

# USING A BLOG-BASED COMMUNITY TOOL TO FOSTER COMMUNICATION AMONG TRAINEES

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## ABSTRACT

In contrast to assumptions which can be summarized as "computer work makes you lonely", computers may also be used to facilitate communication [1, 2]. We are currently running an application in cooperation with the internal training program of the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS), with the major aim to give trainees means to communicate with peers, while completing their on-the-job trainings in offices all over Austria. A second goal is to create a common platform for trainees and their coaches. The tool is based on blogs, which are integrated in a *dual interaction design*, dividing the screen in two sides, on dealing with context and the other with communication. We present first results of our test run, which are on the whole encouraging: Although the use of this application is voluntary, the acceptance is quite high after four weeks in use.

## Keywords

Blogs, Community, Interaction Design

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We present the preliminary results of a project conducted with the internal training program of the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS). The training consists of on-the-job training phases, where the members of the course are distributed to offices all over Austria and are attended by a personal coach, as well as several two-week intensive courses in Linz, where the group of trainees gets together. While this program is basically very effective, trainees often feel isolated at their workplaces, being cut-off from others in a similar position, with similar problems.

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The coaches, on the other hand, are assigned a trainee without a reduction of their usual work load. They do not have a common platform, i.e. there is no contact between them and means to compare the in-service training situations.

In an initial session we asked for expectations and fears among the trainees. The most prominent expectation was better contact and less isolation, while the greatest fears were lack of privacy and consequences of speaking their minds openly.

In addition to these social conditions, it must be noted that computer literacy among the trainees varies and that they are repeatedly confronted with complex software applications as part of their training.

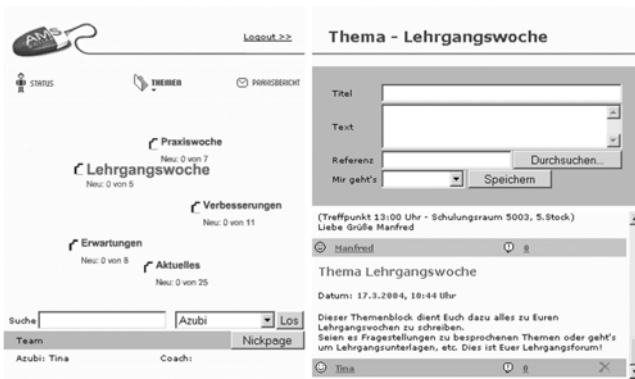
Thus the aims of our project can be described as follows: Trainees should be given means to communicate with peers in the same situation during phases of in-service training. Coaches should be invited to communicate among each other and to compare the situations of different trainees. Any participation should be on a voluntary basis. On the technical side, the project should not involve learning another complex program.

## 2. THE APPLICATION

In this chapter we will briefly describe the reflections, which served as a basis, as well as the result.

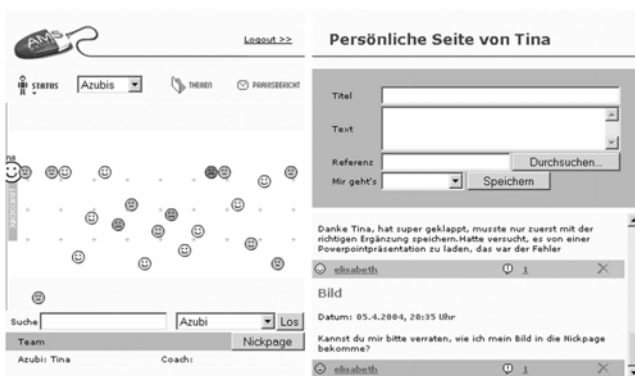
If we had to find a slogan for our application, it would probably be "less is more" – simplicity was the guiding principle. With respect to fear of surveillance we made a decision in favour of creating a space, which excludes the public and is only open to members (i.e. trainees and coaches) but completely transparent within, meaning that any member may read any posting.

The application – screenshots are shown in figure 1 and two - is based on what we call a *dual interaction design* [3]. The left half of the screen serves for choosing a particular context, while the actual communication takes place through blogs, which are displayed on the right side



**Fig.1: Dual interaction design – with context and menu for views, search and link to nick page of the left, and a blog as communication medium of the right side.**

[4]. As such, the particular entries shown are filtered with respect to the topic chosen or the person addressed directly. With each entry there is the opportunity to mark it with a smiley to display ones mood and add an attachment. Other members of the community may comment upon postings. Each member of the community is represented through a nick page, which links trainee and coach in order to foster “team spirit”.



**Fig.2: After login the member gets a first glance impression of the overall mood of either coaches or trainees on the left, while the blog on the right side is filtered for personal postings.**

A status page (see figure 2), which is displayed after login, gives an overview of the activity of either trainees or coaches in on glance, as well as their mood, which members give at login.

### 3. ANALYSIS

At this point the project has been running for 9 weeks, but only 4 weeks of on-the-job training with internet access, which served as a basis for this analysis, took place during this period. We started a course of 17 trainees, the course

leader and a moderator for technical assistance. A month later seven coaches joined in.

During this period there were more than 1000 logins and a total of 1041 visits to nick pages. Of the 292 postings, 180 were in the context of a particular topic, 112 on a nick page. The option to add a mood (smiley) to a posting was used in 23% of the cases.

The activity was mainly coming from the trainees; of the seven coaches only two wrote 6 postings all together.

A closer look revealed a small group of three users who posted at each other's nick pages.

Except by course leader and moderator, who used it for the distribution of course information, the option to attach files was not used, while the upload of a picture to the nick page was widely accepted.

### 4. CONCLUSION

To start with the good news: after a series of failures of similar projects within the AMS, the acceptance of the application was surprisingly high.

That is not to say that there was no chance to learn from mistakes. Concerning the topic of transparency, it is not clear what became of the fears of surveillance. Since participation was not evenly, sceptics probably just did not participate.

On the level of interface design we learned that the commentary function was not accepted, which we need to take into account for the next version. We also need to note that subgroups formed which were not linked to a particular topic. Such groups should be given a “virtual cafeteria” in the future.

However, the project is still in an early phase and more detailed results are to be expected.

### 5. REFERENCES

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