

Are Weblogs really ECM Lite?

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Unless you've been hiding in a cave, you've probably run across the term "weblog" (or "blog") in the news. Perhaps you have a teenager who loves LiveJournal (over 6 million free or very low cost blogs and growing) or followed political controversies inflamed by bloggers during the 2004 campaign.

Weblog defined

A weblog is web site typically made up of short, frequently updated entries ("posts") containing commentary as well as links to other sites that the author finds interesting. Weblog server software makes it very simple for the author to add or edit posts, and automatically formats all posts using an attractive diary or newspaper format. Posts are typically shown in reverse chronological order, with the most recent item at the top of the page, and older items rolling off into an archive that's easy to browse or search.

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) defined

In the 1990's Dave Winer and others created an XML data format for distribution of updates from weblogs and news sites. The idea is very simple: a web site can automatically publish an update page in RSS format with the title and brief summary of new items that have been posted to the site and a link back to the full post.

This allows programs called RSS readers to scan the RSS update pages of a large number of sites every hour or so. An RSS reader can present a news ticker style summary in a web browser, Outlook mailbox or desktop client. You choose the weblogs you want to "subscribe" to based on your interests.

How do you find RSS feeds that interest you?

One way is by reading weblogs which link to one another, holding a public conversation about topics that interest you. You can also find RSS feeds using RSS search engines like Technorati or Feedster that work like Google, but search RSS feeds as they are updated in close to real time.

Now you can search for your company name across over a universe of independent RSS feeds and find out: "Who's talking about my company right now, and what are they saying?". You can monitor the entire RSS universe.

How big is the RSS^{1*} universe? In March 2005 Technorati tracked changes to over 7 million weblogs and traced close to a billion links (and Feedster is not far behind).

Weblog Characteristics

To me, the most striking characteristics of weblogs are:

- 1) Simplicity: Anyone who's comfortable writing an email message can learn what they need to author their own weblog in a very short time (minutes to hours).
- 2) Reach: With the rise of internet search engines, what an individual writes on a free weblog can reach an audience the size of the World Wide Web.
- 3) Scaling like the web: The combination of weblogs, web search engines syndication feeds (RSS) and syndication feed search engines proves that it's possible to find and stay informed about what you care about in an environment as vibrant and chaotic as the World Wide Web.

Why should any enterprise settle for less?

I don't believe they will. The value of actually knowing what's happening in your business (and what your business knows) has driven large enterprises to write large checks for top-down Knowledge Management systems with generally disappointing results.

The new generation internet provides a model which can make everyday working communication simpler, while keeping everyone with an active (and valid) interest well informed. It provides much better awareness, but cuts non-productive reporting overhead. Equally important, the same web and syndication infrastructure works for dissemination of information from line-of-business systems; for example, a syndication feed of sales wins from your CRM system is valuable to everyone in your company.

Working communication within an enterprise has some characteristics that differ from the public weblogs by employees and CEO's that have been the focus of many "business blogging" conferences. Let's use project management as the first example.

¹ Although RSS is the earliest and most widely known syndication format you may also hear about Atom. In practice most syndication readers and syndication search engines support both formats transparently, so I'll use the more general word "syndication" rather than "RSS or Atom" in the rest of this article.

Weblogs for project management

A product team for a new cell phone product might include:

- 1) A core team from corporate marketing, engineering and management;
- 2) Corporate stakeholders from finance, legal, sales, manufacturing, purchasing and customer support.
- 3) External stakeholders including key customers, key component suppliers, expert consultants, distributors and advertising firms.

A weblog can help deliver the new product on time, under budget, with the right mix of features and a sales and marketing campaign ready to roll.

The core team uses the weblog to keep track of their own research, discussion, debate, decisions and follow-up actions. Although the core team may be in the same location, it's common for them to be juggling several projects at once. They want to stay on the same page internally and keep external stakeholders engaged, but cut reporting overhead.

Corporate and external stakeholders can tune in for updates and issues that hit their particular interest, and respond when the core team identifies a issue where stakeholder feedback would help. External stakeholders are often in a different time zone (or country), and all stakeholders are typically engaged in many projects other than that which is the focus of the core team. Stakeholders need to switch their attention to the details of the core team's project very quickly when an issue pops up.

The cast of characters changes frequently, and it's important to be able to bring a new core team, corporate or external stakeholder up to speed quickly.

The project weblog makes it easier to understand the dynamics of the project and team as well as track the discussion that surrounds the formal plans, specifications and budget that might be stored in a content management system.

Personal versus Enterprise weblog characteristics

Project management is an excellent example of weblog use in an enterprise, but note the shift in focus from personal to enterprise use:

- 1) Enterprise weblogs tend to have group rather than individual authors. For example, it's much simpler to have all 100 members of the core team participate a weblog that focuses on the definition and delivery of the product rather than trying to stitch together discussion about this one project scattered across a hundred personal weblogs. Each core team and stakeholder becomes a member

of one or more project weblogs. They can easily shift their attention from one weblog to another. A syndication feed for each weblog makes it easy to monitor the pulse of many projects.

2) Enterprise weblogs require the ability to *securely* address a *selected* audience: Most personal weblogs are open to the entire World Wide Web. Most enterprise weblogs are either behind corporate firewalls or allow selective access to particular audience by name or role.

3) Because each project weblog has an explicit business purpose, the content tends to focus on working communication rather than personal opinion about topics unrelated to the project. Having a group weblog open to interested (and authorized) stakeholders also tends to keep discussion on topic. It's also useful to have more private weblogs available to the core team for candid discussion.

4) For general use, give each employee who wants one a personal weblog that encourages candid discussion of any topic, particularly when deployed behind the firewall.

Other enterprise weblog applications

It's not hard to draw a similar diagram of core team, internal, and external stakeholder communication for marketing and sales teams, particularly those who sell complex and expensive products such as pharmaceuticals, manufacturing equipment, aircraft etc. Other excellent candidates include:

Competitive Intelligence / Market Research groups within large corporations

Professional service firms: Legal, Business Consulting, Advertising

State and local government: Homeland security, Law enforcement, Public project management, Public land and resource management.

Each of these use cases offers the ability to connect and put on the record the working communication that typically is written once for information but gets lost in email, which is one of the worlds best 1:1 dialog mechanism, but one of the worst imaginable 100:1000 person working communication platforms.

By making daily working communication simpler and more effective for the people who do the work, weblogs create a resource that can be used to keep internal and external stakeholders informed as well as creating a valuable record for top down analysis.

Are Weblogs really ECM Lite? Yes

I believe that enterprise weblog software (with security, scalability and compatibility with enterprise identity management) will become ECM Lite - a complete solution for some businesses – and a working communication layer over traditional ECM and line of business systems for large enterprises.

Paul Taylor of the Financial Times writes:

"What distinguishes enterprise weblog packages from earlier personal blogging packages is that they incorporate advanced features such as permission-based security, archiving, dynamic views and sophisticated search capabilities to the core features found in all weblog packages.

As a result, some of these enterprise weblog suites are beginning to look a lot like a low-cost alternative to traditional content management, knowledge management and groupware software packages.

What is more, unlike most complex enterprise application software - which typically costs hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars and may take six months just to deploy the infrastructure - corporate weblog software uses the standard web infrastructure and can be deployed almost immediately." - Business logs on to blogging, Financial Times, March 3 2004

I believe that like ECM systems, successful enterprise weblogs deployment requires business process knowledge that can best be delivered by channel partners who are closest to the enterprise customer, and weblog software that lines up with enterprise needs for security, scalability, and fit with IT infrastructure.



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