

Netting biz: Blogging bug bites big bosses

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They are the most time-challenged people on the planet. Jetsetting between continents, spending hours in boardrooms, heading industry forums...Even a 24-hour day may be too short for a busy chief executive. But that hasn't stopped a handful of them from taking out time for the hottest activity on the World Wide Web: From Jonathan Schwartz of Sun Microsystems to Kevin Lynch of Adobe to Infosys' Nandan Nilekani, corporate honchos are now holding forth on issues close to their heart through web journals aka blogs.

It's their way of reaching out to an audience on topics as varied as CEO salaries, art, outsourcing, innovation, job reservations, the future of the world...And it's also helping them connect both with clients and employees. "Blogging has reinforced bonding among employees and helped us create an environment of honesty, openness and progressiveness," says avid blogger Francisco D'Souza, CEO of Cognizant. At Cognizant, blogs are used as a platform for innovation, knowledge management, competitive insights and communication. The company has set up an internal blogging system called Channel One.

Most top executives post their blogs here and employees frequently comment on them. "We live in a naked knowledge economy where communication, collaboration and collective ideation are indispensable for successful team leadership. My experience shows how blogging helps in achieving collective goals," D'Souza explains. At Infosys they have Think Flat, a blog meant for the bosses to post their musings. Everyone from Nilekani to Stephen Pratt (Infosys Consulting) have written here since July 2006.

Already popular among CEOs in the West, the blogging bug is catching on in India too - although it's still largely confined to leaders of tech companies who see it as an effective communication tool for conveying to everyone where their company is headed and why. Some are also members of the CEO Bloggers' Club on the Internet, where they get to interact with peers and share their experiences with fellow bloggers.

Infosys and Cognizant are encouraging it officially, but some like Sanjeev Bhikchandani, CEO of a job portal, started blogging on their own. Bhikchandani loved reading blogs and regularly posted comments on them. While following an interesting controversy in the Indian blogosphere some months back, he decided to post his own blog. "I had read about the popularity of blogs overseas and after Google launched its blog search, I began to use it to see what the blogs were saying about my company," says the blogophile who writes intermittently on a range of issues.

So does Srikanth Velamakanni, CEO, Fractal Analytics, for whom writing a blog is like visiting a gym - if it's irregular, it's pointless. "I'm trying hard to cultivate some discipline around it," says Velamakanni who likes to write on "forward-looking" topics. "The idea is to guess how different the world will look tomorrow and to question the curse of common thinking."

Blogophiles believe blogger-CEOs encourage an atmosphere of openness in a company. But how does the boss view negative comments from employees? "The quintessence of blogging lies in the opportunity it provides for you to speak your mind. I have seen quite a few negative comments posted in response to my entries. However, as long as people don't write derogatory comments, all comments are welcome and are taken in the right spirit," says Sukumar Rajagopal, chief knowledge officer, Cognizant.

As for touchy corporate issues, Sukumar says his approach is to treat the post as if one were writing for an analyst. "Do enough research and then write. Blogging is transparent enough for readers to know how much effort you have put in. Besides, they fill in the gaps with their own perspectives that you may not have thought about," he explains.

Marketing guru Seth Godin has the last word. According to him, CEOs should not blog unless they can be candid, urgent, timely, pithy, controversial or utilitarian. "Short and sweet, folks: If you can't be at least four of the six things listed above, please don't blog."

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