



Corporate blogging strategies of the *Fortune* 500 companies

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the emerging new phenomenon of corporate blogging and its objectives. In particular, this study focuses on how *Fortune* 500 firms attempt to maintain control, while supporting employee autonomy in corporate blogging.

Design/methodology/approach – Using the framework of corporate blogging strategies proposed in this study, corporate blogging practices of the 2005 *Fortune* 500 companies were analysed.

Findings – Most organisations maintain high levels of control by implementing top-down blogging strategies, while few support employee autonomy by applying a bottom-up blogging strategy. Because of the inherent limitation of each strategy, many organisations attempt to take advantage of the complementary mechanism that balances autonomy and control. Organisations emphasising bottom-up blogging tend to focus on product development and customer service content strategy, while those practising top-down blogging focus on thought leadership or promotional content strategy.

Research limitations/implications – This study reports leading blogging firms among the *Fortune* 500 companies. However, the study sample accounts for only 3.6 percent of the 500 firms. The results of the study shed insights on newly emerging corporate blogging in terms of its trends, issues, and possible future direction.

Practical implications – Companies that adopt blogs must realise that developing a candid dialogue with customers is the best way to build a meaningful customer relationship.

Originality/value – This study is the first attempt to systematically investigate the corporate blogging phenomenon.

Keywords Corporate communications, Online operations, Reports, Promotion, Worldwide web

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

When large corporations rushed to establish home pages on the web in the late 1990s, it was generally expected that they would be more transparent and open in their communication with customers. However, it is highly doubtful whether they have fully utilised the capabilities of those new faces as a two-way communication tool because most corporate home pages have been primarily used as a platform to push mundane advertising messages (Liu *et al.*, 1997; Salam *et al.*, 1998; Young and Benamati, 2000). In some respects, this disappointing result might be understandable because it is difficult for “official” home pages to handle thousands of customers, as some of them might take advantage of the anonymous nature of the internet and post disparaging or economically damaging messages (France and Carney, 2000). In fact, it is still difficult to find message boards on large companies’ home pages (Robbins and Stylianou, 2003).

Recently, a new communication tool, blogs (weblogs), has captured the interest of those companies as an alternative to the existing formal communication channel as



evidenced by a growing number of conferences dedicated to business blogs (e.g. Canadian Blogging Conference, Blog Business Summit). As many practitioners suggest, a corporate blog might be defined as a web site where an organisation publishes and manages content to attain its goals. This definition, however, seems to be insufficient to explain why and how large corporations serving different constituencies are implementing blogs. For example, a casual observation of corporate blogs shows that they are operated by a variety of authors ranging from rank-and-file to chief executive officers (CEOs), evolving from various purposes such as promotion and customer service.

In order to answer how and why corporate blogs are increasingly being adopted, we examined a variety of corporate blogs, especially those launched by the 2005 *Fortune* 500 companies. In particular, we focused on how those companies attempt to maintain control while supporting employee autonomy in blogging.

Employee blogging phenomenon

A “blog” – short for “web log” – is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual (Blood, 2002). Because the blog can be used to convey various types of information, such as personal, public, commercial, and political, it has become an effective communication tool over the internet. With the rising popularity of blogs, a growing number of organisations, such as Microsoft and Sun Microsystems, now look for ways to accommodate this blogging phenomenon.

Net generation in the workplace

As employee blogs enter the business world, an increasing number of organisations are beginning to notice the persistent grassroots efforts made by leading bloggers who have long advocated the right to express their opinions in the blogosphere. The net generation[1], a new generation often called Generation X or Y, makes up the majority of those bloggers. According to a recent survey, Net-geners are joining the workplace of the new economy, growing from 14 percent of the workforce to 21 percent over the past four years (Armour, 2005). With the advent of the information and knowledge revolution, Net-geners, equipped with high technical skills and better education, are increasingly being regarded as an important corporate asset to be valued (Bogdanowicz and Bailey, 2002).

Both practitioners and academicians have recognised that Net-geners exhibit differences from the baby boomers who preceded them, seeking to identify unique attributes that characterise them (Ruch, 2000; Tulgan, 2000; Tulgan and Martin, 2001; Marshall, 2004). Most importantly, Net-geners not only “demand independence” but also “seek meaning and community in their work place” (Rubenstein, 2003). Indeed, the effective management of new breed of employees who create value through their expertise has long been discussed since Peter Drucker coined the term “knowledge workers” in 1959. Some scholars proposed the concept of “citizenship”, arguing that a company should treat its employees as citizens and align the goals of individuals with those of the firm (Handy, 1998; Manville and Ober, 2003). Advocates of self-management also share this notion of employee empowerment (Luthans and Davis, 1979; Manz and Sims, 1980; Mills, 1983; Uhl-Bien and Graen, 1998; Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Manz and Neck, 2004).

With this in mind, now organisations consider Net-geners as a source of competitive advantage because they can be “brand ambassadors” no matter what roles they play in the organisation (Hannegan, 2004). Blogs can be used to offer organisational citizenship to Net-geners who are “emotionally open to the Net and use the Internet primarily as a social technology” (Leung, 2003). For example, Robert Scoble of Microsoft, a celebrity blogger, is known for expressing his opinions on Microsoft and its products. He tries to tell the story in a balanced way without either exaggerating or extenuating. It provides credibility when he is positive about a decision the company makes. When the company faces unreasonable criticism, he actively defends Microsoft and actually has his audience acknowledge the point (*The Economist*, 2005).

In addition, blogs can be used to actively engage customers. Herein Net-geners can play an important role as passionate online evangelists for their organisations. For instance, Macromedia, one of the first major companies that officially adopted corporate blogs (Stone, 2002), highlighted the role of knowledge workers (Backbonemedia Inc., 2005). Specifically, Macromedia[2] encouraged its bloggers to post not only product information that will bring value to customers but also enough personal information that will humanise the company and build a sense of community around the products.

Conflicts involved in employee blogging

Despite many potential benefits, organisations do not appear to embrace blogs with open arms. This reluctance is primarily due to the lack of rules governing the blogosphere, often called today’s “Wild West” (Jones, 2005). Moreover, the nature of blogs, characterised as “a breakthrough form of democratic self-expression” (Nardi *et al.*, 2004), has resulted in disputes between employee bloggers and management over what is appropriate blogging content. Worse yet, some employees were even fired over their blogs. A Microsoft contractor was fired after he posted pictures of Apple G5 computers being unloaded at Microsoft. The entry, “Even Microsoft wants G5s”, was deemed as being a security violation (Bonne, 2003). A Delta Air Lines flight attendant lost her job after she posted photos of herself in uniform on her blog. Delta stated that those photos, in which she is wearing Delta uniform with the blouse partly unbuttoned, were “inappropriate and unauthorised use of Delta branding” (*USA Today*, 2005). A Google blogger was terminated because he posted some complaints about Google’s compensation package, compared to his previous employer Microsoft (Perez, 2005). In fact, examples of employee bloggers confronted with such problems are so pervasive that a list of those is even being shared among bloggers[3].

Control versus autonomy in blogging

Ideally, employee blogs can be an effective means for an organisation to tap into its employees’ latent potential and let them act as online evangelists whose word of mouth will bring added value to the customer. However, as discussed above, an organisation’s adoption of employee blogs also raises the issue of control – a key element in organisational activity. In order to achieve larger goals of an organisation, individuals who participate in it must surrender some autonomy (Barnard, 1968). Because of this inherent tension, the issue of control is always a source of conflict in any organisation (Barker, 1993). To work through this dilemma, an organisation requires ongoing “processes of negotiation in which various strategies are developed” (Coombs *et al.*,

1992). In the context of corporate blogs, whatever the benefits of adopting them, it is manifest that organisations engage in “processes of negotiation” – mechanisms that balance between control and autonomy. As an initial attempt to understand organisations’ adoption of corporate blogs, this study sheds light on how organisations are addressing the issue of control while supporting autonomy. Toward this end, we develop five corporate blogging strategies in terms of control mechanism and categorise corporate blogs launched by the 2005 *Fortune* 500 companies. In addition, we examine why organisations are adopting blogs by conducting a content analysis of corporate blogs.

Research model

Types of corporate blogs

Organisations are adopting blogs for various purposes such as promotion and customer service. Those blogs, collectively corporate blogs, are operated by a variety of authors ranging from rank-and-file to CEOs. Although it is difficult to draw clear lines among various blogs that organisations are implementing, we suggest five types of corporate blogs that can be categorised based on the characteristics of authors and contents as shown in Table I. The five types are based on those suggested in the literature (Dearstyne, 2005) and an evaluation of about 50 corporate blogs (see below and the Appendix):

- (1) *Employee blog* – An employee blog is a typical personal blog that is maintained by a single rank-and-file employee. When organisations took a hands-off approach, employee blogs were hosted on commercial sites. Although a majority of employee blogs are still hosted independently of the company web site, employee blogs are increasingly being hosted on company-owned domains as more and more companies are officially sponsoring employee blogging. For example, all employee blogs of Sun Microsystems can be found on a public blog aggregator, Planet Sun, which collects Sun employee blog entries.
- (2) *Group blog* – While a typical employee blog is operated by one person, a group blog, also called a collaborative blog, is written by several people. Most group blogs focus on a specific topic, often a technical one with authors who are experts on the topic. Some group blogs are started under employees’ own volition and self-hosted. For instance, on OracleAppsBlog, hundreds of Oracle applications consultants and implementors share their knowledge and experiences. On the other hand, others are driven by strategic plans crafted

Blog types	Characteristics
Employee	Maintained by a rank-and-file employee Varies in content and format
Group	Operated by a group of rank-and-file employees Focuses on a specific topic
Executive Promotion	Featuring the writings of high-ranking executives Promoting products and events
Newsletter	Covering company news

Table I.
Types of corporate blogs
and their characteristics

by management and hosted in companies' official web sites. An example is Dell's Linux blog run by Dell's Linux experts.

- (3) *Executive blog* – People have become more interested in top executives who run companies than in individual companies (Gaines-Ross, 2000). As CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett has also stated “people are voting for the artist, not the painting” (quoted in Stewart, 1998, p. 72). When top executives appear in the blogosphere, their blogs generate instant traffic and can be an effective tool to establish a direct connection with stakeholders. Alan Meckler, CEO of JupiterMedia Corporation, is actively using his blog to exchange ideas and trying to enhance JupiterMedia's image (Pelletier, 2005). Marc Cuban, the owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, is also using his blog to communicate effectively with fans of his team.
- (4) *Promotional blog* – The purpose of the promotional blog is to generate buzz about products and events. This type of blog is somewhat controversial among bloggers at large, primarily due to the lack of an authentic human voice. One blogger described this situation as follows: “Every time some ad agency launches a fake blog, outcries ring from the ‘legitimate’ blogging community . . . (posted on April 5, 2005 on Shel Holtz's “a shel of my former self”). One of the first attempts was Dr Pepper/Seven Up's Raging Cow blog, which was supposedly written by its cow mascot. The company hired several young bloggers and asked them to promote its new milk beverage “Raging Cow” via their personal blogs. The blogging community severely criticised this strategy as deceptive, and one blogger even proposed a product boycott (Gallagher, 2003). This case is considered a classic example that demonstrates that traditional marketing gimmicks found in press releases are not tolerated in the blogosphere.
- (5) *Newsletter blog* – Aside from typical personal blogs, some organisations have launched a newsletter type of blog that officially represents their positions. Thus, this type of blog tends to be filled with well-polished messages. Examples are Yahoo! Search Blog, Google Blog and Red Hat Magazine. They cover a variety of topics such as company news and product information.

Corporate blogging strategies

Using the same data used above, we developed five corporate blogging strategies in terms of control mechanisms. The categorisation of those strategies is based on the key bloggers, the extent and patterns of usage on corporate blogs, and the purpose of blogging. As shown in Table II, corporate blogging strategies are mainly divided into bottom-up blogging and top-down blogging, depending on whether a company officially allows its employees to blog. Specifically, bottom-up blogging companies are defined as those that allow any employee to blog on their publicly available aggregator sites. Thus, we first located a directory page that contains links to employee bloggers and searched company blogging policies. We classified those companies that explicitly allow any employee to blog inside company-owned domains as bottom-up blogging companies. For example, Planet Sun, which collects Sun employee blog entries, clearly announced its permission of employee blogging as follows: “Welcome to Blogs.sun.com! This space is accessible to any Sun employee to write about anything”.

Blogging strategies	Characteristics
Bottom-up (company-wide)	<p><i>Key blogger</i> All company members</p> <p><i>Extent and pattern of usage</i> The company has blog aggregator sites and several types of blogs</p> <p><i>Purpose</i> Product development and customer service Each blog serves a distinct purpose (communication channel for customers, thought leadership, etc.)</p>
Top-down I (Top management commitment)	<p><i>Key blogger</i> High-ranking executives</p> <p><i>The extent and pattern of usage</i> The company does not host employee blogs and has several types of blogs</p> <p><i>Purpose</i> Thought leadership or communication with stakeholders</p>
Top-down II (Individual)	<p><i>Key blogger</i> Few select individuals from various units</p> <p><i>The extent and pattern of usage</i> The company has several types of blogs Most blogs are inside company-owned domains and operated by one author</p> <p><i>Purpose</i> Thought leadership</p>
Top-down III (Group)	<p><i>Key blogger</i> A select group of employees</p> <p><i>The extent and pattern of usage</i> The company operates one type of blog and multiple authors operate one blog</p> <p><i>Purpose</i> Focused on a specific niche</p>
Top-down IV (Promotion)	<p><i>Key blogger</i> Lacking of human voice</p> <p><i>The extent and pattern of usage</i> The company operates one type of blog</p> <p><i>Purpose</i> Promotional purposes or customer feedback</p>

Table II.
Corporate blogging
strategies

Basically, top-down blogging companies are defined as those that:

- assign or allow a small number of employees to blog inside the company-owned domain;
- provide a directory page that contains links to a small number of employee bloggers hosted on third-party sites; or
- have corporate blogs other than employee blogs.

The top-down approach is further divided into four types:

- (1) *Bottom-up (company-wide)* – Companies that apply this strategy can be best understood through their employee-based blogging culture. Such firms are officially supporting employee bloggers whose unfiltered messages are directly conveyed to the audience. They typically have blog aggregator sites for employee bloggers. In addition, they operate several types of blogs for a variety of purposes such as customer service and thought leadership.
- (2) *Top-down I (top management commitment)* – The first top-down blog type represents executive blogs. These firms focusing on executive blogs do not host an ordinary employee blog. Instead, high-ranking executive bloggers actively communicate with key stakeholders, using informal communication styles (Joyce and More, 2005). In addition to executive blogs, the companies may operate promotional blogs with a conversational feel.
- (3) *Top-down II (individual)* – Although organisations in this category host various types of blogs, including employee, executive, group and promotional blogs, their approach is opposite to bottom-up blogging because a relatively small number of bloggers act as online evangelists. The majority of blogs are inside company-owned domains and operated by one author. Most bloggers focus on delivering thought leadership instead of seeking feedback on products and customer service issues. As a result, the readership of those blogs is relatively low (Backbonemedia Inc., 2005).
- (4) *Top-down III (group)* – Unlike the above top-down blogging organisations, companies in this category do not host any personal blogs operated by one author. Instead, they allow or assign a group of employees to maintain a group blog about a specific topic. This approach can provide quality contents and minimise the potential risks associated with personal blogs.
- (5) *Top-down IV (promotion)* – Companies in this category use various types of promotional blogs to advertise new products or upcoming events. Most promotional blogs lack the authentic human touch and give the impression that most of the contents are filtered through the PR department.

Methodology

The general methodology of this study involves a content analysis of corporate blogs launched by the 2005 *Fortune* 500 companies. The *Fortune* 500 companies have long been considered as “leaders” in the use of information technology and their home pages have been extensively researched (Liu *et al.*, 1997; Young and Benamati, 2000; Robbins and Stylianou, 2003). The New PR/Wiki’s lists, such as Corporate Blogs List and CEO Blogs List (see www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php), were primarily used to locate and examine each blog. These lists are frequently updated by bloggers themselves, and are well recognised as extensive and accurate lists of corporate blogs (Steinert-Threlkeld, 2005).

To further ensure comprehensiveness, the Business Source Premier database and Google.com were also searched. We used a variety of keywords for the search, such as “corporate blogs”, “business blogs”, “CEO blogs”, and “employee blogs”. We collected and examined the initial data between March 2005 and September 2005. The data were further updated in December 2005. Through those procedures, up-to-date data on

corporate blogs were captured. For this study, we focused only on publicly available blogs, because internal blogs are usually confidential and not accessible to outsiders. For employee blogs that are hosted on third-party commercial sites, we included only well-known employee bloggers whose employers are in the *Fortune* 500 list.

Descriptive analysis

We analysed a total of 18 companies, 3.6 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies, that have corporate blogs. Table III summarises the main findings of this study with the address of each blog and the profile of each company.

Bottom-up (company-wide)

Microsoft is well known for its support of blogs, as is evidenced by an army of online evangelists who shed light on the human side of the company. Their ongoing efforts, primarily led by celebrity bloggers such as Robert Scoble or Heather Hamilton, are changing public perception of this formerly faceless company. Customers can easily meet the bloggers on blog aggregator sites such as Microsoft Community Blogs, MSDN Blogs, and TechNet Blogs. Compared to the existing official path, these informal channels are considered a better mechanism for product development and customer service. In addition, Microsoft has a famous blog-like web site, Channel 9. As a combination of blog Wiki[4] and web-based discussion features, the site showcases informal and topical video clips. Five Microsoft employees operate the site, which has been a big success and attracted approximately 10,000 people on the day it was launched.

Sun Microsystems, another computing giant, has also taken a big step toward the blogosphere. Like Microsoft, Sun is aggressively promoting employee blogging and maintaining a blog aggregator site, Planet Sun, where thousands of employees blog about their work. Sun uses employee blogs primarily as a supplement to traditional channels of communication with the programmers who write third-party applications that run on Sun's systems (Roush, 2005). This approach is an extension of the existing strategy Sun has historically used to foster strong relationships with developers outside the company (Roush, 2005). Sun's executives, along with plenty of regular employees, are in the front line of humanising the company. The president and chief operating officer, Jonathan Schwartz, is one of the most famous executive bloggers and openly shares his ideas at Planet Sun. His opinions about the company's competitors sometimes provoke altercations. In August 2004, he explained why he thought Hewlett-Packard (HP) missed earnings predictions: "So we all saw that HP had a bad week. My bet? It's only going to get worse – and it has nothing to do with their SAP implementation..." (posted on August 16, 2004).

HP's lawyers even filed a cease-and-desist order although the issue was later dropped. In January 2005, Schwartz criticised IBM because of its unwillingness to develop software that will run on Sun's new system. In addition, Sun is running JavaOne Conference Coverage Blogs in which Sun's engineers and staff present their views on the various topics discussed in the JavaOne conference.

Top-down I (top management commitment)

General Motors' Vice Chairman and Chief Operating Officer Bob Lutz has started FastLane Blog, where GM top management and car buyers discuss products, issues,

Table III.
Fortune 500 companies
and their blogs

Blogging strategies	Company	Rank	Blog type	Examples
Bottom-up (company-wide)	Microsoft	41	Employee	The Scobleizer – Robert Scoble, Technical Evangelist (scoble.weblogs.com)
				Heather’s “Marketing and Finance at Microsoft” Blog – Heather Hamilton, Senior Marketing Recruiter (blogs.msdn.com/heatherleigh)
				Microsoft Community Blogs Portal (www.microsoft.com/communities/blogs)
				Channel 9 (channel9.msdn.com)
	SUN Microsystems	194	Employee	Planet Sun (blog.sun.com)
				Java.net Weblogs (weblogs.java.net)
				Jonathan’s Blog – Jonathan Schwartz, President and Chief Operating Officer (blogs.sun.com/jonathan)
	General Motors	3	Executive/Promotional	JavaOne Conference Weblogs (java.sun.com/javaone/blogs)
				GM FastLane Blog – Bob Lutz, Vice Chairman and Chief Operating Officer (fastlane.gmblogs.com)
				GM Smallblock Engine Blog (smallblock.gmblogs.com)
Boeing	25	Executive	Randy’s Journal – Randy Beseler, Vice President of Marketing (www.boeing.com/randy)	
			777-200LR Flight Test Journal (www.boeing.com/commercial/777family/200LR/flight_test)	
			Things That Make You Go Wireless – Vicki Warker, Vice President, Product Management & Marketing (businessblog.sprint.com)	
Sprint	67	Executive	Ra’ah – Steve Wilson, Senior Director of Global Web Communications (www.swaynewilson.com/wordpress)	
			Oracle Executive Blogs (www.oracle.com/corporate/execute/blog/index.html)	
			Company	
Top-down I (Top management commitment)	Oracle	220	Executive	Examples
				Rank
				Blog type

(continued)

Blogging strategies	Company	Rank	Blog type	Examples
Top-down II (Individual)	IBM	10	Employee	Intertwingly – Sam Ruby, Senior Technical Staff Member (www.intertwingly.net/blog) DeveloperWorks Bloggers (www-106.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/) GameTomorrow (www.gametomorrow.com/blog) Mainframe (www.mainframe.typepad.com) Rational Software Development Conference (www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/rsdc2005)
Top-down III (Group)	Hewlett-Packard	11	Employee	HP Technical Blogs (devresource.hp.com/blogs/index.jsp#tech)
	Dell	28	Executive	HP Executive Blogs (devresource.hp.com/blogs/index.jsp#exec)
	Cisco	91	Group	Dell Linux Blog (linux.dell.com/blog)
	EDS	95	Group	High Tech Policy Blog (www.cisco.com/gov/blog) EDS' Next Big Thing Blog (www.eds.com/sites/cs/blogs/eds_next_big_thing_blog)
Top-down IV (Promotion)	Amazon	303	Group	Amazon Web Services (aws.typepad.com)
	Ford	4	Promotional	2005 Mustang Weblog (blog.ford.com)
	Procter & Gamble	26	Promotional	Sparkle Body Spray (www.sparklebodyspray.com)
	Motorola	49	Promotional	Motoblog (www.motoblog.com.my) ^a
	Nike	173	Promotional	Art of Speed (www.gawker.com/artofspeed)
	Maytag	410	Promotional	SkyBox Weblog (www.ka-thunk.com/index.php)

Note: ^aThis blog was closed in January 2003 and is not accessible

Table III.

and personal experiences. It has gained huge attention from the public as well as employees, getting between 150,000 and 200,000 visits a month. FastLane Blog has become an effective means of conveying messages from GM top management directly to key stakeholders without using the traditional media. When dealers and customers were speculating about the possibility of GM eliminating its Pontiac and Buick brands, he used the FastLane Blog to squash this rumor:

The media coverage on the auto industry of late has done much to paint an ugly portrait of General Motors [...] Many of you probably read something to the effect that “GM is considering shedding a brand.” Let me say it now, for the world to hear: No, we have no plans to shed a brand. Period (posted on March 30, 2005).

GM has also launched a promotional blog, GM Smallblock Engine Blog, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Chevy small block engine. It focuses on a special interest group of this engine.

Boeing Commercial Airplanes uses the same pattern of corporate blogging strategy. Vice President of Marketing, Randy Baseler, keeps an online journal, Randy’s Journal, which has daily readership in the thousands. His first entry, which is widely cited in the blogosphere, provides Boeing’s point of view on competitor Airbus’s new airplane, the A380. Like Jonathan Schwartz, he has been confronted with several challenges during blogging. Right after launching, his blog was severely criticised due to the lack of basic blog features such as permanent links and was closed for a while. In addition to Randy’s Journal, Boeing has 777-200RL Flight Test Journal, a chronicle of the flight-testing written by participating pilots and engineers.

Vicki Warker, Vice President of Product Management & Marketing within Sprint Business Solutions, uses her blog, Things That Make You Go Wireless, to communicate with Sprint’s customers. In her blog, she mentioned that she launched her blog to continue Sprint’s tradition, which is very open to customer feedback.

Steve Wilson, Senior Director of Global Web Communications of McDonald’s, is operating his blog, Ra’ah. The McDonald’s Corporation has recently initiated an internal blogging plan and he is playing a key role in this plan (Newcomb, 2005). At the BlogOn Social Media Summit 2005 in New York, he introduced the company’s blogging plan, saying “you have to show that an open dialogue can occur, and create an ongoing dialogue to move from point A to point B”.

The Oracle Corporation hosts two executive blogs. Each blog has been started only recently, and only a few posts are available at this time.

Top-down II (individual)

IBM’s DeveloperWorks provides a list of about 30 employee blogs. Although most blogs seem to have low readership, some blogs hosting outside the IBM domain, such as Sam Ruby’s Intertwingly, are well known in the blogosphere. Some group blogs recently launched on third-party sites are also gaining recognition from the blog community. Mainframe showcases opinions from a variety of IBM employees who share a passion for the past and future of mainframe computing. GameTomorrow, another group blog, is about games and game-related technologies. In addition, a promotional blog, Rational Software Development Conference 2005 Blogs, provides a directory page that contains links to employee bloggers who participated in the conference. It was closed after the conference but the content remains as archive.

HP hosts ten personal blogs including five executive blogs. While employee bloggers discuss current technical trends in the industry, executives provide insight into the future of the industry from various points of view. While the HP bloggers, including five executives, endeavor to present well thought out essays for general audiences, their blogs tend to be updated infrequently and have yet to gain a wide readership.

Top-down III (group)

Dell's Linux engineers are running Dell Linux Blog, which provides information about using Linux on Dell computers. Amazon's Web Services Developer Relations Team is maintaining Amazon Web Service Blog that introduces software developers to Amazon's new technology platform and product data. Cisco's World Wide Government Affairs department has started High Tech Policy Web Log, where team members share public policy expertise and opinions. EDS' Next Big Thing Blog focuses on current trends in the IT service industry. The blog authors consist of 27 EDS Fellows, the company's most innovative opinion leaders.

Top-down IV (promotion)

Ford Motor has a 2005 Mustang Weblog that promotes its new sport coupe. The blog, however, contains only a few postings and remains relatively inactive. Motorola launched Motoblog, which showcased four Motorola MPx camera phone users' personal experiences. The blog was seldom read due to its unimpressive contents and closed shortly after its creation. Procter & Gamble launched Sparkle Body Spray Blog, which features the writings of four animated girls who appear in its TV commercial. Each character's posting is written in a tone and language to match her unique personality and talks about issues from unique product features to celebrity news.

Unlike the above three firms that tried to bring audiences to blogs, Nike sought a community that is expected to be interested in its new project – the "Art of Speed" film project. Nike commissioned Gawker Media, an influential company among a community that appreciates creative work, to launch the blog as part of the project. Focusing on those who are likely to influence subsequent customers, the blog showcases 15 short films on the theme of speed – Nike's brand concept.

Maytag has SkyBox Weblog that promotes its personal beverage vendor, SkyBox. Maytag uses this blog to collect customer feedback, which is directly given to Maytag's product design team (Backbonemedia Inc., 2005).

Discussion

Current corporate blogging practices

The main purpose of this study is to understand how organisations that adopt blogs are addressing the issue of control while supporting autonomy. Using five corporate blogging strategies, we categorised corporate blogs launched by the 2005 *Fortune* 500 companies. As shown in Table III, most of the 2005 *Fortune* 500 firms that use blogs appear to prefer a top-down blogging strategy, indicating that high levels of control are maintained over corporate blogs. It seems that they do not consider that the benefits of unfettered employee blogs outweigh the risks. However, this does not mean they maintain high levels of control over the growing number of employee blogs hosted on

third-party sites. For example, IBM has recently published the Employee Blogging Guidelines, which emphasise the importance of self-management as follows:

If your blog is self-hosted, use your best judgment and be sure to make it clear that the views and opinions expressed are yours alone and do not represent the official views of IBM (excerpted from IBM's Employee Blogging Guidelines).

In addition, some top-down blogging companies, such as IBM and McDonald's, apply bottom-up blogging strategies by providing employees with a protected intranet environment where they are encouraged to share their thoughts about work. Those approaches, as a mechanism for supporting autonomy, can effectively embrace employee bloggers who otherwise might vent their feelings in a public venue.

We found that only two companies, Microsoft and Sun Microsystems, are using a bottom-up blogging strategy. These firms seek to maximise the capabilities of blogs by supporting employees who are highly productive and efficient. However, this approach might negatively affect companies because high levels of autonomy among self-directed employees can become a liability (Langfred, 2004). To be truly successful, such employees also require control mechanisms such as "external leadership" (Druskat and Wheeler, 2004) and "concertive control" (Barker, 1993). Interestingly, two bottom-up blogging companies do have leading bloggers who act as control mechanisms – Jonathan Schwartz of Sun Microsystems as an "external leader" and Robert Scoble of Microsoft as a "concertive control" person. Indeed, the influence of Robert Scoble is not limited to within Microsoft but expands to most employee bloggers (*The Economist*, 2005).

To summarise, most organisations maintain high levels of control by implementing top-down blogging strategies while few support high levels of autonomy by applying bottom-up blogging strategy. Because of the inherent limitation of each strategy, organisations that adopt blogs do engage in "processes of negotiation" – complementary mechanisms that balance between autonomy and control.

Content strategy of bottom-up and top-down blogging

In order to understand why corporate blogs are increasingly being adopted, we conducted a content analysis of corporate blogs. We identified organisations that adopt blogs mainly for:

- product development and customer service;
- thought leadership; and
- promotion.

Interestingly, we found that bottom-up blogging companies tend to focus on product development and customer service, while most top-down blogging companies tend to prefer thought leadership or promotional content strategy.

By adopting product development and customer service content strategy, bottom-up companies can take advantage of employee bloggers who respond to customers' inquires quickly and effectively. In some respects, this result seems quite natural because the internet's potential to supplement traditional customer information channels has been widely discussed (Finch, 1999). However, this content strategy is radically different from the common approach to exploit the internet's potential in that it attempts to improve product quality prior to market introduction of the product by

disclosing product development processes and actively seeking feedback (Backbonemedia Inc., 2005). Although there might be some risks associated with revealing sensitive information, the use of blogs for product development and customer service could be invaluable for customer-oriented companies that relentlessly pursue improvement and innovation in their products.

Unlike bottom-up blogging companies, most top-down blogging firms tend to focus on thought leadership or promotional content strategy. The common application of thought leadership content strategy might be well expected because most *Fortune* 500 companies have used their home pages as a means of increasing public awareness (Liu *et al.*, 1997; Young and Benamati, 2000). However, the new strategy differs from previous attempts in that blogs convey the genuine ideas of individuals and exhibit candor and passion for the company's vision, mission and values. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the tireless efforts of a handful of individual bloggers.

The cases in Top-down I and II show that those bloggers can enhance corporate credibility and trust by disseminating well thought out opinions on their respective companies and giving outsiders new insights into the companies' cultures. For example, the Boeing case demonstrates that only one prolific high-ranking executive blogger can provide substantial benefits to the organisation in terms of thought leadership. The point is that the success of corporate blogs depends more on the authenticity of bloggers than on the number of bloggers. Most importantly, the case clearly demonstrates that opportunities to leverage the power of blogs are not limited to just customer-oriented organisations.

It is difficult to ascertain whether promotional content strategy is effective in the blogosphere because companies are still experimenting with a variety of blogs. However, those promotional blogs examined in this study tend to exhibit low readership and some of them are even criticised as "simple translations of traditional marketing channels", primarily due to the lack of authentic human voice. In this regard, the success of promotional blogs might depend on whether traditional "marketing speak" is removed from them. For example, Boeing's 777-200RL Flight Test Journal and GM's Smallblock Engine Blog seem to generate at least low-level awareness. In addition, it should be noted that "new types of promotional blogs", launched by the entertainment companies, are gaining popularity (Wegert, 2005).

Executive blogs

Although it was not the intent of this study, it would be worthwhile to note that executive blogs can play an important role in personifying monolithic corporations to internal and external stakeholders as shown in the Top-down I cases. However, it is still uncommon to find high-ranking executive bloggers in the *Fortune* 500 companies. The result is not very different from that of a recent study that investigated the information value of CEO homepages of the *Fortune* e-50 companies (Lee and Lee, 2002). Gillmor (2004) also mentioned that most web sites, loaded with limited and superficial information, do nothing to reveal the character either of the company or its CEO. Indeed, this low participation of high-ranking executives in the e-world could be attributable to the "transparency paradox" faced by today's high-ranking executives (Dilenschneider, 2004). In the current business environment, top-level executives should be more transparent and disclose more information than ever before. At the

same time, they must maintain a high level of confidentiality to run their companies effectively. In reality, though, it is indeed difficult for most executives to walk the fine line between respecting transparency and embracing confidentiality. Thus, it is somewhat understandable that many executives, CEOs in particular, are reluctant to be open and candid on the web, even though most of them recognise the value of the internet as a new communication channel.

Limitations of this study and implications for future research

Because the corporate blogging phenomenon is very new and still evolving, the blogging cases we found account for only 3.6 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies. Moreover, because corporate blogs on the protected intranet are not accessible, this study examined only publicly available corporate blogs, and thus our review is by no means exhaustive. The results of this study should be viewed as a benchmark profile of early adopters of corporate blogs, and future research should continue to examine newly emerging corporate blogs to illuminate the trends in corporate blogging practices over time. Specifically, it would be valuable to examine how corporate blogging strategies change over time as blogging culture matures.

In addition, we found that leading companies from the computer industry are trying to improve product quality before launching final products by opening up the process of product development and actively soliciting customer feedback. In fact, the importance of customer-developer links in software development has long been emphasised (Ives and Olson, 1984; Keil and Carmel, 1995). Specifically, the product development practice that mentioned above – early customer involvement – has been considered “the most effective method for developing and deploying software products and services” (MacCormack, 2001). However, in the context of corporate blogs, it is unclear how this practice is actually applied, let alone whether it delivers positive benefits to both customers and developers. Indeed, the cases reported as success stories in this study are largely anecdotal because there is a marked lack of empirical research. Therefore, future research should include empirical investigation of blogs that pursue product development and customer service content strategy.

Conclusion

As public awareness of blogs is dramatically growing, organisations are increasingly attempting to exploit the value of blogs. In order to understand this phenomenon, we investigated *Fortune* 500 companies that use blogs and presented an initial snapshot of corporate blogging practices. In particular, we investigated on how companies that adopt blogs are maintaining control while supporting autonomy. We found that early adopters of corporate blogs tend to prefer a top-down to a bottom-up blogging strategy. Most importantly, both top-down and bottom-up blogging companies take advantage of complementary mechanisms that could alleviate the inherent limitations of each strategy, seeking ways to balance between autonomy and control. In addition, we identified that bottom-up blogging companies tend to focus on product development and customer service content strategy, whereas top-down blogging companies are likely to apply thought leadership or promotional content strategy.

We believe the results of this study provide valuable implications for companies that are contemplating to capitalise on the rising popularity of blogs. The most

important message for those companies is that blogs are all about communication and conversation. Therefore, companies, top-down blogging firms in particular, must realise that developing a candid dialogue with customers is the best way to establish a meaningful relationship based on familiarity and trust. After all, this is the greatest benefit of corporate blogging. Without a down-to-earth human voice, any attempt to sell new widgets will just backfire in the blogosphere.

Application questions

- (1) If your organisation has adopted corporate blogs, examine its blogging practice. How well is your strategy developed compared to the five corporate blogging strategies discussed in this study?
- (2) If your organisation plans to initiate a corporate blogging strategy, which blogging strategy would be the best for your organisation?
- (3) If your organisation still takes a hands-off approach to corporate blogging, look for employees who would like to start blogs under their own volition. How should your organisation support them to become reputation makers?

Notes

1. The broadest definition of the net generation includes the more than 70 million Americans born between 1977 and 2002 (Leung, 2003; Armour, 2005).
2. Macromedia was acquired by Adobe Systems in December 2005.
3. For example, morphemetales.blogspot.com/2004/12/statistics-on-fired-bloggers.html
4. Wiki is either the web site or the software that allows users to freely create and edit the content.

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Company	Rank	Blog type	Examples
Yahoo!	502	Newsletter	Yahoo! Search Blog (www.ysearchblog.com)
eBay	529	N/A	eBay Developers Program (ebaydeveloper.typepad.com)
Google	541	Newsletter	Google Blog (www.google.com/googleblog)
Adobe	865	Group	Adobe Blogs (blogs.adobe.com)
Earthlink	973	Group	Earthlink Protection Blog (www.protectionblog.net)
Dallas Mavericks	N/A	Executive	Blog Maverick – Marc Cuban, the owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks (www.blogmaverick.com)
Jupiter Media	N/A	Executive	Alan Meckler – CEO (weblogs.jupitermedia.com/meckler)
		Employee	Jupiter research Analyst Weblogs (weblogs.jupiterresearch.com/toplevel)
Macromedia	N/A	Employee	Macromedia XML News Aggregator (weblogs.macromedia.com)
Red Hat	N/A	Executive	Red Hat Executives Blog (blogs.redhat.com/executive)
		Employee	Red Hat People Blog (blogs.redhat.com/people)
		N/A	Red Hat Intern Blog (blogs.redhat.com/intern)
		Newsletter	Red Hat Magazine Editor's Blog (blogs.redhat.com/magazine)
SAP	N/A	Employee	SAP Developer Network Blogs (www.sdn.sap.com/irj/sdn/weblogs)
		Executive	SAP Executive Blogs (www.sap.com/community/pub/blogs.epx)
N/A	N/A	Employee	OracleAppsBlog (www.oracleappsblog.com)

Table AI.
Additional corporate
blogs

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