documents across all of the firm's wikis.

After running a six-week ThoughtFarmer pilot project with one small practice group, the firm gave Colman the go-ahead to roll the product out across the firm. She is now helping transfer already-built wikis from DominoWiki to ThoughtFarmer, and to build new ones.

More and more practice groups are getting interested in wikis. But they are no panacea, Colman and Crosby warn. And the build-it-and-they-will-come approach is unlikely to ensure success. One challenge in some firms will be overcoming lawyers' disinclination to collaborate and their unwillingness to publicly air work in progress, says Crosby. Wikis, after all, are designed to foster collaboration. Firms need to consider how good a fit they will be, given their culture.

Colman says it takes at least two champions to push the concept forward. One U.S. firm offered employees a chance to win a lottery prize for every contribution they made to the new firm wiki.

Concern about irresponsible or inflammatory contributors sabotaging entries or posting the equivalent of graffiti — something that has happened on Wikipedia — are probably unfounded in the corporate environment, Crosby says. Still, wikis give administrators the option to control who contributes, and some firms or practice groups will want to do that. At Hicks Morley, some groups assign paralegals to update their wikis, others let administrative assistants do it, and they limit other contributors to ensure accuracy of information. But some let everyone contribute, and a few lawyers are already jumping in enthusiastically, says Colman.

Getting lawyers involved is where the real payoff will come. Wikis are an inexpensive way to get more involved in helping build the firm's knowledge base — not as a replacement for other knowledge-management efforts, Crosby stresses, but as a complement. **Q**

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