

Hey Wiki, what the Blog is an RSS?

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Introduction

Just when you think you've finally got it all under control, along comes something new on the learning stage to keep you feeling just a little bit befuddled. RSS? Wiki? Blog? Huh? What does this all mean? And how can knowing about these things help you with your organisational learning challenges?

Traditional learning interventions offer time-honoured solutions that are unlikely to ruffle feathers in the upper echelons of your company. Thirty minute e-Learning modules also have their place, but are there other rich learning opportunities lying untapped in the human resource capital of your company? Is the knowledge of your collective being effectively utilised?

Exploiting these potentially far-flung and disparate knowledge resources may seem too unwieldy a task, but by ignoring them you may fail to recognise that in a rapidly changing world, learning needs to be more contextualised, responsive and spontaneous. The technologies of RSS, Wiki and Blog may offer a means to access previously untapped veins of institutional knowledge, and in doing so provide opportunities for building shared understandings within your organisation.

RSS, Wiki and Blog are similar in that they all streamline the process of publishing to the web in order to support the social construction of knowledge. Harnessing their potential to support your e-Learning initiatives is the subject of this article. We hope you'll see how the very simplicity of these technologies is one of their greatest strengths.

RSS

The first thing you need to know about RSS is that it is not actually new. It has been gathering momentum since the late 1990s. An acronym for Really Simple Syndication (or Rich Site Summary, depending on your preference) RSS is a means of sending and receiving content to and from other sites.

For example, imagine you want to add a banner to your site that displays late-breaking financial news. To do this you could set up an RSS aggregator that takes RSS content from a suitable provider, like Business Review Weekly and displays it in a content channel - a predefined area of your website that accesses external content.

Alternatively, you may wish that new information about your website was available on other websites (in the same way that you have organised for financial news to appear on yours). To do this you would need to set up a RSS

feed that others could access. So the two sides to the RSS story are aggregating (gathering RSS from others), and feeding (making your RSS content available for other websites).

Technically RSS is coded in simple XML. Creating a new RSS is simply a matter of adding content to a basic XML structure, then ensuring access to this content through an active feed. There are countless websites that describe this process (eg: <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/tech/rss>), as well as many that provide the necessary utilities for aggregating and feeding. An interested person could get their head around the fundamentals of RSS in a matter of a few hours.

Educational Uses of RSS

From the point of view of the majority of users, RSS is a 'push' technology. This means that you could use RSS to distribute late breaking news of relevance to your audience, rather than hoping that they access the information on their own.

For example, imagine if you had an RSS feed into your corporate intranet. You could define an area on a page of your website that your staff regularly accesses as the location of the RSS feed. In this area you could send through information about new training opportunities, courses that are being offered, or e-Learning modules that are now available. This RSS content may have hyperlinks that lead to webpages of more information.

Alternatively the RSS could provide content in itself. You may wish to notify your team of an important issue that needs to be addressed, display a corporate message, or provide a mini-learning experience. It would be a good idea, for example, to follow a training session, be it e-Learning or face to face, with RSS feeds of some of the key learning points. This would function to remind learners of their training experience, and to help the cognitive integration of new knowledge.

For example, your organisation may have recently been involved in EEO training that identified 5 key areas of improvement. Using your RSS you could ensure that this critical information is presented, in bite sized pieces, to your people on a daily basis.

Then again, you may wish to link your RSS with your e-Learning Blog. If that doesn't mean a whole lot to you at this stage, hopefully it will by the time you've finished this article.

Wiki

Whereas RSS provides channels for the strategic ‘pushing’ of content, Wiki takes the power of content creation from the hands of the few and places it in the hands of the many. In a Wiki, it is the users who create the content – in collaboration and over time.

A Wiki is essentially an editable web site. No HTML or programming knowledge is required. Users simply enter their contributions in plain text with a few basic modifiers. Like RSS, Wikis are not new, and the first example was created back in 1995. After a decade of adoption Wikis continue much as they began – simple and efficient.

For example, you may have a Wiki that records quotable quotes intended to amuse, entertain and inspire your team. Any person who has access to this website may click the ‘Edit’ link at the bottom of the page, and add their new quote. In fact, they can change any text that appears on that page – previous entries included. So, in a Wiki, there must be trust between users that individual voices, as well as the larger the community of users, will be respected.

Like all discursive, socially constructed artefacts, Wikis can suffer from chaos. Accordingly, sorting and refining content may be a house-keeping task necessary to ensure that a Wiki doesn’t become a tangled web of loose threads. The tediousness of this task may well be largely avoided if you adopt the perspective that it is the act of contributing, rather than the consumption of the contributions, that is the greatest value of this technology

Educational Uses of Wiki

Clearly, any knowledge building application that demands the absolute and immutable integrity of the content is not really suitable for a Wiki. Wikis are useful in situations where communities of people are developing shared ideas, values or resources.

Imagine your team has just completed training on workplace safety. At the conclusion of the training, the team was given a challenge to identify practical ways to improve the safety conditions at your site. By using a Wiki, team members can easily add ideas to a highly accessible document. They can just as easily comment on others ideas, and in doing so build up a collaborative statement on safety initiatives.

In this situation, it is the Wiki artefact itself that is of high value as it contains perspectives on practical initiatives. By capturing the collective ideas and

reflections of your team, the Wiki would provide valuable data to inform the direction of future training.

However, if your team has been through a team building challenge that involved them canoeing down rapids and jumping from a helicopter you may choose to set up a Wiki that participants can use to debrief from their experiences. The Wiki would be a community storytelling site and much of the value for the participants will be the act of contributing and the continuance of team building.

Perhaps the most famous educational Wiki in existence is Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), a “free-content encyclopedia in many languages that anyone can edit.” It is the result of a vast collaboration and currently contains over 416000 entries. The Wikipedia project shows conclusively that the model works, and that groups of people can collaboratively create shared knowledge artifacts.

Blog

Whereas a Wiki is the product of a community initiative, a Blog (or Weblog) is a highly individual expression. Blogs are fundamentally online journals, and users (bloggers) create entries on any topic of interest to them. Blogs are typically updated at frequent intervals, and many bloggers add a daily entry.

A Blog is a personal webpage with entries usually sequenced from the most recent. It may have links to peripheral information (details about the blogger, interesting links etc) but it is the regular entries that are of most interest. While Blogs are typically the creation of an individual, they often function as the spontaneous resources of communities of practice. People read Blogs created by other people in common areas of interest. In their own Blogs, people comment on content in other Blogs, and in the process create a shared discourse.

Like Wikis, Blogs simplify the process of putting content on the web and require no specific knowledge of HTML. A Blog has a unique web address (eg: www.blogspot.com/myblog) and accessing someone’s Blog is simply a matter of going to this url. There are many services on the web that will host your Blog, while some organisations choose instead to host these in-house. Either way, a Blog is quick to create and easy to access.

The search engine giant Google has recently launched a Blog site (<http://www.google.com/googleblog/>) which is an indication of how this technology is quickly moving to the mainstream.

Educational Uses of Blogs

Blogs have the potential to make an important contribution to the social construction of knowledge that happens in any community of practice. Like Wikis, Blogs are about both reading and writing, and the blogger is likely to benefit as much as the reader through the process of articulating their thoughts.

Learners can use Blogs to record their reflections on new ideas and to compare these impressions with other learners. Learning practitioners can use Blogs to compliment more formal resources with personal and spontaneous views while mentors can use Blogs to reach out to a global audience of practitioners.

For example, a thought leader within your organisation may keep a daily blog that contains informal suggestions for improving practice, or offers ideas on an ongoing topic of discussion. A subject matter expert may use a blog to discuss new understandings, and in doing so provide a means to effectively share these with their team.

In the field of e-Learning, Blogs have the potential to turn an individual journey into a shared experience. As with listserv groups, contributions are asynchronous, allowing learners time to consolidate their thoughts and contribute in their own time. Even without being an active blogger, a learner can gain a rich insight into the thoughts of their co-learners, and in this way Blogs effectively support legitimate peripheral participation.

Blog meets RSS

It may sound like a battle between celluloid monsters, but actually these technologies form a harmonious partnership that can add spontaneity and energy into a corporate learning agenda.

Imagine that key thought leaders within an organisation keep a regular Blog. As mentioned above, this process is beneficial, not only for the readers of the Blog, but equally for the writers. Now imagine that each Blog has an RSS feed that summarises the key content, and provides a link to the full Blog entry. These RSS feeds are aggregated and sent to a channel on a targeted area of the company intranet to provide constantly changing 'content bites' that link to full entries.

Clearly this is a powerful medium for engendering a culture of knowledge creation and sharing within an organisation. It provides an unusual combination of highly effective and streamlined technologies with informal content, and in doing so, legitimises the expression of ideas. With remarkably little overhead it

becomes a way to support innovation and best practice within an organisation.

Summary

The three technologies presented here can all be considered low entry / high ceiling. In other words, easy to get started with, but capable of sophisticated use. For an organisation involved in e-Learning this provides a benefit in that you don't need massive investment of time and money to add these technologies to your learning program. If yours is a small organisation with few resources to spend on courseware development, perhaps these technologies can provide you with an approach to e-Learning that is innovative and appealing, but at the same time won't blow your training budget.

We all understand that an important part of building competencies within an organisation involves building a culture that supports and encourages learning. Culture is a social construct and these socially-oriented technologies may have the potential to help change the way your learners think about knowledge building within your company. At the very least, RSS, Wikis and Blogs may add a much needed shot of authenticity to your learning program.

If your organisation would like to discuss the potential use of these technologies within your workplace, please feel free to contact us to discuss possible partnering opportunities.

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