



DIGITAL LITERACY:

Getting your workplace up to speed

A business isn't getting the best out of their work staff if workers aren't using the technological tools given to them to the best advantage. An expert explains what needs to be done and how best to approach it.

By Colin Phillips



The internet is a key source of information and a huge percentage of workers are regularly online. But do they have the level of digital literacy needed for a productive workplace?

New Zealand organisations are filled with people who spend their days working at computers, whether that's writing strategy, searching for information online, or looking up contact details on the company intranet. Yet all that time online could be costing your business in ways you've never considered. A recent Auckland University of Technology study found that 83 percent of New Zealanders are internet users and 68 percent are accessing the web at work. We see it as an important source of information, rating the internet for fact-finding more highly than television, newspapers, radio and libraries.

Yet of all the users surveyed by the university, half had been online for less than ten years. That's a huge percentage of people regularly online who are potentially costing your business money by not having the level of digital literacy required to create a productive workplace. And age has little to do with it. In my work, I often hear older people make the excuse that they didn't have the internet when they grew up. Although factually correct, this is not an excuse for poor computer skills. With the right formalised training processes any organisation can work to develop their most technophobic staff into people with strong digital literacy skills who feel comfortable online, who know how to work smartly, and who work productively. This forces individuals to learn fundamental skills by trial and error, and non-systematic learning of core computer com- ➤



Digital literacy tips

- Teach staff the web as well as Excel
- Work in small groups
- Encourage questions
- Check back in a week that they understood it
- Teachers must have excellent skills
- Introduce new online tools
- Teach them about spam
- Explain Wikipedia “facts” may not be true
- Explain what surfing is acceptable at work
- Keep building on their skills

petencies means that many people have big gaps in their understanding of how the basics work.

Productivity jump

Early in 2010, the New Zealand Computer Society Inc found that by formally tackling core computing skills, New Zealand’s productivity would increase by \$1.7 billion per year. The report stated that in adopting a digital literacy standard—at government level— productivity could be heightened in about 70 percent of employees at work. Increasing computer competency by just 20 minutes a day in those workers adds up to 1.7 hours a week in gained productivity, resulting in annual savings of \$1820 per employee.

While the savings to be made are massive, many computer users are still uncomfortable on the web because, in businesses today, digital literacy is assumed. This forces individuals to learn fundamental skills by trial and error, and non-systematic learning of core computer competencies means that many people have big gaps in their understanding of how the basics work.

User testing is a key part of the process for designing and building websites at Base Two and so we encounter many people at varying stages of ability and see first-hand how they use computers. Many users, particularly those of the older generation, commonly worry that they will get lost or break things, so they are tentative in exploring and trying new things online.

Many computer users are still uncomfortable on the web because, in businesses today, digital literacy is assumed.

Learning rules of the game

It’s important that all staff know how to use their computers and they’re trained to use the web just as they would be trained to use software packages such as Word, Excel or PowerPoint. Explaining core concepts like firewalls and how they work, as well as what spam is and how it should be dealt with, means they’ll understand the rules of the game, waste less time trying to make things work, and eventually be more productive workers.

Improving digital literacy isn’t about having your staff work harder—it’s about ensuring they know how to work smarter. At Base Two the majority of our 12-strong workforce spend their day at the computer so it makes good business sense to ensure those people know how to operate their machines quickly and efficiently. We run an initial teaching session, which is followed by a detailed course outline which we run in small groups. Working in small groups lets people learn together. We encourage learners to ask questions and discuss concepts so the group can work out together how to solve problems.

Staff (or clients we’ve taught) then use the tools from the session—for example, a browser, a content-management tool—for one to two weeks on their own. We check in with each individual and ask them where they’re having problems or issues and what they don’t understand and then build on our teaching to help them solve gaps in their knowledge. Following up is a crucial step and one that not many people take—it helps personalise our training and allows us to better understand where our staff or clients are



The rise of the Information Worker

Sven Martin, the Director of CRM solutions for Fusion5, explains how workers' better use of information will lead to a better customer experience.

In this networked information age, the most essential component of business performance is an environment that encourages workers to effectively use and share information. This helps to achieve better outcomes including enhanced productivity and greater customer satisfaction. Gathering, retaining and using relevant customer information enables faster responses, better product and service offerings, and above all, a better experience for the customer.

Customer Relationship Management, or CRM, is a facilitator for achieving these objectives. CRM solutions manage knowledge and information; they also enable the execution of activities within and across value chains while supporting all decision making underlying those activities.

Data, people, and processes can be connected through CRM across the customer facing front-office, sales, marketing, service, and partners. CRM is an information-unifying tool, designed to increase access to and visibility of information, making it the perfect information-worker solution. There is plenty to consider when investing in information-worker-oriented solutions. To that end, making sense of vast quantities of data, and the need for collaboration between a range of internal and external partners.

COUNT THE BENEFITS

The benefits of an optimised CRM solution are numerous:

1. Increased productivity – Optimising a CRM system for information workers empowers them to work faster and more productively.

2. Improved collaboration – A CRM system optimised for information workers helps them work together more effectively. Workflows, multi-stakeholder tasks, and shared information sources keep all employees working together for the customer.

3. Individual impact – Information-worker optimised CRM helps empower individuals with tools tailored to their specific roles.

4. Greater individual impact – Better-optimised CRM helps information workers use more data and tools for broader and better performance improvements. Mobile access, for example, reduces employee down-time and increases their ability to respond quickly.

5. Better customer service – The end goal of any CRM system is to strengthen customer relationships. A CRM system optimised for information workers allows organisations to deliver superior service to keep customers happy and loyal.

6. Reduced business complexity – By streamlining and automating business processes, an optimised CRM system helps information workers at all levels focus on achieving their goals and objectives without being caught up in process complexity.

7. Higher revenues – A CRM system that enables information workers to gain greater, more usable insight into customer needs and behaviours' is critical to finding new revenue sources, from cross-selling and up-selling opportunities to underserved product niches

8. Reduce operating costs – Better information leads to less wasted effort.

FEATURE

struggling and if further training is required. This system is scalable to large organisations, but it requires a commitment to formalised digital education to properly increase literacy skills across the board. That means having a leadership team which has excellent online skills themselves, along with organisational champions who can troubleshoot issues at a lower level to keep staff engaged and happy with the programme.

Take out the rubbish

Although the time you spend in training staff will cost time and money, the benefits to your business will pay you back ten-fold as staff work smarter, are less frustrated with their computers not doing what they want, and they begin to streamline their workflow. Once your workers have a high level of digital literacy you can begin introducing new tools, many of which are free online, to further streamline processes and increase their productivity. One of my favourites is Xobni (www.xobni.com), which is an Outlook plug-in. Train staff to delete their rubbish emails, which are filling up your service space with junk, and use a tool like Xobni to make it easy to search for the email string they need. Adding a simple plugin can save minutes if not hours in searching for emails alone. At its most basic, developing digital literacy begins with staff being allowed to explore and use online sites at work. I know the usual arguments—if you let your staff do this they'll waste all day updating their Facebook status or watching videos on YouTube. That may be true at the start. People by their very nature often want what they can't have, so by operating a workplace where free use of websites is frowned upon, you're making them all the more desirable. Allowing staff to play with Facebook, Trade Me, Stuff and other popular sites, however, allows them to build confidence.

Giving them an understanding of spam, viruses and phishing means they—and your organisation—can stay safe online. As well as this, their own experimentation shows them how websites are laid out, how to research and source information in new ways and, by building on that over time, they become more efficient users of the web along with internal resources such as intranets.

Workplace culture

Ensuring your staff are sensible in their use of website and social media tools is about developing your workplace culture so that staff are engaged with the work they do, want to be effective contributors to your organisation, and understand what is and isn't acceptable workplace behaviour. The majority of people know that looking at R18 websites at work is unacceptable. However, your workforce may not have the level of sophistication to know that updating their Facebook status about how rotten their day at work is can also be detrimental to your business. Or they may not be aware that many businesses look at their employees'


Facebook pages, and even those of staff who work in companies they're looking to partner with.

How you train your staff in what's acceptable is important. Bring your social media policy to life and make it easy for your workforce to see how it relates to them. Telstra Australia has done a great job of this through their 3Rs (Representation, Responsibility and Respect) programme. They've developed an online training manual in cartoon form, which describes what social media tools do, and explains to staff what's in and out of bounds. The programme is supported offline by the communications team so staff can still use social media sites, but they have clear expectations about what's acceptable at work. Follow the course yourself online at <http://bit.ly/Telstra-example>. To see a real-time example of how staff can band together to use social media for business success then see www.twitter.com/TelecomNZ. Nine Telecom staff are running their Twitter account, which serves as part-helpdesk, troubleshoots problems and builds the online personality and brand of the organisation by offering 'sneak previews' of new products and services and by chatting amongst the online community.

Once your staff have a core understanding of how the internet can work to their advantage and are being smart online, you can build on their skills. Modular learning is a great way to do that. For example, teach them how to effectively use Google or other search engines. They'll get a lot further and faster if they understand Boolean searches, i.e. how to use the words 'and', 'or' and 'not' to best effect to find better information smarter. Teaching workers how to use advanced search options is also invaluable because they find the information first time, more of the time, and they find more pertinent results in the initial results. They begin to understand how information is sorted and how to exploit that to be more accurate in their searching.

Get the true facts

One thing that routinely gets forgotten is that not everything on the internet is true. For example, many people I have talked to see Wikipedia information as sacrosanct because they've never been told it is built by users and that the information on it can change at any time. It's much better practice to advocate for your staff to always check a number of sources to check the veracity of online information.

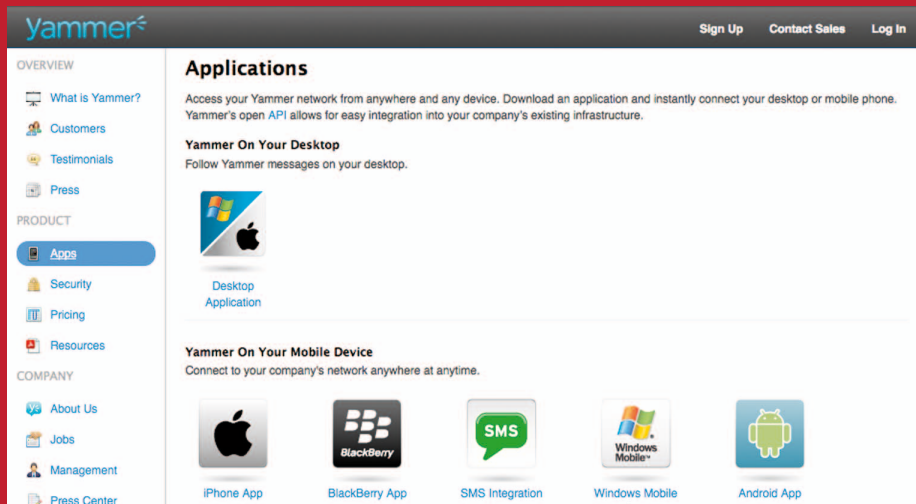
Developing digital literacy in the workplace is a sure fire way for businesses and organisations to increase their productivity. It does require time, commitment, leadership and money but then few things that are worth achieving are ever easy. 

Colin Phillips is interactive director at Wellington agency Base Two. He was one of the early pioneers of web design and has worked with organisations in Spain, Germany, USA, Mexico, Canada and the UK.



By formally tackling core computing skills, New Zealand's productivity would increase by \$1.7 billion per year.

NZ Computer Society Inc report



Business takes a Yammering

While Twitter and Facebook are all the buzz in 2010 for social media, a similar revolution is going on in business with a tool called Yammer for secure internal communication.

Yammer (www.yammer.com) is revolutionizing internal corporate communications by bringing together all of a company's employees inside a private and secure enterprise social network. Although Yammer is as easy to use as consumer products like Facebook or Twitter, its enterprise-grade software is built from the ground up to drive business objectives.

Yammer enables users to communicate, collaborate, and share information, reports and what they are working on. It reduces the need for meetings, increases communication across silos, surfaces pockets of expertise and connects remote workers. A beauty of the system is that, like Facebook, it takes only a minute or two to sign up and get started and workers of all stages of computer literacy can easily grasp how to use it. In fact, one bonus is that workers who are not very familiar with such tools can, by using Yammer, increase their confidence and digital literacy.

Companies using Twitter soon realize that, with the fast growth of the social media tool, tweets soon can become public easily. Think of Yammer as a private version for approved company staff only. Once logged in, Yammer automatically creates a group with reference to your company domain. You can soon create sub-groups for particular sections of staff. That means you can send a message to one person or to a large group working on a particular project. Yammer can also be used on numerous platforms including a PC or Mac or on most mobile services including iPhone, Android and BlackBerry or integrated with SharePoint.

Yammer provides a basic service but most companies soon opt for a paid subscription to get the enhanced features. The number of paid users in Q2 this year was 57% compared with the previous year. A sign of how it works well is that the same quarter saw 100% renewal rate on contracts that have come up for renewal.

This is a typical case study on Yammer's corporate blog on how Yammer has made a difference at a UK consultancy business. A staff member at the firm explained how internal culture and information sharing had improved.

"When I started working here at ICO Partners, I noticed a challenge I've seen before in large global companies with multiple offices in different locations: there's no water cooler or kitchen shared by everyone in the company. No place where information is passed on naturally from one person to the other, gradually making its way to each staff member until everyone 'magically' knows.

"When you're in a company with multiple offices, it's dangerous to believe that just because everyone in your office knows about what's going on, that means everyone at all the other locations knows it, too. Some information might have been shared with a few people via email and selectively passed along, which can create an impression that the info is common knowledge when it really isn't.

Here are the changes Yammer has made:

It keeps email inboxes clean

A wonderful thing. Looking at the email inbox, almost everything is external communication and it's easy to focus on what needs to be done and followed up there. In numbers, we have done 5,000 messages in six months. That's around 40 messages less in our inboxes per work day. Quite likely Yammer also encouraged sharing more but the main point is that this communication does not get in the way of external communication.

The Knowledge base

We've introduced heavy tagging to our Yammer messages and just by clicking on a tag it's easy to follow up what has been discussed about the topic before. Very important when coming back from holidays or someone new is joining the company. Even if for obvious reasons the new starter did not receive an email before, it's easy to get up to speed. Thomas still keeps his plans to secretly take over the world with an army of vampires to himself but we can now conveniently follow up on what he is doing when he is at the other side of the ocean.

Provides personality

Do not underestimate the power of the water cooler! This is where people bond and get to know each other. In our case Yammer is some sort of virtual water cooler and we share what we are working on and where progress has been made – or challenges arise on the horizon. But we also have the popular #spam tag, which classifies less important topics but gets you familiar with each other's personalities.