

» PUBLISH OR PERISH: WEB 2.0 INVADES THE CORPORATION

Empower the workforce! Unlock hidden knowledge

By Rhea Wessel

Knowledge management meets social networking. Companies like British Telecom are empowering their employees with lessons borrowed from Web 2.0. Just social chit-chat, or a powerful toolset for the enterprise?

Every two weeks, BT's CEO, Ben Verwaayen, sits down in front of his computer and fields questions in an online chat session with any of the company's 110,000 employees who care to join in. He invests the time to cultivate a climate of information-sharing at the company. But he also hopes it will show results one day on the bottom line. The chat session with the boss is just one part of an extensive program at the telecommunications company to embrace social networking tools and profit from the wealth of knowledge locked tight in the minds and notebooks of employees—and share it with those who need to have it.

Corporations have long been working to sort, define, categorize and connect their various pockets of human and written expertise in a trend that is known as knowledge management or KM. But now the same kinds of social networking tools—such as MySpace.com, wikis, podcasts and blogs—that are all the rage in the public sphere are entering the corporate realm. Instead of Web 2.0, we're talking Intranet 2.0.

"All these things that are thought to be consumer services are coming into the enterprise," says Ray Lane, former Oracle president and now a partner at the venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers.

BT added social media tools to its corporate intranet, one of the world's largest. It is run under a franchise model, in which content owners are responsible for publishing

and updating information in their fiefdoms. Launched about 10 years ago as a publishing venue, the intranet was upgraded to allow employees to interact more easily with tools such as an online company directory. Eventually, the company added automated services such as online expense accounting. Now, with social networking tools, it is becoming a collaboration space.

EMPLOYEES WRITE A CORPORATE ENCYCLOPEDIA

Without investing much in hardware and software, BT offers employees Web 2.0 features such as BTpedia, a company encyclopedia modeled after Wikipedia; Blog Central, a dedicated space for hundreds of informal commentaries where a project manager can float a question or search previous blogs for an answer; and Podcast Central, a spot where employees can hear and see audio and video broadcasts from top management. Later, employees will be able to post their own podcasts.

"BTpedia is based on two ideas: we wanted to unlock informal information that doesn't get aired because of our formal intranet publishing process, and we wanted to build knowledge. It's about connecting people and building communities," says Richard Dennison, who is managing the social media project. Employee interest in BTpedia has been strong, and so far they have published more than 500 articles.

Another tool, one that is hugely popular, is RSS feeds that help employees control the information they receive and how they receive it. "Because it's corporate, it's not anarchy. Employees have to take certain feeds," says



Intranet 2.0—a new approach to sorting, defining, categorizing, connecting and sharing your employees' expertise for the good of the company

Dennison. For instance, a person logged into myBT will receive all news feeds from the corporate news desk.

Many managers shudder at the idea of employees wasting time in chat rooms. That's why knowledge management consultants suggest each company consider the rules of play before experimenting too much. At BT, any employee can participate in any discussion with any tool, but no one can do so anonymously, as is common practice on the internet. BT decided early on to focus on the advantages of the technology—rather than the risks (such as lost time due to too much chatting). "We wanted to throw things on the wall and see what sticks ... We want the tools to succeed or fail quickly—and cheaply," says Dennison.

SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS MUST BENEFIT THE BUSINESS

One context in which social networking tools can be hugely helpful is the management of change. David Gurteen, a knowledge management consultant based in the U.K., says that 70% of change initiatives fail. He recommends that companies focus on how a KM project benefits the business rather than outcome the new KM tool. "Too many KMers are focused on the long-term outcomes instead of the short-term business outcomes. What that means is that when a slight downturn in the economy comes, the KM project will get cut," he says. Second, companies should get buy-in from the people for whom they are developing KM tools. Christian Waldstrøm, an assistant professor at the Aarhus School of Business in Denmark, says a company should do a social network analysis, which he compares to "performing an X-ray on a patient,"

to understand the company's culture and how information flows through the organization.

Will it pay off? JP Rangaswami, BT Global Services CIO, thinks so. On his external blog he praises Web 2.0: "We will be able to place value on social software, but not yet. The destination is clear ... [It's] one that values human capital and relationships and institutional knowledge." ■

WHAT TO DO NOW

- » Focus on the business outcome that a tool can provide.
- » Get buy-in from the people who are to use the tool—i.e., ensure that tools are relevant for the work at hand.
- » Adapt social software tools to your organization's unique culture after performing a thorough analysis of information flows.
- » Focus on the value that social media can bring your organization rather than the risks that may be associated with it.
- » Experiment with tools and adapt them.
- » Start small, build slowly and allow users to define which tools work best for which business processes.
- » And finally, keep it simple.