

## How to Use Web 2.0 Inside Your Company

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Today the business world is undergoing a significant transformation thanks to a set of technologies collectively known as "Web 2.0." Although it's tempting to dismiss Web 2.0 as Silicon Valley hype, that would be a mistake. Web 2.0 represents an important step in the evolution of Internet-based tools, and in the years ahead, it's likely to have a major impact on the way information is managed and distributed within your company.

What's the fuss all about? For a complete answer, read our BNET Briefing "[What Is Web 2.0?](#)" Briefly, Web 2.0 technologies move data and computing power off desktop PCs and onto the Internet, thus making it easier to collaborate and share information, either among close-knit teams or vast populations. Salesforce.com's customer relationship management tools, the YouTube video-sharing site, and digg.com's news-aggregation service are all examples of Web 2.0 technology.

If you're not convinced that Web 2.0 matters to you, consider this: Not only are Web 2.0 tools simpler to deploy and manage than traditional software, they're often significantly cheaper as well — in some cases, they're even free. Read on to learn the right way to put Web 2.0 to work in your organization.

### Things you will need:

- \$0 to \$150 per user per month
- An hour to a couple of days to enable an application, two weeks to see if your people will use it.
- **Hardware:** Computers running Windows 98 or Mac OS 9 won't work well with Web 2.0 apps. Newer operating systems are recommended. Desktops or laptops should be able to run the latest Internet browsers, and they should have broadband Internet connections via DSL, T-1 lines, or WiFi.
- **Internet browsers:** No matter what flavor of browser your employees prefer — Explorer, Firefox, or Safari — everyone on your team should use the most up-to-date version available. Make sure they also have the latest multimedia plugins (such as Flash) installed.
- **Project leader:** Designate a risk-tolerant team member who is not an IT staffer to lead an effort to assess, deploy, and evaluate a Web 2.0 technology.
- **An open mind:** Web 2.0 buzzwords can be off putting. They also make it hard to understand what Web 2.0 services can really do — until you try them. Don't be afraid to experiment.

## Start Small and Simply

### **Goal: Identify a Web 2.0 service that will actually accomplish something for you.**

If corporate managers learned anything during the 1990s dot-com boom, it was that big software applications are a big headache to install. Fortunately, many Web 2.0 tools are designed to solve discrete tasks, and because they're Web-based, they don't require installation on your hard drives. That means they're relatively easy to test drive.

Talk with your staff to identify common pain points or frustrations with your current systems. Then look for Web 2.0 services that address those problems. (Chances are, you'll be able to try out various offerings for free — or very cheaply.) Looking for inspiration? Explore the directories at [Go2Web20](#) or [All Things Web 2.0](#) to get a sense of the different Web 2.0 services you can use to meet your company's needs.

At Erickson Retirement Communities, which builds and manages senior housing and healthcare facilities, one recurring headache is choosing sites for new facilities. In addition to housing, each of the company's campuses offers restaurants, medical services, insurance, and transportation, so the site-selection process can take years. "It's a challenge to access all the necessary data because of information silos in our organization," CEO Mark Erickson says.

Now, Erickson uses a Web 2.0 prediction tool called Inkling that lets his planning staffers bet on the probability of each potential site to reach completion. Inkling works like a stock market, but each stock is a proposition, such as, "The facility in Madison, Wisconsin, will be completed in May 2009." Employees working on the project use virtual currency to buy and sell shares in the idea anonymously; if no one's putting their money behind the Madison project, it's probably a loser. Inkling didn't fundamentally change any business forecasts, Erickson says, but it has helped the company focus attention on specific questions. "We struggle with having more information than we can use, categorize, or process," he says. "This not only gave people access to information they may not have been looking at, it provided a context for why it was important."

Another easy way to get started with Web 2.0 is via plug-ins — applications that add functionality to the software your staff already knows how to use. For example, a Microsoft Outlook plug-in called [Timebridge](#) integrates information from group calendars and email, making scheduling a bit easier without forcing anyone to change their habits.

### **Technically Speaking**

#### **Decoding Common Web 2.0 Jargon**

**AJAX:** A programming tool for web-based applications that makes them faster and more dynamic, like traditional PC-based apps

**Blog:** A simple, easy-to-use Web publishing platform

**Mashups:** Tools that combine data drawn from two different sources

**RSS:** A protocol that syndicates and distributes content to users who subscribe to it

**Social media:** Tools that allow voting and other democratic techniques for identifying and ranking content

**Tagging:** User-generated keywords that help others identify and find content

**Wiki:** A tool that lets groups of people collaborate on documents

**XML:** A computer protocol that makes information easier to share between applications

step 2

## Build Support from the Ground Up

### **Goal: Recruit a core group of employees who will embrace new technology and a new management approach.**

In theory, everyone wants to be part of a twenty-first century company that constantly strives for excellence. In practice, most people just want to be home in time for dinner. For many, the idea of learning how to use a new piece of software ranks right up there with dental work in the hierarchy of fun things to do.

Still, some employees will gladly embrace things that are new, either because they have performance-related incentives to do so or because they just like to be on the cutting edge. Such people often influence the opinions of others in your company, because their enthusiasm tends to be infectious. Find these folks, recruit them to become your testers, then let them spread the word — bad or good.

Start with a small group of testers and establish some specific — and easily attainable — goals. Although you want to encourage exploration, the most important thing is to score some early victories by figuring out what tools work best for your team.

Pick a non-technical person to lead the way. This isn't a job for IT. To be sure, your CIO or system administrator should have a hand in selecting Web 2.0 services to ensure they are both secure and compatible with your existing infrastructure. Ultimately, however, Web 2.0 is about encouraging people to collaborate and share, and that's the kind of message that should come from management — not from your sysadmin.

"The clearest thing a manager can do is to lead by example and set clear expectations," says Andrew McAfee, an associate professor of technology and operations management at Harvard Business School. So if you're leading a project that will produce a final report, insist that the team generate the report collectively and keep each other up to date using a wiki or document collaboration platform. If someone emails instead — and they will — respond via the platform.

"Have somebody running the project who has enough skills and experience to articulately provide options to decision makers," adds Jeff Micellef a managing partner at MiPro Enterprises, a professional services conglomerate. When MiPro went looking for Web 2.0

human resources tools, "we decided to designate one person to take the project and run with it," Micellef says. "That cut out a lot of the normal bureaucracy."

MiPro's top management tapped one of the company's executive vice presidents to lead the charge, supplying her with a dedicated team and empowering her to make a product recommendation. The VP chose to deploy [Workday's](#) Human Capital Management tool, and she successfully rolled the new human-resources system out to 365 workers in 31 organizations in just three weeks.

One final suggestion: You may be tempted by a "solution" that will re-engineer your business process and reinvent your company. Don't fall for it. Strive for evolution, not revolution. Web 2.0 tools have the potential to reshape business as much as the original dot-com revolution did, but the transformation will take just as long to solidify.

## Other Resources

### Easy Web 2.0 Starting Points

Buy-in is easier to secure when the Web 2.0 app you're testing really is easy, fun, and useful. Here are a few handy products that require only minimal setup:

[SocialText](#) is a collaboration tool that lets groups of people write and edit documents using a Web-mail-style interface. [Inkling](#) makes it simple to set up a free trial prediction market. [Google Apps](#) provides secure Web-based applications like word processing, spreadsheets, and calendaring. [NetVibes](#) is a free Web portal that allows users to add just about anything to a personal home page — from news and RSS feeds to bookmarks and calendar data. It's like an enterprise dashboard made easy. For more ideas, see "[A Beginner's Guide to Web 2.0 Tools for Business.](#)"

step 3

## Experiment and Extend

**Goal: Determine which Web 2.0 tools do the job best, and build upon that success.**

Market Darwinism hasn't hit the web 2.0 world — yet. Plenty of hungry, venture capital-enabled Web 2.0 startups are still scrambling to find a niche for their products. Many of these companies also hope to be acquired (instead of profiting directly from the revenues their products might generate). The dream of becoming Google's next YouTube is, understandably, very seductive.

For most of these startups, the operative mantra is, "Release early and often." That means some products may not be ready for prime time at your company. Glitches, missing features, and counter-intuitive interfaces are endemic in this immature marketplace. And even when a Web 2.0 service works fine, it may not fit with the way your company operates. That means

you should be prepared to try out several competing products — and then kick most of them to the curb.

Luckily, most Web 2.0 services are either free or provided for a relatively cheap monthly subscription fee. They're also Web-based, so there's no software to install or uninstall. If something isn't working, you just stop using it.

Karen Christensen, CEO of Berkshire Publishing Group, has experimented with plenty of collaboration tools. Berkshire specializes in books about global trends, with a special emphasis on China, so Christensen has employees all over the world. Online collaboration would enable her far-flung teams of writers and editors to share files and schedules, manage projects, track time, and send messages.

First Christensen tried using the popular [Basecamp](#) project collaboration toolset because it combines features like file sharing, whiteboards, and FTP that her teams already use as separate applications. Nevertheless, her staff still needed to learn how to use Basecamp, and it didn't include all the functionality she needed. "People felt like they were spending more time managing the thing than getting work done," Christensen says.

Christensen still dreams of finding her perfect collaboration tool. "When something works and it meets a real need," she says, "we know it — and then we pursue it."

## Hot Tip

### Three Signs of a Web 2.0 Winner

Here are the key things to look for when you're kicking the tires on a Web 2.0 service:

1. **It ties in with an application your employees already use and love.** This lets you sneak the application into your users' hands while providing a familiar interface. For example, [Zoho CRM](#) is a widget that plugs into Microsoft Outlook, synchronizing contacts and customer-specific emails between Outlook and Zoho's Web-based customer-relations management tool.
2. **It comes preconfigured with basic templates or structures to guide new users.** Sometimes a little freedom is better than a lot. Applications that start out as a blank canvas can flummox people instead of inspiring them. To encourage users to sample the waters, look for preconfigured Web 2.0 applications that can be easily customized as users gain experience and familiarity. Enterprise-grade wiki tools from [BrainKeeper](#) offer a variety of standard templates as well as the ability to make custom ones.
3. **The vendor provides a human being who can help with tech support.** There's nothing worse than being stuck in the middle of a project and being told to search through pages of forum questions to find solutions to a technical problem. At InKling, the maker of prediction-market tools, the staff personally answers all emails. The company also maintains a private wiki for clients and publishes its phone number so anyone can call to ask a question.

## Give Power to the People

**Goal: Encourage employees and customers to use Web 2.0 tools in ways you never would have imagined.**

Internet 1.0 technologies like email and static web pages flattened hierarchies by reducing the power of traditional gatekeepers (such as middle managers or executive assistants) who controlled the flow of information. Web 2.0 takes this idea even further by encouraging participation from everyone in an organization — and beyond. Indeed, Web 2.0 technologies not only provide access to information, they also empower users to add, edit, and manipulate it.

Decisions about which Web 2.0 tools to use within your company should be made centrally, but the question of how to use them should be left to individuals, says Harvard's McAfee. "It works best when we think globally and act locally," he says. Choosing one blogging platform or prediction-market tool for your company is a prudent way to ensure that information won't become trapped within departmental walled gardens.

Once the technology is introduced, different departments or business units should be free to use it as they see fit. "Most people inside an organization know what's kosher and what's not," McAfee says.

Still, allowing this level of decentralized control can be unsettling, even for tech-savvy companies like Microsoft. Though the software giant is notorious for keeping an iron grip on its public-relations machine, Microsoft decided to give its employees the freedom to create their own public blogs. Anyone is allowed to blog using company-supplied blogging tools, with no reporting, no review process, and no tie-ins to business goals. Instead, Microsoft has posted a "common sense policy" listing guidelines such as, "If you doubt the appropriateness of a blog entry, publish it to an internal blog first, ask a peer what they think, and then read it the next day before posting externally."

Microsoft's HR department turned its [JobsBlog](#) into a recruiting tool. "It started as a brainstorm between two recruiters who wanted to share a little about the experience of interviewing at Microsoft," says Jenna Adorno, a Microsoft staffing manager who posts to JobsBlog. The site has helped uncover coding talent as far away as Brazil, Pakistan, and Vietnam, and it addresses many commonly asked questions — thus reducing the amount of time staffers spend answering phones or replying to email. It's unlikely that senior managers at Microsoft ever envisioned a blog could do those sorts of things.

### Case Study

#### Using Web 2.0 for a Marketing Effort

Chronicle Books is a mid-sized San Francisco company that publishes glossy, well-illustrated books on culture and design. The company had used its website and email newsletters to reach out to book buyers, but one day Marketing Director Andrea

Burnett got a new idea during her commute. When she noticed that everyone on her train was wearing white headphones, she realized that iPods were now prevalent enough to function as an information-delivery system.

Burnett knew that not all the commuters were listening to music: some were enjoying podcasting, a Web 2.0 broadcasting technology that automatically sends audio files to users who subscribe to them via RSS feeds. Her conclusion: Podcasts of author interviews and book commentary could take Chronicle's marketing to the next level.

Instead of trying to produce the content in-house, Burnett hired Hear Now Productions, a firm, run by former NPR producers, that creates podcasts. In the first three months, more than 11,000 people downloaded Chronicle's podcasts, without any advertising or promotion: The company had simply posted the podcasts on its web site and invited users to subscribe.

Next, Burnett decided to create videos as a way to pitch her authors to talk-show producers. "There's nothing worse than giving a producer crusty footage of an author on a local talk show," she says. Online video company TurnHere produced author videos, which Chronicle posted on YouTube and other Web 2.0 video sites. When sending queries to talk shows, Burnett simply includes a link to the relevant video in her pitch. The first video, for a book called "I Was a Really Good Mom Before I Had Kids," generated immediate responses from the Today Show, Oprah, and Good Morning America. You can see it [right here](#).