Keeping Up: Using E-Resources for a Personalized PD Program

Academic information technology professionals can use electronic resources to establish a personalized professional development program

By **Steven J. Bell**

A recent exchange of postings to an electronic discussion list frequented by information technologists, instructional technologists, and other academic computing professionals revolved around an occurrence that left more than a few subscribers wondering how they'd been left out of the loop. It concerned a faculty member's request for information about new software designed to improve courseware functionality. After some discussion about this new software, an IT person asked, "How did my faculty member know about this before I did?"

I interpreted the question to mean, "How do I keep up with constant change to stay one step ahead of those I support?" Academic IT support professionals ponder that question with increasing regularity. It reflects the constant struggle to cope with the flood of information about new products, new services, and new technologies. Most IT professionals' traditional strategies for keeping current involve regular reviews of trade journals and workshop and conference programs, and following discussion lists. But "keeping up" and staying ahead on the innovation and creativity curve requires technologists to think more broadly and act more proactively in developing a strategy for achieving personal professional development.

This article presents strategies for IT professionals to develop a personalized regimen for keeping current. All use electronic resources that are free or carry a minimal fee, and they facilitate keep-

ing up by "pushing" information to one's e-mail inbox.

The complexity of our work and the varied skills required for professional competency have radically altered the concept of keeping up with change. A basic strategic philosophy of keeping up is that it should go beyond the limits of one's own narrow specialties to encompass change in peripheral fields as well. While keeping track of new developments in higher education, communications, educational technology, Web development, Internet research, and other

fields may seem an insurmountable task, the challenge is to identify methods and sources that channel news of change in ways that are personalized, require minimal individual effort, and allow maximum control over the intake and digestion of information to prevent overload.

Technologies to Assist You

The technologies, strategies, and guidelines provided below will enable each information technologist to determine how to best "keep up" in his or her field.

Delivered to Your Inbox: E-Newsletters

Had the discussion group participant mentioned above subscribed to *Syllabus* magazine's e-mail newsletter, *Syllabus News Update* (http://subscribe.101com.com/syllabus/magazine/NewFree/), where the software announcement first appeared, he or she could have easily answered the faculty member's question. As a mechanism for delivering concise, targeted information, e-newsletters are ideal. Typically an amalgam of text and links, e-newsletters provide brief news items that contain URLs pointing to more detailed information. Some offer a summarized list of headlines at the top to facilitate quick scanning for newsworthy items. To subscribe to them, visit the appropriate Web site and provide a name and e-mail address; a few may require additional registration information.

In addition to numerous information technology e-newsletters, publications are available that focus on higher education, Web technology and design, and instruction and learning. Others just recommend new Web sites. My "Keeping Up" Web site (http://staff.philau.edu/bells/keepup) lists dozens of e-newsletters targeted to information professionals, organized by category.

Commercial publishers such as ZDNet, ComputerWorld, or InformationWeek offer weekly e-newsletter mailings for their flagship publications, as well as a host of specialized newsletters in almost any specialty technology area imaginable. A lesser-known publisher, Lockergnome (http://www.lockergnome.com), offers free, daily e-newsletters such as Tech Specialist, which gives sysadmin and troubleshooting advice for technology professionals, and Windows Daily, which provides PC tips, tricks, and critical updates. Information professionals who want to choose from the widest selection should visit FreeTechMail.Org (http://www.freetechmail.org), which catalogs hundreds of rated technology e-newsletters, all keyword searchable. Both the *New York Times* (http://www.nytimes.com/pages/technology) and *Washington Post* (http://wpni.technews.com/profile) offer daily e-alert bulletins digesting technology stories from each day's

edition. So there is no dearth of choices when seeking electronic delivery of the latest technology news.

Information professionals, in addition to tracking industry news and developments, may seek a broader, more challenging spectrum of technology outlooks. The *MIT Technology Review* (http://www.technologyreview.com/newsletter/newsletter.asp), which focuses on emerging and futuristic technologies, and *Harrow's Technology Report* (http://www.theharrowgroup.com/current.htm), which covers innovation and trends in computing, are good examples of e-newsletters that go beyond the everyday news of industry change.

Adding the exploration of cutting-edge technologies to their keeping-up regimens may allow technologists to enhance their own capacity for innovation. A crossover publication such as *Syllabus IT Trends* (http://www.syllabus.com/news_issue.asp?id=151) does a good job of mixing technology news with items about higher education and learning technologies. Gerry McGovern's *New Thinking* newsletter (http://www.gerrymcgovern.com/new_thinking.htm) is less easy to categorize, as it offers thought-provoking essays and practical advice on the uses of technology for communication.

The number and diversity of technology-related e-newsletters will multiply as the ease of electronic publishing increases. With so many choices, discretion is needed to avoid overloading one's inbox.

Monitoring Changes to Web Sites

What about Web-based sources of information that offer no "push" to interested individuals? Consider a Web site that changes occasionally by adding news or an organization newsletter that is found only on that Web site. The EDU-CAUSE Effective Practices and Solutions Web page (http://www.educause.edu/ep/ep.asp) offers a good example. New solutions for meeting technology challenges are added as they are received. How can a page like this one be monitored efficiently, without time-consuming, manual, routine inspections for new additions? It requires a technology that automates the process of tracking change to Web page content.

Fortunately, there is a good selection of free and fee-based Web page change-detection services available. The better ones, such as InfoMinder ($25) (http://www.infominder.com) or TrackEngine ($62) (http://www.trackengine.com), require annual subscription fees. They offer great flexibility and more features than free services such as Change Detection.com (http://www.changedetection.com/monitor.html) and Watch ThatPage.com (http://www.watchthatpage.com). If you prefer software that resides on your computer, try WebSite-Watcher (http://www.aignes.com).

All these programs function in much the same way. You begin by providing the URLs of sites to monitor, set the notification frequency, and add any customizations such as specific keywords to track, and the services will send an e-mail notice whenever a change occurs on a specified page. The "Keeping Up" Web site lists all known services of this type, describes them in more detail, and explains how they work.

RSS Channels and Blogs

The latest technology for keeping up is Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication (RSS) channels. RSS allows for the delivery of news from Web sites to an individual's computer via news aggregator software. As more Web sites and newer Web logs (blogs) add RSS technology capabilities, aggregator software can select news items from sources close to and far afield from our own.

As with other strategies, using news aggregators to monitor RSS channels helps to automate the keeping up process by extracting and then delivering targeted news for fast, daily review. RSS is mainly a format for distributing XML-based content, and available RSS sites identify themselves with RSS or XML tags. Identifying appropriate RSS channels is facilitated by any Web site that catalogs the ever-expanding number of RSS channels. The Blogstreet Directory (http://www.blogstreet.com/rssdiscovery.html) is a typical starting point.

Many bloggers are making their sites available in XML format for tracking by news aggregators. Blogs can serve as another excellent source for supple-

menting a keeping up regimen. The best are those that already scan news aggregators and provide a daily news digest. Why do this yourself if someone is already going to the trouble? Consider, for example, John Telford's *Information Technology News and Commentary* site (http://itnews.johntelford.com).

If the prospect of acquiring a news aggregator and monitoring it daily seems overwhelming, there is an alternate strategy. Register for Bloglet (http://www.bloglet.com), a free service that lets subscribers set up a daily alert for any RSS Channel. Bloglet sends a daily e-mail that summarizes the new items added to any tracked channel. I use Bloglet to track about a dozen blogs of interest, and it eliminates the need for me to use a news aggregator or spend time visiting each blog daily. Alternately, if you subscribe to InfoMinder, a Web-page change-alert service, it can also track RSS channels. The resource list in the sidebar recommends a good site for learning more about RSS.

How to Avoid Getting Overwhelmed

One hazard in any keeping up strategy is overload. Few of us can afford to allot even an hour to this task each day. To prevent it from becoming a time-consuming burden, here are some strategies for minimizing the time devoted to keeping up.

■ *Browse, don't read.* Get skilled at browsing. Many of the peripheral publications will contain largely marginal content, meaning only 10 or 20 percent of the stories will be worth reading. Train yourself to concentrate on spotting the one or two items you need to know.

■ *Get organized with e-mail tools.* E-mail software allows users to automatically identify messages that will get routed to special folders, typically by creating rules. Create a "keeping up" folder and set aside 15 minutes each day to scan its contents. Avoid stopping other activities throughout the day to read alerts just arriving in your inbox.

■ *Capture now, review later.* You could spend considerable time determin-

ing if Web sites of interest have the potential for future use. Evaluating those sites while online will be time consuming. Gain efficiency by quickly visiting the site in order to print that page, or use your browser to capture the page for offline viewing. Then use your offline time to determine which sites are worth further exploration.

■ *Consider organizing a "keeping up" team.* Ask coworkers to join in a "keeping up" club. Dividing up the resources limits the number each person needs to monitor, which should help reduce or eliminate overload. Team members can easily e-mail e-newsletters, blog items, page detects, and valued Web site alerts to each other. When team members begin to proactively push significant news items to fellow administrators and faculty, the organization will gain tangible and intangible benefits from its keeping up culture.

Conclusion

In need of further convincing of the value of personalized, professional development strategies? Think of yourself as an athlete. To stay at the top of your game, you must maintain a regimen for first-class conditioning. Any athlete who fails to do so soon becomes a burden to the team and ultimately cannot function as

a fully contributing member of the team.

Many information technologists lament over the difficulty of keeping up with the vast amounts of news and information required to stay current. This article suggests adding to the burden by increasing the range of fields monitored to include those peripheral to technology. But to fuel innovation and discovery, we must often explore other fields. Doing so fosters an ongoing dialog within and external to our organizations that will advance our professions and those of colleagues with whom we share responsibility for the higher education enterprise.

Keeping up, if approached in a strategic, methodical way that takes advantage of new "push" and "detect" technologies, need not be quite so burdensome. Efforts to keep up will expend your most precious commodity—time. But consider the value of discovering one new piece of information, software product, or Web site that could save time, increase productivity, or improve services. Keeping up is an activity not unlike an investment. It is risky because there is something to lose and there is no guaranteed return. But, like an investment, if done cautiously, wisely, and with a clear strategy, there is no limit to what you might gain. *e*

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Additional Resources

1. For more information on Web page detection services, see Steven J. Bell, "Do I Detect A Change?" *Library Journal Net Connect* (supplement), Fall 2002, pp. 42–43. Available online at <http://libraryjournal.reviewsnews.com/index.asp?layout=article&articleid=CA251668&publication=libraryjournal>.

2. For an overview of RSS go to <http://www.websearchguide.ca/newsletter/030228.htm>. Additional links to a variety of RSS Web sites with additional information can be found in *Brainstorms and Raves* at <http://www.brainstormsandraves.com/2003_04_27_archive.shtml#93673384>.

3. A directory of technology-related blogs is maintained by Boston Online at <http://www.boston-online.com/Blogs/Technology>.

4. For a complete directory and description of e-newsletters for technology professionals in higher education and related Web pages worth monitoring, visit Steven Bell's Keeping Up Web site at <http://staff.philau.edu/bells/keepup>.

5. Look for RSS and XML tags on Web sites and blogs—they identify RSS channels.