USING BLOGS AS eLEARNING TOOLS BY THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract*: The online environment provides broad options regarding the types of web applications that can be used in eLearning, so who wants to use online learning technics can opt for community websites, forums, blogs, social networks.*
Nowadays, a blog is considered by specialists a very powerful marketing tool for influencing public opinion, and can be described as an explosion of online marketing products; it could also be considered as an instrument of interpersonal and organizational information that can be used in practices of eLearning in companies and it might be seen as a challenge for organizational environment, an innovative tool for measuring efficiency and performance. There are currently blogs that attract online over 100,000 readers per day, enough to interest the media relations professionals. In addition, corporate blogs are useful tools for identifying consumer attitudes and concerns.
This paper represents a quantitative research about the influence of blogs as e-learning tools to the professional community in Romania.
Blogs are not just personal diaries, with impressions in chronological order, they can be real customer or employee feedback archives. Organizational blogs as marketing tools can be used for marketing communication.
Blogs can also be used to influence public opinion or internal organizational management.
With all the benefits a blog can be an instrument of manipulation, because most companies make their fake blogs known to prospects to make positive, influencing and manipulating preferences to visitors or customers. Although it is a means of sharing personal information for teachers or trainers it can be a way of learning, product promotion, comments and opinions, the feedback being appreciated as a way of knowing the needs and wishes of students and a modern e-learning tool.

Keywords: *inbound marketing, eLearning tools, quantitative research, blog*

I. INTRODUCTION

The online environment provides broad options regarding the type of web applications that can be used in eLearning, so who wants to use online learning technics can opt for community websites, forums, blogs, social networks.

Nowadays, a blog is considered by specialists a very powerful marketing tool for influencing public opinion, and can be described as an explosion of online marketing products; it could also be considered as an instrument of interpersonal and organizational information that can be used in practices of eLearning in companies and it might be seen as a challenge for organizational environment, an innovative tool for measuring efficiency and performance. There are currently blogs that attract online over 100,000 readers per day, enough to interest the media relations professionals. In addition, corporate blogs are useful tools for identifying consumer attitudes and concerns.

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A blog is a published journal, updated with high frequency and the Internet is a perfect environment for a wider audience. A blog is built on a CMS (Content Management System) and represents a chronological log data in reverse order; the current positions are listed first followed by the oldest. A blog provides a wealth of information that Internet users take into account.

Blogs are tools used for spreading information, opinions, comments on subjects of vast areas of political, marketing, education, news, etc. appearing in various forms of text, audio, video content. The Blogosphere represents the total number of blogs and bloggers. The term weblog was coined by Jorn Barger on 17 December 1997 and the short form appeared after Peter Merholz in April 1999, broke the word in a sentence ("we blog") in the sidebar of his blog, Peterme.com [2]. The Blogosphere, both in Romania and abroad is in constant evolution. In 2011, bloggers spent more time on their blogs in comparison to the previous years.

Blogads conducted a survey on a representative sample of 57,000 respondents and the results concluded that 25% of Internet users read blogs of interest. It was also identified that those interested in the content of blogs were represented in the vast majority by consumers seeking high quality information, searching for data in areas of interest; they were described as people with claims in the choices they made, preferring highly accurate information sources. They read specialty online newspapers, prestigious newspapers in various fields addressing business issues, sites using RSS to read blogs or information management sites on various blogs consulting on average 20 blogs daily. Also behind this research, there were people over 30 years old in proportion of 75%, 75% of readers were male and 2% CEOs. Blogs present a wide variety in terms of size, approaches and opportunities for advertising. Technorati has identified three main categories of blogs that are found also in the Romanian blogosphere:

➢ Personal - they discuss topics of personal interest, hobbies, representing about 80% of the blogosphere;

➢ Occupational / professional - these blogs are focused on topics related to certain professions or simply help in nurturing the individual, not required to be provided by an employee of an organization or company; personal items are allowed;

➢ Corporate - these blogs are officially created, maintained and supported by the organization or they are hidden behind a simple name to find information about current and potential customers / users of products / services company; this category conveys important information about the company, mission, policies, products and services, employees, social responsibility, and it is used to publish news about the company, its products or services to be launched, promotional offers, employment opportunities, collaboration with various partners and any information that can attract visitors.

Also, Technorati has performed in 2011 a classification according to the nature of blogging. These categories were derived from those ones identified above:

➢ Hobby - representing more than half of the blogosphere; respondents of the research conducted by Technorati in 2011 said they had activities of blogging as a hobby, for fun, and did not record any income, 60% devoting less than three hours per week to this work, and about half mentioning receiving comments from readers.

➢ Professional - a narrower category comprising bloggers or independent bloggers using blogging as a way to supplement income, be deemed to be their full-time service. Most of the bloggers in this category did not consider this activity as the primary source of income.

➢ Corporate - they are only slightly present among bloggers. They write as part of their full-time or part-time job for the company or organization where they work. More than half of bloggers provide expertise, much with professional recognition for the organization and others have a mission to attract new customers. Corporations have found that this activity brings greater recognition in the

field of employment, and can be successfully used as a primary metric measuring the number of unique visitors.

➢ Entrepreneurs – they do not represent an important percentage and are characterized as individuals who write and post for their own company or organization. Most of these bloggers write mainly about their work, others share their experience, others gain personal recognition and very importantly, others attract new customers for their business.

From the annually conducted research by Technorati among bloggers around the world, between 2004 and 2011 there was an increase in the number of bloggers pursuing mainly the attainment of revenues, about 40%.

Also there is an increase in the number of blogs that have a marketing purpose such as organization presentation, promotion, distribution, public relations (PR) and corporate social responsibility.

So we can talk about a blog phenomenon. Thus we can talk about two sides of a blog:

➢ *The role of blogs in the marketing policy promoted* by the company where a blog is seen as a tool for promoting and distributing products or services, public relations and social responsibility;

➢ *The role of blogs as tools for eLearning*, because individuals usually found in offices in front of computers can easily learn in their own time and for this reason the educational system must adapt these teaching methods to the existing technology. Using blogs in distance learning and personal development, Life Long Learning could become a competitive advantage.

Besides blogs as learning methods we use Chat Rooms, Newsgroups, and professional virtual communities.

1.1. Open source e-Learning Projects

In 2011, the most popular platforms were categorized on the *efrontlearning* blog; here are described the most popular 10 open source eLearning projects from different fields.

App Inventor - (mLearning)App Inventor for Android allows people with minimal programming experience to create simple, personal apps for Android devices. You can create a quiz app to assess your employees knowledge. [1]

BigBlueButton - (Web Conferencing) BigBlueButton is built for Higher Education. It enables universities and colleges to deliver a high-quality learning experience to remote students. The project is hosted at Google Code. [1]

eFront - (LMS) eFront is a user friendly Open Source Learning Management System, visually attractive and SCORM certified! eFront enables "community learning" and supports the principles of "collective knowledge". [1]

CamStudio - (Authoring Tool) CamStudio is able to record all screen and audio activity on your computer and create industry-standard AVI video files and using its built-in SWF Producer can turn those AVIs into lean, mean, bandwidth-friendly Streaming Flash videos (SWFs). [1]

LAMS - (Authoring Tool) LAMS is a revolutionary new tool for designing, managing and delivering online collaborative learning activities. It provides teachers with a high intuitive visual authoring environment for creating sequences of learning activities. [1]

Xerte - (Authoring Tool) The Xerte Project provides a full suite of open source tools for e-Learning developers and content authors producing interactive learning materials. [1]

MLOAT - (Authoring Tool) Multimedia Learning Object Authoring Tool enables content experts to easily combine video, audio, images and texts into one synchronized learning object. All assets are configured to be played back in a pre-configured order. [1]

eXe - (Authoring Tool) The eXe project developed a freely available Open Source authoring application to assist teachers and academics in the publishing of web content without the need to become proficient in HTML or XML markup. [1]

ClassTools.net - (Authoring Tool) Create free educational games, quizzes, activities and diagrams in seconds! Host them on your own blog, website or intranet! No signup, no passwords, no charge! [1]

OpenMeetings - (Web Conferencing) OpenMeetings is a free browser-based software that allows you to set up instantly a conference on the Web. You can use your microphone or webcam, share documents on a white board, share your screen or record meetings. [1]

II. ONLINE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES

Professional communities have begun to make an appearance in Romania in various specialized fields. The main objective of professional virtual communities is the mutual exchange of qualitative information on specific areas.

ProgSquad professional community, for example is an open community for IT professionals located in different professional levels [3].

Advantages brought by the membership to the community are revealed on the site as follows [3]:

- ➢ *Gather Information*-access to topic-specific articles written by other specialists to IT;
- ➢ *Test Your Knowledge* - access to scenarios and case studies, grouped by area of IT knowledge (business analysis, customer support, software engineering, methodology development, soft skills, technical management);
- ➢ *Compete* - the opportunity to participate actively in professional development activities organized in the community;
- ➢ *Compare Tools* - access to software reviews;
- ➢ *Compare ¬ Knowledge* - access to reviews of books and magazines;
- ➢ *Collaborate* - for handling ProgSquad by trainers and / or community colleges with specific technical problems;
- ➢ *Explore* - access to information about certifications and certification routes;
- ➢ *Participate* - the opportunity to participate in events ProgSquad and to influence the manner of operation of some events.

These are also representing the advantages in any other online professional community.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Currently we are in a time of ICT (Information and Communication Technology). The Internet is necessary for using the virtual environment to exploit the variety and wealth of information offered to us. Today's Romanian youth demands services because of lack of time to go to the actual courses. This is why it is of high importance for the academics to focus on eLearning methods as students will be more responsive to increasingly more information. Blogs are tools that could be exploited for effective learning and flexibility. The research was conducted among students of the Romanian-American University in Bucharest, with ages between 18 and 40 years old. The research was conducted between October and December 2011. Research purposes relate to the online learning methods, especially blogs used by young people studying in Bucharest.

Professional communities in Romania should refocus their horizons by considering learning programs conducted through online tools, especially blogs.

A sample of 521 respondents gathered in RAU (Romanian American University) was used being statistically representative. The data was entered into SPSS 17.0 and correlations were made, hypotheses were tested and also $\chi 2$ test (chi square test) and cross tabulation were performed.

Figure 1. Crosstab - eLearning methods * Online instruments

		Online_instruments		Total
			1	
eLearning_methods	Blogs Count	352	0	352
	Expected Count	185.1	165.9	352.0
	Expected Count			521.0

Crosstab analysis in SPSS shows the number of respondents who prefer to learn using online tools. The above table shows only blogs as online learning methods. The results show that 352 of the 521 respondents choose the learning preference of blogs.

Following the results obtained in specific table chi square test, we can say that there is a relationship of interdependence between eLearning methods and online blogs as tools. This is confirmed by the small values obtained - 0000 limits and the high values of Pearson Chi-Square test (143.550), Likelihood ratio (63 350) and Fisher's exact test (63.725). Together, these results determine the acceptance of the null hypothesis with a probability of 99%.

Following the results obtained in the specific table hi square test, we can say that there is a relationship of interdependence between online and self-sampling. This is confirmed by small values obtained - 0000 limits and the high values of Pearson Chi-Square test (167.210), Likelihood ratio (230 373) and Fisher's exact test (221.828). Together, these results determine the acceptance of the null hypothesis with a probability of 99%.

Since the values obtained are very low - level of significance is 0000, we believe that the null hypothesis is accepted with a probability of 99%. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between self-interdependence online and the use blogs as online learning tools.

Figure 2. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Monte Carlo Sig. (2-sided)		
	Sig.		99% Confidence Interval		Sig.	99% Confidence Interval	
	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound		Upper Bound	Lower Bound
Pearson Chi-Square	167.210 (a)	3	.000	.000(b)	.000	.000
Likelihood Ratio	230.373	3	.000	.000(b)	.000	.000
Fisher's Exact Test	221.828			.000(b)	.000	.000
N of Valid Cases	521					

0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.27.

Source: Crosstabs extracted by the authors from SPSS soft, version 17.0

After using SPSS, the results show that respondents consider using online blogs as online tools not only useful and effective learning methods but also as promotional tools.

Figure 3. Blog's utility
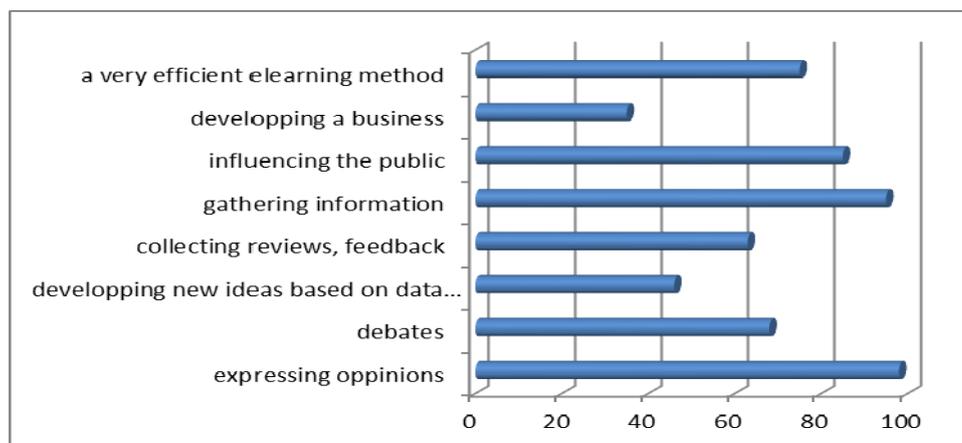
Also a ranking of benefits provided by blogs was created as shown in the chart. It can be noted that they are well appreciated as methods of expressing opinions, information gathering, *highly influencing* masses (viral marketing) but also a very effective learning method.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

All students, who took part in the survey, know the term blog and also know the meaning of a blog. The students are mainly attracted by interactive learning methods where they can use video, audio and online discussions.

Interactive learning methods used in universities are not promoted and exploited as they should be. The respondents are familiar with the meaning of the virtual community term and believe in it as a rich source of information. Most respondents considered the student-teacher communication forum to be effective, a method of easier learning and recollection, an advantage to have a source to be consulted at any time of day and / or night, thus breaking the barriers of time.

The respondents believe that blogs are a tool to achieve more attractive themes for seminars that should take place preferable in the virtual environment.

The eLearning related objectives of an educational institution and the posting of blogging tools could lead to image building and institutional strengthening, fostering team spirit, mobilizing students for learning faster in the online environment for the purpose of becoming better prepared for the labor market.

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