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The Wiki Workplace

Thanks in part to younger workers, more companies are using social computing tools to aid collaboration and to foster innovation and growth

By [Don Tapscott](#) and [Anthony D. Williams](#)

When Robert Stephens graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in computer science in 1994, he wanted to start a business consultancy. But hiring a staff of good consultants takes a lot of money, and Stephens had little, so he founded Geek Squad, a cheekily branded computer repair company that helps consumers navigate the increasing complexity of electronic gadgetry.

From humble origins, Geek Squad grew and grew. In 2002, after nearly a decade of profitable operations, the company was acquired by consumer electronics giant Best Buy ([BBY](#)).

At the time, Stephens had 60 employees and was booking \$3 million in annual revenue. Today, working out of 700 Best Buy locations across North America, Geek Squad's 12,000 service agents clock nearly \$1 billion in services and return some \$280 million to the retailer's bottom line.

For Stephens, Geek Squad's meteoric success was exhilarating and challenging. How, for example, would he recruit and train an ever-growing number of employees, let alone keep them in the loop and gather their input into the business?

One day, Stephens asked his deputy director for counterintelligence at headquarters how things were going in the field. "I worry about those agents in Anchorage, Alaska," he said. "There are about 20 of them there, and I worry about them staying connected to the mission."

"Oh, those Anchorage guys, I talk to them all the time," the deputy director replied.

Prodded for details, he sheepishly told Stevens that they all play *Battlefield 2* online. "With each server, you can have 128 people simultaneously fighting each other in a virtual environment," said the director. "We wear headsets and use Ventrilo software so that we can talk over the Internet while we are running around fighting."

Stephens, who now joins in himself from time to time, says: "The agents taunt each other, saying, 'Hey, I see you behind the wall.' But then, while we're running along, rifles in our hands, one of the agents behind me will be like, 'Yeah, we just hit our revenue to budget,' and somebody else will be like, 'Hey, how do you reset the password on a Linksys router?'"

Welcome to the Wiki Workplace.

RISE OF THE WIKI WORKPLACE

The information and communication technologies that are transforming media, culture, and the economy are also reshaping how companies and employees function. New social computing tools such as wikis and blogs put unprecedented communication power in the hands of employees.

Some companies worry about the risks of uncontrolled communications leaking out. But a growing number believe the new collaboration tools are good for innovation and growth—they help employees connect with more people, in more regions of the world, with less hassle and more enjoyment, than earlier generations of workplace technology.

Geek Squad is a case in point. Many thousands of Geeks are using a growing suite of collaboration technologies to brainstorm new products and services, manage projects, swap service tips, and socialize with their peers.

Best Buy CEO Brad Anderson says empowering employees to collaborate in unorthodox ways is all about "unleashing the power of human capital." As the retailer continues to crush its competition, it would seem that Anderson is onto something. Already North America's largest consumer electronics seller, the profitable company plans to open more than 100 new stores this year, while ailing competitors such as Circuit City ([CC](#)) are shuttering locations.

Much of this is due to a younger generation of workers who embrace Web-based tools in a way that often confounds older workers. Nourished on instant messaging, blogs, wikis, chat groups, playlists, peer-to-peer file sharing, and online multiplayer video games, the Net Generation will increasingly bring a heightened comfort with technology, inclination toward social connectivity, more emphasis on creativity and fun, and greater diversity to the companies they work for and to the companies they found themselves.

Eighty million young people are entering the U.S. workforce. Are today's senior managers ready?

BOTTOM-UP KNOWLEDGE CREATION

Some companies, like Geek Squad, are already finding that internal blogs and wikis help stimulate creative thinking and capture knowledge. One example: Typically, high-level strategy documents are formulated by a handful of people atop the corporate hierarchy. At Xerox ([XRX](#)), Chief Technology Officer Sophie VanDebroek turned the process inside out by setting up a wiki that would allow researchers in the R&D group to define collaboratively the company's technology strategy.

VanDebroek expects a more robust technology roadmap and a much stronger competitive strategy section as a result. "We'll get more content and knowledge in all of our areas of expertise," she says, "including everything from material science to the latest document services and solutions."

Another trailblazer is IBM ([IBM](#)), which in September, 2006, invited employees in more than 160 countries—along with their clients, business partners, and even family members—to join in a massive, wide-open brainstorming session it called the InnovationJam. More than 100,000 participants took part in a series of moderated online discussions taking place in two 72-hour sessions.

IBM expects the insights gleaned will transform industries, improve human health, and help protect the environment over the course of the coming decades. Chief Executive Sam Palmisano believes so strongly in the concept that he's committed up to \$100 million to develop the ideas with the most social and economic potential.

GETTING STARTED

Where should a wiki newbie begin? Much like any new technology, collaborative tools should be piloted in order to prove their utility.

Early wins make it easier to gain credibility and the necessary organizational buy-in. Pilots also allow project leaders to create and optimize appropriate incentive systems, control/governance, quality assurance, and trust
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leaders to create and optimize appropriate incentive systems, control/governance, quality assurance, and trust mechanisms before a wider rollout.

For example, at Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, a European investment bank, employees started using wikis informally in the IT department to document new software. Soon afterward, wikis began to migrate into the broader workplace environment, where teams saw them as a way to get collaborative projects up and running quickly.

When Dresdner Chief Information Officer J.P. Rangaswami learned of the process, he was intrigued by the technology's versatility. The company went ahead with more pilots, and after just six months the traffic on the internal wiki exceeded that on the company's intranet.

Lead users have decreased e-mail volume by 75% and cut the company's meetings time in half. Rangaswami says: "We recognized that these tools would allow us to collaborate more effectively than existing technologies."

READY OR NOT

Wikis, blogs, and other tools will arrive in the workplace whether companies are ready or not, as younger employees tend to develop their own self-organized networks that cut across traditional corporate divisions. Increasingly these employees will be capable of interacting as a global, real-time workforce. Indeed, if Linux, Wikipedia, and other collaborative projects are any indication, it will often be easier and less expensive for workers to self-organize productively than to squeeze them into more traditional business units.

Could too much openness and self-organization in the workplace lead to disorganization, confusion, and lack of focus and direction? Not according to Google ([GOOG](#)) CEO Eric Schmidt, whose employees are allowed plenty of self-direction.

"It doesn't feel like you have the kind of control over the way in which decisions are made that you might have had in a more traditional environment" Schmidt says. And yet he is convinced that self-organization is better. "You talk about the strategy, you get people excited, you tell people what the company's priorities are, and somehow it works out."

Clear goals, structure, discipline, and leadership in the organization will remain as important as ever and perhaps more so as self-organization and peer production emerge as organizing principles for the workplace. The difference today is that these qualities can emerge organically as employees seize the new tools to collaborate across departmental and organizational boundaries, and, yes, "the power of human capital" can be unleashed.

*Don Tapscott, author of [Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World](#), is the founder and chairman of nGenera Insight. Other books he has authored or co-authored include *Wikinomics*, *Paradigm Shift*, *The Digital Economy*, and *Growing Up Digital*. Anthony D. Williams is an author, researcher and former lecturer at the London School of Economics. He is vice-president and executive editor at *New Paradigm* and co-author of *Wikinomics*.*

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