

Social Technologies

Introduction

There are an ever increasing number of tools that are described by the term **Social Technologies**. All of these have one thing in common: the use of technology to try and build collaboration and sharing of tacit knowledge. The term is often used to describe new tools based on the internet; however, we should not forget other equally important tools which do not require a web-platform: mobile telephone communications, radio services and other face-to-face socialising methods.

Detailed description of the processes

E-dialoguing and e-conferencing enables the easy sharing of ideas, information and news. These communications can be synchronised by date and time, or can take place over days and even months. These communications are facilitated by email and web technologies. Email discussions, or lists, can use email to discuss issues. These are either of a hub-and-spoke model whereby daily messages to a moderator are compacted into a single daily message, or they are a free-for-all, whereby all messages are seen by all members of the list. Tolerances and preferences vary by individual. Some email discussions take the form of e-conferences, which are planned around component discussions and pre-prepared short papers on themes and topics. Discussions may be run using both the web and email. Conferences can have a home page which participants visit and post their contributions, and subsequently receive an email detailing either all or a summary of the messages posted.

Internet messaging services provide users with a virtual 'chat-room' where people can talk in groups or on a one-to-one basis. Chats could be seen as voluntary unmoderated discussions; although they can be moderated, this is only done rarely. IM services provide privacy options that allow users to share information more freely than in chat rooms or e-conferencing. Internet messaging services have now evolved into a more complete application, providing video and voice communication to its users thus significantly reducing communication cost.

Digital workspaces use email and the web in order to create a virtual common area for distributed project teams to work together. The software tools enable the development of research project plans, project management, and the sharing of documents across organisational boundaries. These platforms often offer several services including: to do lists, personal information managers, collaborative editors, business-oriented chat-interface and customer resource management applications. They generally allow integration with a variety of other applications, notably the Microsoft Office suite.

Arising in response to the difficulties of using weblogs in a collaborative context, a **Wiki** is a website where any user has the right to create, edit and delete content. System abuses are avoided by a revision control system that tracks changes, enabling reverting to previous versions. The potential of Wikis as open knowledge exchange systems is illustrated by the rise of Wikipedia which started in January 2001 as a 'multilingual project to create a complete and accurate open content encyclopaedia'. The usefulness of the Wiki relies on its ability to aggregate knowledge from the users themselves. Wikis can be used to develop and update information that is useful for many users who, individually, only hold parts of it.

Video streaming can turn a structured e-discussion into a video conference. This can be used to provide a useful primary source on key events. The same can be done with audio records of such events.

Podcasting is a method of distributing multimedia files, such as audio programmes or music videos, over the internet for playback on mobile devices and personal computers. The term podcast, like 'radio', can mean both the content and the method of delivery. The host or author of a podcast is often referred to as a 'podcaster'. Podcasting's essence is about creating content (audio or video – videocasting) for an audience that wants to listen or watch when they want, where they want, and how

they want. It can be used outside the internet to reach more people by providing, for example, rural radio stations with a stream of pre-recorded podcasts on new agricultural techniques or market information.

A **weblog** (usually shortened to **blog**, but occasionally spelled web log or weblog) is a web-based publication consisting primarily of periodic articles, usually in reverse chronological order. Early weblogs were simply manually updated components of common websites. However, the evolution of tools to facilitate the production and maintenance of web articles posted in a chronological fashion made the publishing process accessible to a much larger, less technical, population. Ultimately, this resulted in the distinct class of online publishing that produces blogs we recognise today. See Tool 28 for more details.

Social network services are online spaces that allow different groups of people to come together under shared interests or causes. Their uses range from online dating and political activism to debating research interests. Most social network services include some of the other social technologies to enhance connectivity and promote peer-to-peer communications. Their usefulness to research and policy influence relate to their ability to develop and sustain social and professional networks, share knowledge between members and provide access or entry points to key individuals and spaces. These spaces provide a range of social networking tools that allow users to expand their social networks to those of their friends and colleagues; as well as to search through the network's space for individuals with similar interests. Spaces like the igloo and dgroups have been specifically created to enhance the social networks of professionals in the international development and governance sector. The network provides access to personal blogs of the members, specialised libraries and a clearing house for relevant links and external services. A more popular version of this type of social technology is LinkedIn, which is targeted at business relationships.

E-learning is a web-based (as opposed to computer-based) application for long distance and on-demand learning and includes the use of other communication technologies such as email, internet forums, collaborative software, and classroom management software; as well as hardware devices such as mobiles and PDAs (in this case it is sometimes called M-learning – for mobile learning). E-learning for international development allows individuals to gain access to technical and professional education. It reduces the traditional costs (printed materials) and outreach limitations of distance learning. In most cases, e-learning sessions are designed to fit professionals and are therefore accessible on an on-demand basis – allowing users to engage in their own time.

Sources and further reading

- Hovland, I. (2005) *Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations*, ODI Working Paper 227, London: ODI.