

TECHNOLOGY CORNER:

THE **REAL** CHALLENGE OF WEB 2.0

 **Mark Oehlert**

The hardest part about implementing “Web 2.0” or “Social Media” within the defense acquisition workforce is not acquiring new technology, successful change management, or organizational design. The most difficult challenges confronting users of this new technology are not monetary, functionality, or even integration; rather, the most difficult challenges are difficult questions about how the workforce regards the dynamics of fear, control, and trust within their own organizations. Can these very human questions be answered in a manner that most fully exploits the capabilities that are now open to the acquisition workforce? In this article, the author seeks to answer that question and provide insight and close examination of this new 21st century phenomenon called Web 2.0.

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Instead of pouring knowledge into people's heads, we need to help them grind a new set of glasses so they can see the world in a new way. That involves challenging the implicit assumptions that have shaped the way people have historically looked at things.

John Seely Brown

The quote that begins this article speaks to humanity's common need to avoid assumptions of the past in order to move forward (Brown, 2003). At no time in history have assumptions of the past been left so far behind in the dust as in the past quarter century. The Information Age has ushered in the phenomenon of the Internet—a global cultural gift to mankind that, in recent years, has spawned its own technological child: “Web 2.0” or “Social Media.” This article briefly examines the profound effect of social media on the way we work and learn.

Working under a research grant approximately 10 years ago, this author interviewed a number of managers who had been in charge of implementing Learning Management Systems (LMS) within their organizations. One question posed asked them to name the largest single hurdle to the successful installation and integration of the LMS. Was there sufficient funding? Yes. Staffing? Yes. Were there hiccups in technical terms? Sure, but nothing catastrophic. What then was this single greatest hurdle to success? In every organization, the answer was insufficient organizational design and change management. So then the question was posed to the LMS vendors: Do you provide any organizational design or change management services with your products? None did. The history of LMS is now replete with stories of companies on their third, fourth, and fifth LMS installs. Herein lies the lesson of history and the real challenge of Web 2.0.

Sometimes, it feels like the challenge of 2.0 or social media is one of keeping up with technology. Seemingly, a new tool is created and launched in a matter of seconds versus the pace of 2.0's predecessor technology. Right now, around 100,000 apps are available for the iPhone alone (Farrell, 2009). More and more, the real challenge appears to be one of security. This author was fortunate enough to serve on the working group that helped, in some small part, to craft the current (as of October 2009) draft of a DoD-wide policy for social media usage that is currently being coordinated. A quick review of articles on this topic (Bezier, 2009) and the actual comments coming back from the field pinpoint a level of concern over the exposure of systems or classified information. This concern, however, as interpreted by the author from both the articles reviewed and comments from the field, clearly translates into an element of distinct anxiety.

The challenge that the defense acquisition workforce and all of the Department of Defense faces in implementing the benefits of social media lies in the ability to confront the Three Horsemen of Social Media: Fear,

Control, and Trust (Hinchcliffe, 2009). How many times, when something like social media is brought up (and it must have happened when e-mail was dawning), do we hear objections such as, What if people say the wrong things? What if people say secret things? What if people say bad things? All of these statements indicate some level of fear of the vulnerabilities that these new technologies would launch into the workplace. The only problem? They're wrong—and they ignore the tangible and intangible costs of a missed opportunity.

The reason these objections are a collective red herring is that social media actually do not create any of these as new vulnerabilities. If employees have e-mail and phones or even access to copy machines, the ability and vulnerability for them to create mass havoc already exists.

The First Horseman: Fear

Consider the story of Pandora's box (Wikipedia, n.d.). Pandora is given a box and told not to open it. Her curiosity overcomes her though, and she opens the box and releases all the ills of the world. The end of the story, however, is often left out. Pandora does manage to shut the box again, trapping only hope inside. This is exactly what the fear of social media is doing. By not going forward, albeit prudently and thoughtfully, the acquisition workforce is not managing to prevent any new vulnerabilities. Rather, they are simply managing to keep out the very capabilities—increased sharing of knowledge and increased collaboration—that could actually mitigate some existing vulnerabilities. Even the defense intelligence community is recognizing and embracing that dynamic.

The Second Horseman: Control

The second anxiety-causing dynamic relates to control. The defense acquisition workforce and its managers have always thought (and taught) that tighter and tighter control would help everyone “stay on message”; social media destroys that paradigm. What social media teaches is that to control or shape the message, one actually has to participate in the discussion.

One of the best examples of this is a blog written by Bob Lutz, the vice chairman for General Motors. Lutz started the blog about GM cars called the FastLane Blog (Lutz, 2009). When it debuted, readers seriously doubted if Lutz was really writing it. He eventually confirmed it was really him, and managed to start an authentic conversation with GM customers. Regardless of what happened to the company from a financial standpoint, Lutz realized that press releases just did not convince anyone of anything. Therefore, to shape the conversation about GM cars, he gave up the

mythical control of only releasing “approved” content and acting like people were not talking about GM cars anyway—and simply jumped into the thick of things.

The current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is on Facebook and Twitter (Facebook, 2009); and the Chief Information Officer of the Department of the Navy blogs (CHINFO, 2009). They do these things for several reasons, but one is to shape the conversation by being part of it.

The Third Horseman: Trust

The final and third horseman is Trust. This is possibly the most powerful of all three—it asks the defense acquisition workforce management to look at the people they have hired and upon whom they rely for the day-to-day operations of Project Management Offices (PMOs) and Major Defense Acquisition Programs (MDAPs). Not only are managers to look at their workforce, but actually articulate how much they trust them. What message is being sent if managers trust their acquisition workforce to manage millions of taxpayer dollars, but do not trust them to refrain from using Twitter at work? Consider that these same employees are trusted to make acquisition program decisions that will affect the lives of thousands of soldiers, while managers may be reluctant to allow editing of documents collaboratively. In one sense, what this boils down to is: What kind of culture do we believe we have? Henry Jenkins, an author and MIT professor, writes about one such culture that the defense acquisition workforce may do well to look toward—a participatory culture.

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to expression and engagement, strong support for creating and sharing, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to the novices. (Jenkins 2009).

This is the kind of culture that would seem to value and promote trust among employees and between supervisors, leadership, management, and their employees on the front lines executing their direction. Make no mistake: Fear, Control, and Trust are all issues that must be dealt with to successfully exploit the rich capabilities that social media offer us.

Again, the quote that began this article speaks to the need to avoid assumptions of the past in order to move forward; do not discount this in dealing with the three horsemen—their power to restrain us lies as much within our organizational designs as any real or realized problem or vulnerability. Bill Gates, speaking in 2005 to the National Governor’s Association, had a similar warning. The topic was education but the message was just as clear. He asserted that:

America's high schools are obsolete. By obsolete, I don't just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and underfunded—though a case could be made for every one of those points. By obsolete, I mean that our high schools—even when they're working exactly as designed—cannot teach our kids what they need to know today. Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today's computers on a 50-year-old mainframe. It's the wrong tool for the times. (Gates, 2005)

Those of us who work in training and education within DoD need to share a similar concern. The argument is not that all we do is obsolete; the argument is that unless we adapt, improvise, and overcome our issues with regard to Fear, Control, and Trust within our own organizations, we may well be sustaining a model that is functioning perfectly as designed, but the design itself may be insufficient for current and emerging requirements.

Author Biography



Mr. Mark Oehlert is a recognized expert, author, and speaker in the fields of innovation, emerging technology, and game-based learning. He has worked in the e-Learning field for 10 years, bringing his unique insight as a trained historian and anthropologist to a range of challenges from performance support to mobile computing and learning strategy development. Mr. Oehlert now serves as an innovation evangelist at the Defense Acquisition University.

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