InFocus

Podcasting, Blogs, and Wikis
Can New Technology Lead to More Efficiency?
By John "Buddy" Showalter, P.E.

I certainly don't claim to be a technology guru. However, part of my job involves trying to determine the most effective ways to communicate technical information to engineers, architects, and building officials. I also constantly try to learn new ways to be more efficient and effective in my own work environment. So, can technology's new communications tools lead to more efficiency, or are podcasting, blogs, and wikis just another passing technology fad? And, what do any of these have to do with structural engineering? Here are some possible ideas to consider.

Podcasting

Is podcasting the future for continuing education? Did you know that 60% of all vehicles manufactured today are iPod compatible? If continuing education material is developed in 20-30 minute podcasts, would engineers take advantage and listen to CEU material on their commute?

How about podcasts of technical articles, like those in **STRUCTURE®** magazine? Imagine the opportunity to "catch up on your reading" on your commute home, listening to articles recorded in MP3 format? There might be a commercial or two involved to help defray the cost to the publisher, but it certainly could be an efficient way of keeping up with some of those stacks on our desks that we'd like to "get to someday."

Blogs

Blogging, utilizing or participating in a blog, could be used by a company to obtain customer feedback. What if you were able to get this feedback instantaneously, in a format your customers were comfortable providing? Whether you admit it or not, your customers are talking about you. Some may not tell you directly, but they are talking to fellow customers or talking with their wallet (going elsewhere). And while I am sure that most customers are saying good things about you, a few may be criticizing aspects that you need to know about. Instead of all that going on behind your back, why not use the power of the Web to put it all in a format that benefits you – both the good and the bad?

A blog could also be used for project management. It could be set up as an Intranet accessible only to certain users. Instead of following discussions in a folder in your e-mail system, a blog allows the thread to be organized and searchable using a Web browser.

Just to demonstrate how easy it is to set up a blog, I created one myself. If you'd like to check it out, visit **http://www.awc.org/wood-design/** where I've begun to blog some of the frequently asked questions (FAQs) to our helpdesk. Perhaps you have your own FAQs from architects and builders. A blog might be a way for your company to provide a forum for your customers to ask questions and receive feedback. For those of you worried about "liability," comments can be actively moderated to keep offensive or questionable content from being posted.

Wikis

Have you ever worked on a document with a group of people and had several drafts floating around? You're not always sure which one is current and if someone forgets to turn on "track changes" you're not even sure what changes were made. Enter the "wiki," a type of web site that allows users to add and edit content in real time.

Similar to Lotus Notes, a wiki is far less expensive, while offering 80% of the functionality of a full-blown collaboration tool. So far, only a few big time companies such as Best Buy®, Yahoo!®, and Walt Disney® have adopted this technology, but predictions are that by 2009, fifty percent of companies will have adopted wikis as a collaboration tool.

Probably the most familiar wiki is Wikipedia® (**http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki**). Their welcome page touts, "Welcome to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit." The beauty of this technology is the ability to "roll back" pages to previous edits if erroneous or poorly written content is added.

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Applications for your organization might be development of specifications and other documents requiring collaboration. Similar to a blog, it could be set up as an Intranet, with password protection.

Keeping Up

Are you keeping up with technological advances? It seems to be advancing at a blazing pace. Consider these statistics:
- Processing power doubles every 18 months
- Storage capacity doubles every 12 months
- Bandwidth throughput doubles every 9 months

Conclusion

So, can new technology lead to more efficiency, or are podcasting, blogs, and wikis just another passing technology fad? The only way I know how to find out is to try it. We've all done it – from calculator to computer, from typewriter to word processor, from snail mail to e-mail and then instant messaging, from desk to cell phones, from desktops to laptops…what's next? Ask your kids. They'll "text message" the answer to you.▪

Mr. Showalter joined the American Forest & Paper Association staff in 1992, and serves as Director of Technical Media for the American Wood Council (AWC). Responsibilities at AWC include development of design tools like: the Allowable Stress Design (ASD) Manual for Engineered Wood Construction, which includes the National Design Specification® for Wood Construction (NDS®), and other technical media. Buddy serves as the wood industry representative on the STRUCTURE Editorial Board.

The Lingo...

podcast

A non-music audio broadcast that has been converted to an MP3 file or other audio file format for playback on a digital music player. Developed by former MTV VJ and Internet businessman Adam Curry in 2004, the term was coined from Apple's iPod. Using the RSS 2.0 syndication format, podcasts are made available to subscribers just like news feeds. The client program that captures the audio feeds and synchronizes them with the music player is a *podcatcher*.

blog

(We**BLOG**) A Web site that contains dated entries in reverse chronological order (most recent first) about a particular topic. Functioning as an online newsletter, blogs can be written by one person or a group of contributors. Entries can contain commentary and links to other Web sites and images. A search facility may also be included. A blog with video clip entries instead of text is called a *video Weblog* or *vlog*.

wiki

A Web site that can be quickly edited by its visitors with simple formatting rules. A Wiki was first developed by Ward Cunningham in the mid-1990s to provide collaborative discussions. *Wiki wiki* means "quick" in Hawaiian.

Definitions provided from Answers.com