

Blogging and work: employee perspective

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Some companies are recognising that weblogs written by their employees can be valuable assets: ways to communicate in a human voice within or outside the organisation, to find previously undocumented expertise, and to create unexpected connections between people and ideas. These considerations can motivate a company to engage with blogging, perhaps providing support to maximize positive effects or setting boundaries to minimize risks. However, for employees, the activity of authoring a weblog, even when clearly work-related, often feels outside the corporate sphere of influence. The personal nature of blogging means that companies have no straight-forward way to mandate the content, timing, or manner of blogging. Rather, to successfully exploit weblogs, a business must understand the personal interests and concerns of bloggers and create an appropriate environment.

In this case-study we share results of our research into weblogs at Microsoft. In late 2005 we spent two months attending meetings, reading documents, email discussions, and weblogs. We interviewed 38 employees, including bloggers, those responsible for the blogging infrastructure, managers and executives, and people in legal and public relations charged with considering the impact of employee weblogs.

Weblogs at Microsoft

Microsoft blogging history is a few years old: It includes bottom-up adoption by employees, public endorsement of blogging by company executives, and a variety of concerns about benefits, risks and desirability of blogging across the company.

At the time of our study, the company supported several external servers with over 2000 employee weblogs, blog services open to those participating in company community initiatives, and the MSN Spaces consumer blogging platform. Overall, external customer-oriented weblogs were perceived to be the principal value of the medium. "There is not clear business purpose for it (weblogs visible only internally)," one informant concluded, and an internal server with approximately 800 weblogs is maintained by volunteers. An internal survey indicated that over seven thousand employees were blogging, so weblogs on corporate servers were only a fraction of the activity. This is not surprising: Employees are not obliged to use official company servers, to report that they are starting a weblog, or to identify themselves or their affiliation.

Although guidelines for weblog practice had occasionally been circulated inside the company, people were sensitive over how to characterize it. Repeatedly we were told "the policy is that there is no policy," or "the policy is 'be smart.'" The attorneys we interviewed noted pointedly that all policies covering the disclosure of proprietary or sensitive information applied also to this medium.

Work-related uses of weblogs

The interviews revealed three broad categories of weblog use: direct communication, documenting and organizing work, and showing a human side of the company.

Communicating directly with others inside and outside the organization. People who design and develop a product have unique knowledge, but are separated from customers and users by intermediaries in sales, marketing, and field support, and by the time to reach market. Writing formal articles for publication on the company web site did not appeal to our informants, because of the time and reviewing it requires, and the lack of visibility or feedback associated with such materials.

In contrast, a weblog is an easy way to provide information, share tips, and engage in direct interaction with peers or with consumers of one's work. One respondent noted, "we were trying to ship something and [in my role] I have no external exposure to people... so [starting a weblog] was partly to talk about it with outsiders."

Another respondent received permission to publish internal FAQ materials in his weblog to benefit external readers.

Bloggers found it gratifying to inform or help others, to learn about the reception of their work in the “real world,” or to become visible as an expert in a specific area. Company encouragement to interact with customers and engage with communities provided a supportive atmosphere and eliminated potential barriers, but did not directly induce blogging. As one person put it, “blogging doesn’t come out of fear, it’s about passion.”

Documenting and organizing work. Some employees used a weblog both to communicate with others and to document and organize ideas, describing it as a personal archive enhanced by feedback from readers. “Either I could have written that down it as an internal note and just kept that or now it’s out there on internet, so I can find it more easily and also get hints from folks.” Several internal weblogs, including one by a team, were used to document and share work in progress with others inside the company. Since internal weblogs are indexed for intranet searches, bloggers felt good being able “to add to that index.”

Some bloggers who did not list documentation as a major motivation mentioned reusing old blog entries in drafting more formal documents or providing a link for answering a frequently asked question. Several indicated that they could avoid ‘spamming’ others with experiences and ideas by placing them in an easily accessible weblog post.

Showing the human side of the company. As employees of a company that can seem impersonal to those outside, many described blogging as a way to show a human face, to demonstrate that people in the organization care and are passionate about their work. “I’m tired of being called evil,” said one. Bloggers could recount stories behind products to help people understand why particular choices were made. They shared details of daily routines to give outsiders a sense of their work context. Bloggers felt a history of objectively sharing useful information enabled them to react with greater credibility in crises.

Weblogs can also change the company’s image in the eyes of potential employees. Three informants consciously crafted weblogs for recruiting and provided examples of impact. Their weblogs told everyday work stories for different roles in the company, provided insight into selection or promotion procedures, and shared tips and tricks. Other people reported new hires who applied to a group after reading a member’s weblog.

Effects of blogging: time and visibility

In employee weblogs, ideas that were unarticulated or hidden in personal archives become visible to others, interlinked and searchable. Collectively, this produces a wealth of information about products, practices, tips and tricks available internally or externally. Many respondents reported time saved by blogging: reusing entries, quickly helping others or learning, getting answers to questions, receiving feedback on ideas, finding people inside or outside the company with similar interests or needs.

A few bloggers mentioned that posting to their external weblog helped them connect serendipitously to a person or relevant information *inside* the organization. One informant noted that an idea posted to a weblog resulted in a prototype developed in another part of the organization. He wrote, “I’ve never met Lee or had any agreements with anyone that he would do this. Nor would I ever have been able to send mail to the right group of interested people that might be able to spend the time building a prototype. I simply blogged my idea, the idea found the right people, and we’ve made a bunch of progress that will help ensure the right feature is delivered to our users.”

A weblog also gives visibility to its author. Through writing a blogger’s expertise becomes exposed beyond his nearest circle of colleagues. Many of our informants told about being asked to publish an article or speak at an event as a result of blogging. Several people reported that job responsibilities evolved as their interests were exposed: “[after reading my weblog my manager said] if you are so externally focused, you can be our community lead... now I’m a community lead... I enjoy it.” Others said that being recognized externally as an expert gave them more confidence about their employment prospects.

Visibility can be a mixed blessing. Some bloggers dislike being seen as stars by external readers and worry about, or experience, tensions within their teams when readers attribute team efforts to the blogger; “you are not trying to expose yourself or to be a star.” Also, a blogger who becomes the contact for customers raises expectations about blog coverage and becomes a focal point for questions and suggestions. Bloggers with relatively large audiences complained of resultant email overload and discussed preventive measures. Beyond the substantial effort required just to help, bloggers felt at times that they were doing other people’s jobs.

For some, writing externally yielded publicity that their role and position would not normally entail. Internally, some bloggers acquired more negotiating power or security, as people realized that making them uncomfortable or dismissing them could have repercussions with customers or partners. Blogging externally can be a way to accelerate internal change: some suggestions are more likely to be listened to when made in public than when delivered internally. In addition, bloggers can bring in customer feedback to confirm their ideas, giving a proposal more validity. Of course, these power shifts are evident to others and can lead to tension.

Personal choices

With blogging still an area of experimentation in the company, it is generally up to a given person to decide if, when, why and how to blog. The examples set by other bloggers, including executives, and the existence of company-supported servers, signal that blogging is a legitimate activity, but for few if any employees was blogging an explicit job requirement. In our research we identified a number of choices that bloggers have to make.

Starting a weblog. Most of our blogger respondents began on their own initiative, often with little prior discussion; “I asked only my direct manager and it was on purpose: I knew if I would ring my manager’s manager or manager of my manager’s manager it would become impossible.” Many bloggers identified experimentation, examples set by others, or pressure from others as reasons to start weblogs. Almost everyone mentioned a work-related rationale for blogging, visions of how it might help with job responsibilities. Personal reasons for starting to blog were central in the case of strictly personal weblogs—“it proved to be a good communication tool with my friends”—and also appear in weblogs that include work-related content. With the latter, personal motivations accompanied work-related goals; “I like the conversations that come out of blogging: it’s challenging me.”

Where to blog? We expected the main decision when starting a weblog to be whether to blog internally or externally. However, we found more fine-grained choices and a broad variety of guiding criteria, usually influenced by the goals for blogging.

- **Access and visibility.** Who should be able to access the content? How easy will it be? Internal weblogs are good for sharing non-public information, but do not have exposure of external weblogs. A weblog on an official Microsoft server is easily found by a niche audience seeking Microsoft news, whereas a blog on another external server can get lost amidst millions of other bloggers.

- **Affiliation with the company.** The choice of server can also be influenced by a desire to have or avoid an explicit affiliation with the company. For some stating their connection with Microsoft is a matter of credibility or pride, while others see it adversely affecting their image, causing them to be judged as a Microsoft employee rather than for their expertise.

- **Freedom and control over technology or content.** Although company-supported servers provide an easy way to start blogging, a weblog on a self-hosted server (internal or external) can be a better option for those who want a weblog configuration to fit one’s preferences. Blogging on platforms unrelated to the company also raises fewer questions over the nature or ownership of the content.

What (not) to blog about? With no formal policy, the lack of explicit rules creates risk; each blogger is ultimately responsible for “being smart.”

Most of the weblogs we studied contain a disclaimer indicating that the content reflects the personal views of the author. But when a weblog author is associated with the company it is not always clear where to draw the line between personal and corporate. Even weblogs primarily or exclusively focused on work are likely to have a ‘personal touch,’ presenting information from an individual perspective, in an informal style. Many employees add personal comments to work-related notes, or publish entries about hobbies, events in their private lives, or opinions on non-work matters, suggesting that their readers “come to read the person, not the blog.”

Attitudes differ toward the propriety or desirability of mixing personal and work content. Some bloggers have two weblogs, one for work and one for personal content. Others do not share any private information online, restricting blogging to work-related topics. Others see no problem with mixing work and private issues in a weblog that identifies their affiliation and often stress role of personal information in providing context for work-related posts.

Many struggle to identify what can be blogged about work, finding a grey area between the clearly confidential and the clearly publishable. In one group, bloggers praised clear communication from their management that identified “three topics you are not supposed to blog about.” This provided clear boundaries while not curtailing the freedom to blog.

For most it takes time, trial-and-error experimentation and reflection on internal and external feedback, to find what is comfortable for blogger, readers, and the company, trying to balance conflicting interests. Some respondents started conservatively and grew less so over time, others described specific incidents (e.g. misinterpreted posts amplified by media) that helped them to learn where to set boundaries. In this respect the relationship with the immediate manager was often identified as critical, in getting a blessing to start a weblog, negotiating acceptable uses, or seeking support in cases of unexpected negative effects of a post.

Blogging as part of a job. Given the time demands and work-related implications, how was blogging integrated into ‘the day job’ for which a person was responsible when blogging commenced? For a few blogging eventually become an official part of the job (in one case up to 15 hours per week were formally devoted to

blogging). However, most integration of blogging with direct work responsibilities is not so dramatic. Some bloggers justified spending some work hours reading or writing weblogs, usually by showing its impact on other responsibilities. Others did not make blogging a formal objective, but raised it during their performance appraisal as an extra work-related activity; “it’s not explicitly part of my objectives, but it’s a mean to an end.” A few bloggers try to maintain a complete separation between job responsibilities and blogging, even when the blog is primarily work-related, to maximize their flexibility and freedom in posting.

Content ownership. Despite disclaimers indicating that weblog content contains personal opinions that should not be attributed to the company, employees blogging about work, especially on official servers, conceded that the company owned their content. This is consistent with the contracts governing the company’s intellectual property rights for work-related results, usually interpreted as applying to hardware, software, and branding, but technically covering writing as well. However, not everyone agreed that weblog content should be company property, for example stating that corporate ownership of personal stories on a work-related weblog was odd.

For many blogging involves personal initiative, investment and time. A weblog could also have a long-term value for an individual: as a space that becomes strongly associated with the author’s reputation online or as a record of thoughts and experiences. Those considerations play a role in the decision-making about content ownership. Some bloggers conceded the right and need for the company to have access to their content, but want to insure their own access or reuse rights should they leave the company: “if they said they would delete it, I’d be thinking why am I blogging here [on company server] and not externally.” Others took the extreme position of wanting sole ownership of their words, which led them to host their blogs externally, blog on their own time, or both.

Conclusion

For an employee, a weblog can provide a space to share passion for work, to document and organize ideas and work practices, to find and engage others inside and outside the organization. For an employer, this can result in accelerated information flow, increased productivity, improved reputation and customer engagement, but also in greater dependence on personalities, less control over the corporate face to the outside world, and possible challenges to hierarchy.

Employers and employees who take up blogging should anticipate that their practices will evolve. Their responsibilities may shift. Team relationships are affected. Experience and feedback change a blog; issues arise when bloggers change jobs. If pushed to specify limits up front, an organization could be too restrictive and lose potential benefits. At the same time, it may be good for bloggers to constantly consider limits and consequences—personal judgment and responsibility are inescapable elements of employee blogging.

Side-bar (somewhere towards the end)

One of the interesting findings of this study is about external weblogs of employees that helped unexpected discoveries of interesting colleagues or relevant information inside the organization. What can be done to amplify those effects?

- First, communicate that blogging about work is not a sin and explicitly indicate if there are any taboos (“three things not to blog about”). Indicate that you are aware of potential risks, but prepared to find out how the medium works without making rigid decisions.
- Get to know the bloggers. Ask inside the company and search online.
- Help others inside the company to find relevant blogs of their colleagues. Create a blog directory or let employees add links to their weblogs in their contact details.
- Index work-related entries of external employee weblogs and include the results into intranet search.
- Create a “weblog of the month” column in internal newsletter featuring ideas from external employee blogs.
- Syndicate weblog posts on a specific topics in the relevant intranet sections.