

“InnovationCafe,” an In-house Social Network Service (SNS) Used in NEC

As a measure to promote more efficient and effective information sharing and communication inside a company, the company in-house blog hosting service is attracting market attention. The NEC Group has been using an internal company SNS called the “InnovationCafe,” which has changed employees working styles and accelerated their communications beyond the barriers of different departments and organizations. Some of the software to be used for the “InnovationCafe” has been developed by the NEC employees themselves using the Mashup method in order to achieve a more convenient usage environment. NEC shares in blogs on the Web in connection with a variety of its products and can as a result provide abundant know-how that has been accumulated in operating and managing the “InnovationCafe” to our client companies. We are thus in a position to offer a wide range of solutions regarding SNS business.

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“In-House Company Blog,” a New Tool to Deal with the Diversity of Working Styles

Market trends and business environments are these days changing dramatically. Companies find that it is essential to acquire tools and software in order to carry out in-house information sharing and communications more effectively and efficiently. In such an environment, the “In-house company blog” is attracting wide public attention.

The “in-house company blog” is the concept that architecture developed for the blog, which can easily carry out information dispatch/collection and communications among users, is also suitable for use in a company Intranet environment. This is a business tool with which users have to use their real names to provide user authentication in order to identify which employee has written the information on the blog. The “Internal company SNS (Social Networking Service)” is a site that gathers every single blogs that employees attend. “The Internal company SNS” also provides various functions to enrich communications among employees such as services to communicate with “friends” inside the company or to set up a new group, etc. As a result of such services, the “internal company SNS” can be regarded as an “in-house company blog network.”

The innovative users of in-house company blogs in Japan were small office users such as venture companies or single department users of large-sized companies. The main purpose of such usage has been as a replacement tool for groupware

which could pose rather a heavy management cost for small-sized offices. However, recent cases in which large-sized companies have adopted SNS can often be found. Changes in their organizations and business styles are the reasons behind why large-sized companies have started to employ the “internal company SNS.” The organization style of the command system has shifted from a top-down style to a horizontal style. More companies operating knowledge-based businesses have shifted their business operation styles to autonomously distributed operation styles or to ad-hoc project systems. This business style shift discourages systems by which companies impose information on employees and instead it encourages the usage of tools that accelerate information sharing and communications by which employees on site can independently alter and receive advantages.

The SNS “InnovationCafe” inside the NEC Group

The SNS known as the “InnovationCafe” is widely used inside the NEC Group. It began in a department of NEC as an experimental service in September, 2004. Subsequently it was introduced as a social network service for the entire NEC and specific group companies from July, 2006, supporting approximately 80,000 employees.

Blog users are increasing by about 20% each month. From September, 2006, executives started to use the service. This trend has tended to enhance the interest of employees and the postings to the blog have reached approximately 300 a day and are increasing daily (Fig. 1).

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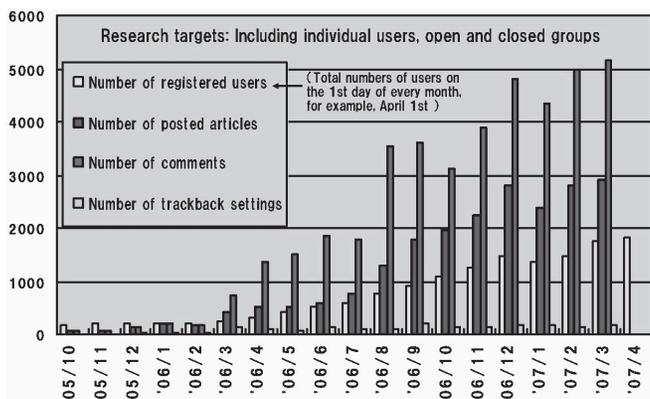


Fig. 1 Changes in the number of “InnovationCafe” users.

In the first stage of the service, volunteers among employees handled the system management. However, an official office was established in order to provide a secure management system in September, 2006, when the full-scale service was begun. The establishment of the official office was not meant to be a system to enforce the opening of more blog sites or of viewing them to employees. Usage policy is left fully at the discretion of the employees. The official office regulates minimum management rules such as prohibiting behavior that violates laws and company rules as well as limiting the extent of information disclosure and how to handle it, etc. With regard to other rules, users discuss and support them on the blogs and it is intended that rules which may disturb the active operation of the service should be avoided.

The “internal company SNS” site consists of a top page, “My Portal” pages, individual blog pages and group blog pages (Fig. 2). The screen layout is rather similar to other SNS sites on the Web. The top page displays the latest news and articles, rankings of popular blog sites, etc. Linked bloggers and belonging groups are listed on the My Portal or individu-



Fig. 2 Screen images of the “InnovationCafe.”

al blog pages.

Communications Activation to Break down Inter-Departmental Barriers

To be a member of a blog, you first start by dispatching information. Then, someone who has noticed your information may send a comment or set a trackback, from then on the linkage of human communications will expand. The in-house company blog site links people regardless of barriers between organizations or different company attitudes. Thus, a company can provide employees with a communications environment in which information and opinions can be exchanged more freely among employees.

To complete the process of a communication, there must always be a sender and a receiver of information. Some of the information will be relevant to his/her business; however, the same information might be quite irrelevant for others. In contrast, information that someone has posted just as casual talk may be important news for someone. Such situations might happen regularly in the communications between people from different departments or organizations. As they may be carrying out quite different business operations some may think that such casual chat on the blog might impede work efficiency. However, we believe that casual chatting related to company business in the “InnovationCafe” will tend to increase company impact. It is our intention to carry out the enhancement of communications for inter-company activities in order to aim at achieving “OneNEC,” a united NEC group (Fig. 3).

The effectiveness brought about by the “InnovationCafe,” a communications tool that communicates between different organizations, will be shown in the form of its effect on working style changes.

For example, even at inter-departmental staff meetings, because every day communications has already been accom-

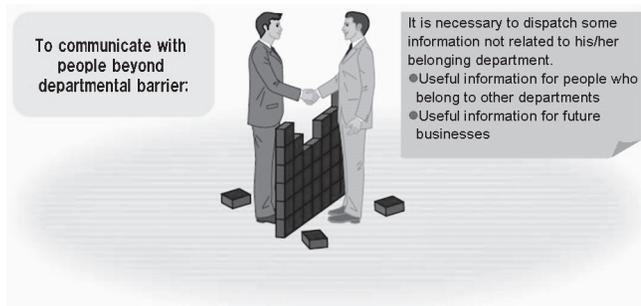


Fig. 3 Communications beyond barriers between different organizations.

Changes in work styles require thought processes

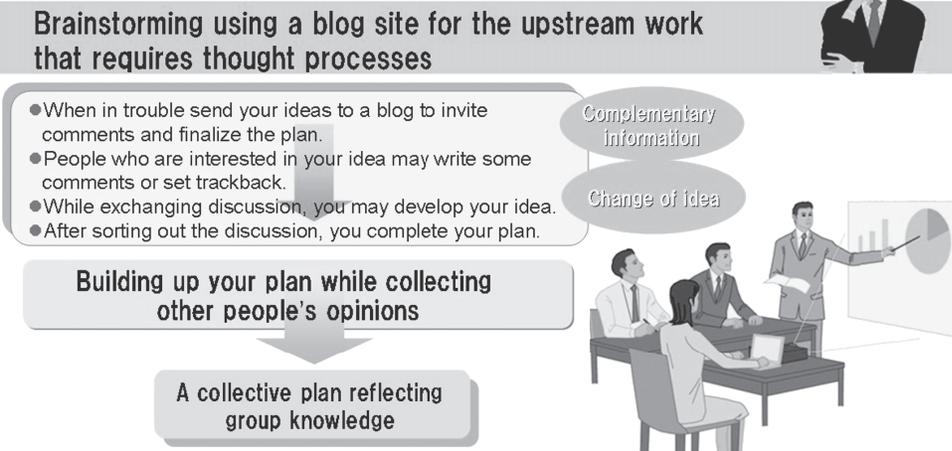


Fig. 4 An example of work style change.

plished via blogs, it is not necessary for the participants to spend time in introducing themselves or explaining their ideas, so they can concentrate on the subject of the meeting in a face-to-face situation. Even if the meeting has to be ended during the discussion, it can be continued later as a group blog.

Communications via blogs show a significant effect especially on work that requires much thought such as making conceptual plans, etc. (Fig. 4). When you have trouble in completing a plan and are just consuming time in an unproductive manner, you can post your problem or idea that you cannot sort out by yourself to the blog. Other employees who notice it may then offer advice by “comments” or “trackback” functions. Quite often, a hint or some complementary information might result, or there may even be a chance to revise an idea. The data completed after referring to various people’s opinions and ideas will have a richer content and a higher quality compared to that collected individually. The ideas of people from different departments and in different positions will be reflected, we may call this the “power of the group.”

The “InnovationCafe” Continues to Evolve by User Input of Originality and Ingenuity

New functions are being added to the “InnovationCafe” one after another. This happens because the employees belonging to engineering departments often develop new tools for the blogs via open API (Application Programming Interface) during break times or at weekends. Then, they disclose the source

codes of the tools on the blogs and other employees make other new tools based on these sources. Such a development process is the so called “MashUp” of the Web2.0 era (Fig. 5).

For example, to enable employees to dispatch information more freely, the functions listed below have been developed to make full use of comments posted to the blogs.

- A function to rank hot articles according to the number of comments received.

A valuable “internal company social database,” can be built up in a short period by introducing an internal company blog site or SNS.

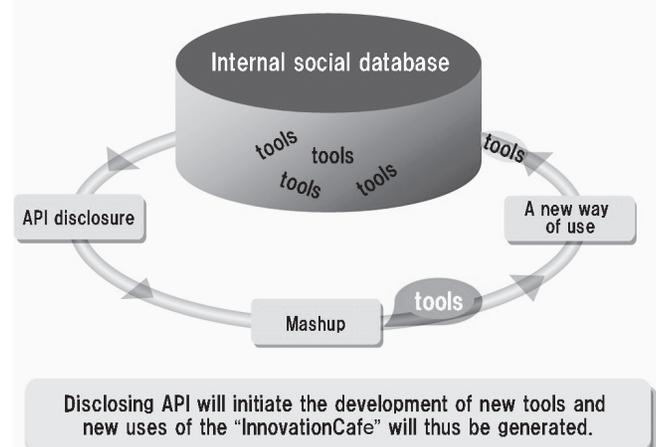


Fig. 5 Internal company social database and Mashup.

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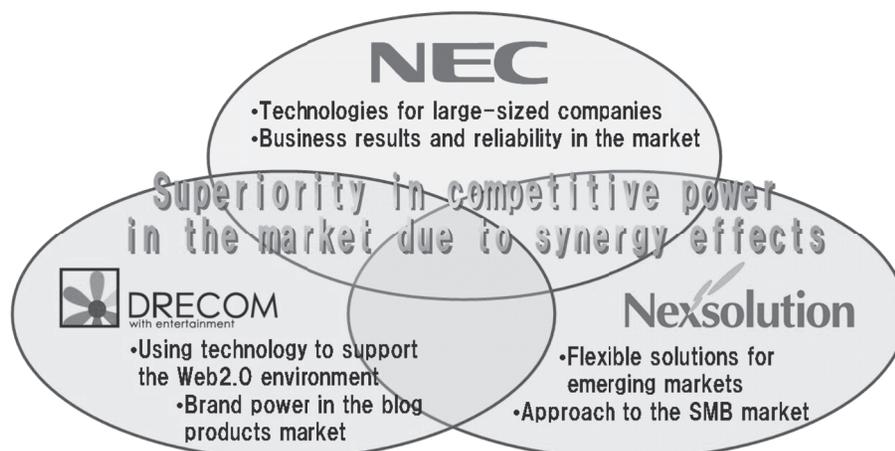


Fig. 6 Internal company blog solution business under the collaboration of three companies.

- A function to list or RSS distribute the latest comments.
- A function to count up numbers of clicks when the button allocated to an article is pressed.

With these functions, the articles for which a lot of comments are exchanged can be more widely accessible, or any new comments sent to a certain article can be found more easily, so that employees have now begun to discuss their subjects with the comment function on a stranger’s blog site. It is easier to write a comment than posting an article with a track-back function so that more and more employees have started to write their opinions, etc. using the comment function. Also, by using a click function, employees, who used to be hesitant to post an article or write a comment are now more easily able to dispatch information and express their critical opinions such as “This article is very useful,” etc. because they only have to click a button.

As explained above, a promising cycle of trends and events is occurring at the “InnovationCafe.” The usage environment there improves in proportion to the originality and ingenuity of users and this trend encourages the result that more and more employees are starting to use the “InnovationCafe” as a work tool.

Company employees develop and improve the information systems inside their companies by themselves. They are doing so not because they are in charge of it but because they enjoy developing new systems while making use of their skills. Such an approach, that a leading company should develop their system in an open community environment has hardly ever been seen before. It seems that Web2.0 trends have changed both people and society due to the spread of innova-

tive Internet systems. In addition, this phenomenon has occurred because company infrastructures have been improved and changes have happened among company employees and organizations. The advent of the “Internal company blog” might have been the catalyst that has motivated such advances.

New Business Initiated by the “InnovationCafe”

There have been successful cases of new businesses being created by people who began their relationships via the “internal company blog.” People who have not even seen each others faces have met in the “InnovationCafe” while holding discussions with each other on the net, finally they have come out from the Internet world and have built a real relationship and developed new businesses in the real world by breaking down inter-departmental barriers.

The internal company blog solution business announced on the 24th October, 2006 is one of these. The system solutions to meet the needs of customers are provided by NEC Nexsolutions Ltd. in collaboration with communication tools by “DRECOM Blog Office” (Drecom Co. Ltd.) and various NEC products (Fig. 6). First of all, linkage is established with the “UNIVRGE SV7000” NEC’s telephony server using SIP (Session Initiation Protocol). For developing more expandability and higher reliability in communication systems, NEC Nexsolutions Ltd., it is planning to collaborate with “Star-Office 21” a groupware system, “WebOTX” an application server and “CLUSTRPRO” a HA clustering product.

While managing and operating the “InnovationCafe” NEC

is accumulating abundant know-how. For example; how to activate communications in the in-house company blog, what sort of rules are required to enable smooth blog management, what types of problems are expected to occur. NEC will provide solutions for all of these and support our client companies in their pursuit of effective “in-house company blogs.”

Conclusion

Internal company blogs extract information held by individual employees and accelerate information sharing inside a company. They also activate communications among employees across different departments and organizations. Moreover, the “InnovationCafe” provides a means for employees to experience the idea of Web2.0, which focuses on “User Experience” as its most important concept. The InnovationCafe is evolving as a mechanism for extracting the abilities of individual employees and improving company supremacy.

NEC is also able and willing to provide the new solutions required for the Web2.0 age to our clients while applying the abundant know-how accumulated in the management and operation of the “InnovationCafe.”

We are quite sure that blogs will be an essential component of business solutions for enterprises. We aim to provide an environment to enable the use of blog sites for a “broadband office,” mobile work and telework systems while connecting to blog sites and for our various solutions systems and products used for employee ID, secure remote access, mobiles, unified communications, contact centers and thin client computers. NEC intends to develop a total solutions business for a powerful IT network society of the future.

*Some products and services introduced in this paper are mainly provided for the domestic market.

*DRECOM Blog Office is a trademark of Drecom Co., Ltd.