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The Internet Grows Up: Web 2.0 Moves from Social Networking Into the Business World

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The Internet Grows Up

CIOs are continually challenged to manage resources efficiently while keeping their companies relevant as technology evolves. The transition of Web 2.0 from the consumer sector into the business environment is poised to help them meet these challenges and positively impact how the individuals in their companies interact.

Web 2.0 is not a specific operating system, but a term that marks the maturation of the Internet and, more importantly, how people use it. Instead of an expanse of content stored on individual sites, a Web 2.0 environment meshes multiple pieces of functionality together and enables the actual user to create his or her own experience. For example, let's say you're planning a trip to New York. In the past, you would book a hotel room on one site, get a map to that city on another site, and check the weather report for that locale on yet another. Today, you can get this combination of content in one application, in one step, customized to your preferences.

The next phase is an era of personalized computing where functionality is based solely on the needs of the individual user. Where instead of reading a newspaper, you're electronically delivered content on the subjects you want to see, traffic reports for your ZIP code, insight on your individual investments, sports news on your five favorite teams. It's like being given the components of a car: if you put them together one way, you create an SUV; another way, you create a roadster. They both do what they're supposed to do, but the driving experience is different with each. Web 2.0 can bring that sort of personal preference to Internet content.

The actual creation of Web content has dramatically changed with Web 2.0, as well. Now, information is not only read by the masses but also written by the masses. Blogs take the concept of the editorial and expand it to a global community for commentary and the exchange of ideas. Wikis, collaborative Web pages where readers can add to or modify the content, engage an online community of brainpower instead of a handful of writers and academics. Who could argue the success of Wikipedia and its ability to provide a relevant, comprehensive reference resource that updates as quickly as the world it defines?

But, perhaps the most iconic symbol of this "grown-up" Internet is the explosion of social networking sites. Facebook alone has more than 150 million registered users and 20 million pieces of content – ranging from Web links to photos and blog posts – shared each month. MySpace is experiencing similar success. LinkedIn expands business networking beyond the power lunch into a 24-hour online endeavor. Similar sites bring together individuals with common hobbies, interests and affiliations.

Web 2.0 Goes to Work

Although the rise of Web 2.0 functionality was driven by the consumer market, today these tools are crossing over to the business environment. This functionality, often referred to as SaaS, or Software as a Service, in an enterprise-type venue, offers considerable opportunities to companies worldwide.

The most obvious is collaboration. Companies are defined by their innovation, their ability to engage their employees to solve industry challenges with creative ideas. In a large company, employees are spread around the globe, creating little pools of knowledge working independently. Time zones and travel restrictions make it difficult to introduce these individuals, much less facilitate any meaningful exchange of ideas. Web 2.0 breaks down the boundaries, creating a common port for interaction.

Although today's virtual work environment has increased productivity, it has also reduced traditional on-the-job learning – namely, mentoring opportunities between younger and more-experienced employees. Web 2.0 enables seasoned workers to teach, counsel and share experiences with newer employees on a regular basis, as well as work with other senior staff members to document intellectual capital in a common, wiki-type knowledge base.

ACS, for example, is applying this innovation to learning services. It's exploring three dimensional virtual worlds for e-learning and collaboration – combining the accessibility of a virtual classroom or conference room with a more engaging delivery mechanism. Web 2.0 allows that type of creativity.

Customer communication can be enhanced through Web 2.0, as well. An online portal developed for information exchange drives transparency. This type of interaction doesn't replace the face-to-face meeting, but it provides the ability to collaborate between scheduled meetings through blogs, RSS formats and other centralized, online vehicles to keep the communication flowing continually. ACS has already deployed this type of tool to shorten the time between client interactions and strengthen client intimacy.

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A CEO blog can replace the weekly e-mail; a social networking-type site can gather employees with similar interests to participate in community service projects and share fundraising ideas. Facebook-type pages can introduce new employees to the team and facilitate the social interaction that solidifies a greater spirit of cooperation among employees.

Instead of logging on to check the status of employee sales training, a manager can now access that application on his or her phone, by voice recognition, to get an update in an instant. These Web-based capabilities have also been used to support government programs, including various food stamp programs and the E-ZPass electronic toll collection solution.

The opportunities are as diverse as the individual companies themselves. The results range from increased efficiency and employee relevance to moving from a tactical environment to one that promotes creative thought.

The Green Factor

Web 2.0/SaaS technology is also a viable, relatively painless way for companies to go green. The information technology industry generates as much CO₂ as the airline industry. As good stewards of the environment, it's up to every business enterprise to work to reduce those emissions.

At the same time, every company has to find new ways to increase efficiencies by eliminating waste. For every 27 watts of power used in a data center, only one watt is actually used for computing. If employees are enabled to use an application on a mobile phone or PDA, instead of a PC, the environmental impact is dramatically reduced.

Forwarding e-mails from person to person for review not only slows productivity but also wastes valuable server space. It is far more efficient to place the document in one location and send the team members to it for input. In addition to conserving computer resources, this strategy reduces errors and enables employees to work more effectively as a unit, without dealing with the distraction of an overflowing e-mail box.

The Convergence of Worlds

We live in a time when an individual's personal and business worlds have begun to blur. If you're on your mobile phone or PDA-type device, e-mails and texts come in around the clock, both personal and business-related. It becomes harder to identify just when are you "working" and when are you not.

In a Web 2.0/SaaS-empowered world, it's important to make the distinction. The security needed to protect a MySpace post is measurably different from what is required for a corporate collaboration on financials or marketing strategy. Just as companies created specific protocols for sending faxes – the information that could or could not be included – when this technology came on the market, the same type of documented guidelines must be initiated with corporate blogs, wikis and other collaboration tools.

If an individual gets up in the morning and checks personal e-mail, and then business e-mail, there has to be a mechanism for switching security profiles when that person moves from his or her social persona to business. A manual shift carries a margin of error and risk. Ideally, a device or software application can be set up to make that switch automatically, without any user intervention.

Another challenge comes with the convergence of ages in the workforce. Anyone under the age of 30 has grown up living a very public life. Many of these same individuals are learning just how visible their MySpace home pages are – not just to their friends but also to corporate recruiters – along with the detriments of "telling all" on these vehicles.

Conversely, more-mature employees grew up in a world that valued privacy, and they may be hesitant to embrace such a visible means of interaction. Human beings are creatures of habit, whether that means taking the same route to work every day or picking up a phone or forwarding an e-mail – even when there's a more efficient system in place. Training and initiating procedures that prompt behavioral change are critical for successful, secure deployment.

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The Ungeeking of Technology

Web 2.0 not only brings new opportunities for individuals and corporations alike, but it has also done something even more universally significant: it has removed barriers from technology. Application widgets make accessing content as easy as drag-and-drop on a mobile device. Content and how it is received can be customized, without needing a computer sciences degree – or a friend who has one standing by. These tools, supported by new hardware options such as touch screens, make technology available, accessible and usable for people from every demographic in all types of environments.

The Internet has grown up – not only meeting the needs of individual users and their personal preferences, but also giving businesses new opportunities to interact in a more productive, collaborative and more environmentally conscious way. It's technology that drives innovation – and that's good for business, and for the world.

You can learn more about us at www.acs-inc.com.