

INTELLIGENCE BLOGS IN THE ENTERPRISE – TRACTION 3.0

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In 1945, Vannevar Bush published the article '*As we may think*,' proposing a machine called the Memex, originally envisioned as a microfiche machine allowing for storage, annotation, and cross referencing of one's personal information corpus. As early as the 1960s, hypertext pioneers translated Bush's vision into reality with applications as various as Doug Engelbart's hypertext journal or *NLS* (for Online System).

While the Memex concept described the importance of sharing information, Bush's horizons were limited by the technology of the day. In particular, the digital computing and communications we now take for granted had not yet entered his frame of reference. As the web evolved and new technologies became a part of its infrastructure, richer media became possible and the web became a business tool for buying and selling via e-commerce. More importantly, it created shorter-term ROI through intra-organizational sharing of knowledge and dynamic problem solving.

In the personal web publishing space, weblogging (blogging) started to catch on nearly as soon as the web became more widely available to the masses. In 1996 Providence, Rhode Island-based Traction Software (www.tractionsoftware.com) evolved Engelbart's hypertext journaling concept to develop the first enterprise weblog software. I had the chance to review the next evolution of Traction's core product with the 3.0 full-release version upgrade of its weblogging platform.

Spurred on by the *business process reengineering* (BPR) craze of the late 80s and early 90s, modern corporations

found themselves without a middle management layer, through which things used to get done – they'd all been right-sized right out of their jobs. And companies weren't yet technically savvy enough to restore that integrating level of people with software as a process enabler. From the mid-1990s to today, email, portal, intranet, and knowledge management systems have been the modern solution to the disconnect problems created by BPR.

BLOGGING TRENDS IN ENTERPRISE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITIES

In late 2002, I found Traction while doing research on the developing blogging phenomenon. Since then a lot of progress has been made both in the technologies behind enterprise blogs and in the ways in which organizations are using them.

I can think of dozens of companies, large and small, who are using weblogs to accomplish sundry team-based missions in any environment where broad dissemination and user management is crucial and information analysis and interpretation is the core function. CI happens to be a great example, alongside IP asset management, legal, and even accounting. Traction jumped out at me because of the identify of their benefactors.

"The value of Traction is that it makes collecting, organizing, and publishing information to the web or intranet as easy as using email," said Gilman Louie, president and CEO of In-Q-Tel, the CIA's venture capital group. "Traction's product is a valuable tool among our growing portfolio of

cutting-edge technologies that benefit enterprises like the CIA."

Now, as an investor, it's Louie's job to be a cheerleader for his portfolio companies. As a contributor to US national intelligence effectiveness, in his role funding and guiding those companies to ensure their survival and maximum potentiality of whatever products and services emerge with relevant application in the intelligence community, he's ideally more of a pragmatic patriot.

WHAT IS A WEBLOG?

But, first things first. What is a weblog and where does it fit within a CI program? As an interactive web-based journaling system, weblogs reduce the pain of managing source information and automate much of the dissemination activity currently plaguing CI teams which prevents them from focusing on the core analysis task. Given more time to conduct situational and impact analysis, weblogs also furnish an excellent vehicle to inject analysis into source documents. I'll illustrate with a real-life example.

Early in 2002, a semiconductor company's CI team (with whom I've been familiar for the past few years), was struggling with the volume of event notifications and other news that clogged their inbox each day with both trivial as well as shatteringly important market developments. With a budget of essentially zero and with an understanding that their real role was to reduce this volume and explain its meaning, the intelligence manager decided to try an experiment.

Because more than half of the unit's hours were devoted to current

awareness and early warning activities (the rest went to ad-hoc and commissioned deliverables), the CI director wanted to shift the focus away from the *sort-and-report* output consumers were used to and ratchet up the value-add toward a deeper level of analysis and recommendations. This would also be a positive step in her department's long-term career and visibility strategy.

In an effort to start small and control this new environment effectively, the CI director had one of her research analysts learn how to publish a twice-weekly (Tuesday and Friday) weblog on just one of their key global competitors. The analyst was tasked with writing situation and impact analysis, and address from her company's context any relevant behavior and events of that competitor. When matched with any subsequent recommendations and plans for action and follow up on subjects of interest, hyperlinks citing secondary sources at the close of each document entry were added, in case users wanted to click-through to read the source material referenced in the situation analysis.

Alongside these baseline *push* activities, the CI director established a threshold understanding with the analyst regarding when the primary deliverable would break out of the twice-a-week standard broadcast schedule, should events transpire concerning that competitor — an acquisition, new product announcement, and other priority activities — that would be too critical to wait until the next update. Then she turned on the mailing list feature (already present in their portal software) so that subscribing intelligence consumers could have their competitor analysis pushed once it was published with an abstract of its content.

NEXT GENERATION SYNDICATED INTELLIGENCE

Today this initiative has evolved into a broader adoption of NewsGator's

RSS reader (RSS is *rich site summary*, an XML standard for document markup) to accept the blog's RSS feeds through an Outlook plug-in to do the reading for them, rather than using the more cumbersome email to push delivery. RSS allows all the blog's readers to accept blogged intelligence output securely through any client. This ranges from their desktop or notebook computer at work or on the road, a public kiosk in an airport or at a conference, to a smart-phone or PDA. In other words, anything that can accept an IP address can give them secure access to their firm's CI services.

Likewise, the CI team's corpus of collected alerts, opinion pieces, recommendations, research reports and other documents were indexed for searching by intelligence consumers in case a meta-analysis of past output would be required or finished intelligence output could be reused or recycled.

Traction has made several important improvements in its 3.0 release that deserve highlighting and which also fulfill a few of the items on my own wish-list for virtually any information system.

Custom Page Sections:

Most weblog tools display content as a list of recent entries with the last entry first. Traction's interface can take on this familiar look, and can also create and customize page sections to include any arbitrary cross section of content, such as product announcements from a particular company, or all companies mentioned in a particular country. As another example, the first section in a project might be alarms, followed by news, followed by analysis entries. You could also setup sections that list human intelligence or open questions or key intelligence topics.

Internationalization:

Traction supports the capture and search of any language which can be encoded in Unicode (UTF-8) including

all Western European, Slavic, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Hebrew and other languages. Language support is provided for project, user, label, and file names. Currently, Japanese and English locales are provided. Each reader can set their own time zone, so that the publish dates of articles and comments will not appear to be time shifted.

Extensible Authentication:

Enterprise customers frequently maintain directories of account names, passwords and role-based permissions using LDAP (lightweight directory access protocol) or Microsoft Active Directory servers. Traction 3.0 introduces an extensible plug-in authentication mechanism that allows external administration of user account names, passwords and role-based permissions.

Traction provides executable and Java language source code for LDAP and Active Directory plug-ins, as well as a run-time extensible interface that can be used to interface with micropayment and single sign-on solutions. Support for TLS/SSL encryption and optional X.509 certificate based authentication was introduced with Traction Release 2.5.

Extensible User Interface (Skins):

Traction's new Skin Definition Language (SDL) makes it possible to create a new look and feel using only HTML editing tools with CSS-driven skins (cascading style sheets, which make the layout of the user interface most flexible for the CI team to alter and fine-tune over time). This provides a simple web interface that is easily extensible using style sheet control.

SDL can serve all skins simultaneously, allowing customers to choose one based on personal preference, or have it chosen automatically based on the browser and device being used. Traction provides five skins with the product, including ones that are optimized for Palm OS, Microsoft PocketPC or Blackberry handheld devices.

Enterprise search engine compatibility:

Enterprise customers frequently want to expose the content of key internal data sources to enterprise wide search and content analysis. Traction 3.0 articles, comments, and file attachments can be completely or selectively exposed to spidering by search and data mining engines such as Verity Ultraseek, Google, Tacit, Autonomy and Clear Forrest. Each article is independently indexed, making it simple for enterprise search applications to show the title and content of hits, and link back to the correct article.

Support for syndication and weblog standards:

Traction 3.0 extends interoperability with best of class support for publishing and syndication protocols. It supports RSS 2.0 for content syndication, as well as Blogger and MetaWeblog XML-RPC API's for publishing and editing content using popular blogging and RSS aggregator programs such as the NewsGator plug-in for Microsoft Outlook. This makes it

easy for readers to create a custom RSS feed from combinations of projects, topic labels, authors and search expressions. Traction 3.0 supports password-protected RSS feed for aggregators that support Basic http: (realm) protection.

So, will weblogs take over the enterprise CI software market? That's like asking if the CIA plans to do away with all of its other intelligence software. Not likely – there are far too many needs that weblogs simply cannot fulfill on their own.

But they are important tools, relatively new to most CI practitioners, that are both easy to deploy and even easier to use. They can be bolted onto CI management environments and provide a platform for rapid analysis, dissemination, and collaboration around market and competitor event-based activity.

Traction's entry-level Communicator product costs US\$250 per user/seat and can be installed and up and running in a few minutes. But if you're still not sure weblogs are for you and would like to experiment with a

widely-used free tool that is somewhat less flexible and more difficult to use and configure, try out MoveableType (www.moveabletype.org). I've used it myself and, if security and authentication aren't major concerns, it might be an alternative until you can get budget dollars approved for something more robust.

(For further info on blogs from a CI perspective, see: 'Organize, Analyze, Distribute: The Enterprise Weblog,' Frank, J., *Competitive Intelligence Magazine*, Volume 6, Number 2, March-April 2003, pp. 51-52; and 'Blogging the Competition – Weblogs Take Center Stage in CI,' Zimmerman, K.A., *KMWorld Magazine*, Volume 12, Issue 10, November-December 2003.)

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