Chapter LI
Blogs:
A Computer Mediated Communication Tool for Virtual Team Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Blogs are evolving beyond "personal conversations" to tools which could support collaborative working in virtual project teams. Virtual teams need to adopt and understand new work practices, sharing attitudes and communication modes to effectively empower team participation. Companies are adopting blogs and wikis as tools for improving dialogue among workers, customers, and the public because they can affect information exchange and establish specially tailored, user-friendly data archives. Blogs could become a tool for a new way of communication, working collaboratively, sharing information and mutually supporting other team members. However, like any emerging technology tools, it will be a challenge to integrate blogs into existing business processes. This chapter discusses how blogs can be exploited for virtual team collaboration and discusses various issues and challenges that need to be resolved if blogs are to become an effective tool for virtual team collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Web logs (often called "blogs") are an emerging computer mediated communication tool for online expression or virtual collaboration. Blogs are an interactive dialog for online users who can read blogs and submit their own comments, thoughts, opinions and links to related news articles, other blogs, and Web sites (Coleman, 2005; Smolkin, 2004). The universe of blogs is conventionally referred to as the "blogosphere." This term was coined in 2002 by William Quick and was quickly adopted and propagated by the war blog community (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere). Earlier blogs were created by a few individuals for engaging likeminded individuals or groups on certain topics, but now blogs are created by groups or organizations to engage their employees or group members for virtual team collaboration (Klein, 2005). Blogs and blogosphere readers

are growing in numbers and thus becoming an important computer mediated tool for communication and collaboration (Dearstyne, 2005; Delio, 2005). According to research conducted by comScore Media Metrix, a division of comScore Networks Inc. and sponsored in part by SixApart and Gawker Media, 50 million U.S. Internet users visited blog sites in the first quarter of 2005. The report also indicates that 400 blog domains tracked by comScore were visited by 50 million U.S. Internet users in Q1 2005. This represents an increase of 45% compared to Q1 2004. The study also found that blog visitors are 30% more likely to buy products or services online. While less than 40% of the total Internet population made an online purchase in Q1 2005, 51% of blog visitors purchased online. The average blog visitor who bought online spent approximately 6% more than the average online buyer. The report indicates that there are an estimated two million "bloggers" globally, and that figure is growing steadily (A Research Report by comScore Media Metrix, a division of comScore Networks Inc. and sponsored in part by SixApart and Gawker Media, 2005).

With the acceleration of communications technology, we now find ourselves living and working in an increasingly global virtual environment. Organizational development professionals are beginning to consider how virtual communications technology will influence the way in which we work together, and whether it will enhance or hinder organizational effectiveness. Virtual team work is a subject of increasing interest (Geber, 1995; Grenier & Metes, 1995; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1996). In a virtual environment, teams are interconnected and can work with any person from any enterprise in any place at any time on any challenge. As a result, organizations become knowledge driven and thus information sharing and knowledge exchange become very critical factors for the organizations. This is possible only by means of new communication modes. Thus, communication is the essential backbone behind virtual work and organizations (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999).

There is already strong evidence that media elites, editors, publishers, reporters, and columnists, are using blogs for political campaigns (Dearstyne, 2005; Heyboer & Rosen, 2004). However, blogs could be used effectively for global virtual team collaboration. Blogs are changing the way many individuals, groups or organizations get and disseminate information, insights, and opinions everyday for work related tasks, and activities (Anderson, 2004). Some blogs are created by individuals to record and log thoughts, activities and reactions. Personal blogs usually resemble one's personality and acts as a virtual representation of that person in the virtual world. Thus, most people use personal blogs as an effective means to promote themselves and their favorite interests. At times, personal blogs could be very influential especially if they are created by well-known persons and celebrities in their area. Similarly, blogs can be used as virtual team collaboration and communication tool for groups of people with similar interests. Blogs can be an effective tool for sharing information globally online on a 24/7 basis. As companies are required to coordinate their global operations and activities on a 24/7 basis, blogs can connect different teams at different locations on a 24/7 basis to exchange their information, comments, feedback or thoughts for virtual team collaboration for successful development and completion of projects. Blogs could be useful as one of the collaboration tools for these virtual teams. While there are many other computer mediated communication tools (e-mail, virtual white boards, chats, video conferencing and net meeting, and teleconferencing) that are available for virtual team collaboration, the unique nature and characteristics of blogs (media richness, engagement, convenience, pervasiveness, etc.) it may be advantages to use blogs for virtual team collaboration (Quible, 2005). Blogs are occupying an increasingly important place as a computer mediated communication tool for virtual team

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