

FIGHTING “BOOMER BRAIN DRAIN” WITH A NEW TOOL: A WIKI SITE

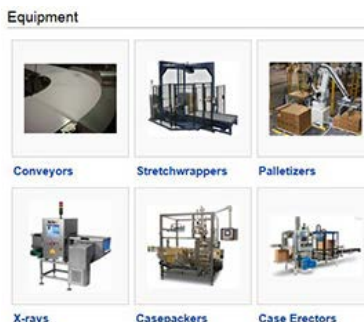
A SIMPLE INFORMATION SHARING SITE ACCELERATES KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

“**Retirement**” is a word that lights up the Boomer crowd while worrying business leaders, Gen X-ers, and savvy Millennials. With senior engineers retiring all over the country, knowledge and experience is lost every day, and many companies don’t have solid strategies in place to capture this valuable, yet often intangible asset. As a result, they stand to lose out on competitive contracts or – even worse – damage relationships with long-standing clients. Finding fast, efficient means to download information from senior team members to new, fresh-faced recruits who are eager to absorb whatever they can is critical for the ongoing success of any business.

At my firm, POWER, we’ve developed an innovative tool to mitigate the impact of an aging workforce: a knowledge-sharing site, based on “wiki” technology.

First off: what is a “wiki” and how does this relate to engineering?

Googling “what is a Wiki” leads you directly to its most well-known example, Wikipedia, for a definition: “A wiki is a website that provides collaborative modification



Just a few of the many specific areas of interest that are highlighted on our internal wiki.



Employing a non-traditional tool like a wiki site can help experienced veterans “download” information and lessons learned to more junior team members.

of its content and structure directly from the web browser.”

At POWER, we have used this technology to create an internal collaboration site aggregating our team’s learned knowledge and resources across all spectrums of an engineering discipline or field of study. Basically, it’s an online encyclopedia of “all things engineering” collecting what we’ve learned through careers of delivering successful projects. We use this site as a clearinghouse to share vendor information, design concepts, tools and processes, examples, lessons learned, websites with useful or valuable data/information, and more. We document our experiences with vendors, our relationships with contacts (how best to work with key people), and tips for working with important clients. We also include training items: lunch and learn presentations, reference materials, internal training materials, etc. for our teams’ quick and easy access.

What about more traditional venues, like mentoring?

Mentoring is often the first strategy companies employ to address the knowledge and experience challenges posed by an aging workforce. New recruits are teamed up with cagy engineering veterans and instructed to absorb as much as possible – *quick, before Joe retires!*

Mentoring becomes challenging, however, when you’re in a competitive consulting environment: many clients don’t want the “new recruit” using their job for “training,” they want experience, expertise, and hard-earned solutions to their challenges.

And it’s hard to blame them! I don’t really want the guy right out of trade school running the plumbing or electrical in my house, either – I want someone that I trust who knows what he’s doing. Mentoring strategies can be successful, but they’re often difficult to implement.

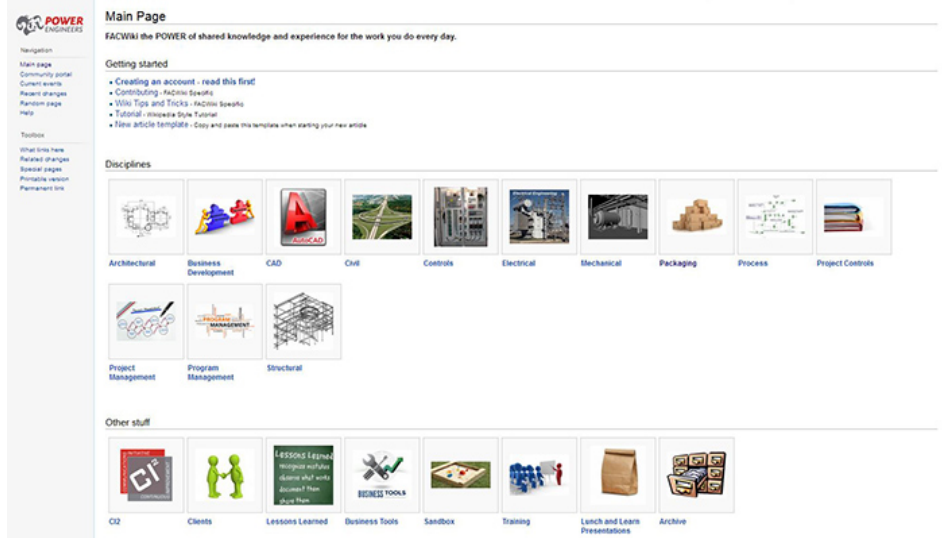
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A wiki sounds great, but does it actually work?

We created our wiki site a few years ago to help us save knowledge, share information and collaborate across teams and across offices. When we started it, we thought it would be an interesting experiment, but didn't know if it would take off or not. Our teams have adopted the wiki at a rate that exceeds everything we thought possible – in short, they use it and they love it.

We attribute a few things to its success:

- All our team members have access and editing ability: through the peer editing function, best practices and critical knowledge float to the top. This often means things may be changed and revised a few times before we settle on a final version, but the process of getting to an answer has proved extremely useful.
- The process of editing and the desire to "get it right" drives collaboration: people start talking about their different project experiences around the same subject, and the process of getting to an agreed-upon write-up accelerates the knowledge transfer process, while sparking great discussions and brainstorming.
- The wiki has saved us both in time and coordination ([and you know how much engineers hate waste, right?](#)): we no longer waste valuable time *planning* to share content, instead we just get to work and add it to the Wiki.



Our wiki page houses information across departments, engineering disciplines, and different types of projects. Team members have found it to be an invaluable resource and a way to quickly learn from their colleagues.

- The site is attractive to both our younger team members and our retirement-age staff: it gives junior team members an entire department's worth of information in an easy-to-access format (instead of just what their mentor knows), while also being attractive to the Boomers who want to be needed now and remembered in the future. The wiki offers a way for senior staff to leave a legacy that will continue to be useful long after they've retired. Even though they may be golfing in Aruba, their knowledge is still hard at work, helping out their friends and team members.

In short, we've found a great tool to capture knowledge, drive team engagement, and make the insights of key people available to the company at large. Whether

they're a junior, mid-level, or a senior engineer, our team members have all learned something from the process and from the information on the wiki itself.



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About the Author: Kelly is a skilled packaging engineer with an aptitude for solving challenging problems with innovative solutions. Throughout his career, he has supported several of the world's leading food and consumer products companies. Kelly currently leads POWER's packaging team and is always on the lookout for creative ways to make their work more effective, efficient and valuable to our clients.