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# To PB or not PB: making wikis work for your library



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Library staff at Leeds Metropolitan University have recently launched a wiki to help them with the organisation of the information they need for their day-to-day enquiry and circulation duties. Here we outline the development of the project and the reasons behind choosing a wiki as the best format for this information.

Since 2002 the libraries at Leeds Met have maintained an intranet which was used to collect those important pieces of information which seemed to constantly slip the net. Whilst our official Library Online website contained a wealth of information for both students and staff, a working group realised that we required an informal way of collating vital information which is hard to remember when working on our Help and Information Points. This includes the questions which were asked about the wider university as well as our library services.

The idea was that a single point of reference would provide consistency of service across the campus libraries and finally make our working environment as paper free as possible. Coupled with this, in September 2006, our information and circulation desks combined, further reinforcing the need to provide consistent and easily accessible information to all service point staff. With a new title for our joint enquiry and circulation

desk being the Help and Information Point, we decided to rename our intranet Help and Information Point Online (HIPO).

The intranet was developed by Information Officers across the two main Leeds Met campus libraries (Headingley and Civic Quarter). As the project developed, it became clear that staff across all teams found it of value and by the beginning of this year there were around 200 pages of information hosted here. Content ranged from technical tips for allowing students to access our student portal from various browsers, to the nearest bus stops to campus, to where to go for help with wireless networking in halls of residence. Whilst we realised that we couldn't provide a comprehensive help service for all university services, we wanted to give our staff some, if not all, of the information they required, even if the question was not directly related to the library.

As the intranet developed a few problems began to emerge. Mainly this centred around the use of Dreamweaver as our principal web authoring tool. While most Information Officers had the experience and confidence to use Dreamweaver successfully, we found that staff from other teams were lacking the skills or confidence to get involved. Training was offered, but condensing a basic Dreamweaver tutorial into appealing bite sized chunks proved unfeasible, and many trained staff lost interest. There was also the added problem of ensuring that the software was installed on each staff member's PC.

Much of the inspiration for the project to convert our intranet pages to a wiki can be attributed to a course which Susan attended in June 2007. Run by Libraries for Nursing, the course detailed Web 2.0 developments and their applications within the library context. It encouraged delegates to put their learning into practice, and Susan believed a wiki project would be ideal. Not only would this hopefully organise our information in a better way, but also allow staff to learn about wikis in a practical and useful manner.

So, why did we feel a wiki would be to our advantage? Firstly, by making the right choice of provider, we hoped to allow all staff the means to edit pages using a plain text editor, rather than HTML. Secondly, we believed that a wiki's ability to retain and restore all previous versions of a page would be a bonus. Finally we hoped that the simple layout and search function would help all levels of staff to locate information more easily than the previous site.

The next step was to choose our wiki provider. Leeds Met recently launched a student wiki and we considered using the same technology for our site. However, we found that the lack of a plain text editor would mean a certain degree of HTML authoring experience would be necessary. As we were trying to get as wide a range of contributors as possible we decided to look outside of the university for a wiki provider.

As with many technologies, a plethora of wiki providers exist. To narrow our choice we used WikiMatrix ([www.wikimatrix.org](http://www.wikimatrix.org)), which matches wiki providers to your criteria. This suggested nine potential providers, which were then eliminated one by one by means of further research.

The clear candidate which emerged was PBwiki (<http://pbwiki.com>), an American company which prides itself on functionality and high levels of user support (to find out what the PB in PBwiki stands for, please see their website!). They also provide free and subscription services depending on your needs.

Once we'd signed up and chosen our domain name, it was simply a case of transferring the content from our previous website. Most of this was easily accomplished simply by copying and pasting. As the wiki is hosted entirely by PBwiki, this also gives you administrator control without the chore of server maintenance.

This was also a perfect opportunity to look again at how our information on HIPO was organised. As the website had evolved, information had become scattered, and the different campuses were tending to create individual pages for their own procedures, rather than combining with related information. For example, routine checks on our IT facilities had split into two pages according to campus. In some ways this explained why the number of pages had risen to 200 over the years, as when we came to re-assess what needed to be on the wiki, we found that this figure could be reduced to approximately 100 pages.

Content maintenance of the previous HIPO site had been the responsibility of page owners. We hoped that the ethos of a wiki would encourage all staff to contribute to the site, but the only true way to test this was by launching the site.

The timing of the launch proved to be a difficult decision. Whilst the bulk of the work had been

accomplished over summer 2007, it was felt that a launch close to the new academic term would ensure maximum awareness. However, due to the barrage of emails and information which most staff receive prior to a new term, we opted for a fairly low key approach. An article was written for our internal library staff newsletter, and an email was circulated to all staff. We tried to keep the tone light and stressed the advantages of changing the site to a wiki.

Once the information had been sent, it was then a case of waiting to see who would begin to use the site. Our main concerns were the reaction of our circulation teams and the need for positive first impressions which would encourage word of mouth recommendations. In fact the positive staff reaction far exceeded our expectations with over twenty staff registering for the wiki within the first few hours. More encouraging still, however, was that a page had been edited within a day, and this was by a member of our circulation team.

Over the last term we have run brief introductory training sessions, open to all library staff, but made these deliberately low key for two reasons. Firstly, we wanted to stress how intuitive using the wiki is, and secondly we had produced comprehensive instructions which were held on the wiki itself. We wanted to give a quick guide to getting on to the wiki, and then leave the user to read further instructions online and build their confidence in this way.

We have been very encouraged with the response so far. We're hoping that over time the use of the site will grow, and staff will feel it truly belongs to them. We are anticipating initial teething problems with the self regulation of the site, particularly with the new structure of some pages. In fact, there have already been pages created which need to be absorbed into a more generally themed page. However, at this stage we are happier to let staff build their confidence in using the wiki, especially as these will be our contributors of the future.

We can happily report that all of PBwiki's website promises have been delivered. Emails to America have been answered overnight, and the user forums have provided support for most other things. Other than their routine downtime, the site has also run without any problems. We're sure there are many other wiki providers out there who would also be able to make your transition to Web 2.0 quite painless. Go forth and wiki.