

Analysis of the usage and value of weblogs as a source of business news and information

by *Julia Habermann*

March 2005

Blogging has become the latest trend on the Internet. Weblogs (blogs) don't just impact the mainstream media and private Internet users but also business to the point that it can no longer be ignored by organizations. Well known companies like Microsoft, Sun Microsystems and Google use them internally as a knowledge-sharing and communication tool as well as externally to express their point of view to the public.

Weblogs play an important role, especially for information professionals and knowledge managers. It is their responsibility to inform their internal clients of the latest trends and news that is relevant to their organization.

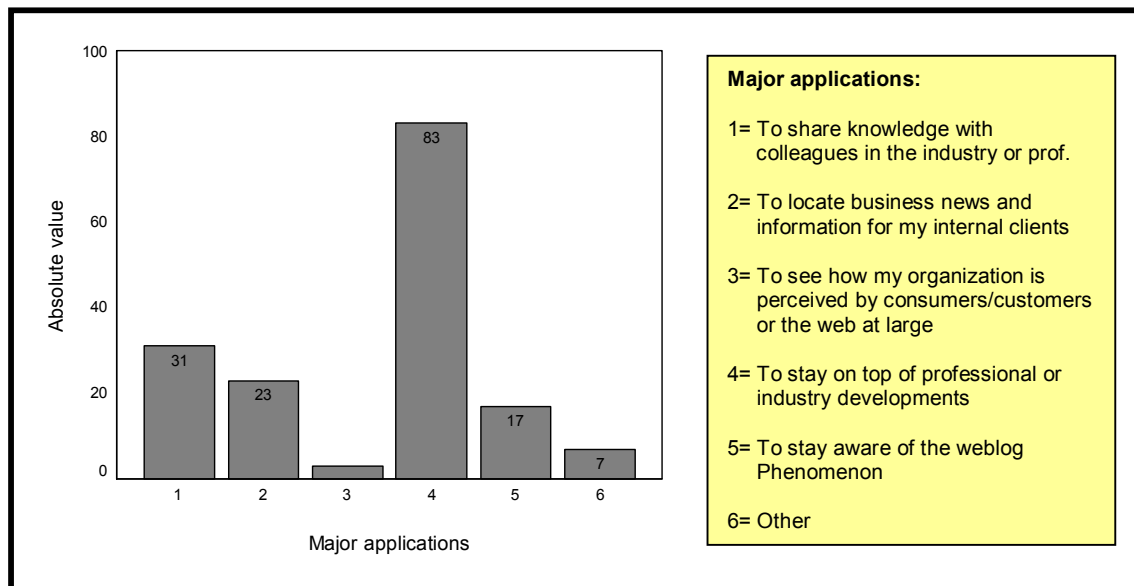
A weblog is characterized as a frequent, chronological publication of personal thoughts and Web links. Most weblogs are part of a community that has permanent links to each other and to late-breaking news. Information spreads very fast in most cases even before it reaches the mainstream media. This fact makes weblogs an essential and unique source of finding late-breaking news and discovering newest trends that are discussed in blog communities.

Weblogs don't just respond to news and information, their authors also publish their own thoughts and knowledge about specific topics which allows the reader to get different viewpoints. Through commenting, linking and trackback bloggers are able to share their knowledge with each other and develop new ideas.

Many companies and their employees started blogging to build trust and increase their relationships with their clients and to represent their company in a more personal way to the public. The information on company blogs allows knowledge workers to receive insights on their competitor companies which can't be found elsewhere on the Web.

This article is based on a web survey, where information professionals and knowledge managers from all over the world were asked about their usage and value of blogs as a source of business news and information. The results of the survey show that 40.2% (or 167 people) out of 415 participants already use blogs as such a source. Information professionals and knowledge managers as blog users are mainly from North America. Figure 1 demonstrates that the major application in using weblogs as a source of business news and information is to stay on top of industry and profession developments and to share knowledge with colleagues in their industry.

Figure 1: Major business and professional applications for weblogs



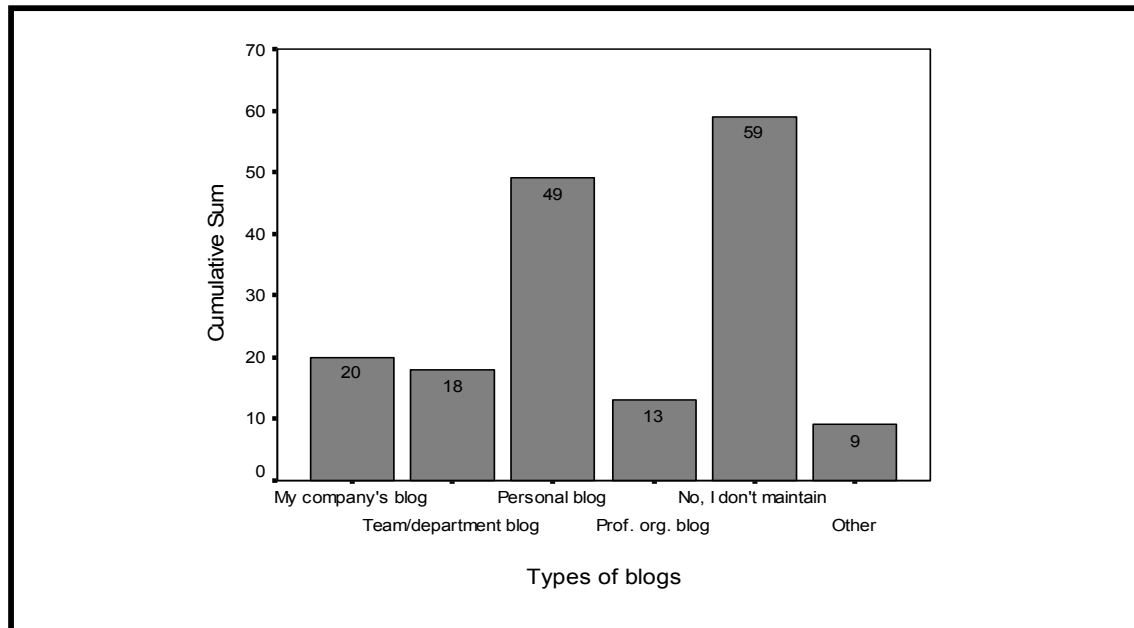
The survey results also show that knowledge workers mainly read weblogs specific to their profession. The most popular weblogs are ResourceShelf, LISNews.com, ResearchBuzz, Library Stuff, Shifted Librarian and Librarian.net. They all link to each other and have built a community of interest.

Knowledge workers manage the usage of blogs mainly by checking them directly and a lot of them also read them through RSS feeds via news reader but rarely through search engines.

Most of the respondents believe in the reliability of weblogs. 47.7% out of 153 respondents think weblogs are 'somewhat important' and 43.1% believe they are 'very reliable'. This shows a high acceptance of blogs as a source of business news and information. Weblogs improve knowledge workers' work habits because with blogs they find information that they can't find elsewhere on the Web and they keep them more up to date on professional developments than other sources. However the majority don't see the advantage of saving time through reading weblogs.

A large number of knowledge workers who participated also maintain or contribute to a personal weblog, some of them even a company's, team/department or professional organization's weblog which shows that most knowledge workers are not just using them as source of business news and information but also as knowledge-sharing and communication tools.

Figure 2: Maintenance and contribution of weblogs



However, not many of them incorporate RSS feeds or Atoms in their blogs. Effective usage of these tools could be improved.

The minority see the importance of blog content for reputation management. 9% of 152 respondents say blogs are 'extremely important' for reputation management and 18% say they are 'somewhat important'. However blogs are an important source to discover trends and changes in business before it is too late to influence the outcome. By maintaining their own blog, knowledge workers could also improve their company's reputation or branding.

In conclusion it can be said that in regards to the survey results weblogs already hold value for information professionals and knowledge managers. However blogging is still in its infancy, a lot of knowledge workers still don't use them for a variety of unknown reasons. Based on the explosion of blogs over the past few years one would suspect that the blog phenomenon will continue to increase in the future.

Weblogs have become an essential source of business news and information which should be monitored. Weblogs keep knowledge workers current with what people are thinking, writing and linking to behind the actual news. Weblogs can have a considerable personal bias and hence are a useful starting point to obtain more information. However weblogs should not be seen as a main source of business news. The information provided through blogs balances the information published in the mainstream press with independent and biased viewpoints of what the world says about business and trends. As a knowledge-sharing and communication tool a blog can be part of the overall communication channel between colleagues, partners,

customers, suppliers and others in the industry to support its strategic goals and reputation.

Nevertheless the growth of blogging can also create the threat of information overload because the existence of too many blogs can cause losing track of what's been offered. Knowledge workers have to be aware of this threat and find ways to work around it. It's important to verify the relevant sources first, before trusting them. Tools like RSS feeds or news readers help to manage the growth of blogs.

If blogging is to successfully increase in the future and not fizzle out, information providers will have to find ways to incorporate blog content into their service or they will miss out essential information. Search engines will also need to expand their features.

Blogging certainly has a role to play in terms of culture, communication and the future of technology. However for now blogging is still too young to evaluate whether the trend will continue long term.

Biographical note

Julia Habermann (julia.habermann@gmx.de) is a student of Information Science and Economics of the University of Applied Science Cologne. This report is a summary of her thesis "Analysis of the usage and value of weblogs as a source of business news and information for information professionals and knowledge managers".