

# **Business Weblogs – A pragmatic Approach to introducing Weblogs in medium and large Enterprises**

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*Please Note: This paper was originally written in German and then translated into English. If you understand German you will have much more pleasure reading my thoughts in the original version. It is available online from my website.*

## **Introduction**

As public awareness towards weblogs has been rising, the interest towards business applications has grown.

Small Businesses have been quick to realise the new possibilities that weblogs offer and use them as simple Content Management Systems to publish regularly updated content to their websites. Consultants use them to display their knowledge and get the awareness of potential clients. Experts use them to connect to other experts in their fields.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Dan Bricklin talks more deeply about Small Businesses Blogging in [1].

But large enterprises, in which the potential benefits of weblogs can be even higher, seem to be having difficulties to embrace weblogs.<sup>2</sup> This seems strange at first sight, as many Bloggers work in large organisations and have realised the benefit that especially K-Logging brings them.

In this paper I will show that several difficulties exist that have to be overcome when an organisation wants to introduce weblogs.

I will first give an overview of possible applications of Weblogs in Business. Then I will cover the organisational obstacles that stand in the way of an introduction of weblogs in medium and large enterprises. Finally, I will propose a path which organisations can follow step-by-step to introduce weblogs.

My ideas are oriented at companies with 50 employees or more. My thoughts might also be useful for smaller enterprises. However they will not usually need such a complex Change Management process as described here.

## **Applications of Weblogs in Enterprises**

Enterprises can use weblogs for different purposes:

- As a Content-Management-System to manage the content of websites
- As a "bulletin board" to support communication and document sharing in teams
- As an instrument in Marketing to communicate with Internet users
- As a Knowledge Management Tool

### **Content-Management-System**

Weblogs can be used as simple Content-Management-Systems. I will not talk about these applications further, because they pose difficulties that are specific to weblogs. Also, these applications are mainly interesting for small companies.

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<sup>2</sup> If there are really many companies that already use weblogs internally, as speculated about in [2], why don't any firsthand reports of these projects exist?

## Bulletin Board

A weblog can be used as a communication hub in teams or departments. It supports discussions and document exchange.

The central data storage minimises redundancy. The archive makes finding old documents easy. The volume of email that group members receive can be reduced.

## Marketing

By using weblogs companies can use the Internet to communicate in a „human voice“ and participate in conversations<sup>3</sup>. This can help to improve its image and binds interested people to it. Jim Carroll gives examples for the content of such weblogs in [12] and [13]. To develop a feeling for weblogs on the World Wide Web [14] is an interesting introduction.

At the moment it is even possible to get a lot of attention just by starting or sponsoring weblogs, no matter what their content is.<sup>4</sup> This may seem interesting to companies in the short run. In the long run however such actions will be useless or even harmful if they are not planned strategically.

## Knowledge Management

Weblogs or „K-Logs“<sup>5</sup> can be used for „informal Knowledge Management“. They capture knowledge in the moment that it is created or used. They help with the transfer of knowledge between individuals and facilitate the formation of Communities of Interest. They make it easy to find experts in the organisation. [5] gives an overview of this theme, [15] goes further into the details.

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3 And thus this paper, like any other paper about weblogs, cannot get around citing the „Cluetrain-Manifesto“ [3].

4 The American Softdrinkproducer Dr Pepper/Seven Up Inc sponsored der weblogs, especially written by teenagers and started own to promote a new soft-drink called „Raging Cow“ [4]. Although the content was completely useless, the campaign received immense attention in the Blogosphere.

5 This term propagated by John Robb stands for „Knowledge-Log“. It is meant to delimit weblogs in Knowledge Management from private „fun weblogs“ and diaries. In [5] Robb defines a K-Log as „a tool for an expert or employee to publish insight, a point of view, links to resources, important documents and e-mails with annotation, and other thinking to an intranet where it can be archived, searched, and browsed“. The technical limitation that he puts forward is however not very accurate.

# Obstacles of an Introduction

The introduction of weblogs in an organisation will encounter several obstacles some of which I describe here:

## Uncertainty because of unclear *termini*

The discussion about weblogs is often a fuzzy one: Very different things like Warblogs (political weblogs), private diaries, Marketing-Weblogs and K-Logs are all subsumed under the term „Weblog“.

In an environment where professional applications of weblogs are unknown to most managers, this makes it very difficult – if not impossible<sup>6</sup> - to gain acceptance for new initiatives under the word „Weblog“.

It is critical that a new *terminus* for applications of Weblogs in Business - „Business Weblogs“ - is found.

## Existing Solutions

In their most simple applications weblogs compete with solutions that already exist in companies. Managers will base their decision on starting or not starting a weblog-project on the expectation of the advantages of the possible new solution over the existing one, taking into account the project-risk. As no experience reports exist yet, this is a problem.

## Fear of Divulgement of sensitive Data

Managers fear that by running weblogs, sensitive Data could leave the company. Of course this risk is already present in most organisations (any employee with access to the World Wide Web or Email could transport documents through the corporate firewall) but in the current discussion this danger is being linked to the concept of weblogs.

## Perception of „new Costs“

Managers are reserved towards weblogs because they fear that employees will lose productive time when blogging.

Writing a weblog is seen as a „new process“, time being the input and „more hypertext on the intranet“ being the output. The value of this is not clear to all managers.

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<sup>6</sup> „Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.“ (The borders of my language are the borders of my world) says Ludwig Wittgenstein. [6]

# An Approach to Constructing a Weblog-Infrastructure

How can an organisation introduce weblogs and handle the complexity of the possible application? I propose a step-by-step path that starts with simple applications. More complex ones are added later and get integrated.

The sequence I propose here does not necessarily have to be adhered to. Depending on the pace of the adoption of weblogs and the organisational culture, it can be reasonable to introduce some applications earlier or not at all.

I limit my reasoning to applications of non-public weblogs inside of companies.

## Step 1: Pilot Scheme

Companies should start with a pilot scheme before attempting a larger roll-out of weblogs in their organisation. This is not a „complete“ pilot: Only some of the possibilities of weblogs so that the organisation gets introduced slowly to the new medium.

To reduce uncertainty, an existing and well-known process – project documentation – is put into the centre of the new application. Its complexity is low and not raised through the new application.

### A Project Weblog

A weblog is set up for one of the company's current projects. The project should have a team that is made up of 5-30 members of different departments. The project should be in an early phase, possibly in planning.

The weblog is used as the central repository for project information and documentation. Every project member gets the right to publish and edit own entries. At least one member of the team should have worked with weblogs before. The project manager should be trained to use the system.

Project documents should be published directly to the weblog or be referenced from it. Email messages to more than one recipient that are not time critical, can be replaced by weblog entries, like announcements of meetings or meeting minutes. As a rule of thumb every message that is relevant to more than one recipient should be considered „bloggable“.

An effect, the weblog should

- reduce the volume of E-Mail received by the project team members
- reduce training time for new team members
- effectively archive project documentation
- document the project progress

It is likely that at first the project manager will be the main user of the weblog. He will use it to distribute official project information. However he should encourage other team members to use the weblog right from the start of the project. Data should never be kept redundant. The weblog should always have the most up-to-date information. This is important because otherwise the concept would lose its value.

At the beginning, people should blog „as much as possible“. If the volume of content grows too high or some of the content is no longer interesting for everybody (for example if the group of developers embraces the concept faster than marketing), filters can be introduced.

Never should project members be discouraged from blogging something. If people adopt the new application fast, the organisation should quickly come to a decision about the next steps of the introduction of weblogs.

## **Technical Requirements**

The technology of the weblog should be kept as simple as possible. The server on which the weblog software is running can be decentrally located and does not necessarily have to be integrated into the company's IT. The team member must be able to access the weblog through the browser in their normal work environment.

The weblog must produce URL that are „permalinks“ at least for the duration of the project. It should be possible to comment individual entries and to contact the author of weblog entries via email easily.

Also, it should be possible to „subscribe“ to the weblog and receive a notification by E-Mail when a new entry is posted.

## **Advantages of a Project-Weblogs over a Departmental Weblog in the Pilot Scheme**

A Project Weblog has several advantages over a weblog introduced in the operative work of a department:

1. A project has a goal and a clearly defined end point at which its results can be evaluated. Here, the application of a the weblog can also be assessed. This gives a much better environment than a „testing period“ which could lead to lower participation in general.
2. The fact that the team members come from different departments makes it easier to transfer what has been learned about weblogs to other departments once the pilot scheme is finished. Negative „cliquish“ associations that could come up if only one department uses weblogs, can be avoided.[5]

When the project is over, it should be analysed how the weblog has been used. Possible questions are:

- How often has the weblog been accessed?
- How often has something been published to the weblog?
- Which team member posted? Who posted often, who did not post at all?

- What kind of entries were written? (General information? Announcements of new documents? Announcements of events? Discussion of ideas or change requests? External news important to the project?)

The group should discuss the value of the weblog and recommend ways in which the concept can be improved.

## **Step 2: Project- and Departmental Weblogs**

If the pilot scheme was successful, Project Weblogs should also be introduced in other projects. At the same time the members of the first project can demonstrate the concept to their departments and can evaluate the usefulness of a weblog in its operations.

Before weblogs can be introduced companywide, some technical requirements have to be fulfilled:

### **Technical Requirements**

- Setting up a weblog. A project manager must be able to set up a weblog easily. For this, an IT-process, possibly an automated one, has to be set up.
- User Administration. The project manager must be able to add and remove users to his projects weblog himself.

The pages produced by the Weblog-Software should be integrated into the company's Intranet.

### **Departmental Weblogs**

Departments can start their own weblogs to communicate news like new employees that have joined or new services being offers. The weblog can also be used to discuss experiences and suggestions for improvements.

If departmental websites exist on the Intranet, they can be augmented by the weblog. Depending on the organisation's culture and the planned application of the departmental weblogs, they can be made public to the entire organisation or just be available to members of the department.

If there are no imperatives for keeping the weblog private, they should be accessible for the entire organisation, to enable knowledge exchange (see also [5]).

If the weblogs are also being used to exchange documents and operative data, using „flags“ to mark entries that will not be interesting for members of other departments. These entries can then be filtered when other people view the weblog.

Departments which require little coordination might possibly switch to using a weblog instead of a fileserver or a document management system.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dave Pollard develops a detailed concept for this in [7]

## **Peer-Support**

The participants of the pilot scheme and other interested employees should be encouraged to start their own „Meta-Weblog“ to write about the use of weblogs in the company. They can report experiences, discuss new ideas and help solve problems that come up in other projects.

## **Advanced concepts**

If weblogs are adopted quickly, more sophisticated technology can be introduced earlier. For instance, the content of project weblogs could be integrated into related departmental weblogs by using RSS. Using the possibilities of hypertext should be encouraged to interlink the organisation's weblogs.

## **Step 3: Weblogs in Workgroups and CoIns/CoPs<sup>8</sup>**

In the third step groups other than project teams or departments should receive weblogs. On the technical side, this does not change a lot. From an organisational perspective however, the step is significant, because groups that were formally not recognised before can form<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, the focus of weblogging changes from simple publication to Knowledge Management.

While the weblogs we have been looking at until now had clear goals, these new weblogs can have unclear goals or no goals at all. They serve groups to exchange information, knowledge and thoughts and help their coordination.

## **Technical Requirements**

Making weblogs available for further groups brings some new technical requirements:

- To be able to scale and to avoid hampering the formation of groups it must be possible to set up weblogs automatically or semi-automatically.

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<sup>8</sup> To avoid the ideological debate about the differences or similarities of Communities of Practise (CoP) and Communities of Interest (CoIn) I will use these terms as synonyms. For a definition of CoP see [8].

<sup>9</sup> Companies that have identified existing Communities of Interest / Communities of Practise as part of their Knowledge Management Operations will find this step easier. But even then supporting those groups with tools on the Intranet is not trivial.



- Employees must be able to cope with the rising volume of information. For this, weblogs should publish RSS-Feeds<sup>10</sup> and employees should be equipped with Feedreaders<sup>11</sup> and possibly trained on how to use them. The Feedreaders should integrate into the work environment, that is they should work together with existing PIM<sup>12</sup>-Software oder Personal Portals on the Intranet<sup>13</sup>.

Especially the last point is important, since it is critical for the scalability of the weblog infrastructure. If an organisation is not successful in handling the new content intelligently, an information flood can occur with harmful effects for the organisation.<sup>14</sup>

## Step 4: Personal Weblogs

It can be expected that there will be some individuals that will use weblogs as a personal Knowledge repository in the Group Weblog phase. They will become the first „K-Loggers“ of the organisation. Making it possible for individual employee to run their own weblogs is this a logical next step from the collaborative weblogs described before.

Individual weblogs are the most sophisticated form of Knowledge Management in the scope of this paper. Already at the level of the individual weblogs can be most useful to the knowledge worker<sup>15</sup>. By linking them together in a network of weblogs in an organisation they can become even more effective and create value for the entire organisation.

## Technical Requirements

For this, some now infrastructural requirements have to be fulfilled:

- It must be possible for an employee to set up a weblog in an automated „self-service“ process. If personal homepages exist on the corporate Intranet it must be possible to integrate them with or link them to the weblogs.

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10 RSS stands for „Rich Site Summary“ and is an application of XML, that is used predominantly to publish content of regularly updated websites like news sites or weblogs in a machine readable form. [9] gives an overview about RSS.

11 „Feedreaders“ or „newsaggregators“ are software programs for reading RSS-Feeds. They make it possible to follow many different sources in an efficient way. A list of feedreaders can be found at <http://www.hebig.org/blogs/archives/main/000877.php>

12 PIM stand for „Personal Information Management“. PIM-Software usually encompasses functionality of calendars, to-do lists, contact management and integrates with Messaging applications.

13 „NewsGator“ (<http://www.newsgator.com>) is a feedreader that works as a plugin for Microsoft Outlook konzipiert ist. Some other feedreaders produce „skinnable“ HTML-pages which can be integrated into an Intranet easily. Many feedreaders are available as free software.

14 See also Krcmar's explanations in [10] page 54.

15 For non-webloggers it is often difficult to understand, why webloggers are so excited about the possibilities of weblogs in Knowledge Management. [11] gives an excellent introduction to this.

- Employees must be able to find the organisation's weblogs. A central directory of all weblogs should be available. It should be searchable and categorised. It should also be possible to find personal weblogs through the list of employees on the intranet.
- Feedreaders should be available at every computer workplace. It should be possible for every employee to keep a „Blogroll“ of weblogs that he or she reads on the Intranet even if they don't blog themselves.
- The Intranet's content must be searchable. The standard Intranet search should also return results from weblogs.

It should be possible to keep private and public weblogs within the company. Webloggers should be able to customize their weblog's layout.

Access statistics should be made available to weblog authors, to let them see how often their weblogs are read and how visitors have found it<sup>16</sup>.

The content created by employees must not be „censored“ in any way. It should not be „controlled“ invasively.

The more weblogs become a part of the daily work routine, the deeper they should be integrated into the company's IT-Infrastructure, especially into presence or Instant Messaging systems.

## Result

After following the path proposed in this paper, different forms of individual and collaborative weblogs exist in the organisation.

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<sup>16</sup>Referrers and the content of search queries are especially relevant.

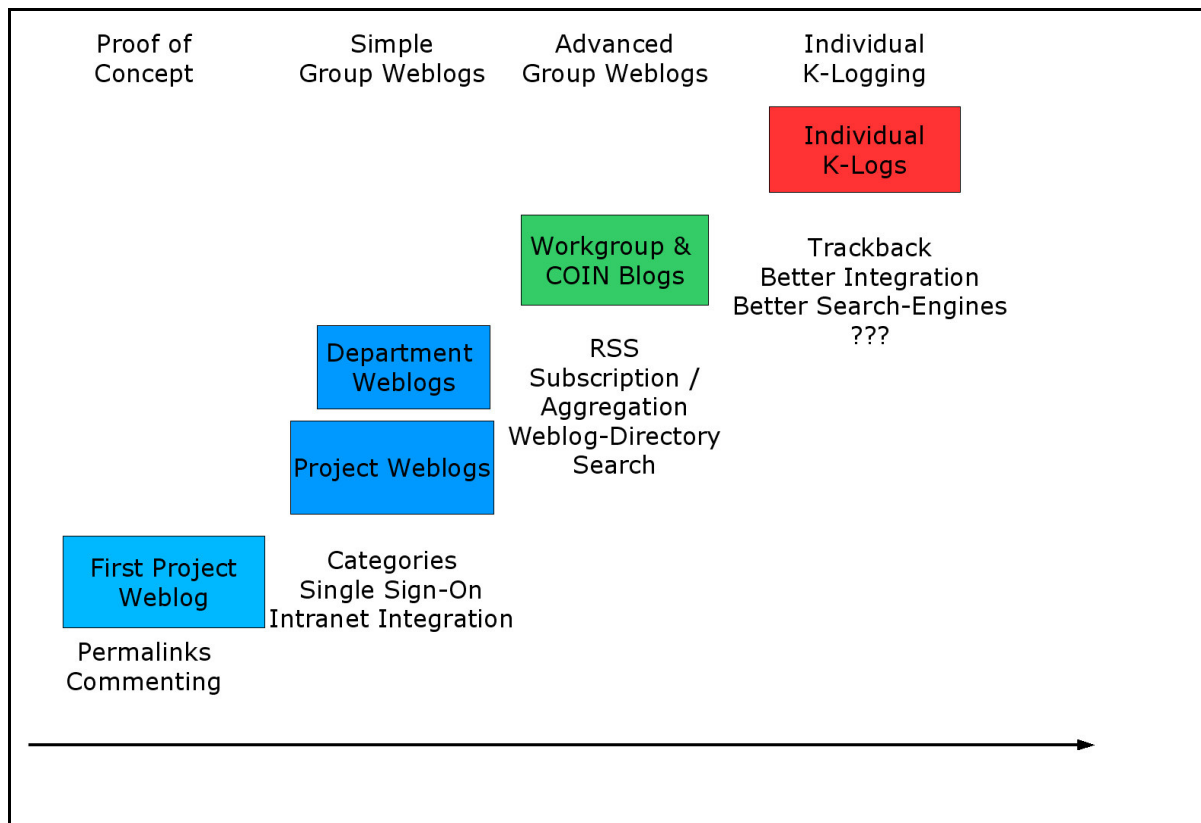


Figure 1: Steps in the introduction of weblogs in medium and large enterprises

Together they form a network in which information is organised decentrally. It is maintained and distributed by the employees for which it is relevant. Little to no central direction is needed.

The emerging pool of information is not very „well organised“ in the classic sense of Information Management. However, if the necessary tools, especially search engines exist, it structures itself according to the needs of its users.

The network lowers organisational barriers that existed before. It leads to a transfer of information between projects, departments, groups and individuals. Communities of Interest can form and collaborate easily.

All content is secure, because it is archived and can be backup centrally.

The employees have a new tool at their disposal which is integrated into their work environment. It helps them in searching and publishing of information and in finding codified or embodied knowledge in the organisation.

# Synopsis

A company that want to introduce weblogs should act in a systematic way to deal successfully with resistance that may stand against the introduction of a new software and a new concept.

By using the approach described in this paper it can start with simple applications and introduce employees and management to the new work technique that weblogs bring with them gradually.

By the broadening to different groups in the company, the main characteristics of weblogs – hypertext and permalinks – create a dynamic that lets a Web of semistructured content emerge on the Intranet which then becomes a complex application for Knowledge Management.

However this dynamic can only accrue if companies progress in a scheduled way and are aware of the potential developments that a Weblog Infrastructure can bring with it. Only then can they build up the necessary technical infrastructure in time and prevent problems of scale and of information overload.

## Future Work

In this paper I have not talked about how internal weblogs and external weblogs on the World Wide Web can go together. This will be part of a future work.

The methodology developed in this paper could be applied and developed further in a research project. Studying cultural change and organisational resistance during an introduction of weblogs would be especially important.

## Outlook

I am sure that weblogs will become a standard application in knowledge intensive companies. Although seemingly primitive they bring possibilities that beat most „Knowledge Management Systems“ that have been proposed in the last years.

However in an introduction of weblogs in an organisation, as much can go wrong as in other projects. But because weblogs can be started on a relatively small scale, companies can experiment with them easily and gain experience that is useful for larger projects.

Companies that dismiss weblogs as a temporary fashion today will lose against more innovative companies that start learning from and about weblogs today.

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