

# Internet power tools

Trevor Maynard, James Orr, and John Harnett tell you about the different ways of obtaining information from the internet.

**T**his article, written on paper, is not alive – just try clicking on one of the links! We have written a similar article at the following address – <http://toolkit.pbwiki.com/InternetPowerTools> – and we urge you to read it in its natural habitat. The live links will give you much more detail and the concepts are better defined by experts than our attempts here.

We've become used to the internet, and think of the explosion in use and content as being behind us, but it is still evolving; it is the next frontier in communication and knowledge-sharing. We describe some free (yes!) power tools which will help you make the most of an opportunity that faces not just business but almost every area of human activity. Do actuaries use the internet to its full potential in obtaining CPD (now called 'life-long learning')? This article describes some internet tools that might be used to enhance such learning.

As we describe the tools below, see the jargon buster box; we've avoided giving definitions in the text.

## RSS and aggregators

If you have some favourite websites, then you probably visit them occasionally to check for updates. Wouldn't it be great if the updates came to you? Well, they can – all you need is a piece of software called an aggregator.

An RSS 'feed' is a description of a website that a computer can read. Aggregators work by taking a copy of the RSS feed from a website at a point in time, then at a later time comparing the new RSS feed with the old. If the two feeds are different then something has been added to the website. The aggregator then tells you a piece of news.

RSS aggregators are nothing less than your own personal newspaper, filled with the content that you personally find interesting. Note that you can add a blog (see below) to your aggregator too, so you don't just have to read 'official' information.

You can run your aggregator online or from your desktop. The benefits to life-long learning are immediately apparent. Each day, the aggregator provides you with a reading list of many of the new developments in your chosen field.

## Blogs and blog search

If you put a log (a diary of events, thoughts, opinions) on the web, then what would you call it? You might call it a weblog for a while, but you would soon get bored and shorten it to 'blog' – and that is what happened.

There are millions of blogs out there, but why should the views of so many 'lay' people be of interest? Doesn't this just contribute to the undergrowth which we are trying to cut through? Not necessarily. Human beings have a great ability to filter information. Once someone has found a good webpage, they often link to it on their blog. If someone has said something profound on their blog then others can link to it from theirs.

Google-search uses a page-ranking algorithm. It is very democratic. It ranks sites by how many people have visited them (the number of 'hits'). If a website has a lot of hits, then Google-search concludes that it must have something good to say and it includes it in your search. This works very well... sometimes.

Of course, if the information is new, or little-known, then standard Google-search will miss it. Standard Google-search is deaf to the views of the individual. Fortunately there are blog search engines (Google has one of these too). These are time-based, and they answer the question 'tell me what has been said on a subject  $y$  within the last  $x$  minutes'. Provided that someone has spotted the new information and added it to their blog, you will hear about it. This is networking without the canapés.

## Tagging (aka social bookmarking)

You may have noticed that these new technologies are all about social interaction and sharing information. As people share information, the internet grows exponentially in its power. Tagging is another great example of this; it is the 21st-century way of filing information.

Let's reminisce about 'filing'. This is the act of putting a physical object in a physical place, in a ring binder, on a shelf, in a filing cabinet, or in a filing room. We were so used to this activity that we replicated it on our computers in Explorer. We have all lost a piece of information that we tied to the twig of a long and winding branch (g:\here\where\ImNotSure\OhDear-ICantRemember\2005\draft\help). We can use search facilities to find our lost works but this doesn't work so well in something as vast as the world wide web.

We don't need to do this. Clay Shirky, an IT philosopher, notes that 'in the electronic world,



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there is no shelf'. It is only the physical object, a book, a letter, a report, that has to be in one place – the ideas do not. A book can have many ideas, and can be about many things.

Tagging allows the author and, more powerfully, the reader to say 'this web page is about  $x,y,z$ '. This is another example of power in numbers. The more people 'tag' (a tag is the description of the content; the  $x, y$  or  $z$ ), the better the categorisation of the web. For life-long learning this will enable us to find information much more easily.

This is how tagging works. A tagging service, such as (the free) del.icio.us, allows the reader to put his or her tags for a particular webpage in its database. In itself this is useful, because if in the future you want to find an article, then you just have to remember one of the tags and it will list all the sites that you have given that particular tag. However, if others have tagged the web page too then you can follow all their tags and find related articles. This is best illustrated by an example. The following link shows all the sites that people have tagged 'R' (the statistical software package). Follow the link and see where it takes you (<http://del.icio.us/tag/R>).

You can even place a person's tags in your RSS aggregator. If you find a guru, then you can see what they are reading. The opportunities for coaching are enormous.

### Wikis

You may recognise this scenario. You are part of a working party, producing a new guidance note. The 'master' document is owned by the chairman. Every so often you send in your comments by email. The poor chairman is deluged and you don't feel like you own the document. This is a mess, and it is inefficient.

How about having a single document that you can all edit and where everyone can see updates immediately? This has to be better initially, though we can see that towards publication a single editor is often called for to get a consistent style. The problem with this is that we all work for different organisations and don't share a network.

Wikis are one solution. These are web pages that the readers can edit. Try Wikipedia [www.wikipedia.org/](http://www.wikipedia.org/) (an online encyclopædia written by the users) to see how powerful wikis are. Wikipedia only started a few years ago and

now has nearly a million English articles that rival the *Encyclopædia Britannica* for accuracy.

These resources are free so you should be able to make a case to your IT department for access. In fact, it is putting you at a competitive disadvantage not having it, so don't take no for an answer.

Our comments grow out of our papers on 'A maths toolkit for actuaries' and we thank Michael Pomery for mentioning our work in *The Actuary*. Our wiki is available for all to see at <http://toolkit.pbwiki.com>. We're also looking at how we can help the actuarial profession with its knowledge and information management. We hope that you will try some of these tools and that they open up new worlds to you. □

### Jargon buster

#### Blog

An on-line personal publication of opinions or information.  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

#### Blog search

Search engines that can search the blogosphere. Try [www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com)

#### Blogsphere

The society of blogs on the internet  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogsphere>

#### Clay Shirky

One of the many 'IT philosophers',  
[http://shirky.com/writings/ontology\\_overnated.html](http://shirky.com/writings/ontology_overnated.html) – worth a read

#### Del.icio.us

A social bookmarking (tagging) service. Type del.icio.us into your browser and open an account today! <http://del.icio.us>

#### Society

There is such a thing: <http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society>. An organisation or association of persons engaged in a common profession, activity, or interest

#### RSS (Really simple syndication)

A view of a webpage that a computer can read. For desktop aggregators try <http://www.rssbandit.org/> or [www.sharpreader.com](http://www.sharpreader.com), or for an online aggregator <http://www.bloglines.com/>

#### Tagging

Describing the content of a web page in one or more simple words (tags). Often known as key words in academic articles.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metadatum\\_\(computing\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metadatum_(computing))

#### Wiki

A website the reader can update, comment on and interact with. Try <http://jamestrevorjohn.pbwiki.com/>