

Community Building within Enterprise Blogs

An iPhone Blog Story

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ABSTRACT

Blogs are one means to enable community building within the enterprise. We conducted a study of an information-targeted blog in a large, multi-national corporation to explore social networking and investigate the degree to which communities are formed. We confirm that in a corporate setting, social networking tools are used to forge new connections with previously unknown colleagues and groups based on shared interests, concerns and information exchange.

INTRODUCTION

The explosion of blogs in the last decade has provoked a great deal of investigatory research. Blogs have been used to tell personal stories, ask questions, invoke discussion and share information and expertise [5]. In addition, we have seen that communities can emerge from blogs and that blogs can be considered a form of social network [2]. We believe, in the context of the enterprise, that blogs can be used to build rich communities, transcending geographic and divisional boundaries.

Community building through online social networking is one of the defining phenomena of this decade. This can be seen in the rise of popularity of sites such as MySpace and Facebook with millions of daily users. In general, these public social networking sites support preexisting relationships [1]. Within the enterprise, social networking tools such as blogs have the potential to enable and create professional communities.

Within IBM we have several enterprise social and collaborative tools, including: Beehive [3], an opt-in social networking site comprised primarily of user generated content; Fringe [4], a social networking resource that aggregates professional information (such as patents, publications, etc.) to automatically generate profiles; and

Dogear [7], a social book marking utility. These tools are both useful as social networking sites and for research into the formation of communities within the enterprise.

A major difference between enterprise and public social networking is that enterprise social networks are more often used to connect to new colleagues or reinforce weak connections rather than maintain strong relationships. In addition to social activities, professionals use internal social network sites to find the answer to a question or locate a contact that can help with a specific problem. In general, we observe one way that professionals leverage their online communities is through information exchange. Through this information exchange, be it via blogs, social networking sites or other means, communities are formed within the enterprise. [3]

We consider a blog to be a social a networking tool that is innately information-centric. We observe the effects of a specific blog within our enterprise, whose goal is to compile and share information. We find that a community has formed around this blog, crossing geographic and divisional boundaries and creating new professional relationships within our corporation.

THE IPHONE BLOG

We initially created the iPhone blog as means to quickly centralize and disseminate information about the iPhone within IBM. Our goal was to share information about the IBM iPhone policies, general iPhone information, personal iPhone stories, etc. We hoped that this information would become useful to IBMers world wide, building a community along the way, encouraging and engaging users.

From the beginning we encouraged readers to use IBM's internal social networking tools. We frequently made reference to Fringe and Beehive and took advantage of the fact that some readers regularly use these applications to connect with current colleagues. We wanted people to get to know the posters and commenters beyond just their names. To keep track of who was posting and commenting to the blog, we employed people tagging [4] and tagged all posters and commenters in Fringe. Instead of keeping a static list, tagging allowed us to dynamically observe the changing distribution of authors and commenters.



Figure 1. An iPhone blog post about the geographic distribution of readers, viewed on an iPhone

USER STUDY

We conducted a user study to explore the blog's community effects and the connection between blogging and the other social networking tools. Our hypothesis was that readers, posters and commenters alike were forming a community, as well as using the blog as a stepping stone to other social software. Additionally, we studied the degree in which employees felt they were gaining social capital and becoming involved in mutually supportive relationships from reading the blog.

Results

We surveyed 45 iPhone Blog posters and commenters. 80% of the respondents felt that they were part of a community through reading the blog. This is significantly higher than previous studies, for example in [6] only 27% of heavy corporate bloggers experienced community related benefits. 90% of respondents said they wouldn't hesitate to email a poster or commenter if they had a question about a post, and in fact 56% of respondents had emailed or instant messaged a commenter or poster. We partially attribute these results to the fact that the blog is not "owned" by one person in the traditional sense, nor is the blog about one specific person's work. In single author blogs the author generally derives the most social benefit [6], whereas here we believe the benefits are now distributed throughout the community.

The majority of readers already used social networking sites (55% use Beehive and 41% use Fringe), but a surprising 21% of respondents now use Fringe as a direct result of reading the blog. The percentage was smaller for Beehive

(10%), but that is likely attributed to the fact that more readers already use Beehive. 12% of respondents added new friends in Beehive and contacts in Fringe as a result of reading the blog.

Through people tagging, we observed that the blog's reader base is distributed throughout IBM's divisions (software group, research, sales, consulting, etc.), as well as across continents. Given this diverse reader base, we can say with high confidence that readers are reaching out to other readers and forming new relationships, using the blog as a stepping stone to other social networking tools to further build and reinforce their relationships.

CONCLUSION

We investigated how a community can form around an enterprise blog. We observed that new relationships formed between readers that otherwise had no connection and often lived on different continents with different job roles. Membership in this community was further enhanced by use of social networking sites, connecting the disparate and diverse individuals that make up large, global enterprises.

The iPhone blog induced more a community feeling among readers than shown in previous studies of blogs; we believe this can be attributed to the coupling of the blog with the other social networking sites. This is an interesting area for future research, as more social networking sites add blogging functionality and more blogs add additional "social presence" features.

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