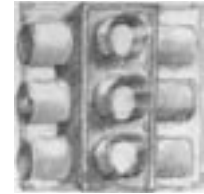


# BLOGS, WIKIS & RSS – COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL COMMUNITIES AND THE VALUE OF DISTRIBUTED CI



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If it seems that 2004 was the year of the weblog (blog), then perhaps 2005 will be the year of the wiki. Early in 2004, blogs were little more than a new kind of internet publishing that most people had never heard of, as frustrated journalists the world over began writing with passion about subjects as varied as the writers themselves, using powerful blogging software that made such publishing easier than ever before.

By the end of the year, bloggers had been influential in such diverse applications as advertising, such as Nike's Art of Speed blog, and political campaigns, starting with the much-emulated campaign trail journal by the Howard Dean campaign that helped turn an also-ran into a front-runner. The November 2nd presidential elections and news coverage as well as the conventions themselves played host to an army of volunteer journalists interested in scooping the ever-more-concentrated corporate media and setting the tone for the rest of us.

## THE RISE OF THE BLOGS

According to blog search engine Technorati, an estimated 4.8 million blogs are being written in the public cyberspace known as the blogosphere, up from just 100,000 in late 2002. When I first wrote in *CI Magazine* about CI staff using blogs such as Traction, MoveableType, Manila and others to streamline dissemination and collection back in 2002, the blogging phenomenon was still in its infancy. Now, enterprises in every industry are learning the power (and risk) of unleashing their employees' ideas on both their colleagues and an unsuspecting marketplace.

Blogs have also taken on a greater role in competitive intelligence practice within the enterprise, alongside blogs in product, R&D, information technology, legal and financial teams, sales and marketing and even executive management. Today, blogging is helping to create de facto communities of practice within organizations large and small. The momentum behind blogging will increase before it starts to wane.

## THE WIKI COLLABORATION TREND

The wiki is another emerging collaboration trend gaining acceptance in the corporate environment and it promises to be no less significant. Borrowed from the Hawaiian word for *quick*, the first wiki was originally developed by Ward Cunningham in 1995. Today they take the form of dozens of software applications that have wiki-like capabilities. Like blogs, wikis allow for very easy publishing and commenting on topics of collective interest to the community; but the unique social dynamics of wikis lie in their utter embrace of chaos by allowing all contributors to change anything on any or all of the documents available, thus subjecting the entire community to consensus-building en masse, whether they like it or not.

Many of these tools are open-source and available free of charge, such as OpenWiki, Kwiki and Twiki. Others have enterprise grade security and other features. SocialText and Confluence are in use at such well-heeled customer sites as Boeing, Raytheon, Cisco, Alcatel, Vodafone, Pixar, BBC, BMW, Volvo, MIT, Stanford, World Bank, United Nations, Disney, Ziff Davis, Kodak,

Motorola, SAP, Yahoo!, British Telecom, Cingular Wireless, Michelin. . .well, you get the idea.

The most ambitious example of a wiki is the Wikipedia – no less than an attempt begun in 2001 to build a free, multi-lingual encyclopedia of knowledge on every subject in the human metaverse. It is now approaching 450,000 individual articles and serves as the laboratory for what wikis can ultimately become given time and attention-span in the enterprise.

## CHAOTIC EDITING AND CONTRIBUTIONS

But what makes wikis so powerful – or dangerous depending on your perspective – is their chaotic editing and contribution characteristics. A wiki is made up of hypertext documents linked together and edited collectively by the community in a web browser interface. It is a very open medium where all authors can add to, change, or delete other people's work. To prevent the damaging effects of creative destruction this can obviously lead to, wikis have a means of comparing two states of a page, known as a *diff*, so that revisions can be viewed and rolled back and mistakes can be corrected.

The reason this works defies logical assumptions. One might imagine that vandals would immediately wreck anything that's ever published, wars over content, politics or other arguments would prove intractable and all the articles would devolve into elementary level gobbledygook.

In practice, wiki articles tend to be neutral in tone, especially around controversial topics. They generally present all the varying viewpoints of an issue as well as offering basic facts. The

only way anyone can write something that will survive collaborative scrutiny is if it's written with such quality, style, and argumentative logic that one's own diametrically opposed counter-arguer can agree that what's been written has value.

This has positive effects on ensuring all arguments are weighed in whatever matter is under consideration. And in CI, focus must be on the analysis of options available and the arguments that make one course stand apart from its alternatives as superior. In the same way that journalists often make the best CI research analysts, so to can collaborative communities produce the best CI.

## SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

The advantage of blog networks is that they facilitate the growth of social networks into true communities of practice. Much of the value of these networks is in their providing fertile ground for the social capital required for effective decision support to grow based on relationships between analytically opinionated minds.

This defies the command-and-control hierarchies that still define most businesses where top-down decision-making is still the rule of the day. Here, the reputations of writers are built on the value of their ideas, their ability to convince others their ideas are valid and therefore develop the most respect and authority. It's the purest meritocracy available.

Wikis are just like blogs, only more so. With wikis, the same social interaction happens, but much faster and with far more intense collaboration. They are based on the notion that the best results come from allowing decision-making to emerge from the bottom up with minimal editorial control from the top down. This so-called *decephalization* (literally, removing the head), allows for more autonomic, instinctive reactions to changes in the status quo opinion of reality. It rewards the sort of radical

thinking that can prove disruptive to competitive markets and offer advantages that can only be matched through a similar collaborative process among rivals.

Collaboration applications that build such de facto communities of practice socialize critical business decisions in an open forum based on the social capital of merit. Otherwise politics obscures the critical success factors at work in whatever decision is being considered, primarily to appease those special interest groups with the political capital to demand their will be done. Wikis neuter the politically powerful by ruthlessly assessing the vulnerabilities or unintended consequences of fulfilling their will while ensuring that all other options are considered.

## RSS

The technology that has made this all possible, and offers us a vision of what the future of our user interface will look like, is RSS (rich site summary or real simple syndication). RSS is an XML specification for distributing published media files to a web address that can be read by a RSS feed reader.

But RSS has done more than become the modern poster child for what XML can do for the masses. It is also the most widespread form of XML in use today. With this momentum RSS could very well become the chief means by which all data, structured or unstructured, is broadcasted and applied. This includes applications such as change-detection in weblogs, retrieving spam-free email, or passing transactional data through a complex workflow environment.

In a speech on RSS and weblogging for competitive intelligence at the 2003 KMWorld conference, I predicted that RSS would eventually become table stakes in every software application in the knowledge management realm. A bit later than I'd predicted, perhaps, but it's now becoming reality. The next release of MS-Office is rumored to be riddled with RSS capabilities.

## SECURITY AND A REAL-TIME DASHBOARD

The real power of RSS is two-fold. First, its client platform independence means it can securely interact with any device, ranging from handhelds and smart phones with web browsing capabilities to public internet kiosks to secure computing environments inside the firewall. Bringing multiple relevant feeds from various sources together, RSS' aggregation capabilities make it possible to build ultra-flexible, low-cost digital dashboards of entire organizations, and even whole markets.

In addition to receiving posts from news sites and other weblogs, RSS feeds can contain data from corporate systems: sales information, financial data, inventory or vendor information, data from partner or distribution systems, competitor events, and all manner of real-time data relevant to the enterprise. Using this method, employees can get up-to-the-minute intelligence from multiple applications on a single screen. In effect, it can create a real-time dashboard that offers not only transparency to the business process, but also provides for near-instant updating of changing variables on the market and organizational landscape.

The challenge now is to catalog true proof-of-concept level examples where collaborative social community applications have had an impact on competitive intelligence efficiency or effectiveness. If you have a good story about your own experience, or process designs you're considering, please send it in (anonymously if you prefer), and I'll publish a follow up column describing the examples for the SCIP community of practice to learn from.

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