

The Rise of Personal Web Pages at Work

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ABSTRACT

A series of 20 interviews in four organizations explores the ways in which employees take advantage of personal web pages to support their work and to reflect who they are. Both interviewee comments and web page examples suggest the importance of individual personalization of information management and dissemination, presentation and perception of personality, and usage from the reader's perspective. These results can inform the development of future web technologies for use in organizations. Furthermore, this self representation on web pages is a way of making individual knowledge more available in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the issues involved in personal representation on web pages within organizations, and was conducted as a precursor for understanding how individuals may ultimately use autonomous computer characters for self representation [1]. Personal interactions are important in a work environment for establishing trust and for exploiting individual knowledge. We suspect technologies such as personal web pages can further promote these inter-personal interactions. Thus, we are interested in the ability of web pages to both capture and present the personal expressions of their authors in conjunction with task-oriented information. While there is considerable attention on electronic representations on the Internet generally [2,3], we are interested in the use of personal web pages authored and hosted within a work environment, whether or not these pages are accessible to the Internet at large.

METHODOLOGY

We identified three high-tech product companies and one college, all of which support personal Web pages for employees. At each institution, we interviewed five employees who themselves had Web pages. For the three product companies, we went to each person's office for an informal, open-ended interview and demonstration of the Web pages. At the college, we had found the Web pages ourselves and conducted telephone interviews. In all cases, the employees were asked how they built their Web page and why they chose the particular format they used, who they thought used their Web page, and whether or not they

used other persons' Web pages. In addition, at one of the companies we examined another 8 individual Web pages without talking to the authors directly.

RESULTS

Not surprisingly, of the 28 web pages examined, 21 (75%) contained project-related information. 14 (50%) contained personal information (hobbies, etc.), 11 (39%) contained photos of the author, and another 5 (18%) contained other images which served to represent the author in some way.

We found the design of the pages to be most noticeably constrained by corporate culture, social conventions established in personal web pages of the author's peers, and the technical competency of the authors. Company 1 clearly sanctions individual Web pages but not so clearly personal information. An employee for Company 2 said the culture is to be yourself and be creative, an attitude that shows in the individual Web pages. Company 3 actively promotes individual Web servers and provides one with each office workstation but separately provides space for publicly accessible personal pages. College 1 is pushing the use of the Web not only for teaching and internal interactions but also for recruiting and external interactions.

Our primary interest, however, was the ways in which personalization emerged across work settings. In each of these organizational cultures, people find ways to present themselves and this was evident in the personal web pages as well. The following sections summarize the most significant comments from our interviews with the authors.

Personalizing From the Author's Perspective

Most pages are used for project information. As described earlier, we found that personal web pages were most often used in support of the employee's project work. The purposes were varied: information dissemination, project tracking, and information management for the individual him/herself. Authors appreciated the ability to provide pointers to their work and found it helpful to organize their own access to project information.

Authors took advantage of the opportunity to personalize. Authors in each of the four organizations included personal information and pictures on their pages. One interviewee said he hoped people would get some sense

of him besides his research field; it's a way to draw a holistic picture of himself. Even images other than photos are clues to the person. An interviewee who does testing put a graphic of a bug on his page. Another chose scenes from Alice in Wonderland which he said are "about the way my life goes."

Some authors felt uncomfortable about revealing personal information. Several authors are less willing to provide personal information. One interviewee intentionally wants his page to have a real "in-progress" look to maintain some "distance between me and it". Another said putting up personal information is not really his personality. A third couldn't think of anything interesting to put up about himself.

Authors don't know how their pages are used. The employees interviewed had only scattered knowledge about who visited their own pages although they indicated they would like to know. Their efforts to provide information appear to be motivated to a great extent by their own uses and their own desires to be known to others.

Personalizing from the Reader's Perspective

Personalization is important. As readers, most of our interviewees found value in personal information about others whether or not s/he was willing to provide personal information. One interviewee said when he thinks of other people's Web pages, it's the personal he thinks of. A second noted that personalizing the page lets you get to know someone a little better or you can get an idea of what a person's like. As one said, she likes pictures of managers so she can understand their personalities. Another said he thinks he gets more of a person if he can see the face.

Readers use personal pages because they reflect the authors. Interviewees told us that they seldom surf and are often pointed directly to sites they should see. Some know which keep useful information and go only to those sites. Others say they use the personal Web pages as an introduction to someone they'll be meeting. Often personal web pages are used by colleagues for access to other material. An interviewee says he goes to the personal page of someone on the team to find the link to the team's page. It's "easier to find that way".

Readers would like pages adapted for their use. Web pages are used by the individuals themselves, their close colleagues, and peripherally related teams. It is already becoming increasingly difficult to meet the needs of all these audiences. An interviewee told us that she thinks customizing a site would be great; she already dreads pointing a manager to a site with a lot of information when he just wants to know something specific.

TECHNOLOGY IMPLICATIONS

As we suspected, the ability to personalize web pages is important, not only to authors but to readers as well.

However, knowing what personal information to include, how to co-mingle personal and task-oriented information, and which audiences will be reading are issues for everyone. People are faced with determining how much information to present and how to successively lead readers further. As one interviewee explained, he wants to share his data results but considers it a problem knowing how to do it.

Furthermore, it is apparent that there will be a continuing tension between the degree to which people are able to personalize their pages and the time and skill required to create and maintain them. Almost all of our authors told us that designing pages is hard and that maintaining pages is absolutely too much work. One author likes knowing people can find out about him and his work but notes that the benefit doesn't come for free.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of organizational culture, project tasks or difficulties of implementation, people personalized their work and their presentation of self in ways that were meaningful both to themselves and to their readers. Recent findings in computer-supported cooperative work emphasize the individuals at the core of interactions and communications [4]. Current trends in management focus on how individual knowledge may be made available and useful to the entire organization [5]. The emergence of personal web pages at work suggests that web technologies can play a useful role in the ways in which employees further their self representation in the organization.

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