

Best
practice case studies
and strategy



Knowledge Management Review

Thank you for downloading from the *Knowledge Management Review* e-library. *Knowledge Management Review* is the leading bi-monthly publication providing the latest trends, techniques and ideas in knowledge management.

FREE SAMPLE COPY ORDER FORM

Choose the products you would like to review, complete your details below and fax or mail your request to us.

PLEASE SEND ME A SAMPLE COPY OF:

- KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT REVIEW**
Subscription publication: Six issues per year with best practices, case studies and research for KM practitioners
- CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY MANAGEMENT**
Subscription publication: Six issues per year with the latest trends, techniques and ideas for CR practitioners
- THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATOR:
WHAT'S WORKING IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION**
Subscription publication: Ten issues per year with tried and tested ideas ready to be used in your daily work
- STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT**
Subscription publication: Six issues per year with best practices, case studies and research for communicators
- STRATEGIC HR REVIEW**
Subscription publication: Six issues per year with the latest trends, techniques and ideas in human resource strategy

PLEASE ALSO SEND ME INFORMATION ABOUT RESEARCH REPORTS:

- EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**
- MAKING MANAGERS BETTER COMMUNICATORS**
- INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MEASUREMENT**
- HOW TO STRUCTURE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

These are just some of our products. To find out about more Melcrum publications, training and events, visit www.melcrum.com

PLEASE PRINT DETAILS CLEARLY OR AFFIX YOUR BUSINESS CARD

NAME

E-MAIL

POSITION

COMPANY

ADDRESS.....
.....or attach your business card.....

CITY

STATE/COUNTY.....

ZIP/POSTAL CODE

COUNTRY.....

PHONE.....

FAX.....

SIGN UP FOR FREE E-NEWSLETTERS

Get practical ideas and useful resources to help you work smarter. You'll get great ideas, tips, resources and freebies. Sign up to:

- The Source for KM Professionals –**
the free monthly e-newsletter for KM practitioners.
- The Source CR –**
the monthly free e-newsletter for CR practitioners.
- The Source for Communicators –**
the free twice-monthly e-newsletter for communicators.
- The Source for HR Professionals –**
the free monthly e-newsletter for HR practitioners.

RETURN YOUR COMPLETED ORDER FORM TO EITHER OFFICE:

US Office: Melcrum Publishing Ltd, 10 South Riverside Plaza, Ste. 1800, Chicago, IL 60606, USA

Tel: (877) 226 2764 • Fax: (312) 803 1871 • E-mail: info@melcrum.com

UK Office: Melcrum Publishing Ltd, 1st Floor, Chelsea Reach, 79-89 Lots Road, London SW10 0RN, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 7795 2205 • Fax: +44 (0)20 7795 2156 • E-mail: info@melcrum.com

www.melcrum.com
MELCRUM
PUBLISHING

Melcrum is a provider of strategic business information. We gather best practices from expert practitioners to help you make better business decisions.

Blogs are the next “big idea” in the business press, receiving plaudits from *Fortune*, *Business Week* and in recent months, *Harvard Business Review*. But what do blogs offer KM specialists? Here Bill Ives and Amanda Watlington discuss how blogs can aid communities of practice, collaboration and team learning.

USING BLOGS FOR PERSONAL KM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Refining the global knowledge marketplace

By Bill Ives, Portals and KM, and Amanda Watlington, Searching for Profit



Bill Ives is a KM consultant and writer who has worked with *Fortune 500* companies for over twenty years. He can be found at his blog, *Portals and KM*: http://billives.typepad.com/portals_and_km/

“Blog” was Webster’s word of the year, *Fortune Magazine* named blogging as the No. 1 business technology trend for 2005, and the *Harvard Business Review* included business blogs in their list of breakthrough ideas for 2005. In spring 2005, blogs made the cover of *Business Week*. In the popular press, blogs have been generally represented as the pronouncements of the politically active, the diaries of teenagers, and the musings of technophiles. While these uses have received lots of attention, blogs possess functional characteristics that promote and support a variety of business uses. This article addresses some of the many ways blogs can help KM.

How can blogs help business?

How are these features successfully applied to business? While writing our recent book *Business Blogs: A Practical Guide*, we posed this question to over 70 business bloggers from large organizations like IBM, Microsoft, SAP, MIT and smaller businesses such as a restaurant, a commercial sign company, web design firms and a regional winery. Ten or more bloggers in each of five groups were surveyed. The groups included: small businesses, individual consultants, non-profit organizations, individuals in large organizations, and blog tool and service providers.

Each blogger was asked: When and why did you start blogging? How has it met your objectives? Have your objectives evolved? What have been the

challenges you faced and how did you overcome them? How do you benefit from other blogs? What are your favorite blogs and why? What advice do you have for other bloggers?

Personal benefits

Several themes emerged from their conversations. The first relates blogs to content creation and management. Until now, KM tools operated from an enterprise level, but there was nothing designed primarily for the individual. In an attempt to serve all, enterprise KM at times served no one effectively. The best information was often hidden on individual computers where even the individual could often not find it or remember its significance once found. Each person had no really effective way to organize their content and add context in a searchable platform.

The simplicity of blogs with individual posts containing content and links, with a searchable archive now gives us a tool for individual content management and a more effective tool for group communication than e-mail lists or discussion forums. Information archived by the individual, complete with links to original sources, is publicly viewable by all in the organization. Others in the organization can add commentary, adding to the collective wisdom, yet the individual retains control over the context and ultimately the content of the archive. RSS feeds, where updates are automatically sent to subscribers, greatly extend this capability.

KEYPOINTS

What defines a blog?

Blogs:

- *Provide simple web pages supporting frequent updates.* Unlike formal web pages that require coding, blogs use simple templates, allowing for informal, ongoing, easy-to-engage-in conversations.
- *Require little or no coding, and are inexpensive to set up.* This virtually eliminates entry barriers to having a web presence. If one has a computer and web access, little more is needed except time and imagination.
- *Provide each entry with its own unique internet address.* Search engines can spider and index individual posts, and other blog writers or readers can pass on links to individual posts thus expanding readership.
- *Make linking to other posts or sites easy.* This facilitates the creation of online communities of similar interests and helps the reader easily find relevant information. Since much information is now stored in a web-accessible location, a blog post provides a way to add context to content links, facilitating personal KM.
- *Accommodate comments.* These add an interactive dimension that builds connections and sharing of ideas.
- *Are arranged in reverse chronological order.* This places the most recent content at the top of the visible page.
- *Place content in a searchable archive that can support navigation via categories for easy browsing.* Some blogs include search engines in addition to categories.
- *Use RSS, Atom or XML feeds, allowing readers to subscribe to updates.* Users can subscribe to blog content and easily read it. RSS (Really Simple Syndication, a lightweight XML format designed for sharing headlines and other content) is one of the biggest breakthroughs, for it eliminates the need to scan individual sites.
- *Are usually written from a personal perspective.* This is a style that's evolved and become expected for blogs. For businesses, blogs provide more personal and informal contact with customers that complement formal websites.
- *Promote transparency through accessibility.* Blogs combine the searchable archive of a KM system with the open accessibility of a website.

From an individual perspective, blogs offer:

- *Creation* – publishing content with a personal voice.
- *Collection* – managing personal content in a searchable archive.
- *Context* – applying commentary to the content that the individual wants to manage.

Building communities

The second theme relates to enhancing networks and building communities that drive business in today's interconnected markets. Blogs provide a platform for individual content management that it is open to everyone. Many bloggers have started their blogs for individual content publishing and discovered that others were reading and commenting on their work. Useful conversations

- The simplicity of blogs serves as a tool for individual content management, and a more effective tool for group communication than e-mail lists or discussion forums.
- Blogs provide a platform for individual content management that it is open to everyone.
- Intellectual property issues need to be addressed concerning blogs along with all the responsibility and liability issues.
- Blogs lower the barriers to individual content management and to virtual conversation within enterprises and on a global level.

opened up that drove new business opportunities. Several individuals reported that through blogging they connected with others sharing the same business interests. These connections resulted in direct business referrals. For others, their blogs provided an opportunity to showcase their expertise and readers recognizing their expertise and turned to them for services. Business communities emerged, and new collaboration became possible. From a networking perspective blogs provide:

- *Connection* – discovering others with similar interests.
- *Conversation* – engaging in dialogs on an organizational or global basis.
- *Community* – building networks around shared themes.
- *Collaboration* – finding new business partners.

The many uses of blogs

Many specific instances of both themes emerged from the diverse set of bloggers surveyed. Here are some of the initial uses.

Outward facing uses include:

- *Expanding market exposure.* Buzz Bruggeman first used his blog, Buzzmodo, to gain greater market exposure for his software product, ActiveWords. He felt that it was a great product, had phenomenal reviews, but at the same time wasn't getting needed traction. After starting his blog, his visibility mushroomed fueled by approximately 26,000 mentions of Buzz on Google. ActiveWords brand gained significant recognition.
- Establish a thought-leadership position. Judith Meskill writes two very popular blogs, "Judith Meskill's Knowledge Notes" and "The Social Software Weblog"; each garners thousands of unique visits every day. These blogs have provided an excellent form of indirect marketing for her consulting work, while continuing to establish her reputation in the marketplace. For example, she receives many more invitations for speaking engagements through her blogging readership.
- *Introduce new products and services* – Pito Salas, head of BlogBridge, a blog and RSS reader development company, writes a blog and



Amanda Watlington

is an expert in the search industry, where she has developed patent-pending tools and methodologies for search marketing. She blogs at *Blogs and Feeds* (http://amanda.watlington.typepad.com/blogs_and_feeds/) and *KM*: http://billives.typepad.com/portals_and_km/

- maintains a website. He finds that his blog provides a place to discuss the development of this product offering. He links from the blog to the BlogBridge site and from the website to his blog. The two communication channels complement each other. The blog offers longer, more informal conceptual pieces. The site offers facts and other self-contained product information. As his thoughts become more formal, he migrates them from the blog to the website.
- *Enhance customer relations.* Microsoft has actively supported blogging by individual employees. Robert Scoble is the most well known, and he noted that blogs are one of the best ways to build relationships with lots of people across the globe. He can link to other bloggers and share traffic with them. He can point out interesting technologies. He can communicate with and get feedback from customers and developers in real-time. Microsoft's support soon produced hundreds of employee bloggers on many topics. Microsoft has created a portal that provides customers with a single place where they can find bloggers who address their specific product questions, greatly improving the customer experience and the impact of employee blogs. SAP's Net Weaver group also offers a central place on their website to find bloggers. One of those listed is George Yu, marketing manager, who sees his blog as an essential part of his job. Until now, he could only get customer feedback in live presentations. Now he gets ongoing feedback through his blog.
- *Provide another direct sales channel and acquire new revenue streams.* An increasing number of bloggers review products and services, making money on subscriptions and/or advertising.

Inward facing uses include:

- *Internal communication and team collaboration.* Some IBM field technicians have created blogs to communicate problem-solving experiences immediately back to their team members while on the road. Dan Gruen, Research Scientist at IBM's Collaborative User Experience Group, points out that, "These blogs can then be used to enable virtual apprenticeships and serve as a valuable resource for future teams facing the same issues." The ability to search both within and across blogs enhances this KM function. IBM has also found other benefits, including a rise in the discovery of new ideas and new connections for these ideas. This is possible because recent blog posts are displayed at the IBM Blog Central site. Participants can see what the others are doing, discover new ideas, and find people with

compatible interests. IBM found this serendipity extends to regular meetings, as participants can look at the other's blogs to find previously unknown common interests or new ideas to discuss, getting to know more about others in less time, making meetings more effective.

- *Project management.* Al Essa, the CIO at MIT's Sloan School of Management mentioned: "We have created a blog forum for each project. Project managers provide updates and everyone in the department can access all project logs." The project lead maintains their project's blog and other team members can contribute. Essa now reviews each online project, drills down for more detail as needed, and adds comments or links to other team blogs addressing similar issues. These status reports are available to everyone in his department, so cross-project communication is a by-product of the project teams' new blog-based reporting platform. The new blog-based reporting system has made project review meetings far more efficient and productive morphing from simple information updates to more meaningful exchanges.
- *Personal KM.* This is an increasingly important aspect of KM. Productivity tools designed to make life easier often have the opposite effect. As discussed, blogs can offer a simple means to create a contextualized personal archive. Many bloggers, including the authors of this article, have come to rely on their blog as their back-up brain. Whether one is writing a book, learning about new technology or simply working in a digitally connected age, it results in a huge volume of often disconnected information. All of this information can be neatly codified into a personal blog. With the blog, it is possible to include commentary and context for each piece of information retained.
- *Learning channel.* Kathleen Gilroy of the Otter Group develops blog-based learning programs for both universities and corporations. She told us, "We found because of the visibility of blog-based discussions to key stakeholders within the corporation, participants contribute more frequently and with a higher quality than through e-mail or chat sessions." One of these learning programs was for a major financial services firm. Teams of employee participants develop new product ideas in their class. After blogs were introduced, the quality of discussion increased and many more of these products ideas went on to become viable new products.

How can blogs hurt business?

The power of blogs can also be used to harm a business and/or an employee. This has already

occurred in several well-publicized cases. The creation of blog policies is an essential step for any business considering blogs. There are several potential areas of trouble with blogging. While these areas are generally not unique to blogs, the transparency and power of blogs can magnify the effect of any bad behavior. The problem comes when people do not recognize this power or understand their responsibilities. In addition to simply giving away the company secrets, there are opportunities for libel, trade disparagement, copyright infringement and, in the US, Sarbanes-Oxley violations with similar security regulation problems in other countries. In addition, most general liability insurance does not cover blogging. These issues are all the more reason to have a good blogging policy, but not a reason to avoid blogs just as you would not avoid e-mail or other forms of communication for such concerns.

The current status of blogging policies is similar to the situation with e-mail 10 years ago. Many companies recognized the impact of putting things in writing with e-mail and developed policies, often as a result of negative consequences from employee e-mails. Blogs are even more open than e-mail and deserve just as much attention. There are certainly both sides to the issue and employees' rights need to be protected, while maintaining individual responsibilities to employer and fellow employees. It is best to work out a policy with much employee input. Intellectual property issues need to be addressed along with all the responsibility and liability issues. Most companies have policies that the company owns the copyright to any content created by an employee that is published through a company website or other channel. They can also edit it, but what about a blog that is published independently by an employee? Each organization will need to work out their own unique solution to these issues; however, they all need to be addressed.


There is no going back

We are only at the beginning of blogs' influence and new applications are constantly emerging (e.g., audio and video blogging). The blog's basic core functions of a searchable archive with transparency and subscriptions to updates will continue to be enhanced with many new capabilities. In addition, these features are being extended beyond blogs. As Tom Malone writes in "The Future of Work" (*Harvard Business School Press*, 2004, p. 41), blogs fit well within the increasing trend toward decentralization in business prompted by the lowering costs of communication. This decentralization is taking a variety of forms, and blogs can support many of these new approaches. Larger organizations, such as IBM, SAP, and

Tips for Bloggers

1. *Don't hesitate, just start blogging.* Almost all of the bloggers interviewed for *Business Blogs: A Practical Guide* recommended this.
2. *Write about your interests.* Blogs are all about content. Write about what you know and have a passion about. Your readers will share your interests and welcome your passion. If you are an employee and want to write about your business, be sure to follow your company's blogging policy. If there is no policy be guided by the dictum of don't share what isn't yours.
3. *Blog often.* Make blogging a part of your regular routine. The more you blog, the more you will find that you will want to blog about. The more you blog, the greater will be your business' visibility.
4. *Write in your natural voice.* Blog readers want an authentic voice, so be yourself. That being said, blogging is not an excuse for poorly written drivel. Your readers will quickly abandon you. For businesses, blogs offer an unusual opportunity to connect with their market informally, unconstrained by marketing/PR messaging that often crowds out authentic communication.
5. *Give links generously.* Blogging is all about connections, so make them by giving links. Credit your sources, and they will credit you.
6. *Enjoy yourself.* Blogging whether business or professional should be a pleasurable creative activity. If it isn't, re-examine why you are blogging.

Microsoft, use blogs to provide a more informal and personal connection with their customers, driving public relations down to the individual employee level. Small organizations are better empowered to reach new markets and remain viable, independent players as they achieve the global reach of large organizations. Inside organizations of all sizes, management layers are being reduced to gain greater efficiency. The transparency of blogs can play a role here, too.

There is no turning back to siloed communication and content storage. Blogs lower the barriers to individual content management and to virtual conversation within enterprises and on a global level. Whenever you lower barriers, new phenomena emerge. Business practices will change. There will be winners and losers. 

Contact

Bill Ives

E-mail: iveswilliam@comcast.net

Amanda Watlington

E-mail: amanda@citysquareconsulting.com