

Weaving Weblogs into Knowledge Sharing and Dissemination

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Abstract

Weblogs as vehicles for knowledge management initiatives is a relatively new concept. The earliest Weblogs appeared only about five years ago. As personal journals, often espousing individual political views or chronicling personal daily events, Weblogs did not seem to fit into an organizational knowledge management framework. Attitudes towards weblogs and uses of weblogs are changing, however. In a collaborative work environment, weblogs bring significant benefits to enterprises willing to adopt the technology. Writers of weblogs, called bloggers, can add to the sum total of knowledge for research projects, share industry and product knowledge, capture and disseminate pertinent news from outside the enterprise, and contribute valuable insights on specific subjects. They are particularly useful for promoting knowledge in cross-cultural environments.

Weblogs can be established within a workplace, a team, a department, or enterprise-wide. They usually reflect the voice of one person, but can be created with several bloggers participating. The role of the information professional in regards to knowledge management blogging can be that of support or creation. Academic, government, corporate and public librarians have used blogs to enhance their visibility to their constituents, promote information services, and raise awareness of internal and external knowledge. In fact, blogs enable information professionals to add significant value to organizational learning.

Definitions

There is no standard definition for weblogs—this is a technology in transition. Exemplifying this is the “glossary” in *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs*, by Paul Bausch, Matthew Haughey and Meg Hourihan. Under the entry for “weblog,” they write “Web pages with timestamped sections of text, ordered chronologically from newest to oldest.” Even less instructive is their glossary entry for “blog,” which reads “An abbreviation of weblog, and the act of writing a weblog, such as I blog, therefore I

am.” Given that two of these authors co-founded Pyra Labs, the company behind the Blogger software used by many bloggers, the lack of a concise and informative definition is staggering.

Writing in *ONLINE* magazine in 2001, Darlene Fichter defined weblogs as “an online journal—a Web page with a series of short entries in reverse chronological order.” (2) Fichter was one of the first to recognize the power of weblogs in information settings, something she expanded upon in a subsequent article describing the use of weblogs as li-

brary marketing tools. (3) It's important, as Fichter notes in her definition, that entries be short. Long essays are not appropriate to weblogs. Most blogs incorporate links to other commentary, which can be a longer exposition written by the blogger, someone else's blog entry at their blog, an article written by an established journalist at that publication's Web site, or another type of source document.

Most people defining blogs use terms such as diary or journal, reflecting the personal nature of the early weblogs. In fact, the earliest blogs were frequently simply lists of links with some commentary thrown in haphazardly. This bears some resemblance to a physical bulletin board. Next in the evolution of weblogs was the personal diary. An individual used his or her blog to record personal events and emotions. The notion of keeping a personal diary is hardly new. A special exhibit at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England, which ran through January 30, 2004, described the diary of Robert Hooke ("the man who knew everything") as having a "hurried, disjointed style, written in short, energetic bursts between periods of work." Since Hooke wrote his diary between 1672 and 1683, it certainly was no weblog. Had the Internet existed then, Hooke's style would have fit right in with the blogging culture. He might even have been tempted to add links to other scientists' Web sites.

What's different between Hooke's day and ours is the technology. There are a variety of blogging software tools available that make creating a blog exquisitely simple. Once you've signed up for one of these tools, such as Blogger, Blog Spot, Blogger Pro, Diaryland, GrokSoup, Greymatter, Movable Type, or others, you're in business. You don't need to be a programmer; the desire to express yourself, a computer, and an Internet connection will suffice. The Open Directory Project lists weblog software at http://dmoz.org/Computers/Internet/On_the_Web/Weblogs/Tools/Publishers.

Although early personal journal blogs were frequently written as if no one other than the blogger was going to read them, in actuality anyone with an Internet connection could access these diaries. One

wonders if some of these bloggers wish, in retrospect, that they hadn't been quite so free in exposing their lives to the world at large. This can still be a problem. Anecdotes are replete about people losing friends and alienating family because of posts on personal weblogs. On the corporate level, jobs can be in jeopardy. Michael Hanscom, a temporary worker at Microsoft, was fired for posting a photograph of a delivery of Macintosh computers to Microsoft headquarters. (4)

In addition to blog software, many bloggers are now enhancing their blogs with news feeds and distributing their blogs using RSS (Really Simple Syndication). A full description of RSS is beyond the scope of this paper, however there are numerous explanations of RSS in both the computer and library literature.

Bibliometrics of blogging

The first blogs evolved from personal Web pages. According to Bausch, Haughey, and Hourihan (1), the term weblog entered the vocabulary in 1997, although people such as Tim Berners-Lee, David Winer, and Justin Hall had been writing "what's new" pages in 1994. The first tools for blog creation entered the market place in 1999.

When did the term blogging begin to enter the public consciousness? A brief bibliometric analysis of related terms (blog OR blogs OR blogging OR blogger OR bloggers) using several standard databases reveals a few articles published in 1999, with 2002 as the turning point and 2003 reflecting a huge upsurge. As of very early 2004, Gale Computer Database includes 410 articles fitting the search strategy, Gale Magazine Database had 411, Gale Trade and Industry had 869, and ProQuest ABI/INFORM had 248. The breakdowns by date are as follows (keep in mind that this analysis includes records posted only from January through May 2004):

Gale Computer Database (computer literature)

2004	107
2003	263
2002	84
2001	17
2000	4
1999	1

Gale Magazine Database (general periodical literature)

2004	146
2003	255
2002	76
2001	20
2000	7
1999	2

Gale Trade and Industry (business and industry literature)

2004	332
2003	590
2002	132
2001	23
2000	9
1999	2

ProQuest ABI/INFORM (business and management literature)

2004	64
2003	174
2002	64
2001	6
2000	1
1999	0

Although there is obviously overlap and duplication among the actual articles included in each of these databases, the numbers show clearly that even the computer literature was not tracking the blogging phenomenon much earlier or in greater depth than was the general press. Business and management, however, was slightly slower to catch on, but now that blogging has shown its worth to businesses, the numbers are escalating.

Aside from the journal literature, books tell their own story. The Library of Congress has added We-

blogs as a subject heading and has cataloged seven books so far under this heading, with several other relevant titles tagged with different headings. The most interesting are by Todd Stauffer, Cory Doctorow, et al., Rebecca Blood, Biz Stone, and John Rodzvilla (5, 6, 7, 8, 9). Interestingly, all were published in 2002 and make no, or minimal, mention of librarians' use of blogs, weblogs in the workplace, or knowledge management. Clearly, there's room for some new books on this topic.

Another metric, however, is less positive about the importance of blogs for organizational knowledge sharing. Perseus Development Corporation (www.perseus.com), more to promote its survey software than to add to the blogging knowledge base, published a white paper based upon its survey of existing blogs, what has become known as the blogosphere. In "The Blogging Iceberg: Of 4.12 Million Weblogs, Most Seen and Quickly Abandoned," Perseus claims that 66% of the 3,634 blogs it examined had not been updated in 2 months and that very few people read each weblog. In fact, it referred to the readers as a "nanoaudience." Perseus identified teenagers as the primary creators of blogs and females as being responsible for 56% of the existing blogs. Extrapolating from their research, Perseus estimates there will be over 10 million blogs by the end of 2004.

This picture of blogs would seem to mitigate against any professional use of weblogging. Information professionals and business executives alike hardly fit the pattern of bloggers presented by Perseus. However, other evidence presents quite a different view—and there are some methodological flaws in the Perseus survey sample.

Weblogs in the media

What pushed weblog technology into mainstream media, at least in the United States, was the Democratic presidential nomination race. Political blogs, with commentary about the candidates, the issues, and the campaigns, grabbed the attention of the media. The role of the Internet in grassroots fundraising surprised most people. As the media discov-

ered the power of weblogs, they realized something that the early bloggers never considered—blogs as quasi-mainstream media, as an incarnation of new journalism. (10, 11) Most people chronicling their daily activities don't think they are publishing. When media personnel begin to use blogging as a vehicle for reporting and commentating, suddenly weblogs gain a previously unheard of legitimacy and stature. They become part of the publishing landscape and print publishers begin to worry about whether their newsletters, journals, and newspapers will be obsoleted by the more current platforms provided by weblogs.

With weblogs both in the news and part of the news, new elements evolved. Originally, bloggers gloried in their individuality, quirkiness, non-conformance, and lack of respect for authority. Blogging was not about the established culture—it was a voice for those outside or even opposed to the mainstream, particularly those with political blogs. Once traditional media adapted blogging, some of the characteristics of weblogs began to blur.

The newest manifestation of the collision of blogging and journalism is the use of weblogs to report on conferences. Sometimes this is done as a group blog, as was the case with Information Today, Inc.'s coverage of Online Information in December 2003 and the Special Libraries Association annual conference in June 2004 (www.infotodayblog.com). Still in its formative stages, how group blogging and weblog technology as it relates to the conference stage will develop is still unclear.

Once the established media began blogging, several things happened. There was more regularity to the publishing schedule; the readership increased, and comments in the blog were repeated in printed and broadcast media. The voice of the commentators was recognized as authoritative and credible. These blogs are part of the established culture and are moving the technology into news arenas. Today blogs can be personal diaries, newsletters, current awareness vehicles, preaching platforms, and even business development tools.

The media's interest in blogging also caught the attention of the corporate world, although some functional areas within organizations were hardly newcomers to blogs.

Weblogs and librarianship

Early adopters of technology, librarians were among the first to start weblogs as true communication devices rather than as personal diaries. The technology immediately appealed to librarians since it dovetails with the resource sharing ethos of the profession. Peter Scott, an early innovator, still runs a weblog for librarians (blog.xrefer.com) and maintains a list of worldwide blogs for and about librarians (www.libdex.com/weblogs). Another librarian who recognized the power of blog technology early on is Gary Price. His Resource Shelf blog (www.resourceshelf.com) is a daily compendium of recent research sources made available on the Web, combined with his commentary on current events and technologies of concern to information professionals. Resource Shelf is "must" reading for thousands. Other important library weblogs include Steven Cohen's Library Stuff (www.librarystuff.net), Tara Calishain's ResearchBuzz (www.researchbuzz.com), Jenny Levine's Shifted Librarian (www.theshifted-librarian.com), and Blake Carver's LISNews (www.lisnews.com). These blogs, like many others created by librarians and information professionals, create library communities. They exist to share knowledge among professionals, rather than within a particular library or company.

Internal blogs exist, but little about them appears in the literature. Several case studies by librarians of their internal use of blogging technology suggest they see blogs as an outgrowth of current awareness newsletters. Steven Cohen's book, *Keeping Current*, emphasizes this idea. (12) Reinforcing this is the LLRX article by Karen Lasnick and Julie Weber (www.llrx.com/features/blogsatlawfirm.htm) entitled "Blogging: One Firm's Experience. Both are librarians for the law firm Bryan Cave LLP, one in Santa Monica, California, and the other in St. Louis, Missouri. They had been sending out e-mail newsletters and found that approach lacking. Not only

was the creation and sending of numerous e-mails becoming onerous, the information was not stored in a central location. Enter blogging, which solved both problems.

A snap poll on the Information Today Inc. web site (www.infotoday.com), a librarian-oriented site, asked "Have you implemented (or are you planning to implement) a blog within your organization?" As of February 2004, 41% answered in the affirmative and 59% said no. Comments ranged from "Another, and not very creative, way for staffers to waste time" to "Yes, a blog is a good proposal for fast information exchange, moreover running on an organization's intranet. I am planning to implement it in the framework of a research group."

Weblogs and knowledge management

Two other aspects of weblogging, rarely mentioned in early definitions, but extremely important when applying the technology to knowledge management in organization settings, are community and archiving. Not only do blogs reflect a personal viewpoint, they allow readers to respond and comment. This give-and-take fleshes out blog content and results in a sense of community among the participants. Archiving differentiates blog content from e-mails, discussion lists, and intranet Web page. The latter may be archived, but frequently are not. Even when they are archived, a search mechanism to actually find information contained within the e-mails, lists, or pages is frequently either inadequate or non-existent. The knowledge management concepts of collaboration, best practices, and knowledge sharing are endemic to weblogs. The integration of internal and external knowledge is another hallmark of blogs.

One of the widely acknowledged problems confronting knowledge managers is the difficulties involved in getting people to share their knowledge. At Braintrust 2004, a speaker from Rolls Royce gave a typical example. A phone call on Wednesday tells the knowledge management team that a senior scientist is retiring on Friday and has an hour on Thursday afternoon available where he can share

his 30 years of accumulated knowledge. Even worse are war stories about employees convinced that hoarding their knowledge is much more to their benefit than sharing it.

The notion of blogging as it applies to knowledge management is sometimes referred to as k-blogging. This type of knowledge logging, as explained by Michael Angeles, an information specialist with Lucent Technologies, works in tandem with librarians. (13) The knowledge bloggers, in his opinion, rely upon librarians to support their efforts and to provide a taxonomy to categorize the blog entries. He recommends that librarians think strategically to insert themselves into the knowledge capture and sharing process and believes that an alliance between k-bloggers and librarians will have a positive affect on the organization.

Applications of blogging tools in the knowledge management field have hardly gone unnoticed in the blogging community. Links to KM blogs, articles about blogging in conjunction with knowledge sharing, and opinions on the topic at Tim Voght's site (www.voght.com/cgi-bin/pywiki?KmBlogger). Most of these, however, concern personal knowledge sharing. They are a little lightweight when it comes to corporate uses of blogging for knowledge management.

Weblogs in the corporate world

There are two types of weblogs associated with the workplace. From a structured, knowledge management perspective, there are the internal blogs. These are usually part of an intranet project and are sanctioned by the employer. Trickier are external blogs. These are personal blogs of employees that fully acknowledge for whom they work.

Internal blogs, such as those created by librarians for current awareness delivery, work best when they appear to be as personal as the original diary type blogs. They need to be a grassroots effort, not something imposed by management. If, say, a public relations department decides that an internal blog, sanctioned by management, will sway workers

toward the corporate viewpoint on a topic, that blog is doomed to failure. Weblogs can be established within a workplace, a team, a department, or enterprise-wide. They usually reflect the voice of one person, but can be created with several bloggers participating.

To succeed as a knowledge sharing instrument, blogs must be viewed as non-threatening. They should be the voice of the blogger, not a tool of management to influence behavior. Blogs are the essence of peer-to-peer communication. It's not music downloading, not song sharing, but knowledge transfer and sharing. As in the general Web world, internal blogs should encourage active involvement rather than the passive receiving of information. Whatever blogging technology is used internally, it should allow the ability to respond to posts. Realistically, those responses need to be reviewed before they are actually posted to the blog.

The simple fact is that blogging is fun, partly because it's not technically challenging and partly because the process invigorates people. Ask someone to simply respond to a blog post about how a particular procedure works, for example, and that person is much more likely to respond to a blog format than to filling out a tedious form. This is even more true when the person knows that his or her peers will read about how the procedure works and contribute their own experiences and knowledge on the topic. This even-handed exchange of views leads to a very productive knowledge sharing environment. Blogs are an extraordinarily efficient means of communicating knowledge.

Blog technology fits particularly well with project teams. At Soar Technology, Inc., making an engineering notebook available to all project participants makes it easier for all team members to find information relevant to the project and to link to other relevant documents. (14)

Blogs transcend language, time, and space. They are informal, so lapses in grammar and the occasional typographical error are accepted. This makes it vastly easier for contributors with different lan-

guages to share knowledge. It also takes away the onus of asking for clarification. It's not unusual for someone to respond to a blog posting by asking exactly what the blogger meant by a particular word. Since words can have different meanings, and since some members of a multinational team may interpret words differently, this clarification is extremely important. In spoken language, people assume that everyone understands words in the same way. But in a blogging environment, where there are no visual clues, it's acceptable to spell out exact meanings and nuances. The casual tone makes for compelling reading and active involvement.

If not all corporations are jumping on the blogging bandwagon, at least one group of professionals, quite removed from information science, have seen the possibilities inherent in the technology. A group of 12 community pharmacists in the U.K. records their daily activities, professional not personal, in weblogs maintained by the International Pharmaceutical Federation. The idea is to share best practices of pharmacists and encourage others to "get involved in innovative projects." (15)

What about when an individual who works for a company uses a personal blog to essentially extend his or her work role? Microsoft's Beth Goza is one example. She uses a blog to communicate with customers and finds the open feedback, particularly their suggestions for product improvement, very valuable. (16)

Even the *Harvard Business Review* took note of the blogger phenomenon in its September 2003 issue. (16) In its hypothetical case study, a manufacturer of surgical gloves discovers an employee, with the online name of Glove Girl, is posting information, sometimes encouraging and sometimes damaging, about the company's product in her personal blog. It's unauthorized by the company, but many reading it believe it's company-sanctioned. She's highly regarded by the community, but can be indiscreet. The question posed is what to do about her. The CEO's gut reaction is to fire her, but he's dissuaded. The experts who present their solutions to this case study—David Weinberger, Pamela Samuelson, Ray

Ozzie, and Erin Motameni—agree that this is not a technological problem, it's a management problem. Suggestions ranged from encouraging more employees to blog, insisting that Glove Girl make it explicit at her site that she does not speak for the company, begin an information campaign within the company regarding risks and opportunities of blogging, and set internal standards for blogs.

Although these sound eminently reasonable, some bloggers, reflecting the non-conformist origins of weblogs, will not be happy. Nevertheless, if blogging continues to grow at the pace most expect, some guidelines will be necessary to avoid legal difficulties. Most companies have policies in place regarding dissemination of sensitive, proprietary information outside the company. Management must make clear that these policies apply to blogs as well. Valuable data should not be given away simply because there's a new technology that makes it easy to do so.

These are not new issues and should not obscure the value of blogging for knowledge sharing and distribution, both in an intranet and an extranet setting.

One blog in the corporate world stands out. It's the personal voice of Steve Goldstein, who just happens to be the CEO of Alacra, an aggregator of some 100 business databases. Steve isn't the normal CEO who minces words. Try this excerpt from a recent posting about an article by James Fallows in the *New York Times* about the demise of what he called "information middlemen," which is what we might call intermediaries or librarians. Here's Goldstein's take: "But headlines can be deceiving and even *The New York Times* publishes idiotic articles, even by well-known writers. (This seems to be increasingly the case.)" It would be impressive if more CEOs in the information industry would so candidly share their thoughts with us.

Future of weblogs

As organizations contemplate their knowledge management, sharing, and dissemination programs, the issue of weaving weblogs into them should be

considered. Professional associations can also benefit from the shared knowledge of their members. Weblogs provide a non-threatening environment in which to share knowledge. Unlike most computer-based implementations, blogs require no expensive capital budget. The technology is either free or very inexpensive, depending upon which software is chosen. The IT staff need not spend hours programming its installation and implementation. Should the weblog not deliver on its knowledge management promises, an exit strategy is equally inexpensive.

Several studies, notably one from Outsell, Inc. and Moreover Technologies, show conclusively that intranets are not used within organizations to the extent expected. Moreover surveyed 2,200 knowledge workers and found that 47% claimed everything they needed for their jobs was on the Internet. Only 10.9% responded that the intranet was their major source of information. This dismal record can be reversed by tying blogging to the intranet. Improved blog technology, particularly in the areas of search, archiving, and classification, will help greatly. The role of information professionals in achieving these improvements is crucial. As David Pollard states in *Salon*, complex intranet don't work. (18) They have become too complicated, too sophisticated for the average user, who doesn't understand the differences among portals, communities of practice, and searching. Pollard believes it's time for the "re-intermediation" of librarians. It's information professionals who understand integrating internal and external information, applying taxonomic principles to data, disseminating information in whatever format is appropriate, and sharing knowledge freely.

Blogging certainly has the potential to transform organizations by greatly accelerating the rate of information and knowledge exchange, allowing tacit knowledge to flow quickly to those who need it, when they need it. Blogs fit perfectly into the knowledge management framework by encouraging a well-informed workforce, providing a means of capturing best practices, and enhancing e-learning.

They are collaboration tools that encourage productive work-related conversations.

Will blog technology actually be transformational or will it be simply another technological fad? That's hard to say, and arguments are being made for both viewpoints. It is safe to say, however, that unless progress is made in controlling spam messages and viruses, e-mail's future is murky. Blogging could be an efficient and effective alternative for information and knowledge transfer, resulting in a more productive workforce.

It's important for information professionals to carefully evaluate the role of k-logging within their institutions, cultivate those trying to introduce the technology, and carve out a niche for themselves. Think of a library blog as a marketing tool and a way of informing your users of your collection and capabilities. Knowledge management can bring important benefits, not only to organizations but also to the careers of information professionals. Librarians and other information professionals need to be seen as integral to the success of their organizations. Keeping abreast of technologies, such as blogging and, on the horizon, social networking, putting them in perspective, and relating them to the real-world environment of our employers enhances the overall worth of the profession.

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