
Editorial: organisational blogs: overview and research agenda

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1 Introduction

In 1997, John Barger – a blog pioneer – coined the term ‘Weblog’ (shortened to blog) and he defined it as “A Web page where a Web logger ‘logs’ all the other Web pages [he/] she finds interesting”. Later, the concept of ‘dated entries’ was added to Barger’s definition by defining blogs as “a site with dated entries, usually by a single author, often accompanied by links to the weblogs the site’s editor visits regularly” (Lears, 2003). The Oxford English Dictionary provides the following definition for a Weblog:

“A frequently updated Web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary.”

They can be topic-based or personality-based and can also be two-way, offering information while inviting the reader’s feedback.

Blogs are characterised by reverse chronological sequence of dated entries and frequent updating usually realised through the use of a special blogging tool. Several blogging software programs are available. Back in the 1999, Blogger (www.blogger.com) released a special software to automate blog publication. Others followed with improvements in the interface and the inclusion of permalinks, crossblog talk and trackback (Blood, 2004). All these advancements make the wide adoption and innovation easier for people.

There already are millions of blogs worldwide. At the end of July 2005, Technorati, Inc., a weblog-tracking firm, was tracking over 14.2 million weblogs and 1.3 billion links. As of July 2006, there are more than 50 million blogs in operation (Sloan and Kaibla, 2006). Blogging has become so widespread because it is fast, easy to use and cheap to operate due to 'uneconomies of scale' as a blogger or a small team of bloggers can reach massive audiences with only a computer, internet access and an opinion (Rosenbloom, 2004).

Blogs have become a powerful tool for establishing and maintaining online communities and their audience ranges from family and friends to professionals, departments and the general public. In an ethnographic study, Nardi et al. (2004) identified five key motivations for personal blogging:

- 1 documenting one's life
- 2 providing commentary and opinions
- 3 working out emotional issues
- 4 thinking by writing and
- 5 promoting conversation and community.

Another study analysed more than one million bloggers and individual entries of about 25,000 blogs to chart the community structure and patterns of blogger activity (Kumar et al., 2004). Kumar et al. observed that blogging is a global phenomenon and bloggers tend to create 'interest-', 'geographic-' and sometimes 'age-' clusters. It appears that bloggers are experimenting with ways to leverage the existing elements of Web logs into more formal social networks (Blood, 2004).

2 Trends of organisational blogging

A number of business firms are already using organisational blogs. Sun Microsystems Inc., for example, encourages its employees to blog on company time, within company space and posts the blogs on a dedicated site. Tim Bray, a blogger and director of Web technologies at Sun Microsystems Inc. sees blogging as 'a good way to increase the communication channel between the company and the world and help in community building' (Joyce, 2005). Edelman (2004) reports on other examples of how companies are using blogs: IBM uses blogs to discuss software development and business strategies with more than 500 employees in 30 countries; Macromedia has a staff of 'bloggers' who update customers about product developments; Microsoft is now encouraging the use of blogs as a means for employees to communicate among themselves and with their customers about new product developments and Nike recently launched its own blog for customers, 'The Art of Speed'. Other organisations that recently started blogging include Nabisco, Verizon, Harley Davidson, American Airlines, Hartford Financial Services Group, Banana Republic, Coca-Cola, etc.

Internally, organisational blogs are used as a tool to collaborate, create and share knowledge and develop communities; while externally, blogs are being used as a tool to communicate and collaborate with suppliers and customers. Some of the important purposes of organisational blogs are as follows:

Community building: the 'ability to bring people with similar backgrounds together is a major strength of on-line communities' (Wright, 2002). Blogs not only help create new online communities, but they can also help strengthen existing offline communities. Internally, blogs can assist in shaping employee identities for project teams and the organisation and in developing and/or improving relationships between employees with similar interests. Externally, blogs can be used to extend the relationships with customers, suppliers and alliance partners, company's products and services.

Communication: informal communication between members of an organisation is important for the exchange of experiences and opinions about work (Zimmerman, 2002). For many individuals, such communication represents the most frequent workplace activity. Blogging tools can assist in developing cross company relations and allow people to be in touch with each other. Thus, experts in given fields can be quickly located, credentials can be examined and project experience can be evaluated.

Collaboration: when employees are able to communicate, cooperation increases significantly. Being a type of asynchronous communication, blogs provide advantages for in-group collaboration over synchronous platforms since people have more time to reflect and consequently their ideas elaborated more (Webb, 2002). Many organisations are using blogs in the workplace as a way of managing information and projects. Blogs allow for collaboration between teams and departments, making it easier to plan and schedule meetings. Furthermore, individuals can use their personal blogs to express their ideas and then collaborate with others.

Knowledge management: the information and ideas contributed to virtual communities can be an important knowledge resource for organisations (Costanzo and Littlejohn, 2003). Known as *k*-logs, teams can use blogging to brainstorm and store information and ideas for future use and also use knowledge sharing capabilities.

Employee engagement: another important feature of blogs is their potential to engage employees to support 'organisations that put people first finish first' (Benton et al., 2004). By supporting human interaction, blogs can play an important role in fostering employee engagement.

Monitoring the environment: blogs may also provide an easy way for employees to post their opinions and views about the organisation (Edelman, 2004). Furthermore, by examining blogs, management can observe the morale and motivational climate in the organisation. In traditional communication media, it has been relatively easy for companies to control or at least tightly manage the broadcast of messages about their products and services. However, in the era of blogs, it is possible for the audience to have a two-way communication and customers have the opportunity to directly and indirectly express their views on businesses (Woods, 2005).

Marketing: blogs offer marketing advantages because they tend to be extremely visible in search engines as they are much more likely to attract links from other popular websites and are updated frequently. Blogs also offer practical advantages because they can add the 'validating' function (i.e. a client has already decided to contact the organisation) and a 'generating' function (i.e. new clients are attracted) to the website (Lawson, 2004).

3 Challenges of organisational blogging

While there are numerous benefits of organisational blogs as described above, there also are several issues and challenges.

Cultural considerations: employees' cultural background may encourage or discourage blogging. On one hand, it may encourage employees with different cultural backgrounds to communicate since it is informal and it can be anonymous. On the other hand, cultural differences may inhibit the use of technology.

Information overload: the problem of information overload already exists and blogs may only exacerbate the situation. This is especially true for external blogs which are already in tens of millions. Hence, readers become very selective about which blogs they read. However, there are those who think that blogs may actually help reduce information overload since bookmarking important sites will move the focus on the most relevant websites (Oravec, 2002).

Quality control: blogs generally contain links to other related pages and this makes them well-linked in the World Wide Web. Consequently, there is the concern that search engines are turning up blogs instead of pertinent information, which some may assume the content as accurate even when this is not the case (Lears, 2003). In blogs, it is possible that not only accurate content and information are offered, but bad advice and information may increase as well (Dewett and Jones, 2001). Another concern regarding the use of blogs in the workplace is that employees may spend precious working time writing and responding to blogs, which may actually lower productivity.

Reputation risks and disclosure of sensitive information: several legal cases involving anonymous speech on the internet have risen (Lipinski, 2001). In some cases employees may use personal blogs as a way to share their dissatisfaction about the workplace and make them available to the general public, which can damage the company's business, morale and reputation (Ison, 2004). Blogs may also become a problem if employees are sharing sensitive or proprietary information. Security may also be a concern for the private, company-based blogs. Both parties may be at risk: the employer's reputation and intellectual property may be harmed and the employee may be fired for expressing his/her discontent about the company.

4 Research agenda

Blogs are relatively new global phenomena and academic research of blogs remains limited as the majority of the existing research consists mostly of conference papers (Gurak et al., 2004; Williams and Jacobs, 2004), descriptive studies (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Kumar et al., 2004) and content analyses (e.g. Herring et al., 2004; Nardi et al., 2004). While there have been a considerable number of studies which have focused on the impact of blogs on training and education (Dickey, 2004; Williams and Jacobs, 2004), there is a paucity of empirical studies about the use of blogs in business organisations.

Future empirical research is needed to investigate how blog applications can affect organisational communication, employee engagement, collaboration, knowledge management and intermediate and ultimate outcomes from employees' and managers' perspectives. The dual perspectives, management's and employees' understanding of the benefits of blogs, are needed, as blogging is voluntary.

Additionally, not all organisations may be ready to use blogs. The successful application of organisational blogs will eventually depend on the culture of the organisation (Guterman, 2003). Therefore, corporate culture is expected to be a critical factor that needs to be analysed in relation to organisational blogging. Organisational policies and procedures on the use of blogs should also be clearly established. The real issue is finding a good balance between encouraging employees to use blogs in order to take advantage of their benefits and restricting harmful behaviour and exposing the organisation to risks.

This Special Issue contains eight papers dealing with different aspects of organisational blogging. The common theme of the papers is the emerging importance of this exploding new medium which can produce enormous value to the organisation but with potential risks.

Trimi and Galanxhi-Janaqi's paper 'Organisation and Employee Congruence: A Framework for Assessing the Success of Organisational Blogs', discusses the need for congruence between the benefits of blogs for the organisation and the users. Such congruence must be understood to conduct future empirical research on organisational blogging.

Lee, Park and Hwang's 'Corporate-level blogs of the Fortune 500 companies: An empirical investigation of content and design', explores a new way to categorise organisational blogs. The study found that the content and design of corporate blogs vary considerably based on the main purpose (type) of blogs.

An unexplored aspect of corporate blogging is the impact of national culture. Jeon et al.'s paper 'A cross cultural study of corporate blogs in the USA and Korea', found that while US firms use a variety of blogs, Korean firms use one primary type of blogs – top-down for promotion.

Evans et al.'s paper, 'CEO blogs: Credibility issues', deals with another critical aspect of organisational blogs. They identify important factors that enhance credibility of CEO blogs, along with uncontrollable factors. The authors make some practical suggestions to CEOs as to how to improve their blogs' credibility.

Kim, Lee and Hwang examine the impact for employee blogging on IT workers' citizenship behaviour. Their case studies found that employee blogging can be an informal mechanism to foster IT professionals' work engagement.

Olson's paper, 'Ethical aspects of web log data mining', deals with a unique aspect of organisational blogs. As blogs are recorded as electronic words, they can be data mined for different purposes. Thus, blog mining naturally involves ethical issues such as profiling people, identity theft, and nuisance. This paper represents the first attempt to discuss ethical aspects of blog mining.

Organisational blogs have become prevalent in the private sector. However, there has not been any meaningful study of blogs in the public sector. Kim, Lee, and Shin's paper presents an interesting analysis of blogging by national level government agencies in Korea, the most networked country in the world.

The last paper by Asllani et al., 'Sharing knowledge with conversational technologies: web logs versus discussion boards', deals with knowledge sharing and retention. They found that blogging is an effective technology for communicating tacit knowledge to a general audience, while discussion boards are efficient for communicating explicit knowledge to a specialised audience.

This Special Issue is only an initial step in exploring the importance and impact of organisational blogs for enhancing competitive strategies. There is a wide open field of

opportunities waiting for creative research to exploit the powerful, inexpensive technology as a source of new value creation for organisations.

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