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Collaborative knowledge at the grass-roots level: the risks and rewards of corporate wikis

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Abstract

The open source movement is founded on the concept of democratising knowledge to freely collaborate and exchange information at the grass-roots level. As Wikis are philosophically grounded in this movement, the use of corporate Wikis in the collaborative creation and operation of knowledge management systems holds considerable potential. However, the impact of using corporate Wikis in the business environment has uncovered some challenging issues such as licensing, accountability and liability regarding copyright, which may require a change in the way we think about intellectual property and licensing in this connected world.

Keywords

Collaborative, Knowledge, Grass, roots, Level, Risks, Rewards, Corporate, Wikis

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70. Collaborative Knowledge at the Grass-roots Level: the Risks and Rewards of Corporate Wikis

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Abstract

The open source movement is founded on the concept of democratising knowledge to freely collaborate and exchange information at the grass-roots level. As Wikis are philosophically grounded in this movement, the use of corporate Wikis in the collaborative creation and operation of knowledge management systems holds considerable potential. However, the impact of using corporate Wikis in the business environment has uncovered some challenging issues such as licensing, accountability and liability regarding copyright, which may require a change in the way we think about intellectual property and licensing in this connected world.

Keywords: Corporate Wiki, Open Source, Intellectual Property, Knowledge Management

Introduction

In the current business environment where organisations are becoming increasingly aware of knowledge as a critical enterprise asset and resource, knowledge creation, production and distribution have placed strains on the copyright laws in Australia. Although knowledge thrives in an environment that supports growth and innovation, it challenges efforts to develop a legal framework to address copyright issues presented by corporate Wikis that operate in a digital networked environment.

The paper describes some of the trends used for copyright protection for Wikis, some of the legal issues raised with open source licenses and suggests guidelines for choosing a copyright license that is suitable for corporate Wikis. Few people seem to have a clear picture of what is acceptable or legal in copying or sharing information on a Wiki. Coupled with a proliferation of licenses, it increases the difficulty for Wiki creators, especially those who do not have a legal background to understand the formal jargon and want to choose the licence that is most suitable for their needs. The significance of this paper is to serve as a bridge to those who want to reap the benefits of corporate Wikis but are hesitant because of copyright issues.

Knowledge at the grass roots level

Recognition of the value of knowledge as an organisational resource is growing fastest at the grass roots level rather than at the corporate-wide or enterprise level (Grudin 2006). Bruns and Humphrey (2005) observed that the economy is shaped through changing patterns of consumption, where grass roots creativity and user-led innovation are key to the development of economic and social value. Grass roots creation of knowledge relies on decentralisation, collaboration, employee participation and a holistic organisational view that seeks to promote an organisational culture that supports such sharing that can lead to more effective knowledge management. Due to the ad hoc and collaborative nature of Wikis, a corporate Wiki can be

envisioned as a technology for enabling grass roots knowledge management in a business environment.

Characteristics of Wikis

A Wiki is an evolving knowledge repository where users are encouraged to make additions to this repository by adding new documents or working on existing ones (Pfaff & Hasan 2006). Wiki, which means ‘quick’ in Hawaiian, is a website for online collaboration that requires no technical knowledge. Wiki pages are written in standard HTML and can be viewed by any web browser. The pages are easily located through the use of a search engine where the user can search for text across the whole site. The user can edit any page through his or her browser by typing the material and create new links and see the changes instantaneously.

The Advantages of a Wiki

Toppling the Information Overload

Traditionally, the channels of information have been controlled by those who have wealth or influence, making a few individuals in the society information overlords. Things that seem to matter in the real world, such as age, social status, and level of education, are often dismissed as unimportant online. The Wiki upholds the same democratising effect because it fulfils the age old quest for knowledge that is shared, discussed, published and available to all where the power to create, is distributed collectively to improve content quality.

Knowledge Creation and Management

The business environment is often dictated by the pace of change and the need by the company to remain competitive. A corporate Wiki is a better method of knowledge management than a standard knowledge portal because a Wiki creates a social network where people learn and teach each other and this social network forms the basis for knowledge creation. For example, corporate Wikis are useful to involve users in writing a user's guide so the customers can contribute questions that the manual writers would never have anticipated.

Productive ecosystem

The formal organisation consists of structures, hierarchies and processes that are set down on paper and in job titles, while the informal organisation is made up of a complex network of relationships between employees in different departments or business units and at different levels of seniority within the company. The formal organisation is largely based on predictions of how work will happen but does not take into account the changes that might creep up on the formal organisation if it is unaware. By contrast, the informal organisation relates to how the company actually operates. Culture, networks, relationships and the emotional motivation people have for work that is not related to bonuses or pay, are the things that connect people to the organisation and to each other. Procter and Gamble has developed a productive ecosystem of external collaborators that creates value more effectively than a hierarchically organised business (Tapscott and Williams 2007). Openness gets rid of the natural inertia of bureaucracies. A corporate Wiki harnesses the power of self organisation enabling mass collaboration to become a new mode of production.

Copyright and the impact on the ‘commons’

Although technology has decreased the overall costs for production and distribution of knowledge and permits the easy modification of information into new forms of knowledge and works, the paramount challenge is technology's ability to subvert traditional means of information asset protection and make copyright infringement a reality, either deliberately or

through ignorance (Maxwell 2002). The struggle between established copyright laws and the democratisation of knowledge is similar to the historical fight for the right to land ownership in the English system of common lands when there is talk about intellectual commons or information commons.

Drahos (2006) defines 'intellectual commons' as referring to information, such as verified knowledge, information embodied in technology, the products of technology (for example, music) and many other discrete classes of information. He adds that an open intellectual commons is necessary to promote freedom and diversity of information societies. He adds that governments "have been corrupted by the wealth of big business, will not deliver the institutions of knowledge that citizens want." A Wiki can be a type of 'information commons' that are common spaces where people can share experiences and have unanticipated, un-chosen exposures to the ideas of other people (Hasan & Pfaff 2006).

The Australian Copyright Act of 1968 states that copyright is the right to control the use of one's own work (Comlaw 2007). Creators or owners of materials can choose to give, sell or license this right to others. Copyright law tries to achieve a balance between creators and users of copyright works where creators or copyright owners have access to economic incentives to encourage the creation of more novel work while at the same time, giving the public access to created works. Under Australian law, online distribution of copyright works covers fair dealing, the use and copying of computer programs and licensing options allow users to use copyright works, in exchange for remuneration. In fair dealing, the use of the work must fall under the categories of: review or criticism, research or study, news reporting or for judicial proceedings or professional advice (Comlaw 2007). However a serious challenge is posed to this balance due to a leap in technology pitting the public's right to universal access with the private economic rights of the copyright owner (Samuelson & Davis 2000).

Legal Interpretation

Faced by the plethora of copyright licences, it makes the job of Wiki creators more difficult when attempting to choose the correct licence to meet their needs. These sections address some of the legal terminology and a selection of licences commonly used.

Free Software

A common feature of Free Software licenses is that the content must be made available to the public who will have the right to make derivative works. The licenses do not have warranties and make an effort to limit liabilities. Many Wikis avoid taking the path of traditional proprietary approach by using liberal licences such as public domain, GNU operating system and Creative Commons licences.

Public Domain

To begin, it is important to point out that the term 'public domain' is not a licence. Instead, it means the material is not copyrighted and no license is needed. The author that releases his/her work to the public domain forgoes the copyright. The public has the freedom to use, modify, remove the author's name and claim copyright ownership. If something is in the public domain, it is free to be used however you like with no restrictions. It is easy to confuse open source software with software in the public domain which is usually readily available over the internet and can be downloaded for free, at no cost. However, there are a few key differences.

Open source

Open source is not necessarily freely available with restrictions. Open source is made available under the terms of an open source licence including the use of the software and/or the code is subject to the terms of the licence. Open source licenses must permit non-exclusive commercial exploitation of the licensed work, make available the work's source code, and permit the creation of derivative works from the work itself. The fundamental purpose is to deny anybody the right to exclusively exploit a work. However they are more suitable for computer software than for Wiki contents.

Copyleft

A copyleft licence does the opposite of what proprietary licenses usually do (Potorti 2005). While proprietary licenses make it illegal for others to use original material without the creator's consent, a copyleft license is a free license that uses copyright laws to protect the freedom. This means that every person who receives a copy of a work has the same rights to study, use, modify, and release the modified new works.

Types of Licensing***GNU General Public Licence***

The General Public Licence (GPL) is a copyleft licence designed for free software that grants users the same rights that the law grants exclusively to the copyright holder. This includes the freedom to access and use source code, alter and re-distribute the copies of the modified program. Restrictions are placed on those who want to distribute the program or derivative works to keep the software and derivative work free (FSF 2007) so as to build a community that uses a software/product commons that everyone can contribute to and no one has the right to take it away.

GNU Free Documentation License (FDL)

The GNU FDL is complementary to GNU GPL, to address certain needs that were not met by licenses originally designed for software. The purpose of this license is to make a manual, textbook, or other functional and useful document 'free' in the sense of freedom. *Wikipedia* which is a multi-lingual Wiki of encyclopaedia entries; and *Wikia* sites which are Wikis that allows the *Wikia* community to create a repository of free content, come under a copyleft licence giving the public free access to the contents. Wiki users have the freedom to improve the information on the Wiki site and redistribute the original or modified information commercially or non-commercially. In addition, the GNU FDL preserves for the author and publisher a way to get credit for their work, while not being considered responsible for modifications made by others. (FSF 2002). The GNU FDL Version 1.2 is recommended for Wiki sites because they contain teaching materials for different topics, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and any other works that provide information for practical use.

Creative Commons (CC) licences

Creative Commons was developed as a response to the creation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (2004) in the U.S. that pushed the balance of power towards copyright owners at the expense of copyright users. Creative Commons licences are non-copyleft free licences intended for artistic works and entertainment works, designed for all kinds of digital content except for software, including art works, photographs, music and literary texts. Chen (2006) argued that CC licences should not be confused with the ideas behind the Free and Open Source Software because these ideas refer to transparent works and are not compiled into forms that cannot be perceived. Some CC licences do not allow modification and might not

be regarded as 'free'. The FSF (2007) agrees that since all Creative Commons licenses do not grant any specific freedom, this would make it incompatible with the GNU GPL and with the GNU FDL.

Nonetheless, the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial ShareAlike Licence 2.5 is also a popular choice among Wiki creators. *WikiHow* is an online Wiki that aims to build the world's largest how-to-manual. The *WikiHow* volunteer community contributes instructions on everyday problems. *Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki* is an open content resource for librarians around the world to share ideas and successful library programs. The Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial ShareAlike Licence 2.5 allows the user to copy, distribute and display the work and to make derivative works. The conditions are that the work must be used for non-commercial purposes, attribution made as specified by the author/licensor, and that derivative works are released under a similar licence.

Implications for practice

Analysing the different kinds of licences used by community Wikis will give corporate Wiki developers a better understanding of the kind of licences they would like to adopt. It should be noted that corporate Wikis are different from community Wikis in terms of access. A corporate Wiki is installed on a corporate server and are run inside a firewall which means that they are exclusive only to certain employees in the organisation. For organisations which want their customers to have access to their corporate Wikis, it is suggested that only designated registered customers gain access to the site. Unwanted intruders can neither view nor tamper with the business documents. Wikis often have legal disclaimers and publicly disclose its Wiki policy informing users of good Wiki practice and how to succeed doing it. Much of the Wiki contents written under these licences are mostly the work of employees who have dedicated time and sacrifice to the development and distribution of knowledge for the benefit of as many people as possible. Free knowledge is a social good in itself. The pursuit of this goal and the moral principle of upholding this social good are shared by the Wiki community. Taking someone else's work and distributing it as one's own is morally reprehensible. This moral principle is responsible for the largest part for the enforcement of copyleft and non-copyleft licences, and not the courts of law.

Conclusion

In the changing face of the internet and connectivity, the businesses that succeed in the future will be the ones that adapt and change. This paper provides compelling evidence that the emerging 'creative commons' can be a boon, and not a threat to business. The popularity of Wikis is difficult to ignore and warrants more research by the academic community. The Wiki approach increases the collaborative productivity of an organisation or its extended ecosystems. Choosing an appropriate license for a corporate Wiki is not a trivial matter and should not be taken lightly. There is no single best licence, and both the GNU FDL and The Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial ShareAlike licenses provide great value to the Wiki community in their own ways. It is important to select a licence by understanding what that license means and its implications. Agreeing or disagreeing on the common legal interpretation will not change how others perceive their ability to be involved.

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