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Putting Web 2.0 To Work

Although many HR leaders may prefer to bar Web 2.0 from the workplace, doing so could leave their organizations at the back of the technology pack.

By Tom Starnier

For much of the HR community, the idea of Web 2.0 sneaking into the workplace conjures up some scary scenarios. Using today's ubiquitous media reports as a roadmap, visions of out-of-control wikis, YouTube videos gone wild, and personal pages revealing way too much information appear to be the most celebrated trademarks of the so-called Web 2.0.

So perhaps it's not surprising that a recent survey of 700 HR executives found that 64 percent said their companies block access to social-networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, while 63 percent block access to blogs and nearly 70 percent prevent their employees from accessing video or photo-sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr. The study, conducted by Redwood City, Calif.-based security firm Clearswift, also found 54 percent of the HR professionals have had to discipline employees for "wasting time" on the Internet.

However, some experts say HR could be making a major mistake by running away from Web 2.0 and its elements.

On the contrary, they say, HR executives looking to make some positive waves within an organization should embrace Web 2.0 -- or certain aspects of it, at least. Web 2.0, they say, can have impact on critical business-driven areas -- most importantly, by attracting and retaining talent (including the Web 2.0-fueled millennials entering the workplace now and in the next several years), not to mention employee collaboration and engagement.

"Whether it's a blog or a wiki, Web 2.0 has some great applications when it comes to knowledge sharing and collaboration, though you probably don't want your employees co-authoring the next SPD [summary plan description] via a wiki," says Stamford, Conn.-based Michael Rudnick, a consultant at Watson Wyatt.

In fact, a few technology-based HR vendors already understand that Web 2.0 can help HR make some major strides in the ongoing quest to be more strategic. SuccessFactors, a San Mateo, Calif.-based provider of talent-management software, has started NEXT Labs, a new initiative that incorporates rapid feedback from clients to build new products that feature Web 2.0-type functionality.

Meanwhile, Taleo, a Dublin, Calif.-based talent-management vendor, and Lawson, the St. Paul, Minn.-based provider of enterprise-resource planning software, are integrating elements of Facebook into their platforms (more on that later).

Rob Bernshteyn, vice president of global product development and marketing at SuccessFactors, says there's a simple reason why Web 2.0-type tools will benefit HR and employers in general: People genuinely enjoy using them, and for good reason.

"End-users of enterprise software now expect an experience similar to consumer applications such as Yahoo, eBay and Google -- an experience that is simple, rich and rewarding," he says. "It's time to move past the days when enterprise software meant a boring and difficult experience. It's time for enterprise software that's fun, engaging and innovative."

Bernshteyn adds that because human capital management applications typically touch nearly everyone within an organization (ERP applications, by contrast, may touch 5 percent), moving to Web 2.0 tools is a natural for HR.

Jason Corsello, vice president in charge of the Center of Excellence at Knowledge Infusion, a technology consulting firm in Walnut Creek, Calif., and author of the *Human Capitalist* blog, says Web 2.0 can make it easier for organizations to share knowledge.

"Web 2.0 is not only about participation, but also about leveraging the collective intelligence within an organization," he says. "The benefits are limitless, including becoming the glue that connects the people within the organization."

Where the Millennials Are

"It's only recently that HR and companies have seen the infiltration of Web

2.0 elements from the mainstream into the corporate world," says George Thomas, a Philadelphia-based principal and communications consultant at Mercer. "Their challenge is to figure out a way to use Web 2.0 productively."

Part of meeting that challenge will need to include, for many, a bit of research. The Clearswift survey found that 23 percent of the HR executives were unfamiliar with Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube, Facebook and Wikipedia.

Some companies that have implemented Web 2.0-type tools in the workplace have found they're a useful way to spark creativity among employees and increase engagement and interaction among -- and between -- employees and customers. Palo Alto, Calif.-based Hewlett-Packard recently launched HP Uncut, a YouTube-like system that lets HP employees make their own videos that demonstrate best practices for using and maintaining HP products and then upload them to the corporate Web site.

"Through search optimization and social tools provided on our video platform, we can enable the right content to reach the right person, no matter how narrow the niche," says Donna Stokes, social media manager for HP's Imaging and Printing Group, adding that the system is based on video uploading technology provided by The FeedRoom, a New York-based firm.

For example, customers interested in creating custom surfboard art, recycling inkjet cartridges or converting 8mm family films to DVD can get answers via HP Uncut. Visitors to the Web site can forward the videos to friends and family members who may be looking for similar advice.

For the company, the key HR benefit of HP Uncut is employee engagement, says Stokes, adding that the program has inspired employees from all age groups and across a diverse set of organizations and affiliations. In fact, some of HP's most active participants are senior executives.

"The most popular video category is 'How I Do It,' " Stokes says. "There seems to be a lot of momentum around sharing best practices, tips and tricks, and creative printing activities -- especially subjects that strike a personal note with employees at home or with friends and family.

"We've only begun to scratch the surface of what's possible," she adds.

"Creating an Uncut video is fast, simple and a highly personable way to communicate insights, answers and creative ideas. The response from employees has been outstanding."

Experts seem to agree that there is a confluence of factors expected to drive the adoption of Web 2.0, regardless of whether HR is behind the wheel or not. Perhaps the most critical driver is the emergence of the millennials, the oldest of whom are just now entering the workforce.

Lisa Orrell, a consultant and author of a recently published book entitled [*Millennials Incorporated*](#), says companies that hope to attract this age group need to cast a wide net, certainly one that includes Web 2.0 elements.

"Where are the millennials? They are on MySpace, Facebook and YouTube," says Orrell, who consults with large employers about millennial recruiting, managing and retaining.

However, few of these younger workers would expect an employer to offer something as robust as Facebook or MySpace on the job, she says. Keeping people engaged, she says, is what really matters.

For example, Orrell says, a Web 2.0 social-networking application can fill the need for mentorship among millennials. Orrell recently moderated a panel discussion at Yahoo and, of the five young professional women on the panel, two came from very large companies that had no mentor program in place.

"I was shocked," she says, adding that Web 2.0 can deliver a "mentor match" component, much like dating services such as eHarmony or match.com, as the foundation for an effective, and fun, mentoring program. In fact, Mentor Resources, of Sausalito, Calif., does just that, offering WisdomShare, a Web 2.0 application that matches mentors with mentees online within the enterprise.

Value, Not Hype

If HR gets behind Web 2.0, the technologies within vendor applications will have a huge impact on the profession. But it's still early, says Corsello.

"Most every client we speak with today has it on their radar, although most companies are still in the exploration phase," Corsello says. "Right now, though, most companies have been risk-averse in their Web 2.0 approach

for fear of litigation and data-privacy issues."

He adds that many vendors are focusing on the usability advantages of Web 2.0 technologies, but that, over time, the opportunities for collaboration and information sharing will become more important to customers.

Taleo has built its Taleo Business Edition application on Facebook Platform, which enables companies to integrate their recruiting applications with Facebook, giving them access to millions of users (and potential job candidates).

According to Jason Blessing, a Taleo group vice president, more than 50 percent of Facebook users return to the site each day, which means tremendous access to talent. By using Facebook, he says, small and medium-sized companies can connect with passive job candidates through a highly popular Web 2.0 platform, effectively leveling the playing field with large organizations in the search for talent, he says.

Lawson Software is also integrating its recruiting applications with Facebook. However, Larry Dunivan, the company's global vice president for HCM, says Web 2.0 needs to be approached carefully.

"The real challenge is to uncover the Web 2.0 ideas that deliver value, not just hype," he says. "We're in a very early phase, because many people don't understand it all yet. It's certainly a very provocative way to challenge customer thinking."

To Dunivan, it's not whether or not Web 2.0 will have a major impact on HR, it's just a matter of when.

"All it will take is one major breakthrough, and when that happens, we'll see the adoption of Web 2.0 elements really take off," he says.

Watson Wyatt's Rudnick agrees.

"Facebook is like an employee directory on steroids," he says. "There is tremendous potential to do inside the enterprise what people already are doing on the outside. The real irony is that this is going on anyway."

With SuccessFactors' NEXT Labs initiative, the company's programmers solicit ideas from SuccessFactors users via the Web and incorporate the best ones into new software prototypes that incorporate Web 2.0 features

designed to help clients spark more collaboration among their employees and have them take a greater role in managing their career paths, says Bernshteyn.

Several of the prototypes so far have included CoachTV (career tips via broadband video), Barometer (an instant gauge of how the company is doing), SMART Goal Wizard (a "fun" way to build career goals) and Employee Directory (a multi-layered database).

"The idea is you want to improve contextual collaboration," Bernshteyn says.

Thomas says that, while there are some HR issues that need to be managed -- for example, employee privacy, potential for sexual harassment, leaking of sensitive company information, etc. -- the situation is not much different from a decade ago, when instant messaging, AOL and the Internet invaded the workplace. And an organization has yet to be brought down via Web surfing or instant-messaging by employees.

"With Web 2.0, you can take the elements and bring them in-house, behind firewalls, as a way to ensure more control," he says. "For example, you can add social networking, implementing applications similar to MySpace or Facebook, but all with the protection of being behind the firewall."

Thomas says there are many tools available on the market and in the public domain that, if integrated by a determined IT organization, can help replicate many of the features of Web 2.0 behind corporate firewalls. For example, a good starting place is the latest versions of corporate portal software.

Many of the leading intranet portal applications provide some built-in tools or extensions that support Web 2.0 features such as blogs, video posts and media-rich company directories that can hold employee photos and fun facts.

But, he adds, bringing Web 2.0 technology in-house doesn't necessarily mean you can replicate the full experience or value of social networking. Part of social networking's appeal, after all, is that you can express yourself freely, something employees may not be comfortable doing over a corporate network.

What about the possibility of paralyzing fear preventing HR executives from letting Web 2.0 elements loose within an organization?

"Are HR executives scared of Web 2.0 right now? Yes and no," says Mercer's Thomas. "A lot of employees are bringing the Web 2.0 culture with them to work, whether it's Facebook, MySpace or Twitter [an instant message-like application]. Some HR people think it's dangerous, and others see it as potentially energizing. To me, it's inevitable."

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