

October 2009

# Safari Books Online Shows Glimmer of a Knowledge Management Future

by Jim Murphy

AMR Research recently spoke with two **Safari Books Online** customers, **Nuance** and **Sun Microsystems**, both of which had garnered benefits beyond their expectations when employing the service. The conversations inspired several revelations. For starters, they highlighted the high value of content as a service. The cloud's value is not simply about technology, tools, and applications. While small providers like **SpringCM** evangelize—and larger vendors, like **EMC**, **IBM**, **Open Text**, and **Microsoft**, scramble to adapt—cloud-based content management, the ultimate potential might be cloud-based content.

Then there's the knowledge management (KM) dilemma: the firewall or the fire hose? The once-sturdy barrier between the internal and external is crumbling, and like the destruction of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago, that may be a good thing. Companies must consider that content, process, and communities span across employee, partner, customer networks, and the community of the web at large. Comprehensive knowledge and content management strategy must encompass internal and external resources and communities.

And let's not forget that the web's free content can be costly. Though it's a rich, limitless source of information, it's also a bottomless pit of distraction and misinformation. Publicly available web content is sorely adulterated by marketing, advertising, and political agendas. Web search is under continual threat of hijack by organizations whose primary interest is to lure or distract people with jobs to do. Users need reliable, authoritative, and objective information and knowledge as the basis of their work and business decisions.

Lastly, books are part of the knowledge corpus and should be part of the content management strategy. Companies have spent billions digitizing documents, instituting portals and forms-based interfaces,

and, most recently, implementing social networking platforms in often fruitless attempts to “capture knowledge.” Meanwhile, some of the most valuable knowledge weighs down acres of bookshelves and desks.

## About Safari Books Online

Safari Books Online is an electronic reference library for developers, IT organizations, and, increasingly, business leaders. As a subscription-based service, it gives organizations access to electronic books from top technology publishers. It's also expanding its library of business and management publications.

Access to Safari Books Online's library is available to individual subscribers, workgroups, and entire enterprises in various packages, including Safari Bookshelf for the Enterprise, Safari Basic Tech Library for the Enterprise, Safari ITIL Library for the Enterprise, Safari Business Library for the Enterprise, and the comprehensive Safari Premium Library for the Enterprise.

## Case studies up close: The drivers

Nuance is a 3,000-employee provider of speech and imaging systems. Growth by acquisition has left the company highly distributed and global, with a disparate range of skills spanning development languages, tools, and platforms. It needed a consistent set of authoritative resource materials for the IT staff.

Sun Microsystems' Learning Services group serves a huge community of Sun employees, partners, and customers. About 6,000 of them need access to timely, reliable technical information. A decade ago, the company realized buying print books was an inefficient way to offer authoritative, up-to-date technical material. Users rarely needed to read a full book, often needing to collect information from many.

Both organizations realized that pure software wouldn't fix their problems. Content management systems were like empty bookshelves, and learning management systems (LMS) couldn't accommodate needs that varied so widely and changed so perpetually. Moreover, developers had to learn while working, rather than taking time out to complete structured courses. On-the-job training has quickly become a tautology in the IT business.

### The selection

Both organizations chose Safari Books Online primarily because of the crucial content it provided. **O'Reilly Media**, **Peachpit Press**, **New Riders**, and presses of major software providers like **Adobe**, **Oracle**, **IBM**, **Microsoft**, and Sun itself are indispensable resources for IT professionals. Safari also offers Rough Cuts, a service that allows access to pre-published manuscripts, and Short Cuts, which are shorter than book-length articles. The company also makes available a wide array of video tutorials and recorded conference sessions.

For both Nuance and Sun, technical characteristics and features were secondary to the content itself. Yet features brought far more value than anticipated. In addition to being able to search and navigate through a more reliable library of resources, employees could use features, much like those of **Amazon.com**, to rate and recommend content to colleagues. They could also use Safari's self-organizing maps and smart folders to navigate and share content.

In addition, Rough Cuts entails authors that agree to post their unpublished work partly as a way to accept feedback and suggestions from users actually performing the jobs described. So what they ended up with wasn't just a library, but a community of IT professionals collaborating among its stacks. Better yet, it was a library full of professionals focused on solving problems for the benefit of their business, not just trying to sell or flame one another.

### What's so special about Safari Books Online?

Of course, neither the company nor its customers would be the first to discover the value of community. The public web offers more communities than you can shake a stick at. A range of new vendors like **Jive Software**, **NewsGator**, and **Socialtext** are waving the Enterprise 2.0 banner to help address internal knowledge management needs. More established enterprise content management (ECM), portal, and collaboration vendors are offering social networking features to expand the appeal and adoption of their systems. But the public sites are replete with noise and distraction, with enterprise providers starving for useful content.

The unique characteristic of Safari Books Online is that it engenders a focused, motivated community for an authoritative body of content. What's even more interesting is that companies can effectively cordon off their internal community's interactions from those of the general public. An authoritative content source, combined with an internal community, helps ensure an assiduous focus and alignment with business-specific initiatives, while ensuring intellectual property (IP) protection.

## Reaping rewards

The most practical, tangible benefit for using Safari Books Online comes in the form of expenses that would have gone into frequent and redundant book-buying by individuals, groups, and departments. Nuance and Sun also mentioned significant space saving.

The less quantifiable but more powerful benefit, both customers agreed, comes from improved developer productivity and coordination, which surely impacts innovation and leads to faster introduction of higher quality products. The less-tangible benefits are gathered periodically through usage analysis and satisfaction surveys that correlate use of the library with impact on innovation and customer service.

Both companies also gather qualitative feedback. Here are a few quotes Sun Microsystems provided:

- “This saved us a lot of time and effort. It would have saved us even more time and effort if I had thought to use Safari first, rather than trying to compose appropriate **Google** searches to answer our questions....”
- “Our office recently moved to the Flexible Office concept. One thing I really missed was my bookshelf of technical reference books. Guess what? Sun’s eBooks have solved that problem! In fact, this is better than paper books. I can read them at work, at home, and in hotel rooms. (Yes, on occasion, I do read this stuff on the road!)”
- “I was recently tasked to write some software in a language I had never used before. I was able to access excellent references within minutes using Safari instead of waiting for a book to be delivered or wasting time in the local bookstores. I consider Safari an essential tool in my work here at Sun.”
- “Safari Books Online is my favorite employee perk after health and dental.”

One additional benefit came to light in our discussions with Safari Books Online and its customers. In case you haven’t noticed, the web age has left the publishing industry reeling over questions of business models and rights management. Publishers’ approaches to protecting versus openly distributing books vary widely. Readers and organizations requiring access to indispensable resources are then left to employ multiple systems and processes for multiple publishers. Safari Books

Online deals with the legal and copyrighting issues, insulating users from this complexity, and providing a single platform through which to access materials from any publisher.

## Emerging challenges and opportunities

Learning about Safari Books Online and talking to its customers was an eye-opening experience. Too many knowledge and content management strategies focus on platforms and applications rather than the content itself.

The experience also raises challenges for enterprises and the vendors that serve them. For example, when a provider like Safari Books Online offers indispensable content atop its own platform, interface, and community, how can it work with other knowledge resources? For example, Nuance is compelled to look at other online publishing services for academic books. Does it make sense to have a different provider, a different repository for content, and a different user experience for each knowledge domain? Does it conflict with existing, internal content management systems, and KM resources?

Nevertheless, with Safari Books Online, the initial glint of a glaring opportunity to improve enterprise knowledge management has surfaced. Knowledge management systems that readily cross the firewall as well as on-premises software, online services, and content domains are the key to breaking down the information silos that plague every enterprise.