Some of you will have had a chance to hear Dominic Thurbon speak at the Local Government Conference about how social media tools are allowing the emergence of ‘disorganised collaboration’ and enabling organisations to work across silos. You may have also heard Brad Wynter of Whittlesea Council speak about how broadband and social media1 can be used to build community.

This is certainly an area of increasing interest across a broad range of business and Government sectors and there is plenty of information available to those who wish to explore the opportunities that are provided by new technologies, and new thinking about how to use technology.

The UK based IDeA network (Improvement and Development Agency) for Local Government has a social media platform – Communities of Practice – which has over 20,000 Local Government officers and elected members registered on it. What a wealth of knowledge about all things Local Government in the UK.

I found an interesting article there by Ingrid Koehler (2009)² entitled 10 Social Media Myths, which highlighted the following:

- You don’t need to be an IT technician (or even a ‘geek’) to use social media. Millions of ordinary people, including members of your community, are using it every day. Brad Wynter presented data which showed that in a US survey, only 17% of respondents did not engage with any social media tools.

- Social media is not just the province of young people. However, it is true that different tools may align better with different groups (for example 3/4 of Facebook users are under 35 years of age, 2/3 of MySpace users are under 25 years old).

- This doesn’t mean effective use of social media is easy. While you don’t need high powered tools or a specific tool, you do need effective conversations. Good conversation/consultation/communication skills are required.

- Also while many of the tools are free, this doesn’t mean they come at no cost to an organisation. It takes time, effort and resources to implement and operate social media programs.

- There is often a worry that by opening up a conversation with online tools, inappropriate things will be posted. This may happen occasionally, in the same way it can in a public meeting for instance, but generally people tend to act fairly responsibly. There is a greater risk in not providing opportunity for people to raise issues and ideas.

- You don’t need flash consultants to make social media work. Across the 29 councils in Tasmania, there will be activity in this space already, or individuals who have developed their interest and skills outside their day-to-day job. Find and harness the energy, enthusiasm and skills of people within the sector.

- Social media needs to be part of, and aligned with, a company’s brand, messaging and strategic goals. Social media will not replace our traditional methods of engagement and consultation, but will broaden our reach and also can improve our internal dialogues and information sharing. Social media supports both ‘one too many’ and ‘many to many’ conversations.

One issue for government/s to consider is losing control of a conversation because they are too slow to make use of social media. A third party might set up the definitive social network site around the topic of interest. For example, Whirlpool (www.whirlpool.net.au) was first into the broadband/telecommunications discussion/feedback social network and now that site attracts more daily traffic than Optus and Telstra put together. The two biggest telcos have lost all control of the discussion around their products and services because they didn’t get in quickly enough.

Opportunities may be opened up through early establishment of a place for open discussion - where
you can still be part of the debate and have some participation. This first requires an understanding of how social media works, having a clear purpose and alignment with key strategies, identifying appropriate tools and putting good processes in place (eg moderation/feedback).

As Dominic Thurbon said, it is not that organisations (and we might also insert communities here) aren’t “filled with brilliant people. It’s that the smarts of those people can’t be separated from the person themselves; so when they leave, or forget something, or if you don’t know them yourself - the knowledge slips through the cracks.” Social media tools provide us with the opportunity “to capture, search and leverage the brilliance of people inside the organisation. In a knowledge economy, this is key.”

To find out more about social media, try these useful weblinks:

Barnett Council - www.youtube.com/user/Barnetcouncil1

NSW Local Government Network - lgwebnetwork.org/conference

IDeA Communities of Practice - www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do

Australian social media expert - http://laurelpapworth.com

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1 Social media is information content created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies. These are intended to facilitate communications and interaction with peers and with public audiences. Typically this happens via the internet and mobile communications networks. Social media can take many different forms, including internet forums, blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video. Examples of social media applications are Google Groups, Wikipedia, MySpace, Facebook, Last.fm, YouTube, Second Life, Flickr and Twitter. Many of these social media services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms like MyBlogLog, Friendfeed and LinkedIn. (IDeA www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageid=9531122: 18 May 2010).

National Cyber Security Week 2010

More than 70% of Australians with mobile phones now use them to access the internet, looking for news, entertainment, weather updates and other information services. At least a third of us also check our emails using a mobile phone, make financial transactions, or visit a social networking site.

The explosion in wireless internet access has been accelerated by the growth in sales of smart phones and the proliferation of wireless internet connections and it is just one of the reasons why government and industry came together to promote the importance of internet security during National Cyber Security Awareness Week, which ran from 6-11 June.

According to Rob Forsyth, spokesperson for the week and Deputy Chair of the Internet Industry Association, security is something we just can’t take for granted. “No matter where or how you go online – from a computer or a phone, on a landline or a wireless connection – you have to protect yourself,” Mr Forsyth said. “We are urging people to secure their computers, phones and WiFi connections – and to do it now. Your personal and financial information is enormously valuable and each year, we share more of it online, the technology gets smarter, we get smarter but unfortunately so do the crooks,” he said.

National Cyber Security Awareness Week is a unique partnership between the Federal Government and the corporate sector, designed to increase community awareness of the risks and the simple things people can do to protect their online transactions and protect themselves from fraud and scams.

Throughout the week, all Australians were urged to do six simple things to improve internet security:

- Install security software on computers and phones, update it regularly, and remember to turn on automatic updates;
- Get a stronger password and change it at least twice a year; and don’t share it with anyone;
- Stop and think before clicking on attachments or emails from unknown sources;
- Think hard about sharing any personal information online - it can be used to harm or embarrass you, your family or friends; and
- Parents need to know what their children are doing online and what to do about anything suspicious or creepy.

To get the latest information on internet scams, viruses and malware, go to www.staysmartonline.gov.au and sign up to the alert service.

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