TO: Dr. Ryan Weber
FROM: Student
SUBJECT: EH 602 Proposal: "Implementing a ChargerNet Blog"
DATE: June 6, 2008

OVERVIEW

This proposal is a formal request for approval to proceed with an analysis of the feasibility of implementing a ChargerNet blog as part of the portal's official release at the University of Alabama in Huntsville this fall. I propose to use research collected during the spring semester as part of an overall analysis of ChargerNet's user interface to proceed with this project. These findings and conclusions will be outlined in my final report on July 29, 2008, and will be presented to John Stanton, Director of Customer Service and Training for UAH's Computer and Network Services Department, and Roger Haley, CNS Training Analyst. I have accepted a full-time position with Yulista Management Services in Huntsville, but I will still be a part-time employee at CNS for the purposes of reporting my findings and making recommendations to Stanton and Haley on the ChargerNet redesign project. The following proposal includes a detailed description of the purpose, audience, scope and approach of the project as well as a brief background of the client, a review of the available literature and a description of my qualifications.

PURPOSE/AUDIENCE

The purpose of this project is to determine the benefits of implementing a blog as part of the university's new portal that will be released in the fall.

The primary audience for this project will be John Stanton and Roger Haley, who will use this information to determine whether a blog will be a useful addition to ChargerNet and to decide on the best course of action to implement a blog if they approve the project.

BACKGROUND

UAHuntsville's Computer and Network Services Department plans to officially release its new Web portal, ChargerNet, in the fall. The portal will allow university students, faculty, staff members, and researchers access to secure online information and applications with a single sign-on. The goal is to eventually require all online university systems to be accessed through ChargerNet.

The new portal will be a work in progress, with frequent updates and additions expected during the first few months. The platform should stabilize as time goes on, but there will always be a need to share information on the state of the portal, new features, and other changes. CNS personnel have found that mass campus e-mails are not an effective way to spread information to the university community.

As technical writers for CNS, Roger Blackwelder and I spent the spring semester writing documentation for ChargerNet and completing research on possible improvements in the user interface. While researching the portal designs of other universities, I discovered that the University of Saskatchewan implemented a "What's New in PAWS" blog almost two years ago

to document the progress of the school's new portal. The university still uses the PAWS blog to announce changes and additions to the portal. Stanton and Haley instructed me to pursue more intensive research on blogs, and after reviewing my initial research asked me to devise a detailed analysis of the benefits of a ChargerNet blog and recommendations for implementation.

SCOPE AND APPROACH

This project will focus on the benefits and feasibility of implementing and maintaining a ChargerNet blog and an RSS feed of the blog on the ChargerNet login page. This project will not address any other interface or visual design issues with the new portal.

I will collect data by following three inquiry methods: practitioner inquiry, scholarly inquiry, and professional inquiry. The project will focus on answering the following questions, which are paired with their respective sub-level questions.

1. What is a blog, and is it an appropriate application for transmitting information about ChargerNet?

What are the benefits of sharing information through a blog vs. sending e-mails to the university community? Are there any public relations risks associated with maintaining a blog? How are the different kinds of blogs defined, and what kind of information does each type specialize in? What type of blog would be appropriate for transmitting information about ChargerNet?

2. Who will implement and maintain the blog?

How many personnel will be able to post entries to the blog and/or supervise the comments if they are turned on? Who will be in charge of approving blog entries before they are posted? What will be the guidelines for removing inappropriate comments?

3. What are the software/hardware requirements for hosting a ChargerNet blog?

What are the budget and safety considerations when choosing blogging software? Does the university already own blogging software? Does CNS want to host a blog on a university server or keep it on a remote server? What are the software/hardware requirements if an RSS feed for the blog is added to the ChargerNet login page?

Question 1: What is a blog, and is it an appropriate application for transmitting information about ChargerNet?

Approach

Scholarly literature and professional publications detail the history of blogs and define the different types of blogs and what type of information that each is best at transmitting. I have interviewed Roger Haley about the university's problems with mass e-mail communication efforts. Through e-mail exchanges with a Saskatchewan portal administrator, I have a first-hand

account of how that university's personnel implemented a blog to share information on the university's portal introduction.

Question 2: Who will implement and maintain the blog?

Approach
   Scholarly literature and professional publications outline "best practices" recommendations for organizations planning to implement and maintain a blog. One of the most important recommendations that Blackwelder and I made about ChargerNet was to hire or appoint a portal administrator to oversee the implementation and day-to-day maintenance of ChargerNet; this administrator would logically be in charge of the blog. Dr. Wilson Luquire has indicated that he intends to appoint someone as portal administrator; this person may not be identified until after this report's deadline.

Question 3: **What are the software/hardware requirements for hosting a ChargerNet blog?**

Approach
   In mid-May, John Stanton indicated that he wanted PHP-based blogging software that could be hosted on a university server. There are several PHP-based solutions, but because the Salmon Library blog uses a customized version of Wordpress, a free application, I am going to recommend that we use it. I will explore Wordpress's possibilities and limitations, and list the steps that need to be completed in order to set up a ChargerNet blog. I will also explore the technical requirements for making an RSS feed for the blog on the ChargerNet login page.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

   Since 1999, when free online software was released that allowed users to create weblogs without special programming skills (Fleishman 2001), the number of weblogs has increased exponentially. There are millions of weblogs online, with so many added and abandoned each day that it is effectively impossible to keep an accurate count. As the trend grew in the early 2000s, the word weblog lost its first syllable: In 2004, Merriam-Webster named "blog" the word of the year, defining it as "a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer" (Merriam-Webster 2004).

   There are several types of blogs, sharing most of these characteristics (Byron 2006):

   • Content entries (often called "posts") presented in chronological order, with the newest entries on top and posts archived at a permanent URL.
   • Topical archives organizing posted content by month, year, and keyword.
   • A "comments" section allows readers to leave feedback.
   • A subscription feature (RSS, or Really Simple Syndication) that alerts subscribed readers when a blog is updated.

The earliest blogs, created in the late 1990s before blogging software was easily available, were "filter blogs," which simply provided links to other Web content, many times with commentary from the blogger (Kelleher 2006). Today, blogs maintained by individuals are more likely to be personal journals along the lines of Merriam-Webster's definition. They are well on their way to replacing personal home pages among individuals (Herring 2004).

Corporations and other organizations are increasingly using blogs for marketing and other forms of internal and external communication. Organizational logs are the perfect instrument for the "markets-as-conversations" approach recommended by Doc Searls and David Weinberger in *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. While business strategy has traditionally treated online communities as targets, Searls and Weinberger recommend treating them as collaborative relationships. The interactive nature of blogs may help organizations institute conversations about themselves and their products or services (Albrycht 2004). Blog entries should use a conversational tone, helping corporation avoid traditional corporate communication that readers instantly recognize as "profit-driven machinery" (Kelleher 2006).

Organizational blogs, as defined by David Sifry, founder of leading blog search engine Technorati, are blogs that meet three criteria (Kelleher 2006, 399):

- They are maintained by people who post in an official or semi-official capacity at an organization.
- They are endorsed by that organization.
- They are posted by someone perceived by the public to be clearly affiliated with the organization.

The main risk of blogging involves the personnel in charge of writing the blog entries. If they are not well-trained in public discourse, or if they deliver information that is not approved for release by organizational higher-ups, then the reputation of the organization may be put at risk (Kent 2008).

QUALIFICATIONS

I spent most of the spring semester analyzing ChargerNet, and am therefore familiar with the unique communication challenges that CNS will face in regard to the system's introduction and updates. As part of my work with ChargerNet, I have spent more than 50 hours studying blogs and have amassed a good deal of research on the variety and uses of blogs. As a part-time CNS employee, I will have access to key university personnel and systems if I need more information.

SUMMARY

This proposal outlines the steps I will take to meet the requirements of literature- and practitioner-based research in the field of blogs. I have listed three major questions that I propose to answer and have detailed the steps of my research in the enclosed schedule. In this project, I will determine the feasibility of a blog and the best course of action to implement and maintain a blog, since I believe that a blog may be a valuable communication tool for UAHuntsville's new portal.

Enclosures:

1. Schedule

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SCHEDULE FOR EH 501 RESEARCH PROJECT

Task	**Completion Date**
Literature and Research Review	
1. Review journals and books for research gaps	June 2-June 6
2. Compile research	June 9-13
Client Inquiry	
3. Compile blog request details from John Stanton	June 9
4. Compile interview information from Roger Haley	June 10
Practitioner Inquiry	
5. Compile information from blog practitioner	June 11
Software Recommendations	
6. Research Wordpress features and requirements	June 13
7. Research RSS feed technology	June 14-15
Research Report Draft	
8. Prepare visuals for report draft	June 15-16
9. Write draft	June 15-June 29
10. Turn in optional project report draft	July 2
INTERNSHIP PROGRESS REPORT DUE	July 2
Final Report	
11. Revise report draft and visuals	July 7-18
12. Edit and polish report	July 21-25
FINAL DOCUMENT DUE	July 29
INTERNSHIP PORTFOLIO DUE	July 29