



Setting a Context for Human Resources and Web 2.0

By Wesley Wu, Towers Perrin

Web 2.0 is certainly one of the more discussed and debated “technologies” in the business arena today. And while Web 2.0 is surrounded by significant degrees of confusion and skepticism one thing is certain: Web 2.0 is here to stay. Web 2.0 is ubiquitous now on the Internet, it seems to be making headway into private and business applications, and will soon impact the HR space, as well.

What is Web 2.0 (see sidebar)? In practice, Web 2.0 is characterized by an enhanced user experience on an Internet page employing Asynchronous JavaScript and XML (AJAX) technologies, greatly increasing content interactivity. More generally, Web 2.0 has taken on broader meanings that include online communities and collaboration. While the latter is not absolutely correct, it is a downstream effect of Web 2.0.

The primary function of Web 2.0 is the enhancement of the direct user experience. Asynchronous JavaScript and XML technologies enable Web pages to behave more like

applications and permit people to interact directly with the content and tools. Web 2.0 functionality is being found in an increasing number of sites, led by many of the well known Internet search and portal companies.

However, Web 2.0's use as a social/community framework and collaborative Internet usage, which is relatively new, e.g., MySpace.com and Facebook.com, has fostered a new approach to the Internet where users participate in multidirectional discourses through interactions with many other users at the same time. If Web 1.0 was defined by the linear and unidirectional interaction of a single user with an Internet page, Web 2.0 has been partially defined by the simultaneous interaction of many users within a community.

Another clear example is the use of community-driven content sites such as Wikipedia. A wiki is a type of site that allows non-technical people to add, change, or delete the content of the site. In Wikipedia, an online community comes together through a strict set of rules and governance to manage one of the largest online knowledge bases available on the Internet. What could be considered anarchistic by an outsider is actually a well-moderated system of community-based knowledge submission, approval and continuous editing. What is notable about Wikipedia is how the community self-polices; changes viewed to be capricious or malicious are corrected, often almost immediately, by individuals who have taken it upon themselves to ensure that the quality of the information remains high. This is certainly a type of empowered behavior that we would like to see in the organization. A wiki approach to collaboration is one that might be embraced by certain types of organizations, especially those that thrive on a team approach to innovation or those that have global operations. Indeed,

What is Web 2.0?

When you request a Google map of your neighborhood, you get a map of the area that allows you to search for local businesses, say “restaurants.” As Google lists local restaurant results alongside the map, your selection of any of those restaurants brings up a window overlaying the map with pertinent information including reviews, Web sites referring to the selected restaurant and other useful tidbits. These are several features of Web 2.0 working in the background, an experience most Internet users are familiar with, but may take for granted as simply the evolution of technology. While that is correct, a more meaningful description is the leap of Internet technology from the basic (1.0) stage to a more advanced state (Web 2.0).

many companies have successfully implemented wiki-based applications to improve the availability and quality of information. These wikis are often highly specialized repositories of information about a single topic, although companies have general interest wikis, as well.

There has been an expansion of the “2.0” nomenclature: Enterprise 2.0, Business 2.0, HR 2.0 and many others have followed the rapid adoption and discussion that has characterized Web 2.0. For example, new collaboration models stem from the adoption of corporate communities interacting within wiki technologies, and equal excitement has been created through the use of social bookmarking Web sites such as del.icio.us. These are “2.0” theories that describe new approaches to business, process, and community that often have technology at their source.

Web 2.0 Technologies HR can Implement

Much of the HR 2.0/Web 2.0 discussions have revolved around the learning process. Certainly, learning may be the most obvious place to start as HR takes a cue from Wikipedia and looks towards a continuously evolving knowledgebase. Not only could Web 2.0 technologies reshape the process of learning by moving many learning experiences from the traditional classroom to the on-demand wiki Web site, but the collaboration of learners and information providers are continuously integrated into the wiki, greatly reducing the cost of the learning process.

However, many other opportunities exist. Within the organization, Web 2.0 communications can provide employees with a much broader framework for networking and developing a wide-ranging community across divisions and geographies. And this, in turn, can have tangible benefits for employee performance, retention and engagement – all key goals of companies. Take, for example, the onboarding process. In any organization, this community of users has several significant characteristics. First, they are all new, highly engaged, and motivated to learn about their new environment. Second, they are a transient population in that they will be part of this organizational sub-community for a short period of time. Third, they want to make an impact quickly. These characteristics provide the perfect environment for a wiki. For example, a well-orchestrated site allows each new hire to read all new-hire postings – from comments about the quality of food in the cafeteria to insights about how best to navigate the corporate culture. At the same time, the wiki promotes a community of peers, and as time progresses, each generation of new employees will automatically associate itself with a distinct new peer group. Finally, because these employees are motivated and engaged, there is a high probability that they themselves will add content to the wiki, ensuring that it is updated as time goes on.

There are distinct advantages to this onboarding approach:

Low overhead – Rather than running weekly onboarding meetings that have dubious value, an onboarding wiki

Samples of Web 2.0 and HR in action

Current HR technologies employing Web 2.0 are infrequent. However, some vendors and third-party consulting organizations have ventured into this arena, using “bolt-on” functionality to enhance existing technologies and to increase the user experience in corporate self-service and portal environments. For example, a common bolt-on enlists pop-up help and support for various processes within the HR self-service tool. This support might include simple instructions, or may be more complex, employing profile-based or contextual support.

can be integrated into a more mainstream onboarding site. Information presented to new hires is rapidly consumed and users know where to retrieve the data when needed. A wiki also reduces the overhead burden of future phone call inquiries regarding these topics as it becomes a *de facto* self-service site.

Autonomous environment – A wiki community, even one on onboarding, runs fairly autonomously, and while governance is needed, a wiki can be a large knowledgebase whose content is created without the major participation of HR and corporate communication partners.

Comprehensiveness of the onboarding site – The wiki may become a more comprehensive knowledge base as employees who initially onboarded continue to use it for informational purposes. What started as helpful advice to “ask so-and-so about this or that” may become a more permanent structure to record and to validate these employee hints, exposing that knowledge to a much broader audience. Finally, the knowledge that is gathered is almost certain to provide a direct view into the dynamics of the workplace and can give managers the insights needed to address issues that impact productivity.

There are some other considerations, and HR will need to actively participate in addressing them. Wikis need to have strict guidelines to work well, and HR needs to work with IT to ensure compliance with regulatory and corporate policy. If users begin to “flame” other employees or the organization itself, the trust in the process will quickly degenerate. However, there is a fine line between governance and dictatorship, and that line must be walked carefully.

Human Resources may want to appoint mentors or sponsors for each generation of new hires who can respond to questions on a wiki forum. Just as essential, however, is the organization’s ability to provide support through business leaders and senior professionals. The attention from the senior ranks provides new hires with a sense that they are cared for, provides development opportunities for mid-level employees and allows the organization to lead. It’s easy to see how using a wiki to capture and support these interactions and relationships can lead to new thinking about ways

the employee lifecycle can move from the current one-off transactional focus to one that supports end-to-end talent management.

Human Resources will continue to see Web 2.0 technology enhancements coming from software vendors, especially in the area of manager portals, where process-based interactions are more common. One of the major challenges of the portal has always been usability and adoption. When Web 2.0 is implemented with an eye towards design, it has the potential to significantly enhance the user experience and further increase adoption rates. For example, performance review portals now have Web 2.0 technologies that load prior compensation detail that can be called to the screen without a page refresh. As HR software vendors continue to develop new portal uses for Web 2.0, manager and employee willingness to use technology will increase, with measurable benefits for the organization.

Web 2.0 and Governance

As we move into a Web 2.0 world, how users manage themselves and engage in conversations may differ between the public Internet and the private intranet. Establishing the right rules of engagement before launching communities will set the tone for the community, enhancing employee adoption and the overall probability of success for the community.

As online communities are created, we've realized that while anonymity might be appropriate in the public Internet, user identification and transparency are more desirable in a business context. However, sometimes transparency is not enough to ensure proper user conduct and adherence to corporate policies, so the free-form nature of Web 2.0 communities often needs to be reined in by the business. The rationale for this approach goes beyond mere politeness. Corporations need to be careful not to lose breakthrough ideas that may be prematurely quashed by Web-based group-think. Likewise, they must be diligent about establishing an environment that encourages collaboration and allows the team to help articulate and develop individual thoughts and ideas.

However, not all communities are behind the intranet. Today's professional communities exist to allow professionals to share ideas outside the corporate firewall. A growing concern is whether employees are exchanging appropriate information and whether the lines between the professional community and the corporate community are being blurred. It also raises an intellectual capital concern: Who owns the ideas the employee is discussing?

This governance issue does not deal with how the business moderates the discussion; it deals with how it controls what information is appropriate to release to the external business community. The risk of losing trade secrets must be balanced with the benefits of sharing ideas with a broader group of experts and professionals who can bring a

Web 2.0 and HR's Workforce Strategy

Clearly one of the leading topics today is the emergence of Generation Y, also known as Millennials. Gen Y'ers are characterized (perhaps stereotyped) as being supremely capable of using technology to collaborate and to multi-task. It's no surprise that growing up in the era of instant messaging, Facebook and MySpace had something to do with this facility. Because this generation's approach to work and even its perception of work is so different from those of earlier generations, corporations must adapt in order to best leverage the strengths these Gen Y'ers can provide. In short order, corporations will find that Web 2.0 will move from a nice-to-have technology to a must-have technology.

While the creation of a technology environment to facilitate communities and collaboration may not appear to be the primary or even secondary domain of HR, its inevitable impact on corporate culture – from the way people communicate with each other to shifts in work hours – means that HR will likely play a critical role in defining this technology's use and setting parameters for its adoption.

fresh perspective, additional data, or other enhancements to the discussion. Employers will have a growing need to balance internal and external communities, realizing the risks and potential rewards of each.

As we gain greater understanding of Web 2.0 technology and how it can be used, more doors will open to new HR processes and to expanded opportunities for the corporation as a whole. Many of these new technology applications will be brought to us by vendors, but many still can be implemented quickly and easily without the purchase of software. And while governance issues present some interesting and sometimes unanticipated hurdles, Web 2.0 in a corporate environment holds potential that cannot be ignored. One thing is certain: how HR interacts with employees and how employees interact within the organization will change rapidly. Both positive and negative experiences will be shaped by HR's approach to Web 2.0 as it continues to evolve.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Wesley Wu is a senior consultant in the San Francisco office of Towers Perrin, a global professional services firm. He works with major corporations helping improve the effectiveness of their HR functions and specializes in HR strategy, service delivery, function effectiveness and HR technology.