

Case Study: Social Computing in the United States Army

MILSPACE

Situational Analysis

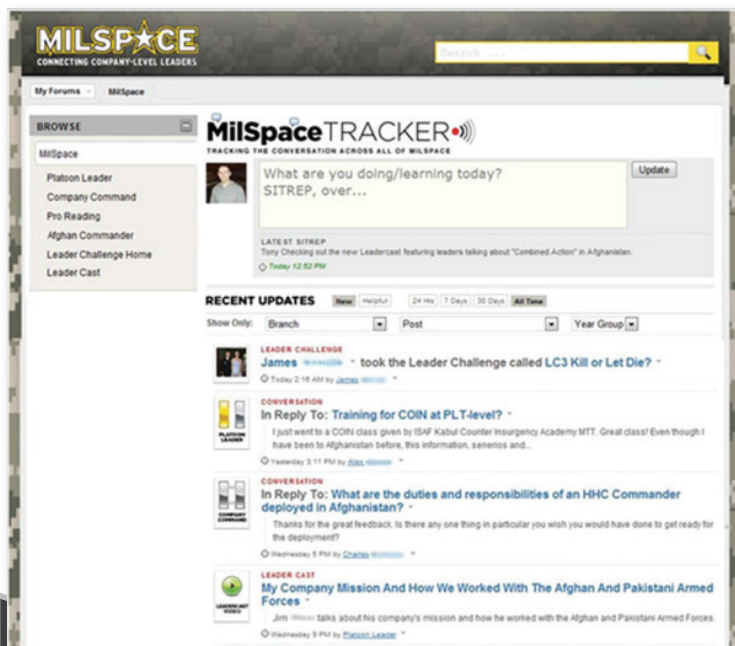
Young leaders in the United States Army work under extremely difficult conditions — leading soldiers in battle, year after year, in some of the toughest terrain in the world against an adaptive and ever-changing enemy. Platoon leaders and company commanders, in particular, have

significant responsibility relative to their experience — making life-or-death decisions for 30 to 150 soldiers. They often operate in remote locations and lack an easy way to learn from their peers or to benefit from the experience of leaders who have gone before them. This is further complicated by the fact that Army officers typically switch jobs every one to two years.

Solution

In 2000, a small team of company commanders set out to create a virtual “front porch” where they could gather with their peers to share what they were learning in real-time and across geographic boundaries. The team, led initially by Captains Tony Burgess, Nate Allen, Pete Kilner, Steve Schweitzer, and a band of like-minded peers, launched CompanyCommand.com (CC), which gave company commanders a place to talk about building combat-ready units, share their best ideas, and solve their most pressing problems. A year later, the group started a second web site, for lieutenants, called PlatoonLeader (PL).

As the sites grew, they became too much for the group to manage on the side. In 2002, the senior leaders of the United States Military Academy at West Point recognized the forums’ potential to transform the way Army leaders learn, and they established a research center to foster the development of the forums while allowing them to remain true to the core vision of grassroots communities run for and by the profession.



Case Study Highlights

Organization:

The United States Army - “MilSpace”

Industry:

Public Sector - Government/Dept of Defense

Situational Analysis:

Army officers sought an easier way to share knowledge and to support one another as they pursued excellence in leadership

Solution:

Online communities of practice built with NewsGator Tomoye

Results:

- Laterally connected profession
- Better knowledge capture/sharing
- Superior, better equipped leaders
- More effective combat teams
- Improved ability to save lives & accomplish the mission

During this time period, the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, emerged as the U.S. Army’s proponent for professional forums, providing forums modeled off CompanyCommand for many other functions at various levels throughout the Army. The West Point team partners with and serves as a research-and-development arm of the BCKS. Innovations that the West Point team proofs in the PL and CC forums can be adapted by BCKS and made available to the entire suite of U.S. Army forums.

Highlighted Features

In the summer of 2008, Burgess and Kilner – who continue to steward the movement – along with technology lead Tom Morel, integrated the two professional forums into one system called MilSpace. Powered by NewsGator Tomoye, MilSpace provides the Army with a powerful development and learning ecosystem. In addition to professional forums that offer sophisticated Q&A capabilities, document sharing, commenting, rating, tagging, blogs, etc., the MilSpace ecosystem includes:

- **MilSpace Tracker:** An activity feed of all the events/actions happening across MilSpace, with built-in custom filters for members.
- **Social Profiles (Dog Tags):** A personal area for each member that details their role, expertise, and contributed content.
- **Microblogging:** Leaders post short updates about what they are doing/learning that others can “like” and comment on.
- **ProReading:** Supports officers in their professional reading by giving them a location to discuss books with others.
- **Leadercast:** Hundreds of video clips of leaders sharing their lessons learned through stories of their combat experience.
- **Leader Challenge:** Interactive video vignettes based on real-life dilemmas to help leaders develop judgment and decision-making skills.

Today MilSpace has over 20,000 members, mostly junior officers, and averages 300 to 400 new members a month. The site continues to grow and evolve with recent additions being an improved design and the introduction of a series of Web 2.0 features such as microblogging and activity streams. These features are driving increased adoption and usage of the system with a 246% increase in status updates, a 60% increase in threaded discussion replies, and a 489% increase in commenting over the last two years.

Making a Difference in Army Leaders' Lives¹

“Not only have I used things that I have seen and talked about in the forum in training for combat, I have used them in combat, with success. The stories and scenarios available in the forum have allowed me to think through situations before I faced them. Even better, I placed my platoon leaders into situations that they were able to think about prior to and during deployment. The forum saves lives on a daily basis.” – Scott

“During a 15-month deployment to Iraq as a platoon leader, the content of MilSpace guided me through numerous challenges that I would have struggled through on my own. When I lost Soldiers, people on the forum could relate, offer encouragement, and suggest courses of action.” – Ryan

“What I enjoy about these forums is all the great outside-the-box ideas all over these web sites – suggestions and recommendations that go beyond institutional learning. The forums have allowed me to interact with peers who have gone through similar situations or who are currently on the ground and they are able to share their best practices and eyes-on-the-objective experiences.” – Gloria

“MilSpace is a growing network of junior officers who are dedicated to the cause of exceptional leadership at the company level. Thousands of us are connecting in an ongoing conversation – sharing our hard-earned knowledge and experiences, becoming more effective and advancing our profession. A foundational assumption that drives us is the idea that the cutting-edge knowledge of the Army resides in the minds of leaders at the tip of the spear – leaders in the experience right now. Connecting those leaders in conversation with each other as well as with those who will follow in their footsteps brings together the Army’s greatest knowledge resources.”

- Tony Burgess, Cofounder, Company Command & Platoon Leader

About NewsGator Technologies

NewsGator makes SharePoint social. Our Enterprise 2.0 software suite, Social Sites and Tomoye, boosts any organization’s performance with the power of innovation management, collaboration, and knowledge sharing - both inside the enterprise and out. Customers achieving results include Accenture, Biogen Idec, CME Federal Credit Union, Deloitte, Fujitsu, Novartis, the US Air Force, and the US Army. Learn to be social at www.newsgator.com.

Learn More

To learn more about the early history of MilSpace, read *CompanyCommand: Unleashing the Power of the Army Profession* by Nancy Dixon, Nate Allen, Tony Burgess, Pete Kilner, and Steve Schweitzer (2005) and *Transforming Army Learning Through Communities of Practice* by Peter Kilner (Military Review Journal, May/June 2002).

To learn how NewsGator can enable your organization with social learning, collaboration, and knowledge management tools, contact us at 800-608-4597 or at insidesales@newsgator.com.

¹ CompanyCommand. “Leaders Describe How the Company Command forum Makes a Difference,” ARMY Magazine (August, 2009).