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zJOURNAL

April / May 2010

zData Perspectives

What's All zTwittering About?

by Craig S. Mullins

Regular readers of this column know that it focuses on mainframe data and database management topics. Although that continues to be the case, I will be stretching the confines of that definition a little bit to discuss the micro-messaging phenomenon Twitter. If you've tried Twittering (or Tweeting, as it is also called) you know that it can be addictive, but it is also growing in popularity as a business tool for communication… even though this might seem hard to believe when you first dive into Twitter.

The basic idea of Twitter is simple. It offers a platform for users to publish messages of no more than 140 characters at a time

from these companies and it can be difficult to decide which of them to follow.

Twitter also allows users to create lists of Twitter users that can be followed in one fell swoop. Instead of digging around looking for relevant Twitter-ers you can just follow lists that others have already created. For example, I created a list of relevant DB2 Twitter users at http://twitter.com/craigmullins/db2-folks. Other very helpful lists you might want to consider following include Martin Packer's mainframe professionals list at http://twitter.com/martinpacker/mainframe ~~and the list of official IBM Twitter users at http://twitter.com/eric_andersen/ibm-official~~. The power of Twitter is that it is a real time means of sharing information with like-minded individuals. I've learned

to publish messages of no more than 140 characters at a time. And that can seem limiting... until you've used Twitter for awhile. When you tweet, that is send a Twitter message, it gets broadcast to all of your followers. Likewise, when anyone you follows sends a tweet it gets broadcast to you.

If you follow me on Twitter (http://www.twitter.com/craigmullins) you'll find that I send out regular tweets for many things, such as:

- when I post a new blog entry,
- to share the highlights of interesting sessions when I attend a conference or user group,
- updates on my travel and speaking schedule,
- to notify folks when I've published a new article or column,
- to share useful links and stories I come across daily, and
- just to share some of the "things" going on in my life.

OK, so what are the business uses of Twitter? Well, sharing information (like I do) is absolutely a business usage. Frequently I hear about things on Twitter that I would never hear about otherwise. A well-developed feed of folks you follow on Twitter can be a very useful conduit for news, trends, issues, and ideas.

There are many diverse individuals participating on Twitter, from comedians to musicians to movie stars to politicians. But more pertinent are the IT people you can follow, including luminaries like Bill Gates (@BillGates), Robert Scoble (@scobleizer), Don Tapscott (@dtapscott), as well as many other IT and business professionals. There are also quite a few industry analysts using Twitter, including analysts from Red Monk, Gartner and Forrester.

sharing information with like-minded individuals. I've learned about many interesting sites, articles, and events using Twitter that I would never have encountered otherwise.

You can also send direct messages to other users who follow you. This can reduce the use of e-mail for short communiqués that do not require in-depth follow-up or attachments. Some forward-thinking companies have Twitter customer advocates who keep a watchful eye on the tweetstream and respond to complaints, comments, and suggestions.

Of course, there are downsides to Twitter, too. First and foremost is that it can be viewed as a time waster by corporate management. Some organizations have blocked Twitter usage so it cannot be used on their work network (as they have blocked other social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn). But that does not preclude you from using Twitter at home.

Another potential problem with Twitter is the avalanche of information it provides. As you begin to follow more and more people the flow of information increases and it can be difficult to keep up with it. By its very nature the information shared on Twitter is off-the-cuff and varied, so not everything will be work-related or even interesting. But there is enough there that is to warrant its use.

It is also possible for you to link your other social media accounts to Twitter. That way, whenever you change your Facebook status it can be automatically tweeted to your followers. LinkedIn has also offers a similar level of integration with Twitter.

Honing in closer to home for zJournal readers, there are many DB2 and mainframe professionals who Tweet, too. Willie Favero and Troy Coleman are regular Twitter users and there are Twitter accounts for industry conferences like IDUG and IOD, too. And most mainframe vendors (including IBM, BMC Software and CA) have Twitter accounts that their customers can follow, too. Sometimes, there are multiple Twitter accounts

In today's social media savvy Web 2.0 era online networking using tools like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn is becoming ubiquitous. Your social media presence can help you to further your career through learning, sharing, and even job searching.

But be careful, because anything you share on a social media web site becomes accessible, so take care before you tweet…

From zJournal, April / May 2010.

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