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Employee Bloggers

TURNING A POTENTIAL LIABILITY INTO YOUR BEST WEAPON

by **Christopher Hannegan & Sara Fisher**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the rise of the blogosphere as it relates to employees and leaders of corporations. Specifically, it examines constructive methodology to shape and manage the growing inevitability of employee blogging and how companies are coping with this new technology, including the formation of guidelines for employee blogs and the use of blogs to improve corporate reputation. The authors also present how blogs are used for internal communications; specifically how blogs can be an advantageous tool for employees to communicate with each other as well as external audiences such as customers and vendors.

Introduction

THE BLOGOSPHERE IS HERE. This new wave of Web-based publication technology is empowering employees in ways similar to the rise of labor unions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While the rise of the blogosphere may be more subtle than fundamental shifts in the early labor-management dynamic, its mission is clear: the 21st century public wants its opinions heard and demands a platform by which to express them.

The advent of this new digital media technology continues to shape modern communications. Blogs are expedient, affordable, and they are flattening the communications playing field. With the mere click of a button one person's voice can be heard by an entire organization.

Research estimates that 34 million blogs will exist by the end of 2005, many of them in developed countries where the number of blogs is doubling nearly each year (Pew, 2005). The Japanese government estimates 3.35 million blogs exist in Japan and that the number will double by 2007. France is estimated to have between 3 and 4 million blogs; Germany has an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 blogs and this number is growing quickly. This phenomenon clearly has global implications. The boundaries of the blogosphere have crept past the United States, long the leader in blog innovation and growth.

However, blogs in the United States are on the forefront of a new trend—employee and CEO blogging. Workforces in many companies are embracing this new communications technology. Blogs written by

CEOs are growing in frequency as a credible way to reach both internal and external audiences (Edelman New Frontiers, 2005).

To understand why blogs are the method of choice for self-expression for many employees, it is important to understand recent research. Edelman's 2005 Trust Survey found that by a 3-to-1 margin, people are far more likely to trust "average people like me" in comparison to figures who possess authority, namely, CEOs. Moreover, a 2003 study by McKinsey & Co. found that 67 percent of consumer goods sales are based on word-of-mouth, highlighting the role that a company's employees can play to promote or discourage sales through online comments. Employees at all levels have suddenly found themselves in powerful positions to advocate their companies' products, policies, and stances—and have found that people are listening to what they have to say.

As the benefits of employee blogging become apparent, so do the corresponding liabilities. Blogs influence news stories, analysts, and regulators and blog information rises with alarming speed to the top of search engine requests due to their frequent updates and concentration of similar keywords. It is clear: organizations must have a well-formed approach to blogging that fits into their communications mix. Moreover, today's organizations need to create the framework and enable the occurrence of blogging in a controlled—and ultimately productive—environment.

Why employees blog

With all the benefits, risks, and possibilities, why are employees and the general public turning to blogs? What are the main drivers for employee blogs? Employees are blogging for the following reasons:

Become an expert

Blogs position employees and their companies on the platform of thought leadership. Blogs written by CEOs or senior management play a key role in this space. A blog is a critical communications vehicle for CEOs to display expertise and opine on various industry-specific topics.

Personalize customer relationships

In a forum where the main objective is not to sell but to improve products or provide superior service, blogs allow employees to personalize relationships with their customers. They are an accessible venue to join customer discussions, provide insight, and solicit feedback.

Foster internal collaboration and bolster knowledge management

Blogs connect employees and project members in a workspace where they can share information seamlessly without writing reports or searching crowded inboxes. IBM, which hosts an estimated 11,000 internal Weblogs on its internal servers, has been highly successful at using blogs in this way. Phil Borremans, PR manager for IBM Belgium and Luxembourg, has used his internal blog "for project management with a team of colleagues...We were testing a new product and needed to keep a virtual team updated on the progress we made...The easy way [through the blog] to comment on milestones or issues increased the interaction in the team compared to regular phone calls or sending out 'update e-mails'" (Borremans, 2005). Collaboration on this level allows for enhanced knowledge management by archiving information and making it available in a single online source.

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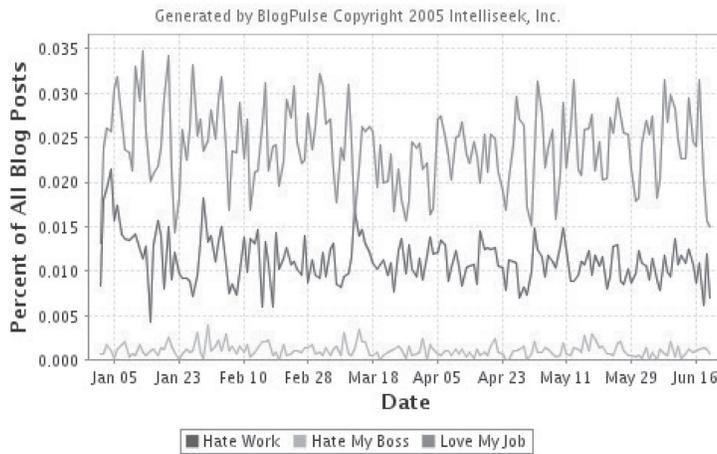


Figure 1

Content of employee blogs

When peering into the blogosphere, initially it may seem as though employers have little to no control over of blog content. This is especially compounded if management is unaware of employee bloggers.

“Many corporations are afraid of Weblogs because they’re afraid of the sound of the human voice,” says David Weinberger of Harvard’s Berkman Center. “But that voice—the unfiltered sound of an actual person writing about what she cares about, sounding like herself—is actually the most important way of connecting with customers and partners.”

While organizations may be hesitant to have their employees blog, it can be reasoned that generally, blog comments are positive. This theme is illustrated in an analysis of blog posts in the blogosphere that relate to people’s workplace. Data gathered by the research firm Intelliseek gives us a good overview of what bloggers have been saying about their workplace over the last six months through blog postings (Figure 1).

Of all blog postings examined in the blogosphere, the overall tone expressed by bloggers about their occupation is positive. Over the six month period analyzed, blog postings with a derivative of “love my job” outnumbered those with “hate

work” by nearly 2-to-1 and outnumbered those with “hate my boss” by nearly 4-to-1. While it is difficult for most organizations to control the content on an employee blog, research shows that what is communicated is generally positive in nature.

Types of employee blogs

The majority of employee blogs fall into two categories: blogs written by employees intended for other employees, and blogs written by employees intended for external audiences, such as existing customers, potential customers, or the general public. Companies that grasp this new technology successfully use employee blogs to improve relationships and enhance corporate reputation.

Use of employee blogs to interact with customers

One way that corporations can use employee bloggers is to gain credibility where it may have been lost. Take the example of the famous employee blogger, Robert Scoble of Microsoft, who maintains the blog called Scobleizer (scoble.weblogs.com). Scoble’s blog receives an estimated 10,000 hits a day and is linked to by more than 4,000 other blogs. In December 2004, Scoble published negative blog postings about the widely panned MSN Spaces product. His honesty about the faults of MSN Spaces actually shifted the blogosphere discussion on the topic to positive for Microsoft. Readers of his blog and customers of Microsoft were impressed that someone blogging on behalf of the company would express an opinion other than the party line.

“I get comments on my blog saying ‘I didn’t like Microsoft before, but at least they’re listening to us,’” says Scoble. “I need to be credible,” he adds. “If I’m only saying, ‘Use Microsoft products, rah rah rah,’ it sounds like a press release and I lose all ability to have a conversation with the world-at-large.”

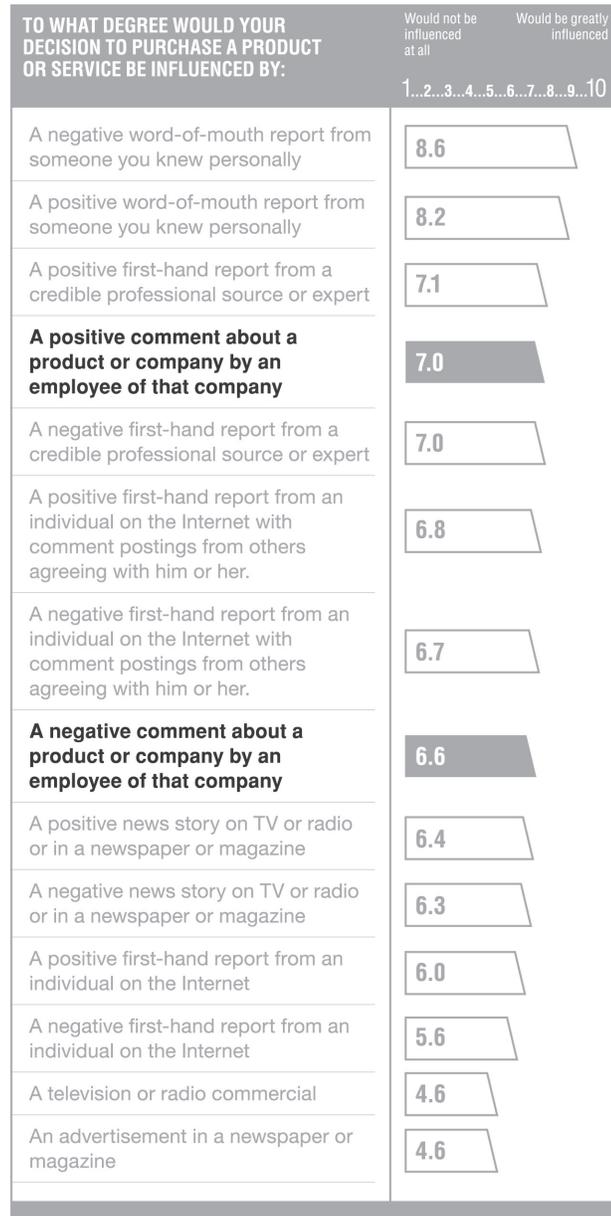
To identify the influence employees have on the credibility of a company or service, we can point to a recent study conducted by Intelliseek. This study shows the average level of influence different sources have on an individual's behavior. As illustrated in Figure 2, an individual would be very influenced to purchase or not purchase a product or service if they heard a positive or negative comment about that product or service from an employee of the company. This demonstrates the potential employee bloggers have to influence purchasing behavior.

In addition, employee blogs can also serve as a way to cut down on customer call center loads. Macromedia started a few employee blogs in 2003 to give customers a single source for information and technical support (www.macromedia.com/community/#blogs). When it released software later that year that had significant bugs, Macromedia's company bloggers quickly acknowledged the need for fixes and helped diffuse the tension building in the blogosphere.

Use of employee blogs as internal knowledge management tools

While the majority of attention on employee blogging has been directed at employees blogging to external audiences, many companies have encouraged blogging aimed at fellow employees.

Google uses its own blogging product, [blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) (www.blogger.com) to create and manage several hundred internal blogs. Many are used for project collaboration, while others are used for social interaction at work, such as selling extra concert tickets or finding partners for after-work sports activities. Some of the blogs also spill over into the public domain. These include blogs for the public relations, quality control, and advertising departments. However, Google uses its blogs for a truly unique reason: it helps the company document its rapidly evolving organizational history.



Source: Intelliseek

Figure 2

"Our legal department loves the blogs," says Marissa Mayer, who oversees all of Google's consumer Web products. "It basically is a written-down, backed-up, permanent time-stamped version of the scientist's notebook. When you want to file a patent, you can now show in blogs where this idea happened."

Organic yogurt maker Stonyfield Farms maintains five internal blogs for various purposes. One called "Baby Babble," is

intended to allow employees who are also parents to share information and tips with other parents (www.stonyfield.com/weblog/BabyBabble/index.html). All of Stonyfield Farms' blogs are run by Christine Halvorson, who has the title chief blogger. In the case of the "Baby Babble" blog, posts that benefit employees also have relevance for consumers.

Sun Microsystems has created a master blog for employee musings that also serves as an internal knowledge management tool (www.blogs.sun.com/roller/opensolaris.do). While the general site is publicly accessible, certain sections of the site and certain blogs pertaining to product development require login as a Sun employee. Sun is also well-known for the blog of its president and COO, Jonathan Schwartz (blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan), who blogs on a weekly basis on a variety of topics facing his company and its industry. The topics of Schwartz's blog also educate employees on these issues, one example being a post explaining why a recent acquisition made sense for Sun.

Use of employee blogs to give senior leadership a voice

An interesting aspect of the rise of employee bloggers is that relatively few of them are C-level executives. While the number of senior executives who blog has increased from nearly zero in 2004 to nearly 10 percent of companies surveyed in a 2005 Edelman study, they still comprise a very small part of the blogosphere (Edelman New Frontiers 2004, 2005). CEOs who have dipped their toes into the blogosphere waters have done so for a variety of reasons, including creating a new marketing channel for customers and potential customers, and providing a platform for thought leadership. The following list showcases some of the most recognized CEO blogs:

Alan M. Meckler of Jupitermedia Corporation (weblogs.jupitermedia.com/meckler) is a pioneer in CEO blogs. Since early 2003, he has been blogging on the topic of

Jupitermedia's endeavors in technology marketing. Meckler views blogging as a marketing opportunity, yet he cautions, "it doesn't work unless you have some personality in it."

Edelman CEO Richard Edelman was among the first CEOs to launch a blog (www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog). Edelman uses his blog to articulate industry positioning, discuss objectives, surface company concerns, and discuss personal passions such as Civil War history. His blog, which currently receives more than 2,500 hits daily, is read by numerous audiences, including employees of his firm.

One of the few CEO blogs that is restricted to employee-only audiences is that of Paul Otellini, CEO of Intel. Blogging behind Intel's firewall, his posts candidly discuss developments at Intel and comment on competitors and industry trends. While Otellini does not talk about his internal blog to external audiences or release its content, parts of posts have made their way into the blogosphere. One post from January 2005 characterized his candor: "While I hate losing share, the reality is that our competitor has a very strong product offering."

Even more traditional companies such as General Motors are getting in the game of blogging. GM's Vice Chairman Bob Lutz blogs regularly (fastlane.gmblogs.com) in a blog called "Fast Lane." His posts revolve around major issues facing the automaker, offer sneak peeks at new designs and products, and feature a good mix of corporate and consumer news.

In Europe, several high-profile French CEOs have begun blogging, including Michel-Edouard Leclerc, president of Association des Centres Distributeurs E. Leclerc, a co-op association of about 600 small and large retailers throughout Europe (www.michel-edouard-leclerc.com/blog/m.e.l). Leclerc gives his opinions on a wide range of political, social, and economic topics in his regular blog postings. He has campaigned effectively on behalf of consumer rights, playing the driving

role in several acts of consumer legislation. The popular Leclerc was mentioned so often as a candidate in the last presidential election that he was compelled to make a television appearance to declare that he would not run.

While the number of CEOs and senior executives who blog is slowly rising, relatively few examples exist of CEOs whose blogs are targeted primarily at employee audiences. While awareness of blogs among communicators is high—96 percent in the United States (up 60 percent from 2004) and 69 percent in the rest of the world—only an estimated 28 percent of CEOs have posted to a blog (Edelman New Frontiers, 2005).

Employee blogs gone wrong

The examples we have reviewed clearly demonstrate advantages for companies to maintain and support employee blogs; however, there are also downsides to employee blogging. Recent press surrounding blogs has been focused on employees who have blogged in the office only to encounter an unfavorable response. The outcome for an employee blogger featured in some of these articles was job termination. In a recent survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, only 3 percent of human resource professionals reported disciplining an employee for blogging, although none reported dismissing an employee for such behavior.

A key example of this occurred in January, 2005 when former Google employee Mark Jen was terminated due to a blog (99zeros.blogspot.com) that discussed life at the company, despite his content disclosure: “It’s all publicly available information and my personal thoughts and experiences.” Paradoxically, Jen has since parlayed his misfortune into a new career at Plaxo, an Internet contact management firm. At Plaxo, Jen is crafting the company’s public communication policy, which includes the use of corporate blogs by employees.

High-profile dismissals are still reverberating in the blogosphere. Yet, recent crack-downs on employee blogging have garnered companies little publicity. In fact, several blogs, such as The Papal Bull (homepage.mac.com/popemark/iblog/C2041067432/E372054822), keep track of companies that have fired employees for blogging.

Despite the negative publicity companies may encounter as a result of employee blogs, organizations may also be burned by decreased productivity if employees are blogging on work time. For these reasons, it is imperative that companies take a firm stance and create blogging guidelines to moderate employee blogging behavior.

The importance of blogging guidelines

According to a recent study conducted by Edelman, nearly 70 percent of responding organizations have no policies for employee bloggers (Edelman New Frontiers, 2005). This is a clear liability for both companies and bloggers. Without a set of guiding principles in place, each blogger interprets what is right according to his or her set of values. In turn, a company’s HR department may apply different standards to bloggers and thereby open the company to potential discrimination issues.

Organizations that have successfully implemented blogging regulations have realized that the guidelines must shape rather than prohibit blogging activity. Blogging echoes human nature; the more restrictive the guidelines, the higher the temptation to breach the guidelines. For this reason, it is advised that companies choose the less restrictive route of publishing guidelines on employee blogging, rather than more restrictive and formal policies.

At Sun Microsystems, COO and president Jonathan Schwartz states, “Well over 1,000 [Sun Microsystems employees]

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have been given space for blogging. There's no restraint on what they can blog about. We provide tools and expect them to be used responsibly. Restricting what you can write on a blog is the same as restricting what you can say in an email or a phone call." Sun Microsystems does warn bloggers not to disclose confidential information that might violate securities laws.

Liberal blogging guidelines like those at Sun Microsystems can only be successful within the context of a comprehensive employee engagement strategy. If a company sufficiently engages its employees and provides multiple outlets for the workforce to express opinions and grievances, those employees are less likely to abuse blogging.

Laying the groundwork for successful blogging guidelines

Before crafting employee blogging guidelines, organizations should first contemplate aspects of their internal culture and assess their vulnerability in the blogosphere. To do so, it is advised that the following questions be considered:

- Are we a "listening" culture?
- Are we open and comfortable with honest feedback? Can we actually handle and manage it?
- How critical is stakeholder management to brand building and corporate reputation?
- Is our company or brand committed to transparency?
- Is our industry being disproportionately shaped by external perceptions about the Internet?
- What is the morale, motivation, and commitment of our employees?
- Are employees already blogging and what are they saying?

This last question, while perhaps obvious, is crucial. Many organizations have been

surprised to learn what is being said about them in the blogosphere and even more startled to learn how many of these comments are from their own employees. Conversely, organizations that deploy Internet-monitoring services typically have a better handle on the real-time pulse of what is being said about them in content, tone, and source. As a result, these companies are also well-positioned to provide an intelligent response.

Each company should develop blogging guidelines that are specific to its mission, its employee base, and its company goals. However, as captured by Yahoo!'s blogging guidelines, commonsense rules should apply (Zawodny, 2005).

1. Employees should be responsible for their own postings on company blogs.
2. Employees should blog at their own risk, and know that the risks of being sued, for obscenity, libel, defamation, trade secrets, etc. exist.
3. All proprietary information of the company is off-limits and grounds for dismissal.
4. Media coverage of employee blogs should be routed through normal PR channels.
5. Employees should blog on their own time unless their job responsibilities include maintaining a company-encouraged blog.

After contemplating the questions above and deciding what parameters to put around employee blogging, organizations can benefit from a number of insightful blog guidelines already in existence.

In addition to guidelines that support blogging, many companies attach disclosure statements to the blogs that communicate presuppositions, business relationships, or political orientations. If a personal blog is going to discuss work even occasionally, the organization should encourage the blogger to add a disclaimer.

If a CEO or other member of senior management is blogging, companies need to be mindful of fair disclosure laws by posting

safe harbor language on the blog to caution readers about forward-looking statements. While some may argue that the introduction of legal language may counter the informal nature of blogs, the potential implications of omitting these statements cannot be ignored.

The impact of blogs

It is evident that the blogosphere is the way of the future. The transformations created by this emergence of digital media are unavoidable. If organizations continue to extract the value from employee blogs as a critical knowledge management tool, they will continue to satisfy employees and outrun competitors. The possibilities provided by blogs are endless. Blogs provide a high ROI relative to implementation cost and foster relationships like never before. They streamline

communications and transform employees into published advocates of your organization.

As 21st century communicators, it is our responsibility to lead the blogosphere. We must be conversant and ready to provide adept counsel on the development and management of employee blogs as a reputation-enhancing tool. While employee and CEO blogs are not silver-bullet solutions, they are viable communications channels and should be considered in the mix of tactics that communicators deploy. Blogs are only the beginning. Communicators must stay alert for advancements in communications technology that may someday take up residence in e-mails, intranets, Internets, and blogs. After all, it is the ability to embrace and effectively leverage these developments that defines our hallmark as a business-savvy communicators.

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