

Community Notes

Blogs: lessons from a rookie

Michelle Laurie

Earlier this year (2007) my work asked me to come up with a system for communication and reporting amongst a team of fifty people working across twenty-five countries. The group will work together over four years and do joint learning on five thematic areas. While an integrated knowledge management and communications strategy is clearly necessary, I felt there was a need for something immediate to encourage reflection, contributing to discussions and learning at the global scale.

At this point my familiarity with blogs was limited to following the adventures of my blogging friends who spend their time dog-sledding and skiing. One uses Word Press and the other Blogger. I put a question out to the KM4Dev community [www.km4dev.org] asking which platform was better and received an overwhelmingly large amount of material from people that have shared a similar experience to mine. Comments came from individual bloggers in Brazil and Portugal to international development organizations located in Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, UK, and the USA. In the spirit of knowledge sharing, I have summarized what I learnt in the table 'Blogging Tool Reflections by members of KM4Dev'.

Reflections

Since embarking on the quest to learn more about blogging I have discovered that it is much more complex than one might think. For example, while Blogger may be a quick and easy solution for an individual, it doesn't offer the scope needed to encourage institutional blogging. I was advised to seriously consider layout, usability and the integration of features as all of these make a difference in the accessibility of the blog to the bloggers and commentators. For example, how comments are integrated can result in mere postings rather than engagement, interaction and discussion. And don't forget, 'It has to have tags.'

Blogging is only one tool in the social software world that many of us are embarking into. Thus, when trying to get new users engaged, it seems worthwhile to find an interactive platform with multiple uses. I have found one of the biggest barriers to using different programmes is that people forget their username and password to the many websites they are subscribed to. A one-stop shop will certainly be more user-friendly though it requires resources for development. This appears to be the way my former organization is going.

Blogging tool reflections by members of 'KM4Dev'

Tool	Strengths	Challenges
wordpress.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to set up and understand - Professional looking templates - Positive feedback, good reputation - Tags, shared authoring, moderated comments, feeds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can't use plug-ins
wordpress.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free and open source - Options for own hosting service - Total control over weblog - Plug-ins available and abundant (http://wp-plugins.net/) - Easy installation of themes - Possibility to use advanced templates such as : http://getk2.com/ or http://tarskitheme.com/ - Strong user community, helpful for problem solving/support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need server - Hard to set up and configure for amateur IT people (but easiest for software requiring installation)
blogger.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to set up and use - Tags, shared authoring, moderated comments, feeds - Can easily embed stat tracking and RSS displaying code (using javascript) - Easily navigable with other google applications - Links with YouTube 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited for institutional blogging - Hard to find RRS feeds from it - Gets blocked by a lot of organizations - Poor support
Serendipity: <u>www.s9y.org</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to install, add new modules and change skins - Supports multiple authors, RSS syndication - Categories - Anti-spamming tools, Good support - Simple to use media library - Gives credit to other sites such as WordPress 	
Drupal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good for complex blogging needs - Free, open source, content management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs professional developer
MovableType	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Group blogging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs a license - Difficult to install, configure
<u>www.b2evolution.net</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to install, design and use - Open-source multi-user / multi-blog platform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need server space for hosting
Elgg: <u>http://elgg.net</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social software platform where everyone gets their own blog - Communities can be created 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to install yourself or set up on their Elgg Spaces
Terapad.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to use, hosted service - Can switch off ads for \$5/month 	

Still, experience in the international conservation and development sector makes me question this decision. Basically, holding out for perfection can result in serious delays and loss of momentum and enthusiasm for adoption of new technologies. Despite not being perfect, there is merit in getting people accustomed to new forms of communication and engaged in discussion. The 'Let's start now' philosophy lets people share the learning taking place each day immediately. Furthermore, most content from blogs is transferable so material shouldn't be lost.

Final thoughts

There is no silver bullet solution as it depends on an organization's needs. I have learned through my experience of posing a question to KM4Dev that while blogging is valuable for teams, other forms of discussion and reflection are equally important to ensure that knowledge is shared. For example, there is a lot of expertise on the subject of blogging and blog software that has come through the KM4Dev community. This did not come out of a google search or another blog.

Great recommended reading:

Getting started with blogging software

http://www.idealware.org/blogging_software/2006/06/introduction.php

This article summarizes the pros and cons as well as key considerations of seven software programs.

About the author

Michelle Laurie is a knowledge management and communications consultant. After working for an international conservation organization in Switzerland for the past four years, she has returned to her native country and is living in the southeast corner of British Columbia, Canada. She will be setting up a personal blog on WordPress.com. Stay tuned!

Michelle Laurie, P.O. Box 1063, Rossland, British Columbia, V0G 1Y0, Canada

E-mail: michelle.k.laurie@gmail.com, SKYPE: michellelaurie, Phone: +1-250-362-5905