

Nercomp 2010 - Presentation Focusing on the Knowledge Base

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Conference web site: <http://net.educause.edu/nc10>

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If You Build It, Will They Come? A Collaborative Framework To Share IT Knowledge

- Tuesday, March 9
- 8:30am - 9:20am
- Room 550

Abstract:

IT support providers and end users both want similar things: fast and easy access to up-to-date IT information and solutions. Why not contribute to and share the same IT knowledge resource? At MIT, we did just that. In 2008 a project was launched to broaden an existing Help Desk internal knowledge base to an Institute-wide IT help system, integrating contributions from IT support organizations around MIT and providing role-based access control. A year into the new shared environment provides us with success stories, lessons learned and excitement about making this valuable resource even better.

Statement of the problem or issue:

MIT's Information Services and Technology (IS&T) Help Desk was reaping the benefits of an internal knowledge base where staff members could search for answers and create articles easily. The next challenge we faced was how to broaden the usage of this knowledge base, provide role-based access control and retain a sustainable system. We knew that there was more useful, untapped knowledge and expertise out there to be captured, both within our own IT organization as well as among technical support providers across the larger MIT community. Additionally, the members of the MIT community have a wide range of computing needs, skill levels, and departmental/organizational priorities. They yearned for a technology information resource to provide just the right kind of information at the right time. How could we effectively bring together the various audiences and create an environment that addressed their needs and was easy to use?

Description of activity, project, or solution:

The Knowledge Base is the working name for an IS&T initiative focused on streamlining the online activity of getting help. We wanted to create an IT troubleshooting hub, a starting point for support providers with MIT specific help and the ability to update content instantly to reflect the latest information available.

In early 2008, an IS&T cross-functional, cross-organizational group, led by the Help Desk, began designing an improved knowledge base to be used by the MIT community, and beyond. As part of the design process, we solicited input from tech support providers throughout the MIT community. We employed a user-centered design approach, including focus groups, prototyping, brain storming sessions and usability testing sessions.

Early in the project, the Knowledge Base team decided on a wiki tool, which was already in use on our campus, Confluence, by Atlassian. One of the key features Confluence had that other wiki platforms did not, at that time, was the ability to easily define and control access to subsets of knowledge base articles. This would give us the flexibility to maintain some internal documentation and quickly share information more broadly when appropriate.

The initial goals of the Knowledge Base project were:

- A public-facing knowledge base of structured answers and technical information that encourages contributions from all IS&T staff, technology partners, and academic computing/ IT service providers from across campus.
- A meta-search interface, which combines aspects of topic-based browsing and searching along with enhanced search features for authenticated community members, based on their roles.
- A smart router for requests for service and help, which would provide a single starting point for a variety of IT service signups and changes. The smart router would give clients targeted information about what to expect, service status, and sources of additional information, as requests are submitted.

When the system went live, it contained information migrated from our internal Help Desk knowledge base as well as data from another independent knowledge base maintained by our IT publications group in IS&T. By "seeding" the system we hoped that the initial user experience would be a positive one and would encourage participation.

Outcome:

As of submission of this proposal, the system has been in active use for one year and its usage has grown exponentially. There has been a demonstrated increase in collaboration among IS&T groups due to easier and more fluid sharing of information. The way we publish information to the community is so much faster and easier today.

Links to search the Knowledge Base system and popular articles have been integrated into other systems, such as our new IS&T web site and an MIT portal called InsideMIT.

Initially, to encourage contributions from outside of IS&T, we invited a small pilot group of MIT IT support providers to author articles in a Community Contributions area of the system. We also targeted MIT departments with tech support staff, such as the Sloan School and the MIT Libraries. After that, the process to grant authoring privileges to MIT community members has been on an opt-in, or request, basis. The demand to create has been gradual and lower than we hoped. We would like to work more with users to find out what roadblocks may exist and specific needs, which are not met.

The Knowledge base has potential to act as a launching pad for more collaborative IT services across MIT. We are making plans to develop a formal Phase II proposal for resources needed to build on the success we've had so far.

The following are some goals for a Phase II:

- Create a more comprehensive search feature that enables searching across more than one system. For example, allow users to simultaneously search The Knowledge Base and the IS&T web site. Hope to utilize a Google Search Appliance to strengthen and expand search capability.
- Explore automated mechanisms for knowledge base article creation, e.g. via email or our ticket tracking system, while also maintaining content quality. Want to avoid users "spamming" the system with fragmented or short-lived information.
- Employ better tracking mechanisms to focus efforts where we'll get the biggest payback.
- Develop an IT information road map. Propose a working group with members from various groups across MIT, whose charge will be to create guidelines for where to find which IT information and how to contribute. Although the Knowledge Base consolidated several information sources there is still an overabundance of wikis, web sites and systems where technical information can be found.

Importance or relevance to other institutions:

Many IT organizations have stated goals to increase collaboration and information sharing. A major challenge is how to do that effectively while retaining information quality and credibility. We believe that our experiences on the Knowledge Base Project can provide insight and ideas to organizations just starting this process as well as to those who are looking to extend their existing systems.

Suggested Audience:

Frontline technology practitioners, IT directors and managers.

Presenters:

From MIT's Information Services and Technology, Computing Support Services

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The Knowledge Base url:

kb.mit.edu

Attachments

Name	Size	Creator	Creation Date	Comment
PDF File Nercomp Hermes presentation.pdf	97 kB	Barbara Johnson	Mar 04, 2010 12:30	

