

Web 2.0 concepts are here to stay. There is no denying that. Also, thanks to the hype generated by Business Week, The New York Times, Fortune and Newsweek among others, Web 2.0 has captured the imagination of consumers and the business world alike.

But knowing how to meaningfully leverage Web 2.0 concepts to fuel collaboration and knowledge management among employees, partners and customers is another story. Web 2.0 can change an enterprise but recognizing how to, in practical business terms, and determining whether you should at all, is confusing. This article aims to dispel some of the myths surrounding Web 2.0 while discussing practical applications for it within organizations.

What is Web 2.0?

The first question is what is Web 2.0? To paraphrase a definition by Tim O'Reilly (<http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>) who was one of the first to coin the term, Web 2.0 is about delivering software as a continually updated service that gets better each time more people use it. This means that the software gets stronger, the more it is consumed and remixed, from multiple sources, especially when individual users provide their own data and services, that in turn allows them to remix the software creating a network effect. Important to note, this architecture of participation happens on the web, and in a fashion that breaks down the page metaphor, on websites or intranets.

In other words, when you take a piece of software or a service and allow users to add, edit and change it as if they were editing a word document, it becomes more powerful and grows exponentially. For this to happen successfully, the software or service needs to be accessible to the users of it – meaning it should be as easy to change, as it is to edit, a word document itself. Furthermore, control should be in the hands of the users and not the designers or the venture capitalists who own or have funded the initiative.

That's all very well, but probably the most important aspect of Web 2.0, is the values it espouses. These values can be summed up as collaborative, participatory, simple, accessible, efficient, lightweight, approachable, action-oriented and user-driven. In other words, values that you see from companies like Google (<http://www.google.com>), Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com>), Netflix (<http://www.netflix.com>), Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>), Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>), Skype (<http://www.skype.com>) and eBay (<http://www.ebay.com>). When you think about Web 2.0, first think about the values before you think about potential applications.

What does it mean for the Enterprise?

So what does this mean for the enterprise? There are a couple of potential impacts. The first is that Web 2.0 concepts can change the way you reach your customers; build relationships with them; and further your brand objectives. Web 2.0 is about the participative economy – in that the most successful companies are the ones leveraging Web 2.0 concepts to encourage their customers to build communities around their products, provide feedback on products, and, in some cases, even drive decision making around them. To do this effectively, you need to examine how you are connecting with your customers and then explore ways to deepen those connections.

This is where solutions like corporate blogs, podcasting, video blogs and web based applications, mashups and online games enter the picture. The hardest part for you will be letting go – allowing your customers to evolve your brand, your products and your company. When done right, it can produce dramatic results. Visit a website like Techcrunch (www.techcrunch.com) to see some innovative examples of Web 2.0 applications.

The second area is around how your enterprise communicates and collaborates with its network of partners whether it is suppliers, distribution partners or service providers. Here, too, there are opportunities for collaboration. For example, ask yourself how you develop the go-to-market strategy for new products. How involved are your business partners? And more specifically, how involved are the foot soldiers in your partner companies? It is easy to share marketing plans with senior executives from a retail partner, but what about sharing those plans with the employees of the retailer who will be tasked with selling the product? This is where Web 2.0 concepts like public predictive intelligence enter the picture and can make a difference (more on predictive intelligence later).

The final area is in the realm of how employees communicate and collaborate with one another. The more collaborative the employees of a company are, the more successful the company becomes over time. Employees that collaborate efficiently by leveraging each other's intellect and resources create stronger and more successful products. Unfortunately, it is also recognized that current collaboration solutions are woefully inadequate. They are difficult to use, cumbersome, limiting and do not empower employees. Rather than fuelling collaboration, they hinder it. Here too Web 2.0 collaborative concepts like wikis (for controlled audiences), folksonomies and internal blogs can make a difference.

But what can you do today?

But what specifically can you do today to understand Web 2.0 better and learn how to use it in your company specifically to support employees and partners? Don't task your information technology department to make every web-based application Web 2.0 ready, or push your product managers to start blogging 25 times a day. Instead, step back and learn more about this space. And, the easiest way to do that is to look at a few examples on the web.

- **Revolutionizing the Phone Book**

The first place to start is with a networking site like LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>). Sign up and invite your peers to join as well. Create a profile of yourself. Play around with some of the linking features. Try searching for someone. And then ask yourself whether your company would benefit from an application like this for all employees and partners. Is it easier to use than your current intranet employee directory? Does it have some nifty features you wish you had on your intranet?

- **Simplifying the Spreadsheet**

The second place to visit is the Google Spreadsheet application (<http://spreadsheets.google.com>). At first glance, Google's spreadsheet application may seem lacking in many respects. From a functionality perspective, it does pale in comparison to Microsoft Excel. However, after playing around with it for a while, you'll discover that it includes the most used functionality. Click on the "share this spreadsheet" link, and you'll see how powerful it can be. And then, click on the buy button to find out how much it costs. But wait a minute, there is no buy button, it is completely free, and that's the whole point.

Web 2.0 applications running in a web window are optimized for collaboration, easy to use and mostly free. Now ask yourself, are there any applications in your work environment you wish were web-based with more collaborative features and better usability?

- **A Bottom-Up Knowledge Management System**

Once you've finished playing around with the Google spreadsheet application, make your way over to Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>). Wikipedia is the largest living encyclopedia on the web. From the home page of Wikipedia, search for the word "collaboration." You'll be taken to a page filled with definitions, explanations and references. You may even notice that the collaboration "article" has been written in collaboration with another wiki called MetaCollab.net. But instead of clicking to MetaCollab.net, click on one of the edit links on the right hand side. You can edit the page yourself in real time. Click on the History tab at the top of the page, and you can see who else has edited the page.

That's the power of Wikipedia. Imagine if your whole intranet was a wiki-based platform where it was incredibly simple for anyone to create, edit or even remove a page. That's the power of wikis. Imagine if you had a wiki to share information and brainstorm with parts suppliers. Imagine if your company intranet was completely wiki driven. That's the power of wikis.

- **Getting All the News in the World**

Next, visit Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>). You will discover that Technorati is the largest directory of blogs. Search for a word – maybe something like innovation, and, in a matter of seconds, you'll see which of 46 million blogs cover it. Go to one of those blogs and bookmark the "RSS" feed. If you used a web browser like FireFox, you'll be able to view live news feeds from that website right in your bookmarks panel.

Alternatively, you could download an RSS reader like Pluck (<http://www.pluck.com>) and subscribe to blog feeds from there. Think about how you could communicate with your

employees or your partners using news feeds. All they would have to do is subscribe to a newsfeed, and they'll get news from you or your department as soon as you publish it.

- **Training Tapes in the Car**

Talking about voice, jump to Business Week's own home page (<http://www.businessweek.com>), and scroll down to the bottom of the page. Choose a podcast, maybe the CEO's Guide to Technology and download it to your machine. Plug in your iPod and listen to the podcast on what Web 2.0 is. If you can learn about Web 2.0 via a podcast, there's no reason why you can't publish podcasts about products, communication strategies, training and industry statistics for your employees.

- **Group Decision Making on Steroids**

The last website to visit on your Web 2.0 tour is Yahoo Tech Buzz (<http://buzz.research.yahoo.com/>). Tech Buzz is a prediction market, taking advantage of the "wisdom of the crowds" concept. This means users can buy and sell a contract on the site. The value of the contract can be interpreted as a prediction for a future event. So go invest your fantasy dollars in trends you think are going to flourish. Use the prices of other trends to understand what the rest of the world thinks of those trends. It is like the stock market, but, instead of trading shares of a company, you're trading concepts.

Next time you need to make a decision between two advertising concepts, consider publishing them on an internal prediction market on your intranet. Let your employees buy shares in each concept based on which one they think is strong. Before you know it, you will have learned which one is better.

Making Sense of it All

There is no doubt Web 2.0 concepts are starting to have an impact in the workplace. Like other consumer innovations impacting the enterprise, these, too, will find their place in the corridors of some of America's largest companies. Already companies like Ernst & Young, Nokia, Kodak, Lucent Technologies, IBM and others are testing different Web 2.0 concepts for their enterprises.

The technology is relatively simple, especially thanks to open source, service oriented architectures and advancements in XML and presentation layer technologies. Companies like Social Text (<http://www.socialtext.com>) and Traction Software (<http://www.tractionsoftare.com>) can also make the adoption easier along with other Web 2.0 concepts like tagging, which allow users to create their own categories when organizing data.

How quickly your company starts to take advantage of the Web 2.0 concepts is up to you. It's a participatory medium, and you need to ask yourself whether your company culture will accept these concepts and how quickly. Only then should you define your business objectives clearly, and design, develop and launch your Web 2.0 solutions in a measured fashion.

Learn more about Web 2.0 and the impact on the enterprise at The Workplace Blog (<http://www.theworkplaceblog.com>)

About the Author



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About Avenue A | Razorfish

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