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Social Computing for the Business World

Social Computing - what's in it for your organisation?

Forums, social networking tools, weblogs, and wikis are collectively known as Social Computing and their emergence in the business world has been driven by the experience and behaviours of millions of people on the web who use similar technologies day in day out to ask questions, get answers and seek out like minded individuals from around the world.

There are many benefits to this new informal, conversational online environment but it is unfamiliar and challenges many of our current assumptions about the workplace. All of the tools that are covered in this article pre-suppose a world in which staff are encouraged to say what they think, openly and freely, and to seek connections and collaboration with other staff. There are still significant cultural hurdles to be crossed before arriving at this envisioned world but putting in place an online environment that spreads the possibility of this way of working is an important start.

The BBC has been a pioneer in implementing these tools over the last four years and this article takes a look at how they are already being used there to help people carry out their jobs on a day-to-day basis.

Forums

Sometimes called a bulletin board or newsgroup, a forum is a place where people can post questions or statements and get answers or discussion from any of the other users in the system. Originally based on mailing lists and then Usenet, forums have been developed a lot recently and tools like Yahoo Groups and Google Groups have added in diary, file sharing, user profiles etc. to make them much richer collaborative environments.

talk.gateway is the BBC's online discussion board and with four years of activity and 13,000 users it represents a unique opportunity to understand how such tools affect behaviour in the workplace. The forums are primarily used as a means of asking questions and getting answers and anyone with access to a BBC desktop PC can ask a question on any topic which can then be answered by any one of the staff who can see it. Having started small with a very low cost solution the system, and promoting its use simply by word of mouth, it's use has now grown to reach almost half the organisations total population of approximately 26,000.

Like most of these systems there was an early adopter group who were mostly younger and more technologically proficient but now contributors come from all parts of the BBC and the range of topics has become very varied. There are threads on the practical aspects of making programmes, producers looking for contributors or help with research for their programmes and even people suggesting new programme ideas.

Posts to the system range from the trivial to the philosophical with everything else in between and fall into three broad groups;

1. Practical questions

These questions such as “How do I do”, “Where do I find?” form the bulk of the activity in the system. They can have easy or complex answers and although some of them may seem trivial, dozens of such questions are asked and answered every week. The cumulative effect is to increase efficiency by saving time and effort and not only does the person asking the question get to benefit from the answer but so do everyone else who reads it. Visual feedback on activity is an important part of this ecosystem and the software shows how many times a topic has been read. Sometimes a question which may have had a simple answer and therefore only have, say, three responses, can have had thousands of views because although the answer was straightforward not many people knew it!

2. Questions relating to how the organisation goes about its work.

Large complex organisations are rarely straightforward when it comes to knowing how things should be done or what is expected in particular situations. Many staff don't know the formal position on policies and until they need to know there is little incentive to find out. Being able to ask a policy related question in an online forum quickly gets access to people who know the answer and have faced the issues before. Very often there isn't a single straightforward answer and different bits of the organisation respond to problems differently. The advent of online spaces, visible to the whole organisation, is arguably the first time that the collective learning so important to efficiency and consistency of activity can take place.

What becomes an issue is how you deal with difference and disagreement. If HR think they have a policy that is rigidly adhered to by the organisation, only to find out from an online forum that different parts of the business interpret it differently, how should they respond? Should they crack down on the dissenters and enforce their existing policy or should they listen to people telling them that it is inoperable in their part of the business and consider modifying the rules to reflect a more shared reality?

Unlike face to face conversations the learning online is instantly distributed amongst a wide audience - with all the benefits and risks that that entails. Managers and staff need to learn the rules of this new game and learn to take joint responsibility for their new collaborative environment.

3. Larger issues affecting staff.

As with internet forums staff forums get used a lot for letting off steam about issues or comparing views about things that affect us in our workplace. This is a valuable way of establishing a sense of "One BBC" - of being able to share problems and the emotions surrounding them.

As an example the BBC broadcast Jerry Springer The Opera last year and by doing so provoked protests from Christian viewers. Inside the organisation there was a similar range of views expressed and this sparked off a thread of around 300 posts on talk.gateway. The thread exposed staff's reactions to the issue and developed into a really involved debate about the rights and wrongs of our actions and of religion more broadly. Threads like this represented the first time that there had been a pan-BBC platform on which to get our collective heads around large issues like this and it was a powerful learning experience for all involved.

Social Networking tools

Within the last few years there has been a spate of tools developed for the web that build on the idea of yellow pages. Users upload information about themselves and their interests and can then form groups and associations with other users. These tools have been successful to various degrees but at their most simple they make it easy to surface and create informal communities and connections.

Connect, the social networking tool originally developed for BP and still in use there, was the one that the BBC chose to use in an attempt to increase the informal networks in the organisation and make them more visible.

At its simplest it is used as a way of adding colour and context to staff's interactions with each other. Many staff use Connect to look up people's phone numbers then as they are speaking to them on the phone they get to find out a little bit about them, their past, their interests - the sort of thing that makes conversation richer and more interesting.

The second use it is put to is to search for someone with specific skills either by searching the whole system or using the expertise topics to navigate to the right person to talk to. We have all had the experience of going outside the organisation to speak to an expert on a particular topic only to find out that the person who really knows what they are talking about works in the next office.

One of the most active areas of Connect are the interest groups of which the BBC has 250. These are used to identify users who have shared interests or expertise and to help communities to form around those groups.

The BBC recently combined Connect with its forum tool talk.gateway which now allows users to form interest groups in Connect and then create associated forums. For the first time these forums allow users to manage their membership (until this point all discussions

on the whole system were open to all staff) and therefore have more specific conversations that may have been too challenging for totally open environments. The most important aspect of this change was that control was in the hands of the users and watching their use of the technology to meet their own work needs is the best way of understanding how this complex ecosystem works.

Weblogs

Weblogs are simply online journals but there are a number of things that make them special. Firstly they represent the first time that it has been trivially easy to publish into a web environment. Until now you have had to be geeky enough to write code or pay for dedicated applications. With a weblog (blog) you use your web browser to access free or cheap blogging tools, write your content, press "save" and your content is published onto the web. Despite their deceptive simplicity blogs have had a significant impact on the web with 27 million of them currently in existence and power and influence being placed in the hands of ordinary individuals as never before.

One of the simple features of weblogs that made them different was the permalink. With normal web sites, pointing at content was a risky business as re-designs or changes of content could break those links. With a blog each post has unique and persistent url that makes that content linkable to for the life of the blog. This simple fact enables rich lines of thought to be built up between different blogs or within the same blog.

Another, and perhaps more significant, aspect of blogs, particularly in the early days of their development, was the blogroll. This is the list of other bloggers linked to from a particular blog. It reflects the selection of sources trusted by the blog's owner to deliver useful and trustworthy insight and information. As such is effectively an endorsement of those other bloggers and this networking effect of blogs is one of their most powerful consequences. Being linked to by highly read and trusted bloggers is one of the main ways to surface in the network and equally being slated by trusted bloggers is the quickest way to have your sins found out!

Some time ago the BBC introduced a blogging tool for internal use and it is currently being used by around 200 staff. These blogs range from personal ones in which the writer reflects on incidents, events, other writing or conversations that affect their work and are of sufficient interest and relevance to capture and make public, to group blogs recording daily activity or research that affect the individuals in the group, or to operational logs where people can record issues and share them amongst their teams.

A number of senior executives in the BBC now have internal weblogs including Richard Sambrook, Director Global News & World Service. He started blogging partly as a way of understanding this phenomenon that was having such an impact on journalism and partly as a way of sharing his own learning as he took up a challenging role in the organisation. His blog has become a great example of the ease and directness of weblogs with around 6,000 staff accessing it each month. His ability to reflect in public on issues and challenges and to then engage in conversation, in his blog's comments, with others interested or involved in these issues is a real departure from previous internal communications methods. In the same way as blogs have started to affect power and influence in the wider web they will most certainly begin to do the same inside organisations.

Wikis

Wikis are basically collaboratively written online documents. They make it easy for groups to write, edit, link or delete pages in a way that enables collaborative working as never before. The word isn't an acronym, as many people assume, but in fact comes from the Hawaiian phrase "wiki wiki" which means quickly. A number of features are common to most wiki tools. It is very easy to write and publish content. The history of each page's changes are tracked and can be seen by all users. Differences between versions are represented graphically and it is easy to revert to previous versions of each page.

The power of wiki technology is most clearly seen Wikipedia where users have created and sustained nearly a million pages (that is just in English - Wikipedia also has versions in more than a hundred languages) to create an encyclopedia to rival the Encyclopedia Britannica in depth and accuracy.

The BBC installed a wiki tool around 18 months ago and the take-up has been faster for it than any of the other tools with around 2000 staff currently using it. The use of BBC wikis falls into the following three main categories:

Web Site Creation

Previously establishing a web site was a relatively complex business with most people having to buy the services of a designer and developer to build a static site which took considerable effort to change and keep up to date. With a wiki they are able to start publishing online content immediately and maintaining it is trivially easy.

Research

Being able to set up a blank wiki page and ask users to populate it with their own knowledge and understanding of a subject is a really quick and easy way to get access to their accumulated knowledge.

As an example the BBC's librarians wanted to establish what directories existed out in the business, what they were used for and who owned them. To try to do this through conventional means using IT would have been a challenge and may not have surfaced all of the informal and unofficial stuff that goes on at the margins. With the wiki, users started populating it with really useful information very quickly. They established a style and format for the data collection and were able to see and potentially change each other's information as they wrote. The result has been the pulling together, possibly for the first time, of a huge amount of complex and valuable information freely offered by users and shared openly in an easy and speedy manner.

Collaborative Document Creation

Many of us have experienced frustration at having to write a document as a group. What normally happens is one person will kick off the document in Word and save it on shared server somewhere. The trouble is others, even if they can remember where the document is and find it again, tend to defer to this original copy and are reticent about changing it and it tends to end up mostly as the original writer intended. With a wiki this changes. There is no clear ownership from the start, anyone can read and change at any time. Changes are tracked and easily visible and version control is in the hands of all users. It is usually possible with wiki software to be alerted to any changes made to the document by

a number of methods and there is generally a much more live and collaborative feel to the writing than is possible using the traditional document metaphor.

As an example we decided that we needed a policy for staff who have their own personal, external weblogs. Having identified our bloggers using Connect a colleague from Editorial Policy created a wiki page, wrote a “straw man” policy and e-mailed the URL of the page to the bloggers. They then piled in changing, editing, improving and discussing their changes until they eventually arrived at a position of consensus and the wiki page stopped changing. At this point the “document” was exported as a PDF and taken to the formal organisation for ratification. The power of this is that those affected by the policy were able to get directly, and very efficiently, involved in its creation and as such are much more likely to support and adhere to its guidelines.

Project Management

Wikis can be used to actually carry out work too. Project plans can be easily created and shared and, through comments threads on the wiki page itself, users can discuss, debate and agree changes and developments. Timelines are easy to create and share and the very open nature of wiki communication means that it is easy to keep teams up to date, informed and engaged in projects as they happen.

An example of the potential for this came about through an activity that wasn't directly work related. In our forums a member of staff expressed frustration that they couldn't take part in BBC competitions and this prevented him from entering the Digital Britain photography competition. I responded to his plea of “Why can't we have our own competition” by setting up a blank wiki page called “BBC Staff Photography Competition” and establishing a closed Flickr group for uploading and sharing the photos. That was all I did - no management, no direction no deadlines. Within a couple of days an enthusiastic group had joined in creating the wiki and had produced rules, criteria, tagging guidelines, judges, timetables and even plans for a physical exhibition of the winning photos! The result was around 400 photos entered by 250 or so staff and an undertaking to make it an annual event. Now OK this wasn't a work related project but imagine this principle applied to “real” work!

RSS, tags and folksonomies.

RSS stands for “Really Simple Syndication” and is a method for weblogs, wikis or forums to publish their content in a way that readers can then subscribe to it. This allows readers to select sites they value, subscribe to their content and be alerted in applications called aggregators when that content has changed. They can then read the various content from these diverse sources in their aggregator removing the need to visit lots of sources and try to keep track of what has changed since the last time they were visited.

RSS is fundamental to building a knowledge sharing environment using these tools and brings about possibly the biggest shift in behaviour. Web content becomes streams and patterns of new and relevant stories rather than static unrelated content. Users who get expert at finding “the good stuff” can share their RSS subscriptions with others and help them piggy back on their experience and valuable sources of news and information.

Tagging is the process of adding metadata to documents, photos or music etc. to make it easier to find in the future. Flickr was one of the web based tools that first made the bene-

fits of tagging apparent. Flickr allows users to upload photos to the web and in doing so tag them with words that describe their content. With thousands of photos being uploaded and tagged every day Flickr takes these tags and makes the patterns in their usage visible in powerful ways.

Del.icio.us came next doing the same thing for URL's. Instead of saving a bookmark to your bookmark file you save it to Del.icio.us and in doing so tag it with words that help you remember its significance. Again Del.icio.us takes these tags and makes patterns with them.

The word folksonomies has been coined to describe this bottom up process of tagging and categorisation and it is increasingly being seen as an adjunct or possibly even a replacement for conventional top down taxonomies.

Conclusion

In the past written communication in organisations was mostly one way and almost always done by a relatively small group of people. With the advent of social computing it is possible to move from the relatively static and increasingly unused world of documents to a much more conversational style of communication that is available to everyone. The effectiveness and creativity that this unleashes is previously unseen in the business world and its potential is enormous.

Once these tools, and more importantly the behaviours they encourage, become more commonplace in organisations they will start to shift the process of discovery, generation and movement of knowledge. Indeed the ability for staff to find each other and collaborate across organisational and geographical boundaries and the consequences of such activity in terms of power and influence are relatively unknown. The old adage that knowledge meant power usually meant holding onto it and acting as a gatekeeper. In this new networked environment it is more true to say that if you aren't taking part and being seen to be willing to share what you know then you are less useful to the organisation than those who do - and are seen to be such!

For those of you not attracted to the benefits and opportunities described in this article I would suggest that you don't have much choice. When the kids texting each other in the playground and instant massaging each other in the evenings start working for you the connectedness that we are only just beginning to understand will be second nature to them. They won't stand for much less and the ability to connect and communicate with fellow workers will be part of their decision as to where they work. Organisations who embrace this new environment, learn to get the best out of it and adjust to accommodate it's potential will gain serious business advantage.

And those who don't?

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Author Biography

In addition to 21 years working in broadcasting, culminating in a senior position in the BBC, Euan Semple has five years of unparalleled experience learning how to make the most effective use of blogs, wikis, forums and other social networking tools, in a large corporate environment .

Euan has been involved in the design of the BBC/Ashridge award winning leadership programme, and he has delivered regular workshops on social computing and its consequences for organisations as part of that programme.

In recognition of his many accomplishments, Euan was voted Information Professional Of The Year (2005) by Information World Review.

As a frequent speaker and author on social computing topics, Euan has presented at many industry events including ix 2006 in Singapore, Reboot 8.0 in Denmark, EU eLearning Conference in Finland and UpFing '06 in France.

Euan has also worked with wide range of clients including, BP, BT, GSK, AIG Insurance, Bell Pottinger PR, ARM Processor Design Cambridge and Scottish Enterprise. He has also run workshops for The World Health Organisation, The British Council and a number of UK government departments. Euan has been the subject of articles in Information World Review, Inside Knowledge, KM World and Computing. His work has been covered by The Guardian, The Economist, and The Financial Times, and he has been interviewed for BBC Radio Five Live's Pods And Blogs programme.

His unique experience enables him to provide inspiration on this wired-up world of work and strategies for how businesses can prepare themselves for the challenges and the opportunities these new technologies represent. He is connected to the most influential movers and shakers of the Internet, and his workshops, which have been described as “inspirational,” have already been experienced by many diverse audiences worldwide.