



Why Social Media Matters for Government

By Andy Blumenthal 04/15/09

While not everyone quite understands social media, or Web 2.0, all of us more or less agree that it is here to stay. In the past the Internet was a one-way information medium, but today the audience talks back. People react to what they see and read, and share information on a grass-roots level, en-masse. Blogs led the revolution, and now we have tweets, wikis, podcasts, social networking sites, as well as sharing of and commenting on photos, music, videos and more.

For chief information officers and chief technology officers, there is no question that social media is a phenomenon that must be understood so it can be leveraged strategically. For one thing, it's already here: The public, who are our customers, are using it outside agencies, and we are starting to see it adopted inside agencies as well. For another, it offers many opportunities. Information technology leaders have long urged the sharing of information across organizational boundaries, and now our stakeholders are not only willing but also driven (some would say obsessed) to reach out, express themselves, share and interact.

Organizational policies about social media will have a profound impact. Earlier communication technologies such as the telephone, fax, pager and e-mail allowed a person to communicate with another or several others--but not to broadcast themselves to the world, at once, in real time. People have the power to communicate anywhere connectivity exists and their content instantaneously becomes part of the Internet.

For the news media, for example, citizens have been elevated to the status of journalists, documenting key happenings and shaping the public's perceptions without the stamp of approval of any of the major networks. If a CIO or CTO follows that lead, anything that one employee says potentially can be seen by other employees, virtually upending the traditional chain of command in which people in authority speak and everybody else listens.

Of course, this is a frightening prospect for most organizations, and many would just as well not allow employees to have this ability. But as IT leaders we cannot ignore the fact that people are motivated to connect, to share something of themselves and learn from others, as well as to leave something behind. It is almost as if the elixir of immortality that humans have for eons searched for has been found in some way. The ancient Egyptians were careful to record their autobiographies before they died, but they knew that few would read them. Today, in about five minutes, a 15-year-old can create a Facebook page and have his or her ongoing autobiography visible to all.

These kinds of tools are overwhelmingly powerful, and given that people (especially young people) spend so much time at work, it is unlikely they will accept a working environment in which self-expression is not possible. With social media, every person can be an author, an inventor of ideas, a politician and a commentator, and contribute to the greater sphere of knowledge and human advancement.

One may conclude that agencies should immediately adopt social media, with accommodations made for security issues. But we also must consider the ways in which it has complicated people's lives and psyches. One issue is

once people start blogging, tweeting or whatever their social media "poison," they find it hard to stop. This allure, taken to its extreme, can result in dramatic behavior. In December 2008, a passenger on a Continental flight tweeted as he was evacuating from an emergency plane landing.

Another side effect of social media, not surprisingly, is shame. People offer intimate details and photos about their personal lives on a Web site, and when they try to take it down later, they find people can still Google it. Or they are the subject of negative reviews by a business colleague or someone who went on a date with them. Or they worry that they are revealing too much. As one writer put it recently, "The more I upload details of my existence . . . the more I worry."

As a CTO, I would recommend two approaches that ensure the public and federal employees use social media to express themselves -- and in a way that doesn't compromise their dignity or privacy, or the productivity of the organization.

First, promote a social-media-friendly environment. We need to encourage the social networking phenomenon rather than erect artificial barriers to it. People have come to expect a certain amount of freedom to express themselves, easily share information and collaborate. As IT leaders, we not only have to accommodate it, but also encourage it. And we know young people especially will demand the tools that they're accustomed to and have come to expect.

Second, we need to educate ourselves about the capabilities and limitations of social media, as well as the cultural and organizational implications so we can knowledgeably implement solutions that make sense. For example, knowing that participating in all forms of social media can be time-consuming and potentially invokes privacy issues, we should have policies and controls in place that define Web-based interactivity in the workplace to mission-centric uses. Social media tools are powerful and should be used in contextually appropriate ways to support work objectives.

Social media will continue to shape and support the way we communicate and collaborate, offering ever-new and speedy ways to participate in the evolving compendium of human knowledge online. Every organization should be adopting these tools and providing their employees support and guidance to use them productively and intelligently.

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