

Using and Customizing MediaWiki for Documentation Projects

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Back in 2002, Comet Computer was one of the early adopters of wiki technology and has since implemented many wiki-based solutions for its customers. Almost all projects included customization of some degree. The success story of Wikipedia is well known. The software behind this project, MediaWiki, is one of the most popular free and open-source wiki engines. MediaWiki is fairly easy to customize by using either community or custom extensions. This presentation uses real-life examples to demonstrate ways of tuning MediaWiki to meet the specific needs of technical writers.

What is a Wiki?

Most people know wikis through Wikipedia but wikis already existed long before this famous creation of Jimmy Wales. The first wiki was created and invented by Howard Cunningham in year 1994. The original idea was to provide a simple platform for sharing ideas. This has not changed much. Wikis are still used for sharing ideas and also for working and especially for writing in teams.

Wikipedia says: "Wiki is an interactive website, which the visitors can edit. Visitors can create new documents and edit existing ones by using a web-browser and somewhat simple mark-up language."

In other words, it is a simplified content management system that enables fast publishing without complicated workflows.

Wikis can be created with many different software products; there are already hundreds of these so called "wiki-engines". There are many open source wiki-engines, there are commercial wiki-engines and you can find wiki-functionality in other types of software, like for example in SharePoint, Lotus Notes etc.

Few examples of productive uses of wikis:

- Coordination
- Guidelines
- Brainstorming
- Highly dynamic processes
- Collecting input
- Doing reviews
- Project management
- Collaboration
- Collaborative writing
- Glossaries
- Article collections (like Wikipedia)

Useful Functions for Technical Writers, using MediaWiki as an example

In our example projects we have used MediaWiki as wiki-engine. We choose MediaWiki for these projects because it is:

Highly suitable for glossaries

Easy to learn

Easy to set up

Solves most of the project challenges (“out-of-the-box”)

Fairly easy to extend

In our example projects we had advantages of using built-in techniques, like templates, template-preloading, template-inclusion of non-template contents (modularizing), section editing, and separating actual content and organizational content in different namespaces. We also made use of built in system for appropriate categorizing of actual content.

MediaWiki mark-up is easy to learn and offers enough possibilities for text formatting. Headings, paragraphs, preformatted text, bold, italics and mono spaced.

Missing features

While in some projects a plain vanilla wiki installation is enough, there are still some projects with special requirements. It is very difficult, or even impossible, to find a wiki-engine that fulfils each and every wish for any project. Luckily, most of the wiki-engines are extendable with plug-ins. For MediaWiki, there are already lots of community extensions available and the plug-in API is well documented, which makes it easy to develop own plug-ins. It is theoretically possible to implement almost anything as plug-in or extension but this is not always cost effective. Therefore, it is very important to evaluate how a specific wiki-engine meets the project requirements. In our case, we could cover about 2/3 of needed extensions with free community extensions and we programmed the rest ourselves.

Lessons learned

Wikis are great tools for collaborative working and writing but there are some things you should keep in mind. Before you start, it is important to evaluate and compare different wiki-engines, since they have often a bit different approaches and are suitable for different types of projects. Migrating from one system to another in the middle of a project can be very time consuming.

Project members will easily accept right tools in right place. Especially the new generations of "Digital natives" find it very easy to work with wikis. In some cases extra attention is still needed to motivate all participants. This can be mostly achieved by training, practical examples and internal marketing.

For co-workers who are maintaining the software itself, technical know-how in some degree is also needed. Experience in installing and programming web applications is helpful. Use of extensions is often very tempting but can also be a pit-fall in matter of costs.

Wikis are meant to be simple, so try to keep your wiki as simple as possible.

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