

# [ Why Not Wiki?

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# 7 Reasons Why Wikis aren't Suitable for Product Documentation

Wikis have come a long way since Ward Cunningham released the seminal "WikiWikiWeb" back in 1994. What was built as a lightweight collaborative database designed to organically flex with emergent activity streams, has now found its way onto the business landscape in organizations of all sizes – from startups to enterprises – using wikis to capture everything from best practices for onboarding new staff, to a curated discussion of the best (and worst) places to take a client for lunch.

However, while wikis have their uses and are definitely here to stay, they're nevertheless categorically unsuitable for product documentation – which makes sense, since they were never designed to do that kind of heavy lifting.

As Ben Cotton advises in a piece for [Opensource.com](#):

"[Wikis are] not well-suited for re-publishing in other formats or offline editing. Keeping the content organized such that it can be found easily can be challenging. Unorganized wikis are particularly prone to duplicated and stale content."

Elaborating on this point, digital content guru Paul Wlodarczyk warns that publishing to wikis from single-source publishing environments (e.g. DITA) often leads to redundant information development/re-keying of content, ongoing content tweaking to (i.e. links, metadata, etc.), and deletion of user comments and ratings when wiki pages are updated or republished.

Below, we highlight some of the challenges, problems and, indeed, horrors that have erupted in organizations that have ambitiously attempted – or were persuasively convinced – to deploy wikis in a product documentation context where it had no chance of survival, let alone success:



# 7 Reasons Why Wikis aren't Suitable for Product Documentation

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## VERSION CONTROL

Throughout its lifespan, product documentation must change to capture new knowledge and reflect evolving requirements. However, as noted technical writer and author Anne Gentle points out on her Just Write Click blog, wikis don't enable or enforce version control. This quickly leads to major problems regarding document identification, duplication, traceability, accuracy and clarity.

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## STRUCTURE

As the aforementioned Paul Wlodarczyk warns, by their very nature wikis promote ROT ("redundant, obsolete and trivial") content. And while there is arguably a role for ROT somewhere on the business communication landscape, it assuredly isn't product documentation. That's because with wikis, efficient curating and tagging are virtually impossible, as is enforcing a functional navigational structure or information management policies. Much like counterfeit currency in the money supply, it doesn't take much or long for bad content to crowd out good content.

3

## INTEGRATION

Product documentation should integrate with other systems in the environment, such as CRM software, so that agents and reps can access content in real-time to answer customer questions, flag potential issues, spot sales opportunities and so on. While it's true that some wikis can be integrated, the process typically isn't easy or seamless. For example, queries may not be dynamic, which means that results aren't updated when a wiki page is viewed – only when it's edited.

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## LOCALIZATION

Localization is essential for product documentation, because the direction or advice for one target market can differ – subtly or significantly – from another. In other words: localization ensures relevance, which is at the heart of product documentation (just as it is with all other business communication, internal or external). However, trying to establish and enforce localized content in wikis is not just an exercise in frustration, it's an exercise in futility. The resources required to make sure that content is consistently relevant to various target markets more than offsets the value and benefit of using the wiki for product content in the first place.

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## FLEXIBILITY

One of the intrinsic characteristics – and most important features – of product content is that it can be efficiently re-published into different formats. Paradoxically, despite their signature fluidity, wikis are not amenable to this kind of flexibility. As the above-mentioned Paul Włodarczyk notes, on wikis content is either locked in, or pushed to PDFs and other formats which leads to an array of formatting and navigation problems.



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## SECURITY

In some cases, it may be desirable (or necessary) for organizations to restrict access to product documentation. However, this is a requirement that wikis aren't designed to achieve. As tech expert and CTO Andrew Smith advises: "Always remember security of your content. If that content needs to be managed or restricted, then it should not be in the wiki, simple as that. If it requires meeting some compliancy guidelines, then again, it has no place in the wiki".

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## SEARCHABILITY

Today's customers – along with employees, vendors, and so on – aren't willing to spend several minutes wading through content in order to (hopefully) find the answers or information they need. While structured and organized product documentation can easily be made searchable, wikis are a different story. As the above-mentioned Anne Gentle points out, "We've all become so spoiled by Google's search algorithms that any local search engine [for wikis] usually comes up short".



# The Bottom Line

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As noted a few times, wikis have the place on the business communication landscape, and the above isn't a call for their extinction. Rather, it's simply a reminder – and a warning – that wikis weren't, aren't, and never will be suitable for product documentation. That's not what they do.

Heeding this basic information management fact – which has not changed since wikis hit the scene more than 20 years ago – will put organizations on the right track. Ignoring or overlooking this fact, however, will invariably lead to problems, challenges, and unfortunately, more than a few horror stories.

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