

Euan Semple on Enterprise 2.0

Euan Semple was a pioneer at the BBC in what we now call Enterprise 2.0—the world of wikis, blogs and bulletin boards. I caught up with him when he was in Toronto and he explained some history:

“It wasn’t called anything when I started at the BBC 10 years ago. People in the field made up the name Enterprise 2.0 half way through; but I was just interested in what happened when you lobbed these disruptive tools into the enterprise.”

The word “disruptive” caught my attention because Enterprise 2.0 is not just about improved efficiency or better communication. The technology changes things in unexpected ways. Semple said:

“Content that would otherwise be in an email that disappears into someone’s PC takes on a whole new dynamic when it is posted in a blog and available to 30,000 people. There were lots of instances where HR policies were being publicly discussed in blogs. I’m sure prior to that, HR just thought everyone was neatly lined up behind their policies.”

While nothing will become of most blog items or wiki posts, the fact that they can lead to the interaction of so many people can create a momentum that the organization won’t be able to ignore. We get excited about the concept of disruptive technologies, but we do need to pause and wonder if this disruption is good or bad.

“It’s like the internet: whether it is good or bad depends on what you do with it. There are ways of establishing these tools so that they are more likely to be positive than negative. When you become experienced with blogging there is a sensibility that comes with the openness of the platform.”

Semple is no young radical and in talking to him it’s clear none of this is all that new. Bulletin boards, blogs, and wikis have all been around a decade or more. The technical skill in making a blog entry is trivial; but a mature sense of the tool, a sensibility, is something that takes time to develop.

“People who have been involved in blogging for 10 years have learned how to see the wood for the trees, how to get more out of the conversation, how to react, and when to be patient. I worry now about

expectations. People think 'I want social-web stuff and I want it now.' They may be disappointed when the results don't develop quickly. Canadian blogger Harold Jarcho was recently writing about the volcano in Iceland. The shutting down of air travel meant more people were trying to work remotely, and Jarcho noted just how unfamiliar with the practical aspects of this most people are. This Enterprise 2.0 stuff is all going to take time."

Computers have opened up possibilities to people that were only available to specialists before. A novice will be immensely proud of themselves when they learn the technical tricks of putting animation into a PowerPoint deck, but it's a long slog from knowing the technical trick to being a designer capable of using animation tools as effective communication devices. My thought in talking to Semple is that we need to be patient for people to really develop their skills and judgement (let's emphasize the latter) in using Web 2.0 tools.

"One of my clients commented on blogging, saying that when reading the comments about an idea they didn't know who was important and hence who they should be listening to. He couldn't map what was going on in the blog with his understanding of power. It's this kind of thing that hints at how these disruptive tools will ultimately have a big impact on how you structure and organization and how you manage it."

I asked Semple if it made sense to encourage blogs and wikis at a departmental level, say in an HR department, or if it needed to be an enterprise initiative.

"My interest is to break down boundaries rather than meet the needs of small groups, so I want as many as people involved as possible. At the BBC I had no rules about who could participate or what they could talk about. I just wanted it to come alive. Subsequently, I've worked with other clients who have set up more focused groups, but I'm still a believer in breaking boundaries."

We can see the possibilities of this kind of wide open communication when you think about what sort of projects get funded in an organization.

"It is astonishing the amount of money that gets wasted on projects that never should have been given the go ahead, but some guy had the positionary power or budget to launch it. If you have wide open discussion of problems and opportunities in wikis and focus groups perhaps you should only proceed with projects where enough people

have expressed an interest that you know the project has the support to really make it happen.”

But the challenge for organizations is that this clearly threatens some of the traditional avenues of power.

“People who don’t have conventional power but are smart and collaborative and willing to help, show up through the web conversation and can have a big influence. Sometimes people who have positional power are revealed as people without much to contribute to the conversation. There is still hierarchy but the web conversation opens things up.”

There is bound to be resistance to this but it provides managers with a real finger on the pulse of the organization. Once it’s active it’s hard for anyone to make a case to turn it off.

I asked for an example and he spoke about his work with the British Library.

“The Library used Yammer which is like an in-house Twitter. It allows people throughout the organization to communicate across initiatives, across opportunities, across functions. It provides peripheral vision. People see a little Yammer post and say “I didn’t realize that was going on...I can help.” That sort of thing incrementally adds significant value.”

So, Euan Semple continues his workshops and spreading the word, so that people realize the degree of change this represents and the relative slowness with which it usually happens. This is a big change and we are better to actively embrace it than be dragged along in the wake of these disruptive technologies.

Euan Semple’s website is www.euansemple.com

David Creelman writes and speaks on human capital management (www.creelmanresearch.com)