How the “Google Effect” Is Transforming Employee Communications and Driving Employee Engagement

(Hint: It has nothing to do with search)

Michael Rudnick
Watson Wyatt Worldwide

Wendy Kouba
Wyeth

United States

watsonwyatt.com
Introduction

Commitment. Trust. Credibility. Focus. Hallmarks of engaged employees and high performance organizations …and the holy grail for many an internal communications strategy.

So what does Google have to do with employee communications and engagement? Everything. Google is the most used site on the internet. Yet unlike AOL, Amazon or CNN, Google doesn’t create any of its own content. All the content comes from its users, who create it, subscribe to it, collaborate with it and provide real-time dialogue and feedback – all the while using very robust, yet incredibly easy-to-use tools that require no training to make it happen.

Google’s success is validating new thinking…

Google is a company that produces no content and sells no products, and yet it dramatically increases the efficiency of content and commerce, all by leveraging the communal activity of its tens of millions of users.

Google’s success – which validates the new way of thinking about media, software, content and commerce - is counter-intuitive to the conventional thinking of just ten years ago when the web was first created…and perceived as just a variation of traditional mass media.

So why should this be of interest to today’s communication leader?

Growing percentages of your employee population prefer – and increasingly expect – to interact with their organizations in the very same way. On the internet, outside the firewall, this is often referred to as “Web 2.0” or “Social Media,” while on the inside, behind the firewall, the terms “Enterprise 2.0” or “Intranet 2.0” are being used.

Watson Wyatt’s ongoing Intranet and Portal Benchmarking Research shows that during the last three years there has been a four-fold (that’s right, 400 percent) increase in “Enterprise 2.0” behavior: employees creating and posting content directly without any approval, guidance, training or intervention from internal communications.

The majority of today’s intranets and portals, with home-grown or pre-2005 portal and content management technology, are no match for the upcoming – or even current – generation of relatively inexpensive, rapidly deployable and easy-to-use tools. Older “legacy” intranets and portals have little ability to drive employee engagement, serving mainly as online electronic newsletters for traditional employee communications content with static information architecture and an overabundance of links.

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1 The most distinguishing characteristic of bloggers is their youth. More than half (54%) of bloggers in America are under the age of 30. Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project. Blogging report, July 19, 2006.
According to CMS Watch’s 2nd Edition of their Enterprise Portals Report (www.cmswatch.com/Portal/Report/), enterprise portal solutions are still very difficult to use and organizations must invest substantial resources to create usable and accessible interfaces.

Couple this with the simple reality that today’s employees compare their company’s intranet to the internet…not to other corporate intranets, as most people believe. Not only does this raise the bar for intranets alone, but it also requires those responsible for intranet content and technology to keep pace with the rapidly evolving online world outside their firewall.

**What To Do Now?**

So how do you create compelling online experiences that foster employee engagement, support your business strategy, and achieve the employee perception and behavior changes that many find so elusive?

1. Don’t run from the “Google Effect.” Embrace it. Think of it as ”Intranet 2.0” – creating an online environment in which the bulk of content is created by the very users who view it. Google’s ever increasing set of easy-to-use, consumer-oriented web tools are literally rewriting the rules for a variety of industries – including entertainment and software – as well as internet commerce in general.

‘User-generated content’ or ‘self publishing’ – including blogs, podcasts, personal mini-websites, Avatars, short videos and alike – have taken the internet by storm. Innovation is moving practically at light speed.

Tools such as YouTube, Wikipedia and MySpace have hundreds of millions of users – more users than all the traditional news sites combined.

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**Transparency for all…**

Not everyone contributes equally, or consistently. But the reality of today’s web is that everything users do online – from simply clicking links and viewing web pages, to posting feedback or conducting a transaction - is captured by others and contributes to what is seen by all.

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[The top 20 social media sites accounted for 4.9% of all internet visits. MySpace is the top site social media site and is also responsible for referring 24% of all traffic to the 19 other sites in the top 20. Source: Hitwise USA User Generated Media Report, November 2006.]
User-generated content has also proven to be the most effective means to encourage use of web-based tools – including Blackberry and WAP browsers. At the same time, it has caused profound change for anyone in mass communications, including employee communicators, television producers, newspaper journalists, marketing managers, public relations counselors and many others.

2. Drive the change, don’t react to it. If your population is skewed to a younger audience, or a large number of knowledge workers, user-generated content can be a valuable option to use in conjunction with existing vehicles and channels. Leverage its appeal to your younger employees, and over time, others with more traditional views will embrace it as well.

3. Think Big. But Start Small and Scale-Up. Today’s technology is made for quick, incremental and iterative changes, rather than the monumental upgrades of years past. Don’t spend 12-18 months planning, building a business case, allocating funds, and undertaking a large-scale implementation. Start with a small group of employees whose profile fits the Web 2.0 criteria. What you set out to accomplish may very well change as your employees experience the different nature of this new online ‘network.’

How are Employee Communicators using this content? Let’s start with one of the most basic forms of user-generated content – a blog – as an example. Corporate blogging has grown quickly in some industries, yet remains a much misunderstood and misused tool. Sure, a CEO blog provides an opportunity for employees to hear from the top. Many CEO’s also blog to their customers (a good list of CEO blogs can be found at: www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php?pagename=Resources.

The road to engagement...

This phenomenon in “user-generated content” or “self publishing” has moved well beyond the traditional intranets of old. And it’s about much more than driving traffic to your portal. After years of investment in portal and content management technology -- and the endless debate about push or pull communications - the trend in portal and content management is following the internet. It’s quickly moving to ‘simple is better’ and putting significant control in the hands of users, while at the same time driving dramatic increases in user engagement.

CEOBlogsList). And CEO’s are increasingly blogging behind the firewall, following the lead of McDonald’s Mike Roberts and Intel’s Paul Otellini. But the real benefit of internal blogging goes far beyond a few senior executives sending one-way messages to employees or customers.

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4. Most feel the latest version of Windows, called Vista, will be the last major windows upgrade Microsoft will ever do. Subsequent upgrades will come incrementally, on 3 and 6 month cycles, rather than 4-6 years between versions.

5. True blogs incorporate feedback, comments and tagging. However, we’ve seen too many senior executives reluctant to embrace such open, two-way blog dialogue, resulting in a one-way blogs.
Companies that actively encourage internal blogging by employees – across the entire spectrum of employee levels, jobs and roles – and provide the tools, templates and guidelines to do it – are finding the benefits go far beyond the knowledge capture that the blogs themselves enable. These organizations recognize that the opportunity for employees to express themselves though a blog enables them to actively contribute to the operation of the organization – to express their opinions, ask questions and move the business forward, all the while helping to create and evolve their corporate culture. Such behaviors are the hallmarks of engaged employees, and blogging is one of the most powerful tools an organization can use to actively encourage and enable engagement.

At the same time, companies that encourage blogging demonstrate trust in their people, a willingness to innovate, and recognition of the value of diverse information needs and work styles.

The same holds true for other types of user-generated content, such as podcasts, wiki’s and individual websites such as those enabled by Microsoft’s “MySite” feature of their SharePoint Portal application.

For example, Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein (DrKW), the international investment banking unit of Dresdner Bank has had great success with their wiki intranet. Branded as DrKWikipedia, it coexists with a traditional intranet, employee blogs, SharePoint and instant messenger. By using multiple tools, DrKW ensures that employees have the ability to switch instantaneously between different types of communications medium, depending upon need and circumstance.

“Raising your hand and asking a question during a town hall meeting with 400 staff is very daunting,” said Dipen Jobanpurta, head of Digital Market Sales for the bank.

What’s the reality of your intranet?

If your intranet is like most, it’s far from the utopian vision of a homogenous ‘site’ in which all your company’s content is contained in a single, consistently branded, and logically organized ‘website.’

The reality is more likely a home page and corporate communications content layered over disparate intranet sites with differing information architectures, navigation, look and feel, coupled with inconsistent branding and content. Most intranets more closely resemble the public internet – where the only common elements found on sites are basic usability techniques such as shopping carts, links and navigation.

“By using the wiki and blogs, employees are able to easily offer their views and share ideas in a manner more conducive to action.” And since these exchanges aren’t buried in email inboxes, the content remains accessible and easy to update at any point in time.

Ramping up DrKWikipedia was a steady process. About half of DrKW’s 6,000 employees use the tool and currently about one in ten make edits.

Meanwhile, the organization with arguably the largest and most pervasive use of user-generated content is IBM. With over 300,000 employees worldwide, IBM’s Blog Central internal blog network is buzzing 24/7. IBM even has a Blogger-in-Chief who helps facilitate – not restrict – IBMer’s in their efforts to blog and share information.
The Benefits
Unlocking the potential of the “Google Effect” and encouraging user-generated communication can result in many benefits for companies. In particular, acknowledging that open communication to – and amongst – employees is vital can help define that organization as an employer-of-choice and enhance recruitment and retention efforts.

These contemporary content methods can also reinforce and improve the satisfaction of current employees, most of whom have a limited frame of reference of organizational technology and communication techniques⁶.

For example, a workforce analysis at a global consumer products company recently found that over fifty percent of their employee population will be Gen X or Gen Y by 2012 – employees whose preferred methods of communication are far more collaborative, asynchronous and interactive than the generations that have preceded them.

A recent European survey found that although only thirteen percent of senior management felt their intranet was “business critical,” more than half their employees said they would be disturbed in their work if the intranet “went down” for one to two hours.

So What’s a Communicator To Do Today… and Tomorrow?
1. Understand the basic capabilities of the technology that exists today, as well as the trends for tomorrow. Many communicators we’ve spoken with characterize these new media and channels as fads, believing that ‘this too shall pass.’ And while it’s true that blogging has evolved considerably in its few short years of existence, the trend in user-generated content is not decreasing – in fact, it’s just the opposite⁷.

2. Make it easy to collaborate. Create guidelines that encourage employees to post. Provide best practices and off-line communities where interested employees can learn about the capabilities, and how they can easily participate.

3. Establish and actively encourage content user communities. Employees want best-practices and core direction without overbearing policy regulation. User communities are a proven means to get the ball rolling, and provide content creators with a means to learn, share and explore new ideas and opportunities.

4. Create print and web-based “cheat-sheets” that show users how they can use the new tools. Use screen shots and call outs to illustrate how easy and efficient the technology is for employees of all ages.

⁶For employees who have not changed job in 4 or more years, any exposure to technology at their prior company is sufficiently outdated as to be ineffective as a means for comparison.

5. Replace a few older intranet pages with new up-to-date content in wiki form. This will encourage others to do the same, and serve as a means to edit the old content, in the wiki, so it immediately becomes current. At a minimum, using a wiki instead of email improves business continuity and reduces risk of lost information resulting from staff changes.

6. Provide plenty of support – technical, editorial and managerial. If employees are expected to try something new, they must be made to feel comfortable when issues arise. Centralized help via email, telephone support, and a user community should be considered.

7. Fix intranet search. Most Intranet search engines are horribly inadequate, and users know it. For any communications medium to be valuable, employees must be able to find what they’re looking for. Page layout and navigation aides can help somewhat, but taking a lesson from the internet, users are increasingly choosing to use keyword searches.

8. Introduce tagging and create a new “folksonomy” for your intranet – that is, let your Intranet become reorganized by its users. That’s right. Forrester research found that what experienced users want most from their company intranets – after better search engines – was better categorization of content. However, because different people think about content differently, simply developing better information architecture isn’t enough. The current approach is a folksonomy – a categorization system developed over time by folks.8

9. Enable RSS. Really simply syndication is de-rigor on the internet. However, it’s all but non-existent behind the firewall today. This is primarily because the current version of Internet Explorer (IE 6.0) doesn’t have RSS capability and most IT departments have frowned upon employees using free RSS readers such as Newsgator. Well, that’s all about to change…

Microsoft’s new version of Internet Explorer (IE 7), which was officially released in November, has full RSS functionality built right into the browser. As IE 7 rolls out across corporations, the demand for RSS content will explode – exactly as it has outside the firewall.

10. Lead by Example. When people are encouraged to work in a new way, most will resist – assuming they actually pay attention to the initiative in the first place. Cut down emails and use the collaboration tools – post agendas as wikis, share business direction in a blog, post administrative details of large meetings so time during the face-to-face gathering can be put directly to productive use.

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8The information architect Thomas Vander Wall is usually given credit for the term folksonomy.
Competing with the content and usability provided over the Internet may seem difficult, but communicators should recognize that achieving the same level of basic functionality, usability and access must be the goal if engaging the workforce is the objective. Clearly the “Google Effect” is here to stay. You can ignore it, leverage it, or wait a bit and then spend the next few years trying to catch-up to it. The choice is yours.

**Cost and Complexity Are No Longer Barriers**

In the past these technologies were very expensive. Implementing a global enterprise portal – from content to technology – cost well into seven figures and resulted in multi-year planning, cross department consensus and support between communications, IT, HR and others – not to mention a deployment roadmap that was nearly as complex as putting a man on the moon. Most of these projects have not lived up to expectations.

But today’s user-generated content tools are very different. The technology is far less expensive, the software demonstrably easier to set up, modify and use, and the implementation process much simpler. Communicators can now focus primarily on setting the content agenda, working with other leaders to help them understand the power of this new channel, creating guidelines to facilitate use, and ensuring that whichever tools are used, they are very easy to use and ensure a consumer-grade experience.

Going forward, communication leaders will have to play a key role in implementing a balanced mix of traditional and user-generated methods of communication. Their challenge? Encouraging employees to use the tools and, at the same time, ensuring they don’t intervene too often or with a heavy hand.

In the not-so-distant future, nearly fifty percent of any employee population will prefer – and expect – methods of communication that are far more collaborative and interactive than the generations that have preceded them.
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