

Corporate Blog: The Critical Communication Tool for Remote Teams

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Executive Summary

The performance of geographically distributed teams depends on informal interaction between team-members that is difficult to maintain when personal meetings are rare.

The author suggests using Internet blogging technology to enable an on-going informal discussion between the team members, to complement interaction through teleconferences. To address issues of Internet security, the author proposes a method of emulating an informal blog through corporate e-mail system. He also discusses the role of the team leader in moderating the discussion to facilitate the creative process, and the importance of trust between team players for successful interaction.

The author argues that the corporate blog is the critical business tool facilitating trust and enabling creativity, cooperation and empowerment in remote teams.

Introduction

With the proliferation of virtual teams where team members do not share offices and company reporting lines, team leaders face a number of management challenges that arise from the lack of informal social interaction between the team members.

Attempts are made to make use of the advances in telecommunication technologies to bridge the “informal interaction” gap. As described in the following section, Kostner (1996) proposes the use of teleconferencing for informal communication between team members.

However, having to assign a specific time for a teleconference limits that process, both in the sense of people being available to communicate and because the time set aside for an informal part of the teleconference is limited.

The absence of some team members from teleconference meetings soon results in some members feeling excluded from the team process – an effect opposite to the one intended when an informal teleconference is set up.

1 Social Interaction in Virtual Teams

The authors (Kostner 1996; Fischer and Fischer 2001) agree that it is very difficult or even impossible to manage a team that does not meet in one place at least once in a while. Still, the cost of travel and the difficulty of coordinating everyone’s schedule means that such meetings are rare.

To fill the gap between infrequent real-life meetings of the remote-team members, managers are looking for ways to enable people to interact more or less informally via teleconferencing and Internet tools.

1.1 Informal Teleconferences

Specifically, Kostner (1996) offers the idea of a non-agenda informal teleconference (*‘joust’* in Kostner’s terminology) to help develop informal links between team members. The purpose of joust is to share ideas, discuss common problems, simply communicate informal but, above all, to build a web of trust between employees in different locations.

In our experience, the most frustrating problem in implementing this kind of informal interaction has been the inability of some team members to attend such teleconferences due to travel, meetings, holidays or other constraints. When somebody is left out of such meetings, the resulting feeling of exclusion leads to breaks in the “web of trust” (Kostner 1996).

An attempt to make people write minutes of such meetings so that absent members know what had been happening in the meeting did not bring any result: the meetings being informal by definition, this very formal element was impossible to implement.

1.2 Creativity Aspect

Non-agenda meetings are still limited in time. Team creativity, on the other hand, is the exact opposite: it is unscheduled and spontaneous. Unless team members have a discipline to capture their creative ideas so they can bring them up during the next teleconference, these ideas are denied an opportunity of going through the heat of team interaction.

There is yet another side to the creativity dilemma, a cultural one. We tend to express our ideas after we have spent some time thinking them over. Unless we are in a real-life, face-to-face brainstorming session, where crazy ideas fly around, we tend to hold back our ideas until they get at least some substance to support them, therefore we rarely bring up wild, revolutionary ideas, even if we have them. Very often, we don't have enough time or discipline to turn our ideas into a more or less finished product that, we think, may be used by other team members. Thus our raw ideas perish without seeing the light of day.

2 Blog as an Aid to Team Interaction and Creativity

To address the above-mentioned shortcomings of informal teleconference meetings, namely:

- Absent team members' feeling of exclusion,
- lack of record of what has been discussed,
- hurdle to team creativity as a result of lack of face-to-face brainstorming,

we came up with a tool that specifically keeps all interaction in a written form while remaining unstructured, un-moderated, and unscheduled.

Both as a technology and as a lifestyle fad, *Internet blogging* is becoming increasingly popular among youths starved of social interaction, and revolutionary-minded opponents of global media control, alike.

Blog, from 'web log', stands for a web page that, like a journal, gets updated by one or several authors, with the latest entry coming first. It is universally accessible (by virtue of being a web page), itself a written form, and blatantly denies any structure or format, in some cases turning into a stream-of-consciousness scribble: essentially, all three elements that fill the above deficiencies of an informal teleconference.

We did make some adjustments to adapt the concept of a blog to the demands of a corporate environment.

2.1 Technology Selection

There are a number of blog technologies available—Twiki is one good example. Some of them are freeware. However most of them require placing a blog server behind the intranet firewall because, as it is, a blog server does not provide any protection against intruder access.

In our case, having to convince our corporate IT to install it on the intranet so that we could play with it was a showstopper.

We also looked at instant messengers like ICQ and surrounding technologies like Miranda IM that can support multiple messaging services. We found that most instant messenger services are designed for one-to-one interaction: they handle many-to-many message exchange very poorly.

Again, security of information in instant messengers is questionable.

We had a look at news server technologies, which have some potential for corporate blogs. However news servers are discussion-thread-oriented. In Section 3.2.3 below I address the issue of threads and argue that blog organizers and moderators should avoid splitting their team blogs into threads.

This pretty much limited our options to our existing corporate e-mail system.

2.2 Turning E-mail into Blog

There were certain limitations that we had to overcome when trying to bring blog culture into the corporate e-mail environment:

- Art of To: and Cc:
- Too many formal elements
- Overloaded inboxes
- Long discussion threads

To recreate the feel of the blog interface, we also made some adjustments to our e-mail clients to emulate that as well.

2.2.1 The Art of To: and Cc:

Ever had a discussion about who was put in Cc: and who wasn't? I am sure everyone has.

Then there is a subtler difference between To: and Cc: in terms of action or non-action.

And then there is the black art of using Bcc:

These are all things to be learned during long years as a career employee.

To get rid of all these complications, and re-create the universal accessibility of the blog, we decided that all our e-mail blog posts will be sent To: all members of the team, irrespectively of whether or not all would interested.

This concept emulates the idea of our team's office space. It has to be said that we do not get together in our office too often. People travel a lot, people often work from home. But when we do meet, we sit in one room with our tables set in a circle, so that we face each other. (Idea of the round table for the business environment credited to Kostner 1996.) It makes it easier to talk to each other but, most importantly, it makes it much easier to join the discussion that you were not in at the beginning.

In our office, it is often the case that two or three people start talking about something, while other people are writing their e-mails or just ignoring the conversation (in reality, you can't really ignore a conversation because you hear it anyway, which is a very important point). Then as the discussion progresses other people suddenly join in – and you realize that they have been subconsciously following the discussion from the very beginning.

The same with blog messages. The blog discussion is informal by definition, so nobody is “required” to post comments. Nobody is even required to read it. (But in reality, because the messages are short and informal, people start reading them, and then move on to long and formal ordinary e-mails.)

The full distribution list concept described above reflects a difference in approach to e-mail and blog. In traditional e-mail, it is advisable (Fischer, Fischer 2001) to avoid mass-group replies. In blog discussion, this rule should not be obeyed because exclusion of any of the team players will have the same result as people being absent from an informal teleconference: this will destroy the feeling of being connected.

This argument is, of course, based on the assumption of a team consisting of around a dozen members – and it won't work for an entire division of 300. But then again, you rarely intend to get informal with 300 people in your office.

For a remote team, the blog becomes a facilitator of universal communication, which is defined as *delivery of information to all parties at the same time*. This is the key element of promoting trust within the team (Kostner 1996). Please refer to section 4.2 of this article for further discussion of communication and trust.

2.2.2 Formal Elements

A conventional e-mail message still carries a lot of unnecessary elements like greetings and signatures that make the correspondence too formal. To emulate the informal culture of a blog, we adopted several conventions for our e-mail blog posts:

1. No formal address at the beginning of the message, unless specifically required by meaning or logic of discussion, which in reality happens very rarely, so our post went straight to the meat.
2. No closing remark, like nonsensical “Best regards,”
3. No name of the author: it is obvious from the e-mail header information.
4. Ban on all auto-signatures that carry telephone and fax numbers, company motto, mission statement, disclaimer and confidentiality clause.

This cuts the message to the essence of the matter, which saves time, effort and visual overload for both writer and reader.

2.2.3 Overloaded Inbox

Having selected the corporate e-mail system as a platform for our blog discussion, we then moved on to re-create the look and feel of the blog interface on our Microsoft Outlook e-mail client.

Firstly, we decided to differentiate our blog messages from the rest of the e-mail. Our blog messages would have a sign “@” on the subject field, and nothing else. We took it as a sign of the team unity, a unique symbol of the group (Kostner 1996, 62). We would not use the subject line for anything else because we had an explicit ban on threads in our discussion. I will touch on this subject in the following section.

Because the blog messages now had a unique subject line, we were able to set a processing rule on the e-mail client to move the blog messages to a separate folder automatically, so that we wouldn’t have to look for them in the inbox.

The second thing we did was to switch on the message preview for that folder, so that when a message is selected on the message list, the whole text of that message is displayed in a separate window.¹ Now we could flick through the messages by just tapping through the list, almost like you scroll down through a blog page.

¹ At the time of writing, it was a good idea to have the preview function switched off for your inbox because message preview could launch an attachment with a virus in it. To avoid that kind of problem, we set our processing rule so that it would not forward messages with attachments to the blog folder.

2.2.4 Discussion Treads

Despite advice to the contrary (Fischer, Fischer 2001), it is customary, during long e-mail discussions, to attach all previous messages at the end of the message, in reverse historical order. It could make sense when a discussion goes at a speed of one message per day, when many parties are involved, and many projects run alongside, in a word, everyday-life e-mail. Instead of finding all messages on the given subject in your e-mail client, you get all previous messages with every message. A matter of questionable convenience.

Contrary to that tradition, our decision was to avoid threads in our blog. This was due to a number of reasons.

Firstly, our rule for a blog message was “keep it short”, so that it could be seen in one pre-view screen without scrolling down through the message. As described above, this adds to the feel of the blog screen, which would be impossible to re-create if messages had long tails of attachments. Fisher, Fisher (2001) refer to this as the “no-scroll” rule: if the memo is more than one screen of text – it is too long.

Secondly, the blog was meant to be informal. In a normal real-life conversation, you state your point of view on the subject without referring to everything that has been said before (as you do, for example, in formal scientific discourse).

Finally, and most importantly, the key purpose of the blog was to promote creativity. When discussion has a thread, you feel compelled to stick to the subject, and not to veer off in other directions. We wanted our blog to look like a permanent brainstorming session, something that a virtual team with little face-to-face interaction badly lacks. So separate blogs should at least visually be disconnected from the rest of discussion.

Just like in natural evolution, where random variations create a basis for survival, we tried to make separate posts as random as possible. It was then down to the team to imitate “the survival of the fittest” (Darwin 1859) through the effort of screening and developing the best ideas.

2.2.5 Clarity v Coherence

As mentioned above, the coherence in team-member posts to the blog is specifically not required. The ideas thrown into blog discussion should be raw, unprocessed, and not necessarily connected with the previous posts. This puts a certain strain on the leader of the team to moderate the discussion, as outlined in the next session, but that is entirely normal. Any brainstorming session needs a moderator – otherwise it will be uncontrolled. The same applies to a blog. This is just the price that you pay for innovation.

What has to be stressed, however, is that coherence is not exactly synonymous with clarity in this particular instance. However informal, the blog discussion is not face-to-face. Non-verbal communication is just not there to compensate for lack of clarity in the message, therefore it is important to remind all team members about use of simple language (Flesch 1960). Blogs require it more than anything else.

Fortunately, the blog removes that cultural pressure of “a need to sound clever” in written communication. The leader’s role is to support and reinforce simplicity in communication. One way of doing this is to introduce a habit of re-phrasing, in your own words, what the other party wants you to do (Kostner 1996, 139). I have found implementing this idea most challenging. Obviously, saying to the team that they should do it is just not enough.

My approach is to highlight how poor communication contributes to the problem when the team meets to analyze a fresh customer crisis or a production issue.

3 Personality Dimension

3.1 Leader as a Moderator

This brings us to the role that the team leader has to take on to facilitate the creativity within a blog discussion.

In the team interaction scenario, every member performs a certain function: one team member comes up with a new idea; another criticizes and modifies it to fit the reality; yet another one matches that idea to ideas implemented by other teams; and then, yet another one turns it into a working solution (Belbin, 1993).

The leader/manager’s role is to actively seek input from the team members. The type of input he seeks from every particular team member will depend on the role this member performs within the team. This will enable the team to follow through on the new idea, from its birth to its implementation.

If left un-moderated, the discussion of a new product, for example, may remain in the state of creative chaos indefinitely, without moving on to the drafting and implementation stages.

The leader has to judge when the team is ready to move to the next stage – and then prompt the team to change the mode of discussion. If this doesn’t happen quickly enough, for example, team members playing the role of implementers will get frustrated by the inventors getting an unfair amount of airtime. What is more important, a project may lose crucial momentum by staying too long in the creativity stage.

3.2 Factor of Trust: Blog as *the* Critical Tool for Remote Teams

Lack of trust is the killer for a blog discussion. Unless the team is in either the *norming* or *performing*, third and fourth phases of team development (Tuckman, 1965 quoted in Hirsh, 1996), it is impossible to expect an open, meaningful and productive team interaction in a blog environment. People need to feel secure in order for team creativity to work – and it is even more so for a distributed team (Kostner 1996, 39-41).

From my personal experience, when my team was reorganized – and then got stuck between a forming and storming phase for several months – there was not a single blog post.

This happened when a new team-manager was appointed. He was based at the company's headquarters, across the world from our office.

The trouble was: he struggled with his e-mail. He was so baffled every time he confronted two-hundred or so e-mails when he returned from a 2-day business trip that he adopted a philosophy: “if it is important, you’ll phone me.”

Here I will not comment on the obvious implication: very soon, every important issue was discussed on the phone, leaving no written record of decisions made. Although this was a clear trust-breaker, at the end of the day this was a simple lack of business discipline that could have been remedied by the proper use of e-mail.

There was a subtler element though, that I would like to highlight.

When this manager discussed his fresh ideas – the ones that were too raw for a formal e-mail – he often chose to sound out the idea with a team member over the phone. Apparently he thought this was a great trust-building technique.

It wasn't that he favored any of the team members, as described in Kostner 1996 (page 107-110), but as he was on the phone with one person at a time, he was able to discuss his ideas only with that person. Over time his ideas developed, and a different team member, speaking to the manager on the phone a couple of weeks later, got a slightly different story.

When the team members talked to each other and compared what they had heard from the manager, a silent suspicion started to grow: he was telling different things to different people.

Mistrust started creeping in between the team members. Team creativity started to wane; blog posts dried out. Dismal business results came as a consequence, about a year down the road.

This real-life example demonstrates that for a remote manager, a blog is *the* critical business tool. Certainly, one may argue that a manager needs to share his half-baked ideas only in a fast-paced, creative environment. But hey! Who said this is not what an average business looks like these days?

4 Blog as a Decision-Making Tool

A blog gives a manager an opportunity to make his own decision-making more transparent for his remote team, while cementing the trust. When a manager argues his decisions in writing (even if not entirely coherent) to his entire team, from the very beginning of the process – as opposed to delivering a presentation with a final product, a decision – the manager gets a chance to solicit valuable input from his team-members.

This process needs not to turn into a congressional hagggle – because the decision itself should not necessarily be made by majority voting: it is still up to the manager whether he wants to be democratic or autocratic in each particular instance but even with a very unpopular decision, the use of a blog improves the manager's chances of his decision being eventually accepted by the team. Here decision-making is similar to negotiating: the earlier in the process you introduce the bad news – and the more the other side feels it is participating in the process of searching for a solution – the higher your chances of acceptance (Cohen, 1982).

Popular decision or not, tapping into the views and ideas of the team will not only widen the horizon of the analysis, improve the efficiency of the decision-making and the eventual effectiveness of its implementation – such an approach, which can only be enabled by a blog or a similar method of universal communication, gives the sense of empowerment to the remote team members.

5 Conclusion

In order to improve performance of distributed teams, managers try to foster informal interaction between team members. While personal informal meetings remain the best option for teambuilding, in most cases meetings are too rare to rely on for a reasonable effect.

Attempts to use tele-, video- or Internet conferencing sessions provide a reasonable remedy but because they happen at a fixed time, it is often inconvenient for some team members and the time set aside for an informal teleconference may be insufficient.

The author suggests using an Internet blog to enable an on-going informal discussion between the team members. Use of blog technology in a company environment may cause security concerns. The author describes a method of emulating an informal blog through corporate e-mail system.

On the personal dimension, the team leader should act as a moderator of the blog discussion in order to maximize input from people performing different team roles, and optimize the process from idea to implementation.

Trust is a crucial element of any informal discussion, irrespectively whether it is online or real-life. In a distributed team environment, a minor breakdown of trust leads to a vicious circle: with less trust between the team members, communication becomes obstructed. This leaves less possibility for a leader to rebuild the trust through communication. Lack of personal interaction leads to miscommunication, which in turn leads to further mistrust.

Experience shows that for blog, mistrust is an immediate killer: as soon as people become defensive, discussion dies out.

When a remote team is involved in sounding out team-manager's decisions, use of conventional one-to-one communication is shown to lead to disastrous results.

Only use of blog or a similar universal communication methodology will improve the efficiency of decision-making, drastically improve the eventual acceptance of the decision, and cement the trust within the team.

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