Investigating Weblogs in Small and Medium Enterprises: An Exploratory Case Study

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Abstract: Contrary to a Wiki where the opinion of the individual user disappears in favor of a more impartial 'collective intelligence', a weblog is author-centered, expressing the author's subjective point of view. This particular property of weblogs played a fundamental role for the popularity weblogs gained for making implicit knowledge explicit in an unsolicited, self-organized way. However, empirical studies from academia exploring internal corporate weblogs remain scarce, especially when they focus on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which make up the majority of all enterprises worldwide. To counteract this lack of research, we investigate an internal corporate weblog in an ICT SME from a knowledge management perspective. We derive both research questions and hypotheses to test within future studies. Furthermore, we consider already gained findings from corporate weblog research and investigate their immediate applicability in the context of SMEs.

1 Introduction

Not just because of the Web 2.0 hype (O'Reilly, 2004), weblogs enjoy a great popularity along with Wikis establishing a well-known source of user generated content on the Web. Being a 'log of the web', the term weblog, attributed to Jorn Barger refers to websites on which entries are commonly presented in reverse chronological order (Paquet, 2003). Termed with Enterprise 2.0 (McAfee, 2006) or Corporate Web 2.0 (Stocker et al, 2007), companies have identified an untapped potential in weblogs contributing to their business goals.

As a socio-technical object of investigation weblogs frame a broad area for interdisciplinary research. They continuously became a new form of 'mainstream personal communication' (Rosenbloom, 2004) for millions of people publishing and exchanging knowledge, thereby connecting to like minded people, establishing networks of relationships. Weblogs seem ideal for experts broadcasting their expertise to a large audience, but they are also suited for 'ordinary' people who want to share

stories with a small group (Wagner and Bolloju, 2005). Exploring the motivation of bloggers on the web, Nardi et al (2004) found that blogging is an unusually versatile medium, used for everything from spontaneously releasing emotion to supporting collaboration and community. However, there is also evidence that bloggers value sharing of their presented thoughts without getting the intensive feedback associated to other forms of communication (Nardi et al, 2004). Gumbrecht (2004) and Herring et al (2002) characterized blogs as a medium having limited interactivity, compared to e.g. listserv. Herring et al (2002) even found the modal number of comments in individual blogs to be zero, indicating the low level of interaction within the majority of weblogs.

In a corporate context, weblogs enjoy popularity in the form of organizational blogs. Those are (1) maintained by people who post in an official or semi-official capacity at an organization, (2) endorsed explicitly or implicitly by that organization, and (3) posted by a person perceived by the audience to be clearly affiliated with the organization (Kelleher and Miller, 2006). Employees are increasingly diffusing information about their experiences and progress at work to the public (Efimova, 2004). From a corporate view, utilization of weblogs has even been heralded a paradigm shift in the way, companies are interacting with their customers. They provide the ability of restoring a human face to a company's self-presentation with respect to information technology extending the customer relationship (Dwyer, 2007). Aiming towards a categorization of corporate weblogs, Zerfaß (2005) created a taxonomy describing fields of applications and upcoming challenges for weblogs.

In an Enterprise 2.0 movement (McAfee, 2006), companies started to adopt Wikis and weblogs, supporting knowledge transfer between their various actors and aiming in facilitation and improvement of their employees' knowledge work. Both tools entail the potential of making the practices of knowledge work and their output more visible and graspable. Corporate weblogs may contribute to codification and personalization of organizational knowledge (Kaiser and Müller-Seitz, 2005). While examining internal weblogs in project management within Microsoft, Grudin (2006) was referring to the request of further empirical studies on the topic of internal corporate weblogs.

With reference to Puntschart and Tochtermann (2004), knowledge transfer is the uni-directional targeted transfer of knowledge from a sender to a recipient. Knowledge sharing is an extension to knowledge transfer, where knowledge flows in both directions, from the sender to the recipient and vice versa.

After a brief literature review with explicit focus on internal weblogs within large-scale enterprises, we will address the need for empirical inquiries concerning the adoption of weblogs within small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which constitute the majority of all enterprises worldwide. Our presented findings are based on an exploratory case study conducted in an Austria SME settled in the ICT industry and employing 50 knowledge workers. We comprehensively analyze structure and properties of this internal weblog and explicitly probe its impact on knowledge management. Finally, we conclude with a summary and a discussion on the limitation of our research.

2 Related Work

Compared to the number of scientific publications on the topic of weblogs in total, those focusing on internal weblogs in corporate settings are scarce. A significant reason may be grounded in the fact that it is more challenging for researchers to investigate a weblog within a corporate context: Because of the access to critical business information published in the weblog, a close relationship of the researcher towards the enterprise is an inevitable precondition.

The four reviewed publications focus on a single case within a big multinational enterprise having a large set of weblogs. Such a weblog network already owns structures and properties similar to the Blogosphere, a collective term for the population of weblogs on the Web (Shi et al, 2007). Solely through examining electronic traces created by weblog users, interesting findings about weblogs can be gained.

To learn more about structures and properties of internal weblogs within organizations, Kolari et al (2007) investigated the internal Blogosphere of IBM. The weblog network was visualized as a social graph based on electronic traces, where bloggers and commentators constituted the nodes while the edges symbolized the relationships between them in terms of comments and trackbacks. The authors claimed to be the first to comprehensively characterize a social network expressed by weblogs within an enterprise. They presented new techniques to model the impact of a weblog post based on its range within an organizational hierarchy using mathematical operations but leaving an empirical inquiry open.

Jackson et al (2007) explored the social aspects of blogging within an unstated large-scale enterprise using empirical methods of research. They analyzed both motivation of blogging individuals and their practices of using weblogs. Pivotal for their analysis was the observed phenomenon that busy bloggers published almost twice as much comments within weblogs they visited than posts in their own. The authors brought to light that weblogs are able to strengthen the weak ties between bloggers. Furthermore weblogs enabled an informal mechanism to encourage disparate and widespread departments to go for a constructive contact. Weblogs provided good means for employees to establish and maintain personal networks. Busy bloggers did not only create value for themselves but also for the medium weblog users.

The growing several thousand both internal and external weblogs covering network of weblogs at Microsoft was investigated by Efimova and Grudin (2007). They probed where, how and why employees blogged, how personal the writing was in work related blogs and what happened when blogging became a formal work objective. While Microsoft valued external customer-oriented weblogs, a lot of skepticism existed towards internal weblogs to which no clear business purpose could be attributed. Contrariwise to external weblogs, internal ones were not formally supported by the company. Employees were free to determine whether, when and for what reason they blogged. A lot of bloggers described blogging as a way of sharing passion for their work and communicating directly with others inside and outside the company. Many described blogging as a desire to reveal the human side of a company, while others used weblogs purely for documentation and organization purposes.

Kosonen et al (2007) discussed roles and challenges of weblogs in internal communication in a large-scale ICT enterprise. They identified a two-dimensional framework based on the type of internal blogs and the related modes of communication. Blogs are employed in internal communication to fulfill strategy implementation goals and to foster informal interactions. Corporate climate and corporate culture determine the success of weblog adoption. Finding a balance between formal guidance and self-efficacy seems to be inevitable. Blogs offer an effective means for sharing knowledge in organizations in an informal manner.

3 Research framework

The goal of our research was to probe an internal manager weblog evolving in an Austrian ICT SME employing 50 knowledge workers. The European Union provides a recommendation for classifying SMEs: SMEs are enterprises which employ less than 250 persons and have a maximum annual turnover of 50 million EUR or 43 million EUR balance sheet total. Due to the different basic conditions in SMEs compared to those in large scale enterprises, we also assume different properties and structures of internal corporate weblogs. Our research was motivated by the lack of qualitative studies of weblogs in the context of SMEs. Taken into account that SMEs comprise the majority of all enterprises worldwide, we accentuate the relevance of our study.

We chose case study research as our preferred research technique, because the researched phenomenon, the weblog, can not be separated from its context, supporting knowledge transfer. According to Yin (1984) 'a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. According to the principle 'use multiple sources of evidence' (Yin, 1984) different sources of information had been taken into account allowing us to address a broader range of historical, attitudinal and behavioral issues. Any findings such a case study generates are likely to be more convincing and accurate. Following Patton's recommendations (Patton, 1990), we chose an information-rich case providing many opportunities for learning.

We started investigating the weblog with respect to its property to facilitate the knowledge transfer between manager and employees. A comparison between content of e-mails sent by the manager to all employees and the weblog content is included. Furthermore, we had the chance to interview the manager talking about his intentions. We even received a certain amount of control over the weblog, shutting down the weblog for a short period of time. Finally we carried out a survey obtaining another set of findings. Using multiple sources of evidence enabled us to derive hypotheses with more accuracy and conviction in contrast to using just a single source of data.

Bearing in mind the extensive desktop research executed before, we were able to derive the following research scope covering techniques, previous findings and impact of weblogs on knowledge transfer:

- We showed why a weblog was used in this particular organization and how it affected knowledge transfer. Furthermore we addressed the question of weblog success in terms of popularity and how to raise it.
- From a researchers' perspective, we probed, whether present techniques from internal weblog research are applicable to weblog research in the context of SMEs.
- Researching weblogs in business settings is still lacking a strong theoretical body. Hence, the overall goal of this exploratory case-study was to develop some body of theory describing the adoption of weblogs in SMEs, which we will postulate in the form of hypotheses to be tested in further studies.

4 Conducting the exploratory case-study

4.1 Exploring the artifact

We began our exploration by investigating the weblog's history of creation: During a critical project meeting, the manager was reporting to all employees hourly, thereby adopting a very personal writing style. After the meeting was finished he expressed the desire to obtain a weblog for future coverage of relevant information.

An instance of Wordpress (www.wordpress.org) (licensed under the GNU General Public License) had been installed on the Web server of the company. Wordpress provides many features, but most of them remained unused within this case: A blogroll including other weblogs or web-sites which are regularly visited by the author was missing. The manager did neither insert hyperlinks to point to interesting internal or external resources, nor post multimedia-enriched content. Communicating confidential information, this weblog was accessible from the intranet only.

We explored the weblog content from both a qualitative perspective (i.e. what did the manager communicate to employees) and a quantitative perspective (i.e. how often did the manager inform the employees). From a quantitative perspective we measured operational figures in terms of number and frequency of posts and comments. Besides communicating via the weblog, the manager used e-mail as a supplemental channel. In the case of the investigated weblog, the reader group could be limited to the crowd i.e. 'ordinary employees', while the management was managed closely personally.

The manager mainly used the weblog to depict tasks accomplished on behalf of the represented organization. Thereby he adopted a subjective informal writing style (Kelleher and Miller, 2006). The communicated information was of both strategic nature, e.g. including knowledge about contracts, challenges, partner-acquisition or presentation of decisions from strategic meetings, and operative nature, e.g. including reports from business trips and stories about the participation at various events. While information being of relevance for all employees was diffused via the weblog, time-critical information being of particular interest to a limited group of employees was transported by personal talks, telephone calls or e-mails. Time-critical information relevant for everybody was still communicated via internal e-mails to assure the information transported reaches all receivers in time.

Table 1. Quantitative analysis of the weblog

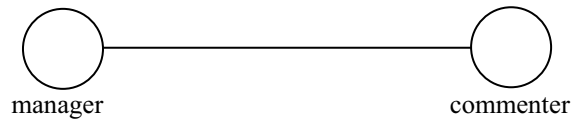| month	number posts	number comments	min gap	max gap	avg gap
			between posts (in days)		
May	8		0	5	1,1
June	5	1	2	14	5,6
July	9		0	7	3,7
August	3		2	21	10,3
September	2		8	18	13,0
October	1		19	19	19
November	2		5	24	15
	number posts (in total)		avg. total gap		
	30		5,8		

From studying the electronic traces we detected (1) a strong decrease of published posts and (2) a rise in the average gaps of posts. Furthermore we observed the phenomenon of only one comment being posted. We will give an explanation in the following sections, after extending the research scope.

4.2 Extending the research scope

The analysis of internal weblogs in large-scale corporate settings can be based upon extensive network data that is electronic traces of e.g. relations between a large set of internal corporate weblogs constituted by comments, trackbacks and blogrolls. Unfortunately, techniques that can be successfully applied in large enterprises (Kolari et al, 2007), including network theory and social network analysis based on electronic traces, can not be applied in the same way in SMEs. In the context of SMEs, there is often only a single or a small set of weblogs involved, which renders typical research measures of network approaches (Newman, 2003) such as degree or centrality of weblog networks impractical or even meaningless. Instead, it becomes more interesting how a weblog interferes and interfaces with nodes (actors) that are offline - such as the different stakeholders in an organization communicating with the weblog author. Our situation required extending the scope of analyzing purely electronic traces as done in many studies of weblogs in large scale enterprises or in the Blogosphere to including offline traces of actors, reading or interacting without authoring a weblog themselves.

In this paper we argue that especially for small and medium enterprises - though we expect the same argument to hold for large enterprises as well - traditional means of social network analysis are insufficient, due to the exclusive focus on electronic traces. Analyzing weblogs in SMEs requires methods that include the offline context. There may not be enough electronic traces to accurately understand the structure and properties of weblogs and how they may be embedded into SMEs. Therefore, phenomena which are investigated purely on the basis of electronic traces might turn out to be obvious, biased or simply wrong. Our investigated case evolved just one internal weblog.

Fig. 1. Social graph of the manager weblog

This social graph depicts the 'internal Blogosphere' as a very simple construct. We expected commenting practices to play an important indicator for the success of a weblog in terms of popularity. By considering only one posted comment, we first argued for a very low interest of the particular weblog within its possible audience. However we wanted to learn more about the respective weblog and therefore extended our investigation to the offline actors.

4.3 Conducting an experiment

Contrary to the approach from Kolari (Kolari et al, 2007) and our criticism expressed in the prior section we emphasized that it is very gainful to experience the impact of the weblog on nodes (actors) which are offline, not owning weblogs by themselves. We asked ourselves the subsequent questions:

- How did different actors perceive this weblog in the context of knowledge transfer?
- What were the benefits for employees reading this weblog? Did employees ignore this weblog as a source of information?
- What was the rationale of just one comment being published during the time of investigation?

We setup an experiment: First we deactivated the weblog exactly seven days after a post was created. By sending an e-mail to every of the 50 employees, we asked whether they had read the recent post and were able to recall the content. Our request was repeated once to receive a higher rate of return.

14 employees in total (28%) replied to our request. 11 employees (22%) were able to basically recite the content of the past weblog post. One employee expressed that he did not read the post. Two more employees provided us with an explanation of their rationale being a nonreader. They typically read weblogs within web-based feed readers, but the respective RSS feed could not be subscribed to in this way. Therefore they simply denied reading the weblog. This fact clearly depicted a goal conflict between manager and employees. Referring to Strohmaier et al (2007), we assumed further goal conflicts to be a reason for weakening the intended knowledge transfer.

Analyzing the findings gained by our experiment, we were able to derive the following hypotheses:

- Few comments in SMEs' weblogs do not necessarily equate few readers.
- Specific weblog configurations are able to counteract personal weblog practices, reducing the ability of the particular weblog to facilitate knowledge transfer.
- Studies of weblogs purely based on electronic traces may lead to biased or wrong findings. Having just a single or a small set of weblogs, it is more interesting to examine the impact of the weblog on offline nodes (actors).

4.4 Conducting a survey

Our first findings dealing with the actual reading behavior accentuated the need for a more detailed survey. The goal of this survey was to increase the accuracy of our findings regarding motivation of weblog readers and nonreaders. Additionally we intended to probe to what extent the goal of the manager – using the weblog to facilitate knowledge transfer towards the employees – was achieved.

All employees who were able to remember the last weblog post during our experiment were requested via e-mail to answer six questions concerning their weblog reading practices. This respective crowd formed group A – weblog readers. All employees refusing to reply in the experiment were surveyed using a different questionnaire including four questions. We probed their rationale of not reading the weblog, especially referring to conditions under which they would change their mind. Because we were not able to eliminate the possibility of also addressing readers, we also attached the questionnaire for group A to that e-mail. All non readers were finally added to group B.

Receiving 40 replies (80%) of 50 possible represented a very satisfactory response rate. Altogether 20 replies were written by members of group A (readers), and another 20 by those of group B (nonreaders).

Following, questions stated to and answers given by group A will be presented. The aim of questions 1-3 was to examine the motivation of employees reading the weblog. From an organizational perspective, further relevance is paid to what extent the manager's goal of informing the employees (a) had been achieved and (b) was in fact achievable by selecting a weblog as a knowledge transfer facilitator.

Q1: I read the weblog, because… Almost all replying employees clearly stated their interest in the tasks their manager was carrying out. One third also stated a general interest in what was happening within and in the periphery of their organization.

Q2: How and from where do you read the weblog? Ten employees used an ordinary Web browser, explicitly mentioning Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox. Six employees used a RSS-feed-reader, while two employees went for an RSS plugin for Microsoft Outlook. 16 employees read the weblog solely within the office. Three employees explicitly addressed the access restriction, which we were also pointed at in our experiment.

Q3: How often do you read the weblog? Half of the employees browsed the weblog for newly created posts at least once a week, while five employees visited the weblog more infrequently in broader intervals. From these findings we assumed reading this particular weblog is more like a scan for newly created posts. Only a minority group subscribed to the RSS feed, being notified instantly after a post was published.

The following question was aimed at exploring the reason of only one comment being posted during the time of investigation.

Q4: From your point of view, is commenting to a weblog post reasonable? Eight employees positively answered this question and quoted to mention different points of view to the author including additional information and aspects which had not been taken into consideration yet. Six employees clearly answered with 'no': The weblog

was purely perceived as an information portal, not a place for knowledge sharing. The remaining employees argued that reasons both for and against comments exist. We found this question to be stated in an ambiguous way, therefore failing to deliver an answer according to our intention exploring the rationale of non-commenting within *this* particular weblog. With respect to Nonnecke and Preece (2001) the observed behavior can be termed with 'lurking', when only a marginal fraction of members in virtual communities actively posts content. Cabrera and Cabrera (2002) provide a socio-economical explanation, investigating the employees' rationale of denying the sharing of ideas within an organizational context.

Approximately half of the employees were reading the weblog. The goal of the next question was to probe barriers when adopting internal weblogs in the context of SMEs.

Q5: To what extent is the manager able to improve the weblog from a technical, an organizational, and a content perspective? The most substantial argument given by the employees dealt with the perceived low frequency of posts. Nine employees explicitly requested a higher number of posts and three employees accentuated a call for a higher frequency of comments, too. By achieving the second, more employees would be encouraged to add comments on their own facilitating knowledge sharing. Two employees argued for making the weblog available from places outside the office. Merely three employees wanted the weblog to remain unaffected.

The substantial goal of the manager was to improve knowledge transfer towards the employees. The closing question for group A addressed whether the weblog had contributed to achieve that goal.

Q6: Has the knowledge transfer from manager to employees been improved by the weblog compared to prior (yes, rather yes, rather no, no)? Nine employees answered 'yes', seven employees 'rather yes'. The weblog constituted a new information channel towards employees, and the information communicated was of sufficient relevance to read the weblog. Three employees stated 'rather no' reasoning with the low frequency of posts, while one employee answered 'no'.

Subsequent, the results of the surveyed group B are displayed. Questions 1-2 dealt with the rationale of employees not reading the weblog.

Q1: I do not read the weblog because… The majority consisting of ten employees denied reading because they simply forgot either existence or URL of the weblog. Since its introduction as a new information portal, only one e-mail had been written by the author. Three employees criticized the weblogs's lacking ability to be read via web-based feed readers. Two employees did not read weblogs at all and one employee argued a lack of time for reading activities beside the work tasks.

Q2: I will read the weblog if… Four employees indicated to read the weblog if they received an e-mail notification for every new post created. They favored solutions based on push-mechanisms over those based on pull-mechanisms. With respect to the literature, McAfee (2006) also described knowledge workers preferring channels over portals. Three employees stated to read the weblog, if it was accessible from the web allowing subscription with web-based feed readers. Five employees did not see any relevance in the published content with respect to their personal work tasks. Two employees used different channels to obtain requested information and the weblog did not provide any new insights to them. Due to the fact that the author of the weblog

conducted little promotion, new employees did not know of its existence. However, three employees were not able to provide a rationale for their non-reading behavior and promised to read the weblog in the future.

Questions 3-3.1 addressed whether a weblog is perceived as an instrument for knowledge transfer by the nonreaders at all. Besides that we wanted to examine the preferred knowledge management activities from an employee's perspective.

Q3: From your point of view, which particular activities are able to improve the knowledge transfer from manager to employees? Prior to this survey, we assumed that nonreaders do not perceive the weblog as an instrument for knowledge transfer. Surprising to us, eight employees in fact did perceive the weblog as an instrument to facilitate knowledge transfer. Besides that, e-mail, newsletter, meetings and personal talks were named. Six employees placed importance on personal meetings between manager and employees.

Q3.1: Do weblogs account for that? 14 employees acknowledged weblogs as facilitators of knowledge transfer, explicitly naming asynchrony, ease of transporting information, little effort for operation and the informal narrative style as essential criteria. Five employees answered 'no', reasoning with the huge effort of retrieving relevant information. Notifications of new posts were not provided either. In addition, in this particular SME informal information channels were available in a manageable number, easily accessible by anybody rendering information communicated via the weblog unnecessary. Furthermore, information relevant for daily work assignments was not published.

Analyzing the findings, we derived the following hypotheses for validation in further studies:

- Weblogs will be read, if they provide sufficiently interesting content that is not available from alternative sources.
- The frequency of posts illustrates a key factor for weblog success in terms of popularity. A low frequency constitutes a barrier to accept the weblog as a knowledge transfer instrument.
- Commenting to weblog posts may lead to a change of the knowledge workers' perception of the weblog as a pure information portal, hence facilitating knowledge sharing.
- Access restrictions regarding tools and/or location will conflict with weblog reading practices.
- Lacking skills and personal accent for an ineffective utilization of the weblog in terms of knowledge transfer, e.g when employees demand notification features that are available but unknown to them.
- Employees will have limited desire to read the weblog if they perceive the relevance of the published content too low with respect to their daily work assignments.
- Weblogs have to be promoted by the authors to turn them into facilitators of knowledge transfer.
- Internal weblogs in SMEs are able to improve knowledge transfer in principle, however, as long as only one weblog with no comments exists, they seem inappropriate for knowledge sharing.

5 Limitation of research and future work

The motivation for our single-case study was based on the fact that known preliminary academic case-studies focused on large-scale enterprises, but most of the enterprises worldwide are made up of SMEs. We intended to advance weblog research to the SMEs context referring to their population.

However, one limitation of the findings generated by our study is noteworthy: First of all, data for deriving our hypotheses was generated by only one weblog in one SME. Single-case studies provide limited feasibility of generalizing to theory. However, unlike surveys, case studies do not make inferences about a population (or universe) on the basis of empirical data collected about a sample (Yin, 1984). In contrast to methods based on statistical generalization, case studies do not reason the selected cases as being sampling units. Individual cases are to be selected as a laboratory investigator selects the topic of a new experiment (Yin, 1984). A single case study can therefore be considered like a simple experiment. Hence findings from a single case-study can be reasoned like findings from a single experiment. If we had conducted a multiple-case study, the developed theory would have a stronger basis, allowing replication of findings. Keeping that in mind, we will test the hypotheses derived within further case studies to investigate whether replication may be achieved.

6 Conclusion

This exploratory case study aimed at generating findings about internal Weblogs in SMEs from a knowledge management perspective. We state out findings as hypotheses to be validated within further case-studies.

In conclusion, we outline our contribution to organizational weblog research in a nutshell: Weblogs are no fast-selling items. Promotion constitutes an important precondition for weblog success. Techniques from weblog research which are based on electronic traces may lead to wrong findings if applied in the context of SMEs that have only a single or a small set of weblogs. Employees will prefer weblogs providing information that is of sufficient interest or relevance for their work assignments and not available from other channels. A high frequency of posts constitutes a key factor for weblog success in terms of popularity. However, a low number of comments does not automatically equate a low number of readers. A specific weblog configuration will establish barriers, colliding with the reading practices of employees. Constituting information portals, weblogs are based on pull mechanism. However, in an organizational context, employees may favor technologies based on push principle. If adopted effectively, weblogs provide good means to facilitate knowledge transfer, but seem inappropriate for knowledge sharing.

Acknowledgements

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