

## Feeding on Wikis and Blogs

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In the old days, when long-distance telephone calls were very expensive, we attended technical conferences to keep up-to-date with the changes in the profession. Of course, the company or university would only pay for the very important staff members to attend these expensive events. The rest of us had to make due with the public library. Fast-forward to today, when the price of a telephone call is nearly zero and the Internet connects everyone. Access to all this information is cheap. It is also overwhelming. Additionally, our ways of organization are changing. Collaboration and community are quickly replacing the command-and-control pyramidal model. Rather than fight it, perhaps we can use the machines to help us adapt.

Blogs are online diaries. They are posted on web sites and accessible to the whole world through a common Internet browser, such as Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Safari. Blogs are one-to-many communication – you write something and many people read it. The emphasis is on content, rather than flash. People write about things that excite them, like the Care and Feeding of Cats, Landscape Photography, Fonts, Medical Conditions, or Statistics. So, what is new? Is that not the same as writing a standard web page? No, for a couple of reasons: 1) automation has taken the effort out of web page design, and 2) blogs allow for comments. It is the second item that is particularly important. It allows communities to form. Unlike e-mail, an archive of the conversation is kept. Blogs are fluid and rapid.

Wikis are reader-generated and edited web pages. One person will start a page, with a little or a lot of information. Then others will enrich that information. Perhaps they will generate additional pages on a similar topic. The whole thing is linked together. As with blogs, the software does all the formatting work, allowing you to concentrate on the content. If you make a mistake, there is a rollback feature. If some creep places offensive words on a page, anybody can quickly roll it back. There is built-in version control, allowing every reader to see changes made over time. Wikis (from the Hawaiian word “quick”) encourage collaboration and help to get the whole team working on a project.

But how does one keep current on all these blog and wiki sites? Must we check them all once or twice a day? What about all the good stuff published while we were traveling to St. Louis? The answer is to let the machines track these changes. This is called RSS – Really Simple Syndication – news feeding. In fact, it is now built into all popular web browsers. You tell the software which sites interest to you. Once or twice an hour (or more!) the computer will send a query: “Any Changes?” If so, it is marked and sometimes a little flag pops up at the bottom of your screen. Once or twice a day, or week, or when you return from St. Louis, you open the RSS feeder and scan the identified changes. Spend time with those that interest you and move on.

Mastery of these three technologies will greatly increase your knowledge of professional matters happening all over the world. Rather than invent solutions on your own, you recycle solutions and ideas from others. By building your community, you add value to your organization.