

Component Perspective

Web 2.0: A Necessity for DOJ



Despite the risks and the threats, Web 2.0 is not just an option but a necessity at DOJ, says Andy Blumenthal, the Chief Technology Officer for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF).

In this interview, Blumenthal talks with the editor about the rewards and the pitfalls of implementing Web 2.0 at a government agency, what ATF is doing with the technology, and what he thinks the Department as a whole should be doing.

Q: How do you define the term “Web 2.0?”

A: Web 2.0 is the participatory web, also known as social media. Web 1.0 was essentially the information Internet, where people put out information to the public and you could search the Web and get it. In contrast, Web 2.0 is a two-way conversation, where people use the Internet not just to put information out there but to exchange it. And that is done through things like wikis, blogs, social networking, and so on.

Q: How much do you personally use Web 2.0 technology?

A: I am a strong social media enthusiast, and I have two blogs, use Twitter, and am on Facebook, Linked In, YouTube, and podcasting, GovLoop, and more. Quite honestly, I was very skeptical at first of some of these odd-sounding tools and technologies, but after trying them and working with them, I found they are incredibly valuable for networking and sharing ideas and experiences across a broad spectrum of people. With social media, your ability to connect with people is almost infinite.

Q: What Web 2.0 technologies has ATF been focusing on?

A: We’ve been focusing on Web 2.0 for some time, particularly within the context of our new ATF portal called ATF Knowledge Online, or ATF KO. With ATF KO we have already deployed capabilities such as online chat, threaded discussions, and shared documents to more than 20 communities of interest, and this has been a successful medium for ATF users to share and collaborate. We even have translation capabilities in four languages. We are continuing to roll these tools out across the organization.

Currently we’re working on the next release of ATF KO in three phases. Phase 2 is an in-depth focus on Web 2.0 social media and will include more tools to enhance the user’s ability to share, collaborate, and participate.

By the way, we are actually in the process of renaming ATF KO to ATF Web, since it will encompass not only knowledge management, but also information sharing, collaboration, applications, and Web 2.0

Q: Which Web 2.0 technologies do you think offer the most advantages to DOJ and ATF?

A: Generally speaking, the Department and the components can benefit from any number of these technologies, depending on where you put your focus. But specifically at ATF, there is a keen interest in developing our wiki capability so that we can collaborate on document content and keep it current, accurate, and complete. There is also interest in leadership blogs to communicate to our employees and external stakeholders. We're looking at enhancing our web conferencing capability, which could save us money on travel and so on. Further, things like Twitter offer additional capabilities particularly for law enforcement to provide alerts and notifications.

Q: What pitfalls do you see Web 2.0 technologies presenting for a government agency?

A: Of course, security and privacy are issues that we need to contend with, as with all information technology. The more we share and collaborate, the more potential there is for mistakes—for things to be communicated that shouldn't be, because they're law enforcement sensitive or confidential for some other reason. Additionally, there is the concern that people don't conduct personal Web 2.0 activities during their official work hours. And there are potential reputation risks if people either misuse or put potentially damaging information or photos out in the public domain. The agency's or the Department's image could be harmed. That's why it's critical for policy and controls to be put in place.

Q: What suggestions do you have for making the use of Web 2.0 productive at ATF and at DOJ?

A: Suggestion number one is that we "just do it." We don't need to be so risk-averse that we hold back from the tremendous potential benefits that these technologies are offering us. Of course, at the same time we need to balance the need to use these technologies with the implementation of policies and procedures to make Web 2.0 relatively safe. We should stand up a Department-led working group with representatives from every component to focus on the development and implementation of Web 2.0 technologies for departmentwide use.

Q: What parting thoughts would you like to leave for our readers?

A: If I could leave your readers with just one thought, it would be this: Despite the risks and the threats, Web 2.0 is not an option but a necessity that is already a reality nearly everywhere else, in both government and in business. We need the leadership and the superior communication skills that will help people overcome the fear of information sharing that could hold back Web 2.0 from progressing at DOJ. And we need to ensure that people use these tools in a professional, mature, and appropriate way by creating policies that institutionalize the right behaviors.

But the most important thing is to welcome this change and emphasize the positive. By using these tools intelligently we are going to create a tremendous force multiplier for sharing and collaborating across the Department and with our partners. ♠