Wikipolicy: the development of institutional policy using social software

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Abstract

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In 2008, the University initiated a project entitled "Policy Workshop 2013" to deliver the "2009 - 2013 policy framework". This new policy should encapsulate the insights, opinions and wishes of students, staff and stakeholders. It was decided alongside other methods to use a wiki as a policy instrument.
Results: A wiki has power, participating in the wiki was very limited and the wiki was used for a topic that was not close to non-participants. In general, the attitude with respect to an open dialogue is not positive unambiguously. Does everybody have to co-decide everywhere? Does it have any benefits for the organisation?

Presentation

Wikipolicy: the development of institutional policy using social software

Several sources have shown that the power of wikis for use as a knowledge management tool is estimated to be high (including by Pawlowski & Robey, 2004; Gonzalez-Reinhart, 2005). *"Wikis have the ability to disseminate knowledge to various domains that reside across time, distance and organizations. They can be integrated as part of an employee's work process in order to facilitate knowledge sharing and system utilization. Additionally, wikis provide a dynamic system for knowledge capture, able to evolve with changing needs.* The open wiki feature allows for communication, collaboration and the documentation of what is collectively considered pertinent knowledge" (Gonzalez-Reinhart, 2005).

The probability of successful application in a context where it involves both knowledge development (qualitatively a better strategy statement) and collaboration (universities as participating, network-powerful organisations) seems to be present. You can build up and maintain networks with wikis. This, however, does not mean that a wiki has been successfully implemented. Often reference is made to ease of use and the expected benefit as success factors with regard to the implementation: Adoption rate = perceived ease of use X user perception of usefulness" (Cooney, 2006). Many authors point out that a successful implementation demands the correct organisational, technological and cultural conditions.

Integration into the structures and processes of an organisation is involved with regard to organisational conditions. Wikis that are implemented as a separated issue from the specific work of employees seem to always be viewed as a burden instead of a tool and do not invite to exchange knowledge. When, however, the wiki is integrated in the daily work, knowledge sharing becomes a successful side effect.

The technological conditions that must be created to arrive at a successful use of wikis and other social software tools relate to the integration of these tools in the ICT architecture of the organisation. It should not demand many or strange additional actions from employees to use these tools.

The cultural conditions for the use of a wiki are listed as important in many sources: "The gap between what is technically possible and what the corporate culture is able to accept is often wider than many people automatically assume" (Hinchcliffe, 2007). This is a special challenge within the context of a higher education institution.

Research questions

The research into the deployment of a wiki focused around two questions:
I. To which extent does the wiki contribute to a qualitatively better strategy statement?
II. To which extent does the wiki contribute to the development of the university to become a more participating, network-powerful organisation?
The contributions of employees to the wiki and the discussions in the wiki were researched with regard to the first research question**.** How does participation in the wiki take place? This involves the quantity of contributions and the nature of the input. This also involves the extent of discussion and the nature of the discussions. The support of and the commitment to create a strategy was also investigated.
When answering the second research question, an investigation took place into what are the stimulating and the hindering factors when using the wiki. Which significance does the wiki have and which value do employees give it? Does the wiki contribute towards a horizontal dialogue within the organisation? Which stimulating and hindering issues play a role?
Below an examination is given into the question related to the requirements that wikis must meet based on the above in order for them to stimulate collaboration within the university.

Method

This research was done through a case study. The reasons for this are: It concerns organisation research, the research had an exploratory function (Van der Zwaan, 1992), a complex situation and question are involved and studying the use and effects of the wiki could only take place within its context.
Different sources have been used in this case study. The research issue has mainly qualitative features with regard to goal, topic and investigated aspects (Wester, Mulder, & Smaling, 2000). The research is to a large extent qualitative in nature: observations and interviews. In addition, the data about the use of the wiki was analysed.

Data collection

The data about the use of the "Policy Workshop 2013" wiki at Zuyd University was recorded by using Google Analytics. These statistics provide an overview of the wiki visits and the duration of these visits. In addition, the numbers of contributions to the wiki and to the discussions related to different items were investigated ("Policy Workshop 2013").
Interviews took place during the duration of the Policy Workshop. The goal was to obtain a total picture of the different opinions and the visions about the topic.
A pre-structured questionnaire was drawn up for the interviews. Two core concepts, "strategic policy" and "wiki as an instrument", were used when drawing up the questionnaire. The dimension 'quality' was mentioned with regard to these two core concepts for the first research question, "To which extent does the wiki contribute to a qualitatively better strategy statement?" The dimension 'commitment' was mentioned for the second research question, "To which extent does the wiki contribute to the development of the university to become a more participating, network-powerful organisation". The "support"; "expertise/knowledge" and "openness" aspects have been identified with regard to both dimensions.
Employees were selected who have different positions in the organisation. Twelve employees were interviewed: two managers who participated in the wiki, two managers who did not participate in the wiki, two lecturers who participated in the wiki, two lecturers who did not participate in the wiki, two employees from the departments that participated in the wiki, two employees from the departments that did not participate in the wiki. The original idea to also interview external people and students was not carried out because these groups did not participate in the wiki. An explanation of why they did not participate falls outside the scope of this research.
Five observations were performed at faculties and organisational units where attention was paid to the strategic discussion of the university. In addition, observations took place at two university-wide

organised events where the strategy discussion and the wiki came up for discussion. These observations took place in November 2008 and January, February, March and April 2009.

Data processing

The KODANI (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2007) software was used to process the interviews. Labels were developed to structure answers based on the provided answers.

Dimensions/Aspect	Assigned Label	Explanation
Research question 1: To which extent does the wiki contribute to a qualitatively better strategy statement?		
Quality; expertise/knowledge	1. Contribution	Provided contribution and why; aspects related to content and motivation
Quality; expertise/knowledge	2. Discussion	Content of the discussion; assessment and involvement
Quality; support	3 Opinion about the wiki contents	About the text of the wiki and about the contributions and discussions
Involvement; support	4A Involvement in forming the strategy	To which extent is there involvement on a strategic level/in the formation of a strategy?
Involvement; support	4B Focus elsewhere	Closer to the faculty/department/shop floor
Involvement; support; public nature	5 Organisation culture	Confidence in the organisation/dealing with a discussion/public nature
Involvement; expertise/knowledge	6 Content as an inducement	To which extent does the content hinder or stimulate involvement?
Research question 2: To which extent does the wiki contribute to the development of the university to become a more participating, network-powerful organisation?		
Quality; expertise/knowledge	7 Wiki as inducement	Wiki as an inducement/hinder instrument to participate, unfamiliarity, technology and time
Quality; public nature	8 Wiki as a communication medium	The wiki (open) medium
Involvement; public nature	9 Participation	Attitude with regard to an open approach in general: Bottom-up, help decide, open horizontal dialogue
	8 Implementation level	Point for improvement mentioned the most

Results

Quantitative data

Wiki use

With regard to the research question 'to which extent does the wiki contribute to a qualitatively better strategy statement?' the contributions of employees to the wiki and the discussions in the wiki have been investigated. How does participation in the wiki take place? Visiting the site and the number of contributions are what is involved with regard to quantitative data. The number of discussion contributions is also involved.

The site had a total of approximately 30,000 unique visits from 15 September. The first two weeks there were 1000 visitors. The first month thereafter (15 September – 15 October) there were 10,000 visitors and, thereafter, the visits to the wiki decreases slightly from 4500 to 3500 per month.

The average visiting time to the site is low compared to other sites with comparable visitor numbers. ("Google Analytics"). The ratio between the number of visitors and the number of active participants in an interactive website follows globally the 90 – 9 - 1 rule: 90% of visitors to a site consumes the information, 9% provides comments from time to time and follows the site intensively and only 1% of web users creates the greater part of the content (Nielsen, 2006).

125 accounts were created on the Policy Workshop site; 38 different people provided a discussion contribution and 31 people contributed to the wiki. Slightly less than half of the discussers also contributed to the wiki and more than half of the wiki contributors contributed to the discussion. Both the number of accounts and the active participation are lower than the abovementioned 90-9-1 rule.

Qualitative data

Interviews

I. With regard to the research question 'to which extent does the wiki contribute to a qualitatively better strategy statement?' the contributions of employees to the wiki and the discussions in the wiki have been investigated.

<u>1 and 2 contributions and discussion</u>

This involves the quantity of contributions and the nature of the input. This also involves the extent of discussion and the nature of the discussions. 31 contributions to the wiki were provided with regard to content. Participants had the following to report (exemplary):

"I wrote about the future organisation, about the student who will be learning in the future and I wrote something about the departments on the platform."

The remarks made by the respondents show that possibilities are being identified that will develop knowledge by using the wiki and, hence, contribute to a better strategy statement:

"I believe there are many different lines of approach from all different faculties and disciplines. Somebody may view it in a particular way while some other person's viewpoint will be completely different. One person may do it from the perspective of construction or technology while another person from the perspective of the social sciences."

The number of contributions to both the wiki itself and the discussion, however, is low. This is recognised by respondents. Someone who tries to elicit a discussion:

"We have 1,350 employees and when you look at who has responded to the wiki, you will realise that it is a whole select group of people who already are involved in coming up with a new policy due to the position they hold."

3 Opinion about the wiki contents

Most respondents' opinion about the content of the text is positive.

"The line that has been provided is something in which I can recognise myself in to a large extent. I believe it is also relevant to the university"

There were many remarks about the style and presentation.

"I find it slightly untransparent, too much has been made of it. I would have preferred if a few concise issues had been added."

Only one respondent explicitly indicated that there should have been different content

"Which role do you actually wish to play as a university, this is what I miss when I view the Policy Workshop. Things have been added there of which I think, on the one hand, that they are too internally focused. Most of the points that have been made are really only related to us. Do we now believe the environment is so important? Points that really deal with the environment are, in my opinion, just one."

The low participation in the wiki is the most important factor when assessing the contribution that the wiki has provided to a qualitatively better strategy statement. Based on the answers to the questions, more can be said about the reasons why there are so few contributions to the wiki. Providing input from the organisation seems to be linked to the involvement of the respondents at the organisation as a whole and the involvement in the formation of a strategy for the organisation on a university level.

4 Involvement in the forming of a strategy/focus elsewhere

The difference between participants and non-participants was the clearest with regard to this issue. Participants in the wiki showed commitment to the university and to the forming of a strategy. Non-participants in the wiki did turn out to be highly committed but often focused elsewhere and not on the university as a whole.

"The strategic policy of the University is also my policy. I am University Zuyd and, therefore, it is very important to me that the focal points and that the course we take are appropriately selected. It also impacts my own work within the faculty and the organisation units. To me it is a matter-of-course"

"I'm extremely involved in the organisation, I believe, but not so much in the strategic long-term policy. I'm more committed to the here and now."

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Strategic policy and joining the discussion on a strategic level are not for me. It is not my target group. If something is asked about issues that we are involved in as a department, I'm more than happy to look at this and to join in the discussion but not on a strategic level."

5 Organisation culture

The organisation culture and the confidence in the organisation were mentioned by different inter-viewed people as factors for providing input. These remarks came from participants and non-participants.

"Maybe it is part of the mentality here in Limburg to think that you are not that important; that you are too self-effacing to actually provide your own stuff."

"The fact that people say "I don't feel safe", "it will be used against you" and "that is what I have heard too".

6 Content as an inducement

The question whether the texts were seen as an incentive or a hindrance to join in the discussion also played a role.

"There should be a lot more gaps in the initial text that should invite people to add or delete."

II. When the second research question to which extent the wiki provides a contribution to the devel-opment of the university to become a more participating, network-powerful organisation was an-swered, the factors that were considered an incentive and a hindrance were investigated when using the wiki. Which significance does the wiki have and which value do employees give it?

 7 The wiki as incentive

This refers to the role of the wiki itself as a tool. To which extent does it form an incentive or a hin-drance to participate. The (un)familiarity with the medium, technology and (lack of) time play impor-tant roles amongst most respondents.

"I did have some difficulty to get my contributions placed at all. Initially I thought that it was very complicated. You have to get used to it first to ensure you know how it works and then it did not hap-pen".

"I'm glad that I work for an organisation unit where it is clear in advance that not everything can yet be done with wiki or whatever."

 8 Wiki as a communication medium

Many remarks were not related to the technology as such but to the communication method in a wiki, the open medium, the unstructured nature of the process and the fact that it is not clear what would happen with the results. Mainly non-participants referred to the lack of structure of the proc-ess. Participants, however, also emphasised that it was not such a simple medium after all to develop the forming of opinions.

"Unguided and unequal. Unequal with regard to perspective. Since some people zoom in on a number of details in such a way, which I cannot specify at the moment, but I think, come on, this does not belong here. You can, for example, resolve it with your director. This is not related to vision development. Unguided, yes, this is true, it jumps at you from all sides".

"Again it involves spending a lot of time on it. Something someone said. What does he actually mean? Should I really respond to this? If you respond, you do not immediately want to put them in a corner so you first start to read what it is all about. I believe that many people who have provided such a contribution, will feel this way about it."

9 Participation

The attitude with regard to an open bottom-up approach, taking part in the decision process and horizontal dialogue has been shown to be very diverse and not unambiguously positive.

"It is somewhat appealing when the following is shouted at the Geulhem caves during the New Year gathering speech: "That is something for the wiki!" It does show a slight pride but it does have meaning; an incentive with which the meaning of this wiki is more broadly started than simply that communication medium."

"Can you do something with it as an organisation? That the person who says something gets a response. Fine, this person will like that. But what can the organisation do with it? That is my criterion. You can, of course, start to discuss things intensively with everybody but what would you actually gain?"

"And this is something we sometimes forget, we believe that we must all be involved in deciding about everything. Everything and everybody must also decide about everything and more. OK. Initially I think gosh, that is fine where it is within your limits but people do tend to go beyond their limits. And I do think that our core business is and will continue to be students."

10 Implementation level

Different respondents indicated that a wiki could work in a different context.

"If there are policy intentions and I ask everybody to provide input, provide a response before that date. If I do this in general, I will also receive few responses."

"It may contribute towards collaboration but I believe that if it is not imbedded in the actual organisation, it will stay a little on the side lines. This is the case with many of those instruments."

"Perhaps also in slightly smaller entities such as, for example, within an organisation unit or within faculties. That you are slightly closer to the real developments."

III. Observations

Five observations took place with regard to the discussions and meetings within the framework of the strategy discussion/Policy Workshop during the process between 27 November 2008 and 16 April 2009.
The wiki was shown not to play a role at all or only slightly in all cases.
In November, the explanation about the use of the wiki within the framework of the strategy discussion was a reason for 11 people to go into greater depth into the use of the wiki as an instrument.
Observation at a faculty in January showed an explicit negative attitude to the wiki. Discussion about strategy and, in particular, about studying in 2013. The request to make contributions in the wiki was viewed as shirking one's responsibility. The wiki was also shown to be an unknown medium with regard to the group discussion. "If you add something, someone else can delete it just like that." "What remains?" and "No time".
Observation at an organisation unit in February showed great involvement and lively discussion of the strategy but the strategy discussion was not regarded as something that you could give form to as an employee. "Why did you formulate this?" Nobody had (yet) considered contributing to the wiki. Unfamiliarity with the use of a wiki also played a role: "This organisation unit is in no way linked to ICT". "Contributing to the wiki is not safe; you are adding the information to a vacuum."
Observations in a later phase (March) provided as the most important conclusion that the discussion in the wiki and the use of the wiki is still not an item to be addressed for the people present.
When the Policy Workshop was concluded, the themes as they came up and were discussed in the

wiki play a role when boosting the discussion but the wiki as such does not really play a role, neither as a community nor in the discussions during meetings.

Conclusions

With regard to the research question to which extent does the wiki contribute to a qualitatively better strategy statement , the contributions to the wiki show that the wiki does have a potential to play a role when developing knowledge in and about the organisation. This could lead to a better strategy statement. Insights are, for example, included and disseminated by using the wiki. A number of those interviewed has also explicitly indicated that they recognise these possibilities. The examples and opinions about the discussion in the wiki at the same time indicate that the participants find it difficult to discuss issues and develop knowledge by using this medium.

The most striking finding, however, is that the participation regarding content in the wiki has remained very low. This has been shown by the quantitative analysis. It is true that many people have visited the wiki but few have studied the textual material for a long time; the number of contributions has remained low and the discussion did not really happen. This also emerged from the observations during the meetings. The wiki did not play much of a role.
This makes it very difficult to give a statement about the question whether the wiki has increased the support for the proposed strategy. There was little criticism with regard to content of the texts in the wiki.

Providing input in the wiki seems to be linked to the direct involvement of respondents when forming a strategy for the university and at the organisation on a university level.
  Those who participated in the wiki showed involvement with the university centrally and with the forming of a strategy for the university in the interviews. This was different for wiki non-participants. Their focus was more on the faculty, on the organisation unit or on the department in which they worked. They, in any case, did not feel a need to actually get involved in the discussion about the forming of a strategy. It can, therefore, be concluded that the involvement with the topic has been an important factor to participate or not in the wiki. The wiki has been used for a topic that is not close at all to the hearts of non-participants.
This issue can also be seen in the arguments that have been summarised under the header Implementation level. What people do in practice, does not fit in at all with the brainstorm in the wiki; a wiki must be closer to daily developments. The themes must be imbedded in the actual organisation. The "time" argument can maybe also be viewed from this perspective.
These findings match what can be read in the relevant literature in which it is emphasised that a wiki must be implemented close to the actual work.
Other factors that play a role: the initial texts where not regarded by everybody as an incentive to participate (this also applied to a number of participants aside of to non-participants); the use of a wiki did not fit in the organisation culture or in the assumed confidence in the organisation.

The question of whether the wiki has contributed to the development of the organisation to make it into a more participating, network-powerful organisation is partly related to the tool itself.
Technical and time issues are mentioned as reasons not to use the medium. The unstructured nature of the process and the open medium wiki, however, also play a role.
Apparently there is a high threshold that must be overcome to start using the wiki. This is shown by the difference between participating in the wiki and the involvement in the forming of a strategy as has emerged during the observations.
The traditional relationship is much more involved during the face-to-face discussions that were observed where a response can be given to statements from "behind the table". The open invitation to think along apparently forms a high threshold.
The attitude with regard to this bottom-up approach and taking part in the decision process is not unambiguous. A number of participants in the wiki is positive regarding this, in particular, management. There are also, however, participants in the wiki who experience this medium as being too

open and informal. Non-participants are more explicit, they doubt whether much will be done with the results and whether the organisation can use the results for something.

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