Weblogs: A Communication Tool

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The term “weblogs” (or blogs, as they are more commonly known) is a contraction of the words “web” and “log.” According to Webopedia (2007), a weblog is “a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual.” Although this definition is true, it fails to mention the expanded role that blogs play in modern healthcare practice, allowing not only individuals but also organizations to share, receive, provide, and collect information.

Blogs have been around for several years, but they have finally made their way into healthcare as an efficient and effective communication tool. The biggest health organization to have relied on blogs for information sharing and online interaction is none other than the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in an effort to collect information on pandemic-flu preparedness from healthcare leaders around the country (see http://blog.pandemicflu.gov). The vast collection of knowledge and insights that the HHS blog has gathered will benefit healthcare leaders, employees, patients, and observers for years to come.

This column discusses the purpose and advantages of a healthcare blog. More importantly, it addresses the potential usefulness of blogs for healthcare administrators. A list of some of my favorite hospital administration blogs is included here as well.

CHRISTINA’S CONSIDERATIONS WEBLOG

I started my blog in 2004, to help me keep track of the large amount of valuable healthcare reference information I have collected (see http://thielst.typepad.com). The blog became a repository, replacing my paper copies of interesting healthcare articles from magazines and journals. When I need to read about a specific topic, I just go back to my blog to pull up the information. I can also send it on to a colleague, as desired.

In addition, my blog allows me to voice my perspective and to invite commentary from readers. While the vast majority of my readers do not post a comment, some do. This interaction has led to an expansion of my network of contacts around the country and across healthcare disciplines. More importantly, it has allowed the exchange of ideas and points of view.

WHY BLOG?

Blogs provide an opportunity for two-way online communication. They are easy to set up, and they can be set up as a public site (as mine is) or as a private site for only select readers to view. The public blog maintained by three hospitals in
New York functions as a community newsletter, called MediSys Pulse Newsletter (see http://medisys.typepad.com). This newsletter is a way for these three facilities to share news about their respective organizations and to provide healthcare-related information.

Private blogs may also be maintained by hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare organizations and providers. Such blogs may be set up as an extension of the organization’s internal communication efforts. They can be viewed exclusively by employees, medical staff, and other healthcare professionals to keep up-to-date on facility-related topics such as construction/expansion projects, workplace issues, performance improvement initiatives, and employee support groups.

A private blog is especially useful in the event of disasters, when a great amount of detailed information has to be disseminated to people who may be in different locations. Can you imagine the benefits of a blog to a healthcare system in the aftermath of Katrina? A blog would have helped a hospital in New Orleans to remain in contact with and feed information to its employees who were scattered around the country. A blog would have kept people informed about the hospital’s plans to rebuild and reopen or enabled the hospital to ask employees on their availability to aid in planning.

SAFEGUARDS
Healthcare organizations work hard to maintain a good reputation in the community, so minimizing the risk of inclusion of inappropriate content on their blog is vital. Two ways can help ensure that blog content is appropriate for the organization’s desired purpose.

First, identify a moderator who can establish and apply the blog’s use and posting policies. This person needs to regularly review the posted content and remove anything unsuitable, including personal attacks, foul language, and spam. The blog can also be set up to restrict comments from only those who are registered users or to post the comment only once after it has been reviewed and approved.

Second, establish a self-policing blog, where readers accept responsibility for reporting anything inappropriate. In the case of my blog, I receive an e-mail each time someone posts a comment; if it is spam, it gets automatically deleted. Since the summer of 2004, I have not had any reader make inappropriate comments. Some readers have disagreed with my posts, but that is just part of the dialog process.

LINKING TO OTHER BLOGS
A public blog should be easily accessible to its target audience. The best way to ensure that it can be easily found is to “ping” (post) to similar blogs and blog search engines. Pinging is a way of linking your blog to others in the “blogosphere” (the blog space), letting them know your blog exists and hence making a path to your blog. This, combined with topics or text on your blog being “searched,” increases
traffic to your site and makes your blog known. Traffic makes the difference in your blog showing up on a Google search on page 1, instead of on page 30.

**THE BOTTOM LINE**

In April 2007, the blog search engine Technorati (see www.technorati.com) was tracking more than 75 million blogs, and this number continues to grow. In addition, the price of this tool is right. Compared to the cost of other forms of communication, advertising, and promotion, maintaining a basic blog costs approximately $14.95 per month. This is a fairly inexpensive option with the potential for exceptional results.

Keep in mind that relatively few administrator blogs exist. However, following is a list of public blogs maintained by healthcare insiders—administrators, leaders, and consultants alike. Some of these bloggers approach their site as an extension of their work, while others clearly state that their opinions are personal and do not reflect those of their organizations.

- `runningahospital.blogspot.com` (maintained by Paul Levy, president and chief executive officer of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston)
- `windberblog.typepad.com/nicksblog` (maintained by F. Nicholas Jacobs, FACHE, president and chief executive officer of Windber Medical Center and the Windber Research Institute in Windber, Pennsylvania)
- `www.healthcaretomorrow.com` (maintained by Andrew Barna, FACHE, director of special projects for the Human Resources Department of Stanford University Medical Center in Stanford, California)
- `www.hospitalimpact.org` (maintained by a group of contributors, all of whom are healthcare practitioners and observers)

I hope this column informs you of this modern communication tool. More importantly, I hope it encourages you to contribute to this form of healthcare dialog—post and ping!

**Reference**

Webopedia. 2007. [Online encyclopedia dedicated to computer technology.]