Firms underestimate power of 'blogging'



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There's an Internet application that few people have heard about, although it is gaining popularity and will likely become a regular part of our working lives. It's called a Web log, or "blog."

And yet, for a technology that is so useful, Web logs are surprisingly absent from corporate intranets. That's because, as with e-mail 10 years ago, few in the corporate sector understand their power — until they begin using them regularly.

Popular in the high-tech, cultural and activist on-line communities, Web logs are Web pages that are constantly updated, on a daily or even hourly basis. They contain a series of notes related to the topic at hand.

Each short item might reference a Web page that offers more detailed information, such as a news report, that caught the interest of the owner of the log. Other Web logs take on the role of a diary. Many are interactive, similar to a discussion group, in that visitors can provide their own comments on any item that has been posted.

And like any Web site, they can include pictures, video clips or music.

Web logs came about as way of dealing with the explosion of information on-line.

They can be used to distill information on a particular topic and keep readers up to date. Rather than doing your own search or visiting 30 different Web sites to read news reports or magazines relevant to your job, you might find a good Web log that does an excellent job of synthesizing multiple sources to a manageable chunk. They're usually discovered by word of mouth.

Basically, with a Web log someone is doing the surfing for you and pointing out the best stuff. In the same way that newspapers summarize useful information into a digestible form, a skilled Web log owner helps you hone in on what you need to know.

The mother of all Web logs is perhaps the well-known technology site Slashdot (slashdot.org). Yet Web blogs are quickly moving beyond the tech community into other areas, such as culture and the arts. They are popular in specialized legal communities, particularly those involving intellectual property issues. For example, iRights (http://irights.editthispage.com/) covers the battles and issues emerging as the Internet and technology clash with the business activities of entertainment companies.

Many Web-based companies are providing services that allow you to create your own Web log, for personal or professional use.

Visit sites such as Blogger (blogger.com), Pitas (pitas.com), and Userland Software's Manilasites (manilasites.com), as well as Weblogs (weblogs.com) or editthispage.com. Each offers a variety of blogging options, all characterized by a simple Web form to add and edit items.

How significant is the Web log trend?

Blogger estimates that there are about 115,000 Web logs on its site alone. There are also some directories that give you a sense of what is out there, such as: portal.eatonweb.com, or the Google Weblog listing (http://directory.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/On_the_Web/Logs). And check out the "First Annual Weblog Awards" — you'll find them at Fairvue Central (fairvue.com).

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I'm convinced that the opportunities to use Web logs within an organization are endless:

- Public relations firms might use them to establish a rolling file of newspaper articles and other Internet references, in order to provide management and staff a sense of the status of the organization in the public eye.
- They would be a useful tool for corporate intelligence if they provided references to the activities, news or changing Web pages of various competitors.
- A human resources department could establish a Web log that provided a quick reference to topics of interest to staff.
- A company could establish a customer Web log, providing a regular series of news reports, ways to solve technology problems and other information for clients. It would be an extremely innovative way of solidifying the relationship with customers.

The folks responsible for corporate strategy should get their heads into the Web log phenomenon and take some time to think about how it might help them achieve various corporate objectives.

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