

U.S. ARMY ★ FORT MONMOUTH

PRESS RELEASE

Release: # 09-21
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January 2010
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Army brings discussion groups behind the firewall

Through a new professional networking tool, the Army's technology community can now share ideas in discussion groups set behind its firewalled network.

Known as milBook, it's opening up safer avenues of communications among personnel.

"The milSuite application allows the professional 'DOD' community to share information amongst themselves that is only intended for the internal community," said Justin Filler, deputy director of the MilTech Solutions Office, an Army organization.

MilBook, which has reached 18,000 users since its inception in October 2009, is part of a suite of tools known as milSuite that also includes a blog and wiki.

Previously, the department lacked a medium for employees to share official and sometimes sensitive information.

"These technologies help those working on similar projects across 'DoD' to connect, share information, incubate new ideas, and help build the 'DoD's' body of knowledge and expertise, while generating organizational learning," said Todd Miller, an Army contractor.

MilBook provides several options for users who wish to share information with specific individuals. By creating discussion threads, they can exchange ideas among specific, self-created groups on topics such as Army policies. The information can either be restricted to that user or shared with the entire milBook community, Filler said. Regardless, it will always remain behind the firewall.

"People across the DoD can find professional working groups on various programs and efforts and join within seconds," Miller said. "MilBook not only connects people, it connects those people to military topics so that ideas and information are shared across the Armed Services."

Presently, many of these discussions are held in e-mails, chats, wikis and blogs. However, milBook is the only tool in the department which can group these together.

“Milbook fills that void that the ‘DOD-at-large’ doesn’t have,” Filler said.

MilBook is also an effective tool for locating Soldiers who might have switched headquarters due to reassignment or for personnel who wish to obtain the knowledge of a subject matter expert.

Since its inception more than a year ago, the Army’s wiki or milWiki has surpassed more than 40,000 users, 10,000 pages, and 4,900 individual articles and is on target as a pilot effort to become a centralized point for updating Army field manual doctrine.

In June, the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center (CAC), at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., launched a test that allowed Soldiers and leaders to make real-time updates to the Army’s tactics, techniques and procedures (ATTP) via milWiki.

“The purpose of the portal is to incorporate insights and lessons-learned from Soldiers and officers, based upon recent experiences in theater; but the goal is to ensure tactics, techniques and procedures remain relevant,” said Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, vice chief of staff of the Army, during his final remarks at the LandWarNet Conference held in August in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. “A Soldier redeployed from Afghanistan, for example, could access the ATTP for site exploitation operations, make changes and add new material based on firsthand experiences in the country.”

With the CAC effort, wikis could virtually turn the three-to-five-year process for staffing and updating field manuals into real time, where knowledge can be shared as soon as it is entered, according to CAC officials. By using these wikis, any individual with access to the manual can immediately update each of its sections.

Seven field manuals were updated during the inception. Eventually, as many as 250 manuals will be available for comment, according to CAC officials.

The third portion of milSuite, known as milBlog, allows users to share news, photos, ideas and insight in real-time, with the capability to comment on one another’s feedback.

MilSuite is assigned to the MilTech Solutions Office, a government organization of the Army’s Program Executive Office for Command, Control and Communications-Tactical (PEO C3T) working in partnership with Product Manager, Acquisition Business.

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