

Sharepoint as a replacement for Facebook?

By Robert Crane

Even wondered why Facebook is so popular? I certainly have and one of the major reasons for its popularity is the fact that it allows people (who aren't geeks) to create their own page on the Internet. They can fill it with everything about themselves and then invite others to link to it. Perhaps the reason that geeks don't understand its draw is that geeks have been creating web pages for years. What they perhaps forget is that it takes a while for the technology to filter down to the average user, who by and large constitutes the largest group of technology users. So something that seems so 1980's to geeks is really only just coming of age to the average user.

Now the popularity of Facebook has proven a challenge to many business owners because many Facebook addicts are far more interested in updating their web page rather than actually doing what they are paid to do during business hours. The typical reaction by management is simply to block all access to Facebook to force users back to what they should be doing during business hours, normal boring work. However, in these times of low unemployment, when companies are struggling to find good quality applicants such a policy may need to be carefully considered because potential employee may choose NOT to work at a business unless they have access to Facebook. In the current environment they certainly have the power to make this choice.

Maybe what is needed is a fresh look at the issue from a slightly different perspective. What if it was possible to encourage an employee to develop a web site to which they feel a personal attachment and yet have that web site related to the business? I propose that just such a situation is possible with Sharepoint. How? Well, Sharepoint is flexible enough to allow people to create, modify, and update their own area within Sharepoint. This could be something as simple as a single page or something as complex as a whole sub site. Best of all you can add rich content like colours, fonts and pictures yet you don't need any special software, it can all be accomplished via a web browser. Don't forget that Windows Sharepoint Services is also a FREE download for all Windows 2003 and better servers, so no upfront software costs there either.

If each employee was allocated their own page in Sharepoint and then encouraged to place information about themselves there what benefit would that have for a business? Well, they could be encouraged to detail information about their emergency contacts, what their personal vision is, what sort of activities they attend outside business and so on. It would

provide them their own person area, which they control, and yet make it available for others in the business to examine and become more familiar with that person. I think this would perhaps foster a more positive business culture for starters since it makes it easier to learn about your colleagues but I think that it would also have an additional benefit. It would familiarize the employee with Sharepoint as a tool and remove much of the fear that is so associated to technology these days. Generally the rule is, the more I use something the more familiar I become with it and the more likely I am to use it. Think of when you learnt to drive. Never thought that you'd master guiding a lumbering metallic beast around the black tarmac did you? Look at you today! Zipping in and out of traffic without even stopping to think about how you are doing it. The difference is practice and lots of it.

Once people have the ability to maintain their own pages on the corporate Sharepoint site I'm sure you're going to find employees who are really excited by what they can do and want to do more. Well, you can put those people to work helping others with their pages (if they aren't already) but now you can put them to work creating something of direct use to the business using Sharepoint. Best of all, they are pretty much trained up on the product and can start being productive immediately.

So now you have a motivated and experienced Sharepoint designer on your team. Give them a project to create a subsite to focus on a specific part of the business and you'll be amazed at what they are able to do. Maybe something that focuses on helping the marketing team. Sharepoint allows the creation of separate calendar, contacts, lists and so on that can be used to focus on that specific requirement. Best of all Sharepoint is flexible enough to be able to create exactly what you or your team requires. Better yet you now have an in house developer who is chuffed at the opportunity to showcase their talents.

The end result is that the business gets something that helps them run their operations better or more efficiently. Other employees get a tool that is customized to their exact needs and developed by someone who knows the business not some random outside consultant. Finally, you get a much more motivated employee because they have developed new skills and been given an opportunity to apply these new skills all within the same business. How could this be anything but a win – win situation for all those involved?

So perhaps rather than trying to take draconian steps of blocking and banning new web developments like Facebook a little time spend considering how they can be harnessed within your business may in fact help you make the younger members of your staff into the most productive members of your business.