

## New workers, new workplace? Getting the balance right

John Cunningham



John Cunningham is Director of Business Markets at ntl:Telewest Business, Hook, UK.

The term "digital native" was first coined back in 2001 by author Marc Prensky to describe a new breed of students entering educational establishments for whom technologies such as the internet were a way of life. Those first digital natives are now making their way into the workplace and having grown up alongside the internet, their understanding and expectations of technology in a business environment are very different from any other previous generation.

For example, they would view technologies such as Instant Messaging (IM) or video conferencing not as novelties, but necessities. And where previously the water cooler might have been the place to be "seen," the digital native is much more likely to be chatting about the office party via Facebook and Twitter. Not only is this a culture shock for businesses, but it also presents a strategic challenge. Whilst most businesses recognize that they need to move with the times, the majority of management and IT structures pre-date Web 2.0. The question is, how can they get the best out of young workers, accommodate new technology and educate staff about using it effectively and acceptably within the workplace?

### New rules of the workplace

The advent of social media technologies has changed the game for businesses and they need to work out where they fit into the "new" world and how it can work for them. There is certainly some skepticism as to whether these technologies can cross into the workplace and benefit the enterprise. Research from ScanSafe in July 2009 revealed that the number of companies blocking social networking sites in the previous six months had risen by a quarter. However, whilst it is easy to dismiss sites such as Twitter and Facebook as unproductive, it is important that companies take a step back and realize how these tools can benefit them.

Social networking opens many doors. Whilst in the past networks were built through the exchange of business cards and face-to-face meetings, this has transferred to the digital sphere. As famously asserted by 15-year-old intern Matthew Robson in his report for Morgan Stanley, Twitter is not for the younger generation, but has attracted a more grown-up demographic. According to Ofcom's *Communications Market Report 2009* the site has attracted an influx of senior level professionals aged 35-54. Equally LinkedIn has created communities for professionals with shared interests, giving people the opportunity to network with people from sectors they might otherwise not have been exposed to.

These online communities have also led to a shift in how customers and prospects are happy to be engaged. Whereas previously they might have objected to phone calls or e-mails, they appreciate that by being on these sites that they are inevitably going to be approached or engaged in conversation. Web 2.0 has led to the personalization of communication, meaning that when these stakeholders are approached it is via a channel they are comfortable with. Savvy businesses are recognizing this fact and looking to reflect this sea change in the way they engage with stakeholders.

Strategically, Web 2.0 technologies are not just about engaging prospects and growing revenue; they can also be extended to foster collaboration across the organization and improve internal communications. With many enterprises operating across multiple locations, IM and video conferencing can help international teams knit together and foster camaraderie. As the intranet becomes old hat, it is becoming harder to find creative ways to disseminate company information in an engaging way. Channels such as YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook Groups offer companies a great forum to do this.

### Putting social strategies in place

So, how can this all work in practice? And where do digital natives come into all of this? With many companies just starting to appreciate how social media can fit into their business, new graduates have a huge role to play in passing on their digital fluency. To them, Web 2.0 is a way of life and they can help companies develop an approach that works best for them as well as playing a key role in educating older members of staff on how to interact with these tools, which is vital to driving adoption.

It is natural that many companies remain concerned that rather than using Twitter for business purposes, employees will take advantage and start to use the internet as a digital playground where they can chat with friends and make social arrangements. For this reason it is important to establish a usage policy that will formalize how workers can use social networking within a work context and spend the time communicating it to them properly. Employees who understand their responsibilities will usually abide by their terms.

Aside from ensuring these tools are being used appropriately, companies also need to ensure that the use of Web 2.0 tools are not negatively impacting other more mission critical applications. Businesses need to ensure that they have the network capacity in place to support a more "chatty" organization, where more and more external and internal conversations are happening over the network. Viewing the latest internal communication video on YouTube should not impact access to a CRM system, for example. Understanding the voice and data that travels over the network is essential to generating the visibility required to understand if you have the right level of network capacity to support this new way of working.

Web 2.0 technologies have been talked about for a number of years, but it is only now as digital natives start to move into the workplace that their real potential is truly being recognized. Communication has moved more towards conversation and the creation of communities. Digital savvy employees bring a wealth of knowledge to companies. Businesses know that they can no longer ignore Web 2.0 as to do so means being left behind and digital natives can provide the answers about how to integrate these technologies to avoid being left behind.

### About the author

John Cunningham was appointed Director of Business Markets in March 2006 and his role is to lead the ntl:Telewest Business sales teams serving the SMB, public sector and corporate markets. John's previous role was with Telewest as Director of Business Services (2003-2006), during which time John led the activities of the private sector sales, customer services, regional support and national training teams. John's experience in the IT industry reaches back to 1985 and an eight-year period with the data networking organization Case Communications, progressing from Account Manager to UK Sales Manager, including a three year overseas posting as General Manager in New Zealand.