

An



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Corporate RSS, Ready to Roll

Analysis of RSS and its application in enterprise environments


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Corporate RSS, Ready to Roll

The development of RSS has so far been driven by individual enthusiasts and news junkies - especially those wanting to monitor blogs. But the versatility, security and cost-effective nature of RSS is now attracting the attention of corporate information managers. This paper examines why RSS is starting to be used in a corporate setting; lists some of its uses and offers the case study of Rohm & Haas to examine how a large corporation is deploying this technology to improve efficiency and encourage information flow.

INTRODUCTION

The confusion over what RSS actually stands for – some say ‘Rich Site Summary’, others say ‘RDF Site Summary’, the favourite is ‘Really Simple Syndication’ – is symptomatic of a technology that has only just emerged.

Until recently this lack of maturity - involving differing standards and low levels of integration - was a deterrent to its adoption by large corporations. But recent announcements show this is changing fast.

Industry heavyweights, both on the web tools and content sides, are now incorporating RSS into their mainstream offerings.

News leaked out last month that Microsoft’s Internet Explorer version 7.0 will include a built-in RSS reader. Other browsers - Mozilla’s Firefox and Opera - already offer RSS as a standard feature.

Microsoft had moved decisively towards adoption of RSS when, in mid-March, it began testing a Web-based RSS aggregator incorporated within MSN. This came hard on the heels of its decision to add RSS aggregation within My MSN personal home page (fed by Moreover Technologies). Yahoo and Ask Jeeves are already incorporating RSS features within their services.

Such integration is one vital precursor for widespread corporate uptake of RSS. The other is the general availability of RSS-formatted content. This has also now happened. Most major news publishers are now offering access to RSS feeds including Reuters, the Wall Street Journal, the BBC, the Financial Times and the New York Times.

The final barrier to the general uptake of RSS within corporations was the threatened emergence of two competing standards - RSS and Atom. Companies were cautious about finding themselves on the wrong side of the technology debate. But the adoption by Microsoft of RSS has now settled any uncertainty about which of the two will prevail. While the supporters of Atom may claim their format is more flexible, the decision by Microsoft to take the RSS route has settled the issue, at least from the corporate-user perspective. The scene is now set for RSS to achieve widespread acceptance as a multi-purpose tool within the daily workflow of corporations.

HOW DOES RSS WORK?

The technology behind RSS is well tested, having emerged from Netscape in 1997. RSS is an XML format that describes a channel of information. This contains titles and links that lead back to an original article. Typically the XML document is made available on a web server and can be pulled down by an RSS reader (sometimes called an aggregator).

In the case of document authors, once they have published their content online – usually to a website or blog – they are required to create an RSS file (also called an RSS feed) which includes headlines, links, summaries and, sometimes, the full text. The publisher then creates the link to the RSS file on his or her website and advertises the fact, usually with an orange RSS or XML button. Most blogging tools automate the RSS feed creation process.

To access an RSS feed it is necessary to have access to an RSS reader. Users can either utilize the readers provided as standard in browsers or portals or download one separately. Some of the most popular are provided by NewsGator, FeedDemon, Bloglines and Pluck.

Once the user has opened the link to the RSS feed, the reader will automatically add the feed to a list of feeds subscribed to by the user. The reader then automatically rechecks the RSS files in the user's list – according to a schedule defined by the user – to see whether new content has been added. In some readers an alerting feature flags that new content is available.

Estimates of the number of live feeds available vary widely, but it is thought to be somewhere between 5 and 10 million – and growing fast. The momentum now exists for all internet-based publishers to start utilising the format.

RSS IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

Anecdotal evidence on the spread of RSS technology within corporations suggests that, to date, few companies have taken a policy decision to comprehensively deploy RSS within their organization. Where RSS readers are currently in use in companies, it is likely to be a personal initiative rather than company policy.

Why, then, should corporations promote the adoption of RSS technology? What are the drivers for further uptake?

This debate has so far focused on the benefits of RSS versus e-mail. The increasing tide of junk mail is giving rise to ever-more draconian anti-spam measures. It is getting hard for corporate managers to decide which scenario is worse – a flood of unwanted emails each day or the risk of anti-spam software blocking a vital message.

For anyone wanting to send or receive a regular report, message or electronic newsletter within a corporate firewall, RSS is looking like an increasingly attractive – and secure – option. The end-user can control the flow, both in terms of what is received, its frequency and whether it alerts the users to the arrival of the message. This “pull” aspect of RSS technology fundamentally differentiates it from the “push” of e-mail.

In broad terms, RSS is best at delivering “FYI” information while email is best for actionable, two-way, communications.

There are, of course, a myriad of other uses to which RSS can be put within a corporate environment. Consider the following:

- A competitive information professional uses his RSS reader to gather regular information from the websites of direct competitors, industry blogs, independent analysts and the news media.
- A corporate communications director ensures the widest possible coverage of her latest press release by making it available as an RSS feed and ensuring its dissemination via a news aggregator such as Moreover Technologies.
- An internal communications manager sends out a regular daily report to all company employees across the world. This includes both internal data and externally sourced information. RSS is one chosen option – with RSS no-one is inadvertently left off the circulation list.
- A consultant needs to keep a customer regularly updated on the progress of a particular project. One secure way of doing this is to keep a weblog and make it available to the customer as an RSS feed.
- Project teams need to keep in close touch even though they might be located on two continents. RSS is an effective and secure way of sharing data and highlighting issues.
- A sales executive wants to keep sending regular messages to a valued customer, especially concerning special promotions. He needs to be sure that his messages are getting through. Both sides agreed that RSS is the answer.
- Corporate bloggers – for example, the CEO who wants to communicate directly with staff or customers – need an audience. RSS is a quick method of reaching out and getting a response.
- A company has just released a new service and wants direct and regular feedback from charter customers. The customers agree to keep a weblog of their experience with the service. The company receives regular updates using RSS.
- Company documentation needs to be kept up-to-date. This includes procedure manuals, employee handbooks, health and safety regulations or price lists. These change regularly and staff need to be notified. While the updated document can be posted on the corporate intranet, the changes can be highlighted using RSS.
- A VP of marketing is organizing her company’s annual conference. This will include customers, suppliers and staff. The agenda and logistics keep changing and she uses RSS to ensure everyone is kept up-to-date. After the event she uses RSS to circulate the power-point presentations and an audio track.

CASE STUDY: ROHM & HAAS

One company that has adopted RSS for internal communications and information sharing is Rohm & Haas, a Philadelphia-based specialty chemicals group. The company has around 18,000 employees connected to its intranet, of which about 14,000 are active users.

Cindy Callan is the company’s eBusiness Analyst who is championing the move. Last year she teamed up with Moreover Technologies to provide her company with 20 topic-based RSS news feeds customized to both the company’s product areas and its geographic distribution.

Three of the feeds - concerning general business news, chemical industry news and semiconductor news - are delivered for display on the company's business information portal. All of the services, however, are also available as RSS feeds to employees connected to the intranet.

"We took the decision to develop our own in-house RSS reader", said Cindy. "We wanted to be sure that it fully met our needs and that we had complete freedom to make it available across the company."

The development of the RSS reader, which was created with a third-party developer, took only about four weeks to complete. This was made available to every employee although they were required to initiate the download.

Once they have access to the RSS reader, employees need only make a single click to add each of the Moreover feeds. But no boundaries have been set and end users are free to go onto the public Internet and add other RSS feeds they require. There is also an RSS feed covering internal company issues available to all employees.

The Rohm & Haas proprietary reader is not yet able to deal with mobile devices and some senior managers, who are regular Blackberry users, have downloaded their own RSS readers for this purpose.

Cindy says that although, so far, she has not had the tools for tracking uptake, the response has been enthusiastic among the early adopters, who want it developed further.

"We have had people enquiring, for example, about how it can be made even more useful with the addition of more searching and filtering functions," she said.

She said there were two main drivers for introducing RSS. The first was to bring together, more effectively, the information needed by employees to do their job. "I get to see the information I want. It's coming to me - I don't have to go out and get it," she said.

The second incentive was the problem of e-mail overload. "I'm so sick of email. Half the e-mails I get are irrelevant and there are just too many to read. This was a major driver for doing this," she said.

In future Cindy is planning to expand the number of internally-generated feeds. The single internal feed that covers company-wide issues is generated by the corporate communication department. She is planning in future to introduce more departmental, product and geography-based feeds. These, she said, should be produced by employees involved with these areas. "We are looking for champions across the company who will create these new feeds," she said.

In general, she concluded, the number of people in the company that understood the value of RSS was still "not huge" - but those who used it, liked it.

CONCLUSIONS

In the "blogosphere" of individuals and enthusiasts, RSS is well entrenched and has already become an everyday tool to improve the accessibility and visibility of web-based information.

The utilization of RSS within the corporate environment is at the tipping point.

There are two main drivers for its introduction. First, the problems associated with email overload are forcing corporate communications managers to seek out alternative channels that are more effective and secure.

Second, the emergence of a common RSS standard, the rising availability of RSS feeds, and the gradual inclusion of RSS readers in commonly used business software is encouraging corporations to adopt RSS.

As understanding of RSS technology disseminates within the corporate environment, the momentum behind the take-up of RSS shows signs of speeding up. On present trends, widespread deployment of RSS within corporations is looking increasingly likely in the next 6-12 months.