

Chapter 6.1

Social Impact of Virtual Networking

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INTRODUCTION

Information has been defined as a set of data, facts, and figures that have been processed in such a way that they become meaningful. They make intelligence. When information is applied to doing something and is globally pertinent, it is said to have become knowledge.

Information flow can be treated as an alternate wealth for a developing society and knowledge networking through virtual communication processes can break the lags and leads of information barriers. It can create an appropriate tool for achieving and facilitating exchange of information and knowledge among development partners, academia, policymakers, and the civil society at local, national, and global level to design and implement plans for development (Rahman, 2000).

Virtual communities are the collection of on-line links to a particular node, examples of which are Yahoo!, eBay, Amazon, or smaller chat rooms or instant message buddy lists. These networks of links are freely chosen, democratic, unrestricted,

and may even be anonymous or pseudonymous (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2002).

The concept of the virtual enterprise has emerged in management literature as the result of the fusion of technological advances and a claimed major socioeconomic paradigm shift. The virtual enterprise can be seen as a temporary alliance of contracted individuals or companies linked together by ICTs, which assembles for the purpose of a specific business task. Advocates of the virtual enterprise believe that it will replace the conventional model of organization in the 21st century (Introna, More, & Cushman, 1999).

The virtual network is being increasingly promoted as a model for a new form of ICT-mediated communication endeavor. Initially, the concept of the virtual network and the supportive role of ICTs as conceived by its proponents need to be clarified. Based on the initial understanding, the establishment of community information centres as the existing instance of virtual enterprise needs to be done.

BACKGROUND

A virtual organization is a collection of geographically distributed, functionally, and/or culturally diverse entities that are linked by electronic forms of communication and rely on lateral, dynamic relationships for coordination. Despite its diffused nature, a common identity holds the organization together in the minds of members, customers, or other constituents (DeSanctis & Monge, 1998). *Virtual* is defined as “being in essence or effect but not in fact or name,” and *network* as “an interconnected or interrelated chain, group, or system” (Lau & Hayward, 2000, p. 362).

To accelerate the development processes at the marginal communities, network hierarchies must reach remote places with easy access and availability, forming a robust intercommunication network. Figure 1 shows possible networking hierarchy within a country.

Rheingold (1994) defines virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net

when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 5). Integrating this concept along with economic, politics, and social aspects, networking among the virtual communities can be bonded to form a self-sustained en masse at the outset (Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002).

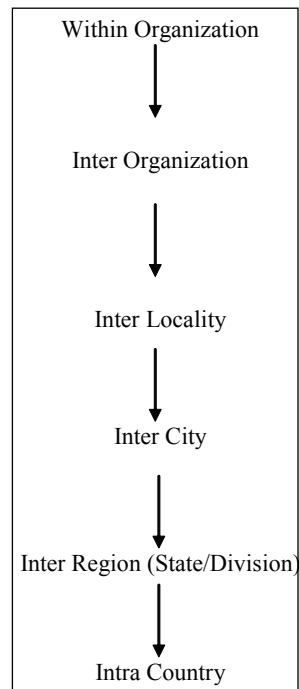
Communication is fundamental to any corner of the information coordinates but is preeminent in virtual organizations. In O’Hara-Devereaux and Johansen’s (1994) view, without communication, the boundary-spanning among virtual entities would not be possible. Electronic communication enables parties to link across distance, time, culture, departments, and organizations, thereby creating “anyone/anytime/anyplace” alternatives to the traditional same-time, same-place, functionally centered, in-house forms of organizational experience.

Usually virtual networks are characterized by their (a) highly dynamic nature, (b) vibrant relationships among entities, (c) unrestricted boundaries, and (d) easily configurable structures. Relative to more traditional settings, communication processes that occur in virtual contexts are faster, customized, momentary, greater in volume, more informal, and more relationship based.

Barabasi (2002) presents a set of concepts which, taken together, comprise his science of networks. His theory addresses varied entities, from the microscopic cell to the macroscopic World Wide Web, as networks. It seems possible that his work offers to our discipline a new model, one that may address historic dichotomies of person/community, locale/relationship, gemeinschaft/gesellschaft, and one/many. It may provide a path for virtual communities to become part of our ongoing research and conversation.

Enabling the remotely located dispersed communities with contents of their own need, at the times of their own demand, at the easy reach of their own are a few preconditions to enlighten themselves with knowledge and raise their capacity to contribute for the development

Figure 1. Networking hierarchy within a country



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