Open Space Learning Leveraging Web 2.0

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How do people stay

networked and connected within your organization? Adapting to changing needs through continuous learning? We expect people to:

- think on their feet;
- learn from their experiences;
- contribute to achievement of organizational goals; and
- be accountable for their actions.

But have we enabled and equipped them to do so effectively using the desktop tools we place at their fingertips?

People create complexity within organizations — they will interact. We are familiar with the power of the f2f informal network of the "grapevine" and the informal learning that takes place in f2f "water cooler briefings." Have you considered how your traditional grapevine is being transformed to be a "webvine"? Who is driving on your virtual organizational highways? It is more than e-mail etiquette and webmasters.

We connect and communicate on an ongoing basis to exchange knowl-edge and learn by doing. The majority of learning in the workplace does not take place in structured learning events — workshops, courses, training sessions — but in informal interactions. It is how we source information and gain experience drawing on the expertise of our colleagues. From an HR perspective, we need to explore the potential social software offers in making our organizations more interactive and productive learning spaces, tapping into knowledge resources in a "glocal" world — thinking globally; acting locally.

Web 2.0 refers to the web-based accessible — often open-source — software tools which enable just-in-time collaboration. Social software enables people to connect or collaborate through computer mediate communication and to engage in community online. Many of us learn of the power of these tools to stay connected and informed by watching our children interact using chat forums, virtual social networking and shared spaces on the web.

Let us explore the possibilities of how we might leverage web 2.0 within a range of human resource functions. Connecting and creating community is a crucial component of integrating new employees to our networks. The first three months of an employment relationship is critical. The time and cost to recruit is high — there is a talent shortage in many fields. So there is a renewed interest in how to welcome new recruits, present a positive first impression, share info, create a buddy system, and get them "hooked" on the job and organization so they will stay. We need to ensure

that this is a two-way communication process and not just the organization pushing info to the new recruit. Web 2.0 tools can enable easier access of both "1 to many" and "many to 1" in informal learning. New recruits can introduce themselves to the organization by publishing their profile; existing staff can refer to the profiles to connect and draw on the expertise of colleagues and peers across the organization. Rather than HR having to centralize, collect and maintain this data, let's use the tools to support the creation of a dynamic and current body of knowledge easily accessible by all.

Many of these tools are somewhere in use in our organizations — whether that is within a corporate blog (web log) that marketing manages on the website, or discussion threads on our intranet site. The power of the pen has extended exponentially within the blogosphere, as a videogame company, Electronic Arts recently discovered. In August 23, 2006 the *National Post* reported in its workplace section how a single blog by a disgruntled spouse of an employee became a catalyst for action — a costly action for the employer. A class action lawsuit resulted in a settlement of more than $31 million for employees of overtime payments to address prior employment practices of employees working on projects for 12 hours per day for extended project periods.

So, although blogs may start as very personal spaces, they can be tipping points for significant change. Even if you attempt to control the web traffic and conversation within your organizational setting, the impacts of how you manage your

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relationships with your employees can be subject to scrutiny by those directly affected, but outside of the hierarchy — i.e., family members — it is a complex web of relationships.

Let us also consider the potential of a blog as a learning and performance support system — where people post questions, ask for help on their blog and experts will find them. Internally within an organization if there is some common vocabulary and templates for employees in publishing their profiles, your expertise locator system can emerge in response to actual needs.

These web-based collaborative software tools model informal learning practices, which have limited structure and are driven by participants' knowledge-seeking behaviours. The power of these tools is their accessibility and dynamic nature. It is just-in-time learning. ■