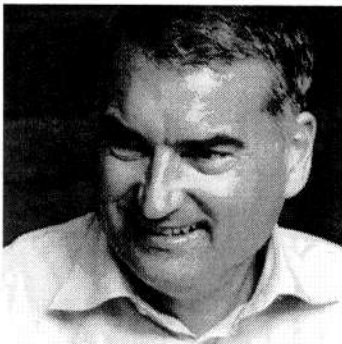


Blogging to build a body of work

Dr Stephen Billing



Blogging is an accessible and immediate way to develop thinking and build a body of work – for academics, practitioners and consultants. After completing my doctorate and considering how to share my research ideas with a broader community, I settled on blogging as a way of offering managers and potential clients useful thinking and practical suggestions on organisational change. In this article, I conclude that the process of blogging is a way of practising the skills of writing about complex ideas succinctly – and further developing thinking.

Key words: *Blogging, writing, post-doctoral publishing, journal writing, blog tips*

Introduction

Depending on what figures you read, there are about 112 million blogs out there. Most are not worth the paper they are written on, or the power it takes to light up their homepage. Many have little content, infrequent posts, are overly self-promotional, and/or are written for search engines, not readers (i.e. full of repetitive keywords). Nevertheless there must be some value to blogging, or why would so many people be doing it?

This article is not concerned with how to set up a blog – my own blog at www.changingorganisations.com uses Wordpress, and there is plenty of technical advice available. Rather, this is a very personal perspective on why I blog. My intention here is to report on the experience of writing a blog consistently for over a year, and provide a few tips based on what I have learnt.

Why blog?

When I finished my doctorate I was well established in the habit of writing regularly. I didn't want to lose that habit, and yet I didn't really have any

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particular goal to focus my writing on. I presented a couple of conference papers, contributed a couple of chapters to edited books and tried writing an article for a peer-reviewed journal – which met with unmitigated rejection. But I am not pursuing a career in academia; rather I want my writing to be a part of my consulting work, so those avenues were actually peripheral to my consultancy aims.

At the same time I wanted to write to continue to develop my ideas, and overwhelmingly I wanted my doctoral research ideas to be available to a mainstream audience, not only to academics with access to a university library and an appetite for reading dusty theses.

So for me, blogging was the perfect medium to express myself to managers, clients and potential clients, because it forces me to write short, pithy posts in lay person's language. I started out with explaining aspects of my doctoral research, and have continued to develop my thinking on a wide range of management, leadership and organisational change topics, inspired by my work with clients and by my own reading. Blogging has enabled me to build my body of work, and get better at explaining philosophical or complicated concepts in relatively simple language.

Your reasons for writing a blog need to be compelling and strong enough to sustain relatively frequent posts over a long period. I aim for posts 2-3 times per week. It is the frequent updates of interesting, useful material that bring people back to your blog.

The process of writing a blog

In my corporate life, I have found myself engaged in two main kinds of writing. The first is what I call 'writing to order'. I became adept at this when I was working as a manager and then I refined it in my practice as a consultant. Essentially, this form of writing applies to reports, proposals, board papers and business cases. The most effective way I have found to write them is to work out in advance what you want to say, do an outline or structure of the piece (I use a mind map) and then fill in each section – this is what I mean by 'writing to order'. You know that the document will have an executive summary, and sections on research method, findings, conclusions and recommendations. You do a rough outline and then write

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it according to the parameters. The outcome of what you are writing is known in advance (proposal, report, review of prior initiative) and you write in order to achieve that outcome – hence 'writing to order.'

The second mode of writing is a completely different process, where you are writing to express yourself and in the process work out what you think. It is very akin to writing a journal or diary, where you are writing to express your thoughts without an end objective. I have had the experience at the end of reviewing what I've written, and thinking 'Wow, so that's what I think.'

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In writing to order, you are focused on achieving certain predetermined outcomes, whereas in journal writing you just write and then at the end you realise what outcomes you've achieved.

Blogging to work out what you think

For me, blogging is the second kind of writing. I start with an initial thought and then write it down and see where it takes me. In this way I learn what I think. I write down my initial premise and then take it from there. Some of my initial premises go straight down a dead end into the rubbish. Well, actually, old ideas don't die in the rubbish, rather they languish in 'Drafts' and rarely see the light of day. Others get totally reworked.

For example – I planned a series of three posts about the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu when I came across something he wrote suggesting there were three problems with social research. I started writing the posts, and the first developed into something much fuller than I originally planned, something quite different. It ended up becoming my newsletter of November 2009, which I send monthly by email to clients and others interested in my work. The second post remains a draft in my handwritten notebook, and the third post is lying around in my blog Drafts, awaiting a day when I revisit it.

What makes a blog post successful?

A successful blog post in my book is one that is read, remembered and talked about. I measure only in an *ad hoc* way – I look at the number of

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comments that each post attracts, and I listen to readers' feedback. Other than that I don't worry too much. I have found that blogging rewards posts that are pithy, provocative and have good headlines.

To be pithy, your posts have to be brief enough that when you catch the attention of someone browsing, they can read your post in one sitting, without having to print it off or save it for a later date.

I have also found that the posts that get the best responses from readers are those where I am challenging orthodox thinking, suggesting an alternative point of view, or generally being provocative.

Headlines seem to be important in attracting people to read your post. I started off with quite oblique headlines, but have moved now to headlines that seek to explain clearly the main point of the post. I don't worry too much if the headline's a little long; I try to make sure that it captures the central idea in the post.

Some people say your headline should be packed with key words so search engines will pick them up. My opinion is that this may be the case if you only have one or two posts. Now that I have a couple of hundred posts on a range of topics, I have plenty of key words in there and as it turns out, I can't control the key words anyway. For example, I discovered recently that someone searched on 'What it means to have great self management' and my blog came up first – but I have never written about self management. I have written a lot about self-organising, but this is quite a different thing. So don't worry about key words and search engine optimisation. Just have great content that is regularly updated and create a good body of work.

Conclusions

People who have done post-graduate research and written a thesis often want to share their thinking more widely. Writing articles and papers for academic journals and conferences is one way of doing this. Blog technology now offers another.

I started my blog attempting to make the ideas of my doctoral thesis accessible to a broader audience. The experience of writing the blog has

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I found myself often splitting up my posts

given me much more than this, including practice at expressing my ideas clearly and succinctly. At the start I found myself often splitting up my posts, because I would have several ideas in one post, it would be too long and take too long to write. Nowadays, if I am explaining a three-step process, I tend to write a post about the whole process and one about each step – making four posts in total.

Blogging has been a useful way of further developing my thinking. Like writing a journal, I put down my thoughts about a topic and then examine them, but unlike a journal, I know they will be accessible by 'the world'. The process described has allowed me to build a body of work – to develop a series of writings over time that express a point of view – and to add to my expertise.

By the way, I initially wrote a mind map for this article (attempting to 'write it to order') and then ended up just writing in a diary style to find out what I think about blogging. I have learnt a lot. I hope you also have gained something of use.

In change situations, familiarity breeds lack of noticing

Extract from a post on [Stephen Billing's Blog](#)

Anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has something to offer here. He says that for Western social researchers asking questions about a group of people, for example, a group of African tribespeople, there is a lot that is taken for granted in the answers given, a lot that is not said by the tribespeople. The tacit assumptions, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and 'models' that the tribespeople use are important, but are left unsaid.

In other words, for the tribespeople, when talking about their customs and practices, they are talking about things that are so familiar that they do not really notice them any more. The tribespeople are not able to talk about them because they do not notice them, and so important assumptions are left unsaid. I suppose it's a bit like the fish that does not notice the water it's swimming in. Or like the air that we breathe that we do not notice from moment to moment, unless it's not there (e.g. asthma).

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Managers are in the same boat, as are leadership researchers and consultants. When leaders are asked about their leadership, and when staff are asked questions by their managers, they find themselves in a world of familiarity, and hence a lot gets left unsaid. This is by necessity, not by design. After all, you couldn't spend days and days explaining every single nuance. But, also, you often are not aware of the nuances until you are in a situation where the nuances become important – for example when you find out that one of your managers has given their people an incorrect view of the changes you are instigating because there was an important detail or nuance that you took for granted and left out of your briefing to them. You can't predict every eventuality.

Recommended blogs

Chris Rodgers at <http://informalcoalitions.typepad.com/> accessed 09.11.09

Chris Mowles at <http://reflexivepractice.wordpress.com/> accessed 09.11.09

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Stephen runs a solo practitioner consulting business based in Wellington, New Zealand. He works with CEOs, General Managers and others with profit and loss responsibility to help organisations create dramatic change for business improvement. In August 2008, Stephen established his blog www.changingorganisations.com. He holds a Doctor of Management degree from the University of Hertfordshire, UK and is a graduate member of the Complexity & Management Centre at the Business School, University of Hertfordshire. He is also an adjunct faculty member of the Centre for Social Sciences at the Open Polytechnic of NZ.

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