

The Ears Have It: Podcasting In and Out of the Enterprise

By: Aaron Davis and Scott Nesbitt



Podcasting is one of the most important developments to hit the scene in a long, long time.
– Dan Gillmore

Podcasting. Some people call it blogging out loud. Podcasting is a fairly easy and fairly inexpensive way of presenting your ideas and opinions.

But podcasting is more than a platform for reviews or polemic. It's also a powerful tool within the enterprise for training, for marketing, and for documentation. Imagine being able to carry product information or supplementary material with you and not have to worry about stacks of paper? You can do that with a podcast.

What is podcasting?

At its most basic, podcasting is the act of recording some kind of program – whether it's music, news, opinion, or a lecture – and making it available for download. Your listeners can then download the audio file to a digital device – like an iPod (from which podcasting got its name), a smartphone, or even their computer – to listen to at their leisure. You can even play podcasts right off the Web.

The mechanics of podcasting

You have the creative skills (at least we hope you do!). And the technical skills, on a basic level, are fairly easy to acquire.

When we say *creative skills*, what do we mean? A few things:

- The ability to come up with interesting and engaging topics. Without these, you're not going to have much of a podcast.
- The ability to take those ideas and write tight, engaging scripts. Or, to be able to (or have the audacity to) work from a set of talking points while keeping things tight and fluid.

One key to an effective podcast is to *focus your topics*. If you prattle on or take too long to get to the crux of an argument, then your listeners will quickly lose interest. And, as a result, your audience will quickly dwindle.

You need to create and maintain a connection with your audience. How do you do that? Obviously, with interesting subject matter. And you shouldn't be afraid to meld your own experiences, ideas, opinions, triumphs, and even failures into the fabric of your

podcasts. It makes the podcasts less clinical and shows that you actually have some knowledge about what you're speak on.

Watch what you say

Of course, you'll also have to be careful about what you talk about. There is information that you should and shouldn't include in a podcast, especially when your podcasting in a corporate environment. Or even discussing your work in a podcast. Like what?

- Confidential company information.
- The names of people you may dislike or may have a grudge against.
- The standard *forward looking statements* about the state of a company or its stock or market position.

The types of information that you can include, though, might be how you solved a problem, how you were able to foster better relations between the technical communicators and developers in your organization, or how you used specific tools in a unique way. But if you're in doubt leave it out.

Interviewing skills can matter

One skill that's sometimes overlooked is interviewing. When doing a podcast, you're not always going to be the one doing the talking. You'll probably find that you'll be getting information from others. Sometimes that's easy, and sometimes it isn't. That's where good interviewing skills come in.

You need to know how to come up with good questions. That could involve research. But you also need to know how to phrase the questions and how to both make your subject feel at ease and draw answers out of them. You'll also need to recognize when a tangent appears and how to capitalize on it or leave it, depending on the tangent.

Interviewing skills take a while to develop. They take practice. You need to look at what you did right and what you may have done wrong, and analyze *why* things went well or not so well. When you do that, then your skills will definitely improve.

Show your passion

Remember that it isn't just what you have to say. It's *how* you say it. Your enthusiasm and passion for a subject, or lack of it, will come through. And enthusiasm and passion are two things that you *can't*

fake. If you listen to our podcast, you'll see that our enthusiasm and passion do come out. At least we hope they do ... There were two very notable instances of this. First, when we weighed in on RoboHelp 6. We weren't exactly kind, and there were a few people who took issue with that. No one from Adobe, as far as we know. Recently, we did a podcast on usability. It's a favourite subject of Aaron's, and we think that we really hammered home our opinions of the state of usability in the wacky world of software development.

To script or not to script?

Working with a script and working from talking points. Both have their allures, and both have pitfalls. With a script, you can control what you want to say and you can keep it tight. The danger is that you can rely too heavily on a script. If you're not careful, then you can sound like you're reading from a prepared statement. Compare a speech by Stephen Harper to one by Barack Obama and you'll see what we mean.

That said, many people talking about podcasts urge you to use a script. Keep in mind, though, that a script can become a crutch. It's easy to rely on it too much, and be straight-jacketed within the confines of the script.

We tried using scripts in the early days of our podcast. But that experiment didn't last long. Using scripts didn't capture the spark or spontaneity that many of our friends and colleagues associate with us. While we didn't seem overly rehearsed or stiff, a certain *something* was definitely missing.

There are several advantages to working from talking points, though. It gives you scope to digress – we hope in a meaningful way. You can also spontaneously express thoughts that come to mind, or explore tangents that appear as you're speaking. Believe it or not, doing that doesn't throw the other person off. Any long-winded expositions, pauses, or fumbles can be edited out.

If you're not sure what to do, or if you're not confident about working from talking points, try using a script. Then, try slowly weaning yourself off the script using talking points that become less and less detailed. After that, compare the results of each. Take the route that turns out to be better for you.

Getting technical

Let's move on to the technical side of things. Here, we're going to discuss the skills that you need to

create a podcast. The main ones are recording and editing. But we'll talk about those in more detail in a few moments.

When you're recording a podcast, you'll generally be doing it with your computer. Chances are you already have the hardware needed to do the job – the computer (obviously), a decent or better sound card, a headset or microphone, and perhaps VOIP software and a recording application to record interviews.

There are a number of recording tools available, many of which are free or inexpensive. These include:

- [Audacity](#) (our favourite)
- [Jokosher](#)
- [GarageBand](#)
- [Podcast Studio](#) and [Podcast Wizard](#)
- [CastBlaster](#)
- [ePodcast Producer](#) and [ePodcast Creator](#)
- [Propaganda](#)

Aside from GarageBand, the list is heavily weighted towards Windows and Linux. These are the operating systems that we use; we haven't gone Mac. At least not yet ...

There are also a number of high-end podcasting rigs available, including:

- [Behringer PodcastStudio](#)
- [U Cast](#)
- [Adobe SoundBooth](#)
- [InstrumentPro](#)
- [Markertek's suite of tools](#)

Essentially, both the high end and lower end tools do the same thing. Of course, using the high-end tools will set you back a couple of hundred dollars or more. It's just *how* they do the job that differs. With software like Audacity or Garage Band, you plug in and record. Actually, you do that with the higher-end tools, too. But some of the higher end tools offer more. Some, like PodcastStudio, come with all the hardware you need – studio-grade microphone and headset, as well as an audio mixer and equalizer. And it all hooks into a computer via a USB port.

The neat thing about podcasting is that you can do it in so many different ways. Some people record with portable MP3 players – Tom Johnson, who does the Tech Writer Voices podcast, used to do that quite a bit. We've heard of other people using mobile phones

or PDAs with recording capabilities. Some even use services like [PhoneCasting](#) or [Gcast](#), which enable you to record and post from your mobile. The sound quality isn't great from what we understand, though.

Your choice of tools will, of course, be based on your budget. Regardless, though, you'll want to get a good microphone or headset – USB preferably. Why? As you probably know, the interior of a computer is noisy. A lot of that noise will be picked up by the average jacked microphone or VOIP headset. This doesn't happen with a USB rig. Of course, if your budget is limited and you already have the recording hardware, then stick with it. Otherwise, make the switch.

Recording and editing

Late last year, someone held forth on me with a brief but impassioned diatribe about audio recording editing. The crux of the argument was that both tasks are difficult, and that most technical communicators would find these tasks a chore to learn and to master.

But at the basic level, the level at which many people are working, recording and editing audio is simple. A show of hands, please: who here knows how to highlight with a mouse, and how to copy, paste, and delete?

Guess what? You can do basic audio editing. It's just a new skill. How many of us had to learn FrameMaker, RoboHelp, and Word? How many of us sprung from the head of Zeus with a knowledge of HTML, DocBook, or DITA? Audio editing is the same. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here.

You need to record before you can edit.

If you're doing a podcast solo, then all you need to do is plug a microphone or headset into your computer, fire up your audio software, click Record, and start talking.

If, on the other hand, you're doing a podcast with one or more other people, or are doing interviews, recording can be a bit more of a challenge.

Podcasting, the DMN way

We'd like to say that our process evolved based on a lot of thought, planning, and experimentation. It didn't. It pretty much just happened.

The biggest obstacle to recording our podcast, besides time, is not being able to get together to do it. We live in opposite ends of the city, so meeting to record a podcast after work or even on the weekend is pretty much impossible.

That's where the magic of VOIP software comes to the rescue. Originally, we used [Skype](#) and recorded with software called [PowerGramo](#). It worked, but as many of you may know, the quality of a Skype session varies. It's not unknown for there to be static, noise, or delays and sound drop outs.

We now use [Google Talk](#) and some recording software called [HotRecorder](#). We haven't abandoned Skype – we still use it for doing interviews.

We also have an editorial calendar. Really, just a list of topics that we want to cover. We choose a topic, then prepare a set of talking points. Usually, those are just a list of the things that we want to discuss and questions that we want to tackle.

Once we have that, we meet up online and start recording. Of course, the original recording is peppered with gaffes as well as *umms*, *aahs*, and *you knows*.

After we're done, one of us pulls the recording into Audacity and edits out all of the things that were just mentioned. If the recording itself contains noise or clicks or anything like that, we use Audacity's built-in tools to get rid of them. Or, at least, minimize them. When necessary, we run the edited audio through a

program called [The Levelator](#) to even out the sound.

Posting and hosting

If you have a Web site, or if your Internet Service Provider (ISP) gives you some space, you can host your podcast there. You can link to your podcast from a dedicated Web page or a blog (if you maintain one). Keep in mind, though, that a five minute podcast can weigh in at anywhere from four to seven megabytes. Obviously, the longer the podcast, the bigger it will be.

Depending on how much space you get from your ISP or Web host, you might run out of space very quickly. On top of that, most Internet and Web hosting providers have limits to the amount of data that can be transferred from a site each month. Once you hit that limit, no one will be able to access your podcast until the beginning of the following month unless you're willing to pay for more data transfer.

If you don't want to, or don't have the skills to maintain a podcast in your own space on the Web, you can turn to one of the many podcast hosting services out there. Many of these services offer free and/or low-cost hosting accounts. On top of that, the hosting services also set up a Web page or blog from which your listeners can access your podcast.

We use [Podbean](#). The price is good, it has a WordPress interface, and a number of interesting features including usage tracking. Some other good (or so we're told) hosting services include [Libsyn](#), [CastPost](#), and [Odeo](#). But don't take our word for it. Do a Google search and ask around. That way you can find the host that best suits your needs.

Training your voice

This is something we're still working on ourselves ... And it's a very important aspect of podcasting.

Put a microphone in front of someone and they get nervous. They stammer. They whisper. They speak quickly. They garble their words. You've probably heard it. You may have even done it. Both of us have, and still do!

That's where training your voice comes in. We don't mean going to a professional voice coach. Unless, of course, you think you need to and can afford to. You can do it on your own. It just takes a lot of time and a lot of practice.

So, what do we mean when we say *training your voice*? Some of the more important points are:

- Speaking loudly, but not too loudly. Project your voice, not to the other end of the room but to the microphone. Don't whisper, but don't yell.
- Treat recording a podcast in the same way you would a conversation. Relax, speak naturally. You've probably heard about that old technique of pretending you're talking to a friend or family member. Keep that in mind.
- Pace yourself.
- Work on your enunciation. It's easy to sound flat or condescending. Again, to get around this always try to view recording your podcast in the same way you would a conversation with someone you know.
- Try to eliminate the *umms*, *ahhs*, *uh-uhs*, and *you knows* from your speech.

Something that's easy to forget is to keep a reasonable distance from the microphone. With a headset, position the mic just below or slightly off to the side of your lips. With an old school microphone, keep about four to six inches away.

The key, though, is to practice. And remember, if you

flub you can always edit it out. Same goes for those pesky *umms*, *ahhs*, *uh-uhs*, and *you knows*.

Using podcasts

Podcasts can be a powerful tool for delivering training. They're available at the user's convenience, are portable, and are easy to create. Imagine being able to refer to the notes on some training, or some new information, anywhere without having to whip out a sheaf of paper or a notebook computer.

Good podcasts not only bolster your training efforts, they're also a great way to bring more life to your supplementary training, documentation, and marketing materials.

- Can help maintain an ongoing dialogue about a particular domain or topic, even after the initial training session is finished
- Are a great way to disseminate new developments
- Are available anytime, anywhere, at the user's convenience
- Make supplementary material more interesting

You're probably asking yourself *why not use a blog or a wiki?* Both are great platforms for getting

information out. But if used properly, a voice adds a human touch. With a blog or a wiki, you're never really sure if what you're reading was written by committee. While a podcast might also be written by committee, you have the sense that someone is actually *speaking to you*. It's a very human connection, and in some ways it's very comforting.

Companies using podcasts

Not all that many companies use podcasts. At least, not yet. Some of the more notable ones are:

- [Open Text](#)
- [IBM](#)
- [Sun Microsystems](#)
- [BMC](#)
- [Red Hat](#)
- [McDonald's](#)

Most companies, including a couple listed above, use podcasts for marketing or for distributing executive presentations and speeches. Other firms, like Gartner for example, do interviews or talks about an issue or technology; it's a combination of an information product and low-level flogging. But it's not really podcasting in the strictest sense.

Other companies do tap into the power of the podcast, though. Like who? IBM's developerWorks podcasts discuss aspects of IBM's technologies – ranging from new features to trends – as well as wrap ups of conferences and the big announcements made by IBM at those conferences. There's even a series of podcasts on [using mainframes!](#)

Open Text, on the other hand, has a mixed bag of offerings. The majority of the company's podcasts are speeches and keynotes and presentations. But OpenText also provides podcasts that are an interesting set of customer success stories – they don't tell you what a product does, but what it's *done* for a customer.

Sun offers several interesting podcasts. They range from news to discussions of innovations that Sun is working on to industry trends and identity management.

Red Hat uses a combination of audio and video podcasts to present tips and product information, as well as to share interviews with developers.

Remember what we said earlier about podcasts being a way to tell a story? Well, companies like IBM, Sun, Open Text, and Red Hat are doing just that with their

podcasts. Instead of spinning a yarn about, say, life in small town Ontario in the 1920s, those companies are telling a story about their products. About how customers *can* use those products. About how customers *have* used those products. About how people have benefited from them.

If you're developing a podcast for marketing, don't try to sell a product. That might not seem to make sense. What we mean here is that if you do try to sell, chances are you'll come across like a huckster. No one wants to listen to that. Try to create something that's more like an aural white paper or case study. Meld the benefits of a product with the problem it solves. Try not to flog.

If you're developing a podcast for training, there are a number of factors that you should consider. More on that later.

What about documentation?

Companies aren't doing too much to combine podcasting with documentation. It is possible to incorporate audio into documentation efforts. It's been done, with varying degrees of success. A couple of years ago, Apple released [audio documentation](#) for its VoiceOver accessibility tool. It was pretty much a spoken version of the manual; sort of like listening to an audio book. It might not be the greatest option, but for the visually impaired it can be a good option.

At [DocTrain West](#) 2008, we all-too-briefly chatted with someone who incorporated short audio cues into online help. He developed short, spoken procedures or additional information or tasks to carry out.

When it comes to documentation, though, video podcasts or screencasts are probably the way to go. It's a matter of showing, not telling. It's easier to show (through video) how to perform a task or to demonstrate a new feature rather than just talking about it or aurally navigating the listener through menus or other parts of the interface. A picture being worth a thousand words and all of that.

Successful podcasting in the enterprise

Creating a successful podcast for training, for marketing, and even for documentation seems simple. But it isn't. It takes a lot of work. Right now, we're going to discuss some of the keys to a successful enterprise podcast by looking at a couple of highly-regarded educational podcasts that are available on the Web.

These podcasts contain the elements that you can, and should, use in any enterprise podcast. We're not suggesting that you ape them. Rather, take these elements and apply them to a podcast that you're doing. Or will do in the future.

Grammar Girl

Like most people, the last thing that we want to listen to is someone droning on about grammar. Well, Mignon Fogarty makes the subject interesting in her [Grammar Girl](#) podcast. She guides listeners through the potentially treacherous wilderness that is English grammar.

How does Fogarty do it? She keeps her podcasts short – a few minutes at most. She also includes a transcript of each episode. Fogarty isn't flippant about grammar – she does cite numerous sources.

But she doesn't treat the subject as sacrosanct. She recently did a episode that focused on subject-object-verb order that used the speech patterns of Yoda as the starting point. Another episode covered greeting card grammar.

On top of that, Fogarty sticks to one topic – like sentence length, subject-verb agreement, or comma splice. Her podcasts are well researched, and as mentioned earlier, feature citations from works like the *AP Stylebook*, *Elements of Style*, and *The American Heritage Dictionary*. So, she's not making this stuff up!

But Fogarty isn't just rehashing a textbook. She's tackling grammar that we all can use in everyday speech and in personal or professional writing. It's practical, not just theoretical.

ChinesePod

As you've probably guessed, [ChinesePod](#) is for learning Chinese – specifically Mandarin. While we both know enough Mandarin to greet someone and order a drink, we do know a number of people who have used this podcast to get a grasp of, or increase their ability in, the language.

ChinesePod is effective (at least, according to our unscientific poll of a handful of people who use it) because the creators maintain a *tight focus*. Each podcast:

- Covers a single topic – for example, like signing up for an art class, ordering noodles, or discussing online shopping.
- Contains *practical* information
- Is short – usually under 15 minutes
- Contains enough repetition to help you grasp a new concept or new vocabulary, without being boring
- Has excellent reference and supplementary material

There are episodes aimed at people of different levels of ability: from the newbie right up to the advanced learner. Each lesson is tailored to the audience, and gives the listener a chance to improve and expand on his or her knowledge.

On top of that, the folks behind ChinesePod take the subject matter seriously but don't take themselves too seriously. They have fun with the material, and that makes learning a bit more fun.

The keys to a successful enterprise podcast

You're probably starting to see a definite pattern forming here. All of the better educational and training podcasts out there have the same, or similar, elements to ChinesePod and Grammar Girl.

So, the keys to a successful enterprise podcast are:

- Keep it short
- One topic per podcast episode
- Focus on the practical
- Have a little fun with the material. Take it seriously, but don't take yourself too seriously

The material shouldn't be dry. You need to put it into the context of the listener. Try to structure your podcast so that the listener relates to the material on a more personal and a more practical level.

Remember that some podcasts – especially ones that are used for training – aren't always going to be listened to in isolation. They're a supplement to your training, user assistance, and marketing initiatives. For example, if you're using podcasts for training then have some worksheets available as PDFs that listeners can download.

Using silence

But something that many podcasters forget is to *use silence*. On the radio, dead air is a sin – the only thing worse is using certain four-letter words. Well, depending on the station anyway. In podcasting, though, brief spurts of silence can be useful. Silence allows listeners to briefly pause and reflect on something, on a concept or idea that was just introduced. And silence makes a conversation or interview seem just that much more natural. An interlude between asking a question and getting the answer is more rooted in reality than snapping the answers off immediately.

Of course, there are limits to the amount of silence you can and should use. At the most, five seconds. Anything more and it will seem to your listeners that there's a problem with the feed or that you've done a bad job of editing.

Barriers to entry

As with any other so-called Web 2.0 technology, you'll undoubtedly encounter resistance if you try to introduce podcasts into your place of work or suggest that a client use one. Here are some challenges you might face:

Misconceptions about podcasts abound. Those misconceptions aren't as strong as, say, those surrounding blogs or social media, but they definitely exist. And let's face it, a lot of execs are kind of clueless about these sorts of things. You definitely have to make a strong business case to sell the idea of a podcast. Well-known tech comm blogger and podcaster [Tom Johnson](#) wrote something interesting in the context of blogging, but it applies to podcasting as well: *call it a new media site where users can interact*. Or, at least access information that can be carried anywhere.

A company may have some very strict desktop software and infrastructure rules, and that could prevent (or at least slow down) the adoption of podcasts. In some organizations, you won't be allowed to install the needed software and hardware until it goes through a lengthy purchasing process, and comprehensive testing (for what, we're not sure) by the support department.

Server space and bandwidth issues could also be a stumbling block. Audio files can be quite large – about a megabyte per minute. And if you have a lot of them, they quickly eat up a lot of free server space. Imagine a network admin having to deal with the potential bandwidth nightmares that can come

from serving all these large files to a large number of visitors. He or she will love you for that.

Can you think of any others? How would you try to get around those barriers?

Knocking those barriers down is tough. But if you can do it, then you can really enhance the flow of information from your organization.

Conclusion

Podcasts, at their very core, are a way of telling a story. What that story is for – training, marketing, or documentation – is up to you. Using your creative and technical skills, you can add another dimension to your deliverables. Is podcasting for everyone? Of course not. But for those technical communicators who can exploit the power of the podcast ... well, they have another tool in their kit. And it's a powerful one, too.

Podcasting is within your grasp, and within your budget. You'll have to learn a few new skills, but that's part of the job – if you don't enjoy learning, then why are you in the technical communications field anyway?

Additional Resources

About.com podcasting site:

podcasting.about.com

Podcasting Hacks:

www.oreilly.com/catalog/978596100667/

The Podcast Studio:

www.thepodcaststudio.com/

A great article on professional podcasting:

www.sitepoint.com/article/professional-podcasting

Five podcast mistakes to avoid:

www.greatbigpodcast.com/2006/09/23/top-5-corporate-podcast-mistakes-to-avoid-like-the-plague/

Ten tips for would-be podcasters:

www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/10-tips-for-would-be-podcasters.html

The podcaster's checklist:

trafcom.typepad.com/blog/2007/08/the-podcasters-.html

Contact Us

Aaron Davis and Scott Nesbitt, DMN Communications

Web site:

<http://www.dmncommunications.com>

Email:

info@dmncommunications.com

Blog:

<http://www.dmncommunications.com/weblog>

Podcast:

<http://dmn.podbean.com>