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**PeopleTalk**

**LOST IN  
TRANSLATION:**  
Communications  
E-tiquette

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CONNECT**

Welcome to the  
Wiki-Workplace

**TALENT AND  
TECHNOLOGY:**  
It All Adds Up To  
Multiplication

**THE NEW TOOLS  
OF THE TRADE:**  
Learning the Web 2.0  
Lexicon



BY SHARON BOGLARI, CHRP



POINT > CLICK

# CONNECTED

## Web 2.0 technology gives HR new ways to connect employees

**I**MAGINE YOU'RE A NEW SALES REP FOR A manufacturing company, working out of your home office in Williams Lake. On your first day, you meet with the Victoria-based CEO, tour the Kamloops manufacturing facility, and have a coffee break with colleagues who work in Nelson and Nanaimo. On your second day you watch the Vancouver sales team practice pitch to a potential new customer and meet with the Kelowna sales director who has agreed to be your mentor.

All this, and you haven't even left your office. Sound impossible?

With the help of Web 2.0 technology, organizations are transforming their top-down, brick-and-mortar operations into dynamic, user-centred virtual communities. The result: engaged employees and a stronger bottom line.

Even if you've never heard of Web 2.0, chances are you've already used it. The term refers to the changing use of web technology over the last few years to promote information sharing and collaboration. In the 1990s, the World Wide Web was little more than an information repository. Web sites hosted read-only material with very little opportunity for true interactivity. Slow internet connections and widespread computer illiteracy restricted the web's functionality.

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Today, interactivity is a key part of the web, as evidenced by the plethora of social networking and video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs and podcasts. Using Web 2.0 technology, users now generate and distribute content and make real-time connections. Power has shifted from company leaders to communities of customers and employees, communities that cross generations and geographical borders and connect like-minded people.

#### Getting a Second Life

Second Life is the fastest growing online community. You can appear in this three-dimensional virtual world as a digital avatar—an animated character that moves and gestures and communicates with other avatars anywhere in the world, both one-on-one or in groups. Many people make a living in Second Life and organizations set up virtual offices where they demonstrate their products, hold meetings and work

on projects. They also conduct key HR functions there.

If you've dismissed social networking sites and virtual worlds as just another form of entertainment, you may want to consider that many experts believe multiplayer online games breed the kind of employee who will thrive in tomorrow's workplace. According to a February 2008 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, the "gamer disposition" creates employees who are bottom-line or goal oriented, understand the need to work in diverse teams, thrive on change, see learning as fun and constantly explore original ways to do things. However, you'll have to recruit them on their own turf.

#### Real Results: Virtual Recruiting

In May 2007, recruitment numbers for the Vancouver Police Department were down for the first time in years. "We needed to get the word out that we were hiring," says Constable Cherie Duggan. The department decided to conduct a virtual recruitment seminar using Second Life. Recruitment officers created avatars who delivered an

adapted PowerPoint presentation and were on hand to talk to interested recruits. "The learning curve to set up the session was steep," says Duggan. "We couldn't have done it without the help of the Centre for Digital Media." (The Centre is a collaboration between UBC, Simon Fraser University, Emily Carr and BCIT.)

The effort paid off. As the first real police department to recruit in the virtual world, the event attracted media coverage and interest from police departments around the world. Thirty avatars attended with four expressing interest in applying. "We weren't expecting to get lots of applicants," says Duggan. "Our goal was to demonstrate that the Vancouver Police Department is an innovative employer with a progressive outlook and we accomplished that."

Duggan believes that delving into the virtual world invigorated the recruitment department. Although they haven't used Second Life again as a recruitment tool, they are active on social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube. "We realized that we have to be creative in finding new applicants. We have to show people that



this is the job they want, which means reaching out to them in a medium that they are comfortable and familiar with."

### Playing together enhances business success

Once you've found the right employees, how do you orient them to your organization's culture and help them move ahead? With 380,000 employees spread across the globe, 40 per cent of whom don't work in a traditional office, onboarding and mentoring are pivotal to IBM's success. Chuck Hamilton is the director of IBM's Centre for Advanced Learning in Vancouver; he's also the program manager for IBM's new 3-D Internet group, which focuses on the application of social technologies in the workplace.

"Play permeates everything we do," says Hamilton. "If you can get people to play together, they build stronger connections." For example, IBM uses virtual worlds to connect employees who are nearing retirement with newer employees around the globe. To see what this looks like, search "IBM at Second Life" or "GreaterIBMConnection" on YouTube.

Initially, the program simply paired up people who then communicated by phone or email. "But the natural evolution was to find a space where people could meet, even if they lived on different continents." So IBM designated an area in their Second Life campus where mentors could meet in real time with mentees. Borrowing from the popular concept of speed dating, they now regularly hold virtual speed mentoring sessions. Employees and mentors post profiles of themselves and then over the course of an hour, employees can meet up with a number of mentors in a private virtual space – all



while sitting at their desk. "Very senior IBMers are swimming and flying next to people who have been in the business ten months," says Hamilton.

## Virtual worlds are ideally suited to learning and developing new skills.

Hamilton claims that age isn't a barrier to engaging in new technologies. While he admits that users must learn the tools in order to comfortably use them, because the new tools are all web-based, the learning curve to use them isn't as steep as for other technology. "It comes down to having a willingness to connect, reach out to others, and receive them into your life."

### Developing on-the-job skills

Virtual worlds are ideally suited to learning and developing new skills. You can practise a sales pitch to an important client and get immediate, live feedback from senior executives at head office. Similarly, you can learn about a new product without having to visit the manufacturing facility.

Hundreds of tertiary institutions are already teaching classes in Second Life. In 2007, Vancouver's Centre for Digital Media simultaneously launched its new bricks-and-mortar campus along with a virtual campus in Second Life. Its Masters of Digital Media Program holds classes and interactive labs in the virtual world. Program director Gerri Sinclair says that a virtual world removes many of the boundaries of the real world, including gender, age, geography and learning style. "Some people learn through text, others through visuals, and still others through doing. In the virtual environment you can use one or all in the way that works best for you."

### What does your data cloud reveal about you?

If you haven't Googled yourself recently, you might be surprised at the links, images, social profiles and media posted on the Internet under your name. Many recruiters now eschew the traditional resume, believing that a candidate's Facebook page provides a far more telling glimpse into the candidate's nature. Consider the consequences of the following online activities:

- Your friend posts an unflattering photo of you from last weekend's wild party on her MySpace page.
- You sign an online petition to elect your local politician who is later embroiled in a scandal.
- You have a bad day at the office and mouth off about your employer in your blog or on your Facebook page.

This myriad of user-generated content on the Internet makes up your "data cloud" and may show up years later on a Google search. It also provides fodder for prospective employers to learn more about you – and decide whether you're a good fit for their organization.

Steve Dotto, host and executive producer of *Dotto Tech*, believes that these data trails can do serious damage to a person's reputation – and is particularly concerned about the effect on young people's careers. "Employers and universities are increasingly looking online to assess candidates, and inappropriate use of this technology could have long-term ramifications."

The bottom line: What happens online stays online – and for longer than you may think. So think twice about what you say or do there.

How does virtual learning compare to the classroom? Stanford University's Medical Media and Information Technologies group has demonstrated that the learning outcomes for an Emergency Response Training session conducted in a virtual world were virtually identical to those conducted in real life, but for a fraction of the cost.

The possibilities are endless for organizations looking to develop employees, says Anders Gronstedt, whose Colorado-based company helps organizations improve sales and workplace performance with virtual



Ronald Cenfetelli, assistant professor at the Sauder School of Business

world programs and other innovative learning approaches. "Imagine sending new employees through a time machine in Second Life to see the company's storied history, having them walk around 3-D models of factory floors, call centres and offices around the world, or walking around 3-D models of the company's products."

Virtual worlds can give employees real-life experiences while sitting at their desks. A bonus, says Gronstedt, is that most employees are more engaged in this kind of a learning environment because they

### Making an emotional connection

Most of us wouldn't even consider stealing a CD from a music store, but what about illegally downloading music from the Internet? We were horrified when, in 2006, RadioShack used email to notify employees that they were being dismissed as part of job cuts, but how many of us have hit the Send button on an issue that really should have been dealt with in person?

Technology provides us with a convenient screen, often enabling us to say or do things we wouldn't dream of face-to-face. There's a perceived anonymity when sitting in front of a keyboard, says Cenfetelli. His research suggests that when we encounter people face-to-face, we are less likely to engage in deceptive or inappropriate behaviour.

Why? Over the course of civilization, human beings have developed subtle, often imperceptible cues for communication, such as eye contact, gestures and smiles. Although Web 2.0 technology has enhanced communication, most current technology is too primitive to replicate the cues that enrich face-to-face communication. "Much of what we subtly communicate is lost when using digital media," says Cenfetelli. "There is a lack of disclosure of gestures and facial cues when you communicate in the virtual world." This may be to your advantage if you're playing poker, but not if you're trying to establish an open relationship with a colleague or employee.

Programmers are already working on the next phase of virtual worlds where we'll likely find avatars that can make eye contact, react, and express their thoughts and feelings. Biometrics and tools such as gesture-sensing webcams will provide greater emotional range when communicating online, ultimately putting a more human face on digital interactions.

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can't switch off or multitask like they can in a classroom or webinar.

#### Collaboration and participation aid engagement

Ask most HR departments how they communicate with employees, and email and the corporate Intranet will probably top the list. The problem with this approach, says Gronstedt, is that these media only promote one-way communication. Collaborative web tools such as wikis and blogs encourage two-way conversations with employees, where "everyone is a contributor and everyone a recipient." This in turn leads to flatter organizations where every employee is an active participant in the conversation.

When Vancouver-based BuildDirect, one of the world's largest online distributors of building materials, launched a company blog in 2008, CEO and president Jeff Booth hoped to foster a relationship of transparency with customers. The blog included customer reviews of their products as well as tips and advice from the various department heads. The resulting increase in sales was gratifying, but Booth says it has also made it easier to communicate within the organization. "We use the same messages with our customers as we do with our employees. Both groups are in charge of our brand." The blog has helped customers get to know the organization, but has also given employees an increased sense of accountability and an opportunity to contribute to the conversation with customers.

Another way innovative organizations encourage employee participation is through crowd sourcing. Sites like [DellIdeaStorm.com](http://DellIdeaStorm.com) and [MyStarbucksIdea.force.com](http://MyStarbucksIdea.force.com) allow Dell and

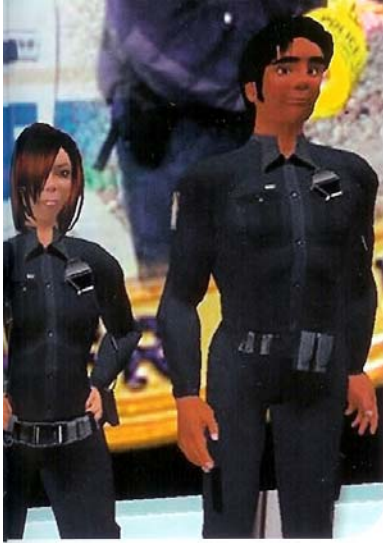
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TECHNOLOGY  
CHANGES  
EVERYTHING



Starbucks customers to suggest ideas, vote on the best ones, and see how they are being instituted. The concept also works internally.

For the past three years, Google Inc. has encouraged its employees to place bets on various questions, such as whether a new Google office will open on time or a new product will ship on time. What they've found is that the employee bets are usually right. Best Buy, Hewlett-Packard and Corning use employee predictions to help forecast retail sales and pick specific features for a new product. Using interactive websites, employees can earn points, prizes and other recognition, such as an opportunity to participate on the product development team. The collaborative technology taps into the collective wisdom of employees to engage them and deliver on the bottom line.

#### Building accountability

As more organizations embrace Web 2.0 technology, they must also come to grips with a greater risk of exposure, both for the organization and for its employees. Steve Dotto, host and executive producer of the Canadian computer show *Dotto Tech*, acknowledges that the waters are muddy when it comes to assuming accountability on social networking sites.

For example, if a Futuresshop employee criticizes Microsoft's new version of Windows on his Facebook page, is he speaking for himself or for his employer? "Many B.C. organizations are choosing to limit access to technology," says Dotto, "essentially treating employees like children." He would like to see organizations play a greater role in shaping technology in the workplace. "It's not going

to go away, so organizations need to engage in the technology and determine how they are going to live in this new world."

One way to build accountability is to involve employees in the implementation of new technology. Ronald Cenfetelli, assistant professor at the Sauder School of Business, researches the effect of technology on individuals. He says that organizations often overlook user involvement. "It's surprising, really, because there is a huge body of research and resources available dealing with usability issues." Approximately one quarter of all IT project failures are because employees didn't adopt the technology, usually because they weren't consulted. "The effect on employees is low morale and distrust of future projects."

If the thought of implementing two-way participation and collaboration in your organization has you running for the legal department, take heart. IBM has made its Virtual World Guidelines for IBM employees publicly available on the web, in part to demonstrate to customers that the organization practises the same principles in the virtual world as they do in the real one. But Hamilton says that when it came down to it, they really didn't need a whole lot of legal language to guide employee behaviour. "Employees treat IBM's virtual campus as an extension of the workplace." In fact, most employees take pride in creating avatars that reflect who they are in terms of culture, profession and personality.

#### Putting people back into the equation

It may seem counter-intuitive, but as Web 2.0 technology develops, there's a positive spin-off for human interaction. Computers are no longer dehumanizing demons; in fact, Hamilton believes that this technology will bring people together.

"We all have an innate need to connect with other human beings. Organizations are learning to leverage technology to satisfy this facet of human nature." Indeed, as organizations expand into global markets and encourage green initiatives such as telecommuting, innovative technology will be vital to helping people stay connected, build relationships and share ideas across time zones, generations and geographic borders. **■**

Sharon Boglari is an Accredited Business Communicator in North Vancouver. Contact: [boglari@telus.net](mailto:boglari@telus.net)

#### Does electronic chatter affect productivity?

Hands up if you've checked your BlackBerry or answered your cell phone while reading this article. Perhaps you're listening to your iPod or surfing the Internet right now. As technology pervades every aspect of our lives, the line between work and home has become increasingly fuzzy. Dotto admits to frequently taking his BlackBerry on fishing trips – something that draws disapproval out on the lake. "One man's pill is another man's poison," he says. "This way, at least I get to take a vacation while conducting business." He acknowledges that without good time management skills one can become a slave to technology and that both business productivity and family life can suffer.

For many of us, using technology to multitask makes us feel more productive. But research suggests that the human brain is not very good at doing multiple things at once. Toggling from one activity to another doesn't give the brain a chance to rest and process ideas, and consequently discourages the kind of deep thinking needed to generate creative ideas. Organizations like Google understand that in order to get the creative juices flowing, people need to be able to escape technology, and they have implemented official policies that encourage down time and non-work-related activities.

On the flip side, constructive use of technology can help get the job done. A recent study by Ohio State University and the University of California, Irvine, revealed that people who used instant messaging (IM) at work felt they had fewer interruptions than those who did not. Instant messaging is often used as a substitute for more disruptive forms of communication, such as the telephone, email, or face-to-face conversations.

Employees are generally strategic in their use of IM, using it to check in with their colleagues to find out if they're busy before interrupting them in a more intrusive way. People are using the technology to solicit answers to quick questions from colleagues and coordinate their conversations at more convenient times. R. Kelly Garret, co-author of the study, says that "people see a new technology and they are innovative in how they use it. They will tailor their use of the technology to their needs and their expectations. And with IM, people had enough time to learn about the technology at home and to find ways to use it productively."