

The internet generation

Can you afford not 2.0?



The first generation to have grown up with the internet are now entering the workforce. They bring with them new concepts and approaches to social interaction, discovery and information sharing. They harness the power of the internet to realise faster, easier, richer forms of collaboration, building vast networks of contacts and knowledge of countless information sources. They cannot be ignored.

Organisations need to recognise that this generation of customers and employees have had their expectations raised by personal internet experiences. Companies must adapt to meet these expectations in order to attract and retain both talent and customers. Companies must understand these new methods if they are to meet or exceed employee and customer expectations. Failure to do so will rapidly result in widespread disaffection amongst the world's most networked generation.

Organisations understand the vital importance of sharing information and knowledge. They are starting to appreciate additional benefits accrue if this information can be easily pooled and discovered.

The greatest barrier to achieving this has always been established patterns of behaviour and a lack of straightforward, non-disruptive end user tools. The emergence of simple but powerful "Web 2.0" tools, coupled with the arrival of young but experienced users, may well be the catalyst for change.

New tools and approaches

The Web has matured. A critical mass of users, the rise of simple content contribution and community formation tools has collectively led to the emergence of the term "Web 2.0". Broadly speaking, "Web 2.0" refers to new online activities enabled by innovative applications of technology and a cultural shift in the way people use the internet (see figure 1 below).

It's not so much that the underlying technology is new. Rather it has been refined and is being applied in more appropriate ways.

This has led to web sites which deliver more satisfying, richer user experiences, (e.g. Google Maps), the emergence of online communities such as Facebook, and the rise of communal knowledge sharing through sites like Wikipedia.

While the technology represents an evolution, it is the revolutionary ways in which these technologies are being used which are generating the most interest.

Figure 1: Key Web 2.0 Technologies and Business Benefits

Tool	Definition	Potential organisational benefits
Weblogs (e.g. Guardian Blog, Sun Microsystems employee weblog)	A very simple method for users to 'post' news relating to their work or areas of interest. Users can add comments to encourage debate.	Improved, more immediate internal communications (e.g. in project based organisations). Greater, more informal interaction with customers and partners.
Wikis (e.g. Wikipedia)	A central repository of information, to which all users are able to contribute/edit/search content using very simple tools.	Capture of tacit knowledge, development of informal knowledge base, simple to create 'living' manuals.
Content Aggregation (e.g. Really Simple Syndication (RSS))	A method of providing summaries of web sites which can then be 'subscribed' to via most devices (e.g. PCs & mobiles).	Reduces information overload – users do not need to browse web sites as updates are communicated to them directly.
Rich Internet Applications (e.g. Google Maps)	Enhanced user experiences delivered via a web browser, based upon a greater understanding of web technologies.	Ability to deploy more fully-featured applications via a web browser.
Social Networking (e.g. Facebook)	Creation of online communities, where users can connect, collaborate and network.	Connection of employees with similar interests and projects can foster greater innovation and collaboration.
Social Bookmarking	The ability for a user community to nominate and vote on 'most useful' links to resources.	Internal prioritisation of useful internal and external materials based on community opinion.

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The success of web sites which depend entirely on user-generated content, user communities and social networks represents a fundamental shift in the way users interact on the web, and, with the right approach, can be harnessed for gain within organisations (see figure 2 below).

A new way of working and developing communities

Those who have grown up with the internet understand how to adapt these tools and technologies to get the most from them. Google answers their questions, and networking tools such as LinkedIn provide their business contacts. The internet is tightly woven into their day-to-day lives and they would be unable to work effectively without it.

The Web usage habits of this generation are also changing. Gone are the days of browsing for updated content and news stories, and receiving large numbers of blanket e-mails. Users are increasingly relying on 'content aggregation' and 'syndication' to 'push' updated content to them.

This generation also relies on different devices to access their information – using home PCs, internet cafes and mobile devices to seamlessly access the same information. This behaviour will influence their expectations of corporate communications as they enter the workforce.

Personalisation tools and a reliance on community-led recommendations also help to reduce information overload, and act as efficient ways of cutting through the 'noise' of traditional information sources.

Organisations who understand how to harness this power of community both within and outside of their organisations can reap significant efficiency benefits.

Opportunities for business

Are these developments having an impact on the corporate world? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes'. They can help address two longstanding challenges – the capture and sharing of corporate knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge, and connecting those seeking information to the relevant experts.

These tools can be extremely valuable in business, but more pressingly – employees will increasingly expect them. In the coming years, it is likely that a reasonable proportion of corporate information will be disseminated on Weblogs and Wikis, as they prove to be more effective than traditional tools for communication and collaboration. Companies can harness Weblogs to provide an informal communication channel with external stakeholders, which, if utilised correctly, can still be effectively controlled.

Simple tools for contributing content, such as wikis and weblogs, provide the facility for knowledge workers to contribute quickly and communicate information relating to their current projects or areas of expertise. Social networking tools offer an improved mechanism by which these skills are identified and the initial connections made.

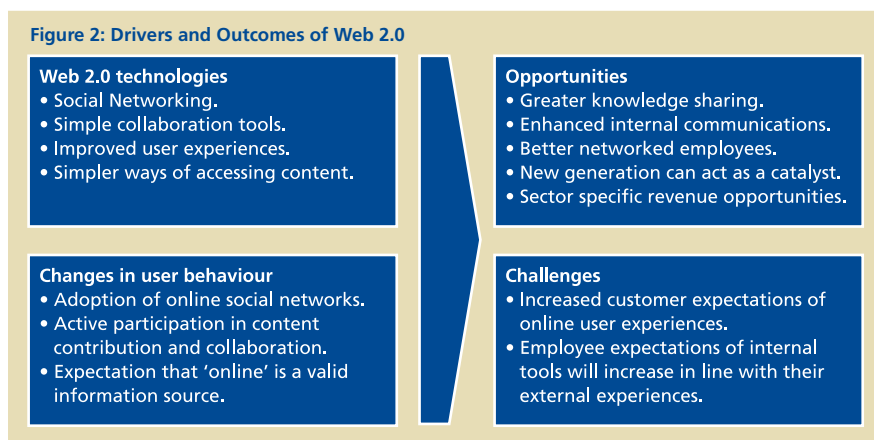
Making it happen – using the Internet Generation

These tools will not work unless they are readily adapted by the workers, and this is where the Internet Generation can provide the most significant benefit. Their familiarity with, and expectations of, these technologies can be used to help drive up take within organisations, and ensure that the necessary online communities develop and thrive.

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Organisations do need to adopt these technologies. The expectations of the internet generation – as both customers and employees – demand it, and therefore failing to incorporate and implement them is a risky proposition.

It is already likely that a number of your employees are making use of these services for work outside of your organisation. Given the quick wins that can be achieved by adopting some key Web 2.0 technologies, the question becomes "can you afford not 2.0"?



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If you would like to find out more about how Deloitte can help your company harness the potential of Web 2.0 please contact:

Costi Perricos
Tel: +44 20 7007 8206
Email: cperricos@deloitte.co.uk

Royston Seaward
Tel: +44 20 7007 8290
Email: rseaward@deloitte.co.uk

Document authors:

Tomas Jones
tormjones@deloitte.co.uk

Mike Grafham
mgrafham@deloitte.co.uk