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Blogging

For knowledge sharing, management and dissemination

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Abstract

Using weblogs, or blogs, as vehicles for knowledge management initiatives is a relatively new concept, but one that has gained rapid recognition. The earliest weblogs appeared only a few years ago. As personal journals, often espousing individual political views or chronicling personal daily events, blogs did not seem to fit into an organizational knowledge management framework. Attitudes towards weblogs and uses of blogs are changing quickly, however. In a collaborative work environment, blogs bring significant benefits to enterprises willing to adopt the technology. Writers of blogs, 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.

Keywords: bibliometrics, blogging, corporate information, knowledge management, librarianship, media, technology, weblogs

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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 regard 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.

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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 [1]. 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 a weblog as 'an online journal – a webpage 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, particularly knowledge management, something she expanded upon in a subsequent article describing the use of weblogs as library marketing tools [3]. Fichter stressed that entries should 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 website, or another type of source document.

In 2004, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary declared blog the #1 Word of the Year. Its definition: 'A website that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer.'

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 30 January 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 fitted right in with the blogging culture. He might even have been tempted to add links to other scientists' websites.

Maturation of blog technology

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 do not 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 had not been quite so free in exposing their lives to the world at large. Some knowledge is better not shared. 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. Microsoft, Delta Airlines, Friendster and Google are among those companies that gained notoriety by firing employees for ill-advised remarks in their blogs. Other employers, notably some mainstream media publishers, have taken the opposite tack, encouraging their journalists to blog. Companies such as Microsoft and GM use employee bloggers to communicate with the public, while many more have inward-facing blogs for internal consumption and knowledge management. Presumable, these sanctioned blogs come with some guidelines as to what is and is not permissible to write in a blog.

Blog usage now transcends these early, some might say crude, definitions. On the best blogs, ones that truly impart knowledge, the entries have moved well beyond short notations peppered with links to full-blown, thoughtful essays. Community, in the form of comments on the blog posts, links to relevant posts on other bloggers' sites, and lists of frequently read blogs, is increasingly important to the overall knowledge base. Classification and archiving of blog posts further

Bibliometrics of blogging

The first blogs evolved from personal webpages. According to Bausch, Haughey and Hourihan, 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 as far back as 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, using several standard databases, reveals a few articles published in 1999 and an enormous increase by mid-2005. Gale Computer Database had one article in 1999, but 671 in 2005; Gale Magazine Database went from two to 726 in the same time span. ProQuest's ABI/INFORM jumped from no articles in 1999, two in 2000, and 762 in 2005. Similarly, Gale Trade & Industry increased from two articles in 1999 to 2464 in mid-2005.

Although there is obvious 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 was slightly slower to catch on. Now that blogging has shown its worth to businesses, however, the numbers are escalating.

Aside from the journal literature, books tell their own story. The Library of Congress has added weblogs as a subject heading and has cataloged over 30 books so far under this heading (several, interestingly, are novels aimed at young adults). The earliest are by Todd Stauffer, Cory Doctorow, et al., Rebecca Blood, Biz Stone, and John Rodzvilla [4, 5, 6, 7, 8]. Published in 2002, they make no, or minimal, mention of librarians' use of blogs, weblogs in the workplace, or knowledge management. In 2004 Anne Clyde published a book on the place of blogs in librarianship [9]. Scheduled to be published in January 2006 is a *Blogging for Dummies* book, authored by Brad Hill.

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, i.e. the blogosphere. In 'The Blogging Iceberg: Of 4.12 Million weblogs, Most Seen and Quickly Abandoned', Perseus claimed that 66 per cent of the 3634 blogs it examined had not been updated in two 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 per cent of the existing blogs. Extrapolating from their research, Perseus estimated there would be over 10 million blogs by the end of 2004.

Best estimates in 2005 did put the number of blogs in the millions. Lee Rainie, Director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project (www. pewinternet.org), reported in a January 2005 data memo that eight million US adults have created a blog and that blog readership grew to 27 per cent of Internet users as of November 2004. PubSub (www. pubsub.com) in July 2005 said it scans 13.7 million blogs. Blog search engine Technorati claimed it searches 14.2 million. That's a lot of commentary – and obviously some blogs get more attention than others. Furthermore, these numbers all relate to public-facing blogs. They do not take into account blogs within organizations.

Weblogs in the media

What pushed weblog technology into mainstream media, at least in the United States, was the 2004 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 discovered 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 do not 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 rendered obsolete 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-conformity 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 2004, the Special Libraries Association annual conference in June 2004 and 2005, and the NFAIS conference in 2005 (www.infotodayblog.com). Associations such as the American Library Association are sponsoring group blogs with volunteer participants. Still in its formative stages, how group blogging and weblog technology as it relates to the conference stage will develop is still unclear. It is clear, however, that event blogging is here to stay.

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), which celebrated its fifth anniversary in August 2005, Tara Calishain's ResearchBuzz (www.researchbuzz. com), Jenny Levine's Shifted Librarian (www.theshift-edlibrarian.com), Michael Stephen's Tame the Web (www.tametheweb.com/ttwblog/), Marydee Ojala's Online Insider (www.onlineinsider.net), 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 email newsletters and found that approach lacking. Not only was the creation and sending of numerous emails becoming onerous, the information was not stored in a central location. Enter blogging, which solved both problems.

Darlene Fichter reports that the University of Saskatchewan's Data Library's six professionals use a blog for knowledge sharing. She describes the weblog as an 'online brain'. It contains snippets of information, such as usernames and passwords, how-to guides for advanced technical or research questions, overviews of new datasets and contact information. What did it replace? The previous 'knowledge center' consisted of sticky notes, scraps of paper, printouts and email folders – not particularly helpful to new employees. The blog now serves as the collective memory for the Data Library.

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 emails, discussion lists and intranet webpage. The latter may be archived, but frequently are not. Even when they are archived, a search mechanism to actually find information contained within the emails, 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 tacit 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.

To succeed as a knowledge sharing instrument, blogs must be viewed as non-threatening. They should be the voice of the blogger, or bloggers, not a tool of management to influence behaviour. 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 this – 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 made 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 languages 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 UK 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 [17]. 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 range 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 information industry world stands out. It's the personal voice of Steve Goldstein, the CEO of Alacra, an aggregator of some 100 business databases. Steve is not 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 2200 knowledge workers and found that 47 per cent claimed everything they needed for their jobs was on the Internet. Only 10.9 per cent 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 intranets do not work [18]. They have become too complicated, too sophisticated for the average user, who does not 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, email's future is murky. Blogging could be an efficient and effective alternative for information and knowledge transfer, resulting in a more productive workforce. As could wikis, which are an alternative knowledge sharing technology beyond the scope of this paper, but one which shows much promise for knowledge management. A major difference between blogs and wikis is the community creation model of wikis. Anyone can change a wiki entry, while only the author can amend a blog posting.

It's important for information professionals to carefully evaluate the role of k-logging (and wikis) 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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