



Improving workplace performance

Jay Cross looks at how employees and their organisations can take advantage of the web 2.0 toolset and philosophy to support learning and improve performance in the workplace.

The current state of the World Wide Web, now called web 2.0 – but it might just as well be called ‘web *n*’ because the web is always in motion- is both a driver and a reflection of the new landscape of the workplace.

Increasingly dense communication networks are democrat-ising the workplace. Knowledge workers are becoming self-service learners, taking on responsibilities that once resided with supervisors and the training department. Knowledge work requires judgment and decision-making, and workers are beginning to use those abilities to manage themselves.

Web 2.0 is a social phenomenon in which people participate, using social software such as blogs wikis, subscriptions, podcasts, folksonomies, and mash-ups.

Web 1.0 was passive; web 2.0 is active. It's all about networks. Web 2.0 comes with a set of beliefs we call ‘internet culture’. Among these are open communication, decentralisation of authority, sharing and reuse of content, collaboration, lightweight business models, perpetual software improvements and social networking as an end in itself. Optimists would also include

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self-organisation, the web as outboard brain, and ‘Everything’s a work in progress’.

Conversation is the most potent educational technology known to man, and web 2.0 amplifies our conversations. Conversations are the stem cells of innovation in the workplace. Conversation links employees to one another and to customers, enabling them to become self-service learners and self-sufficient individuals.

Unprecedented opportunity

Commerce is at an inflection point. Web 2.0 offers unprecedented opportunity for corporate learning, innovation, customer service, growth and profitability. Experts have written thousands of articles to teach schoolteachers, retirees, students, eBay customers, web designers, and even Grateful Dead fans how to take advantage of the internet.

Web 1.0 consisted of static information billboards to which people ‘surfed’. The shift from instructor-driven training to self-

motivated learning has profound implications for e-learning. Many training departments have been pushing out one subject after another. Learners are on the demand side, pulling in what they need to get their jobs done today while keeping an eye on their longer term professional development and market value.

As pull/demand takes the reins from push/supply, conversations replace courses and relationships fill in for workshops. The focus shifts from event to process.

Seven or eight years ago, ‘digital literacy’ was the code name for knowing how to use a browser and keep the children safe from pornography, unscrupulous characters and scams. The focus then was on mechanics.

Today the web is about interacting with the larger community. It’s participative and shared and, thanks to network effects, it’s becoming all encompassing. Anyone in business who plans to be around in three or four years time had better start getting involved now.

Key points

- Web 2.0 is a social phenomenon in which people participate, using social software such as blogs, wikis, subscriptions, podcasts, folksonomies and mash-ups.
- Conversation is the most potent educational technology known to man, and web 2.0 amplifies our conversations.
- As pull/demand takes the reins from push/supply, conversations replace courses and relationships fill in for workshops.

Business leaders look at their graduating children, who are intuitive web 2.0 users, and wonder how corporations are going to deal with people with short attention spans, continuous contact with online friends and non-linear thinking. These young people are scanners – not readers – easily bored and suspicious of rules.

Businesspeople should ponder how they will deal with accelerating change, information overload, incessant competition, unpredictability and the crumbling walls around their institutions. Using social network tools is second nature to the 'MySpace generation'. Non disclosure suggests that you're hiding something. You can't trust what you don't see. Cooperation is impossible without a bond of trust. That's why transparency has become so important – and this applies to organisations as well as individuals.

A core value of internet culture is openness: open software, open practices, open doors, doing things in the open. In hierarchical organisations, hoarding information was a pathway to power. In a flat organisation, sharing information is a badge of recognition that we're all in this together.

To thrive on web 2.0 a person must be able to:

- Navigate the web to find people and information
- Collaborate
- Express him/herself
- Connect with other people
- Be a productive contributor to groups

In a knowledge era, work and learning become synonymous. Here are ten prerequisites for learning or accomplishing navigation, collaboration, expression, connecting and contributing that apply to learners and to doers:

Learn to read the net

Knowledge is not in your head. It is distributed across networks. Learn to read the net; pool and share intelligence with others towards a common goal. Knowledge is a process, not a product. Contribute to the collective wisdom.

Develop a personal dashboard

You should have a personal dashboard of

frequent designations on the web, access to organisational information, and links to your personal stash of tools and techniques. Ideally, your organisation will provide a starter version from which you can build. Experience shows that it's best to start by fulfilling your own learning needs before progressing to other people's.

Be a good web citizen

Before diving into a community, hang out for a while and gain an appreciation of how they function. Online connections are usually stripped of emotional pointers and, so, are subject to misinterpretation. Don't reply to emails in the heat of the moment. Relationships are reciprocal – don't take advantage of the generosity of others. Don't ask for personal help until you've exhausted other resources.

Confidence to navigate the web

You must be confident navigating the web. This entails finding your way, searching for things and overcoming fears of getting lost. You should be able to use bookmarks and tags to relocate things. The only way to do this is to fire up a browser and explore.

Express Yourself

You must be able to express yourself. Perpetual lurkers miss the rewards of participation. Start a blog and write a few paragraphs. Do it again and again.

Nurture the human network

The world is made of relationships. Knowing something is less important than knowing where to find it. Nurture your human network: these are your lifelines. Take care

that your technical connections are optimal as well, give access to reliable, high-speed connections have legible displays and easy access.

Scan, don't just read

You must be able to scan. You don't have time to read everything. There's a lot of junk on the net.

Size-up credibility

You need to be able to size up a site's credibility. In time, you will develop a sense for judging what's real and relevant. Never take an email from an unknown as proof of anything. Urban legends abound on the net.

Research

You need to be able to do research, synthesise and repurpose concepts. There is nothing new under the sun. All culture is a re-mix of what has come before. If you are preparing a presentation, take advantage of the cornucopia of information on the web. Build on the thoughts, charts, photographs, and contributions of others. So, embrace transparency.

The Cluetrain Manifesto

Embrace networks. The good easily outweighs the bad. Provide open access. Get connected. Recognise that the 'user-directed pull' world is crowding out the authority driven 'push' world. Build a learning/working environment, not micro-managed programs. Knowledge workers appreciate points, but they are insulted if you do not permit them to connect the dots for themselves.

By Jay Cross

The Johari Window

Many Organisation Development consultants use a framework called the Johari Window to describe individual degrees of openness, or transparency. Quadrant 1, the things you and I both know about me, is the 'arena'. Quadrant 2, what you know about me that I don't, is my 'blind spot'. Quadrant 3, what I know about me that you don't, is my 'façade'. Quadrant 4, what neither of us know about me, is simply 'hidden'.

Expanding my, or my company's, arena makes me more trustworthy. Disclosing more information to you shrinks my façade while opening my arena.

Encouraging feedback shrinks my blind spot, also opening my arena. Ten years ago, President Clinton declassified 45m pages of previously secret information. How much of your confidential information would be better out in the open?

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