A Comparison of the Features of some CoP Software

Elayne Coakes
University of Westminster, UK

INTRODUCTION

There are now significant numbers of software houses supplying services and solutions for community collaboration. In this article we briefly review the requirements for virtual support and the current offerings. This is not intended as a comprehensive survey, but rather an overview of what might be available.

BACKGROUND

In 2004 the Directorate of Science and Technology Policy (DSTP) in Canada produced a report reviewing portal technology. In particular, DSTP reviewed a specific subset or portals for community support. They looked at four specific program offerings, operating under portals, across eight areas of functionality. These eight areas were:

1. ongoing interactions,
2. work,
3. social structures,
4. conversation,
5. fleeting interactions,
6. instruction,
7. knowledge exchange, and
8. documents.

These program suites—Tomoye, community Zero, iCohere, and Communispace—were all strongly oriented towards Fleeting interactions and Instruction (apart from iCohere), but weakly supportive of social structures, knowledge exchange, and documents. In addition, all software suites contained taxonomy, a local search, an experts database, discussion, and an events notification facility. None provided audio- or video-supported meetings or webinars, and only Communispace provided a (limited) virtual meeting space. All, except for Tomoye, provided community governance and polls.

Other Software Offerings

Enable2 was not considered by DSTP. It is provided by Fount Solutions, who claims that it provides the essential capabilities required for CoP support. These, they say, would include: content management (to generate domain-specific content), discussion forums, document management, member profiles, and a search engine. As we see, the 'missing' capabilities of this software suite are also missing from the software reviewed by the DSTP—that is, support for audio and video meetings, webinars, and virtual meeting spaces. Fount also recommends the provision of weblogs so that users can publish specific content and a tool called Really Simple Syndication

Table 1. Core technology features

Relationships	Learning	Knowledge	Action
Member networking profiles; Member directory with 'relationship-focused' data fields; Subgroups that are defined by administrators or that allow members to self-join; Online meetings; Online discussions.	Recorded PowerPoint presentations; E-learning tools; Assessments; Web conferencing; Online meetings; Online discussions; Web site links.	Structured databases; 'Digital stories'; Idea banks; Web conferencing; Online meetings; Online discussions; Expert database and search tools; Announcements; Web site links.	Project management; Task management; Document collaboration; File version tracking; File check-in and check-out; Instant messaging; Web conferencing; Online meetings; Online discussions; Individual and group calendaring.

or RSS. RSS is used to enable users to subscribe to content sources that match their specific interests.

Livelink for Communities of Practice is relatively new software that was launched in 2004 by OpenText ™Corporation (www.contentmanager.net and www.opentext.com/solutions/platform/collboration/communities-of-practice). Livelink also provides weblogs, FAQs, webcasts, an experts database, forums with threaded discussions, and role-based permissions for community users so that they can perform specified tasks.

Sitescape (BillIves, 2004) also launched new CoP software in 2004. This software provides both synchronous and asynchronous communication facilities, document management, shared scheduling, and instant messaging, as well as a number of task- and process-based tools. Web meetings, white boards, videoconferencing, and voiceover IP are also supported.

iCohere in its CoP Design guide (available from www.icohere.com) states that there are four focal areas for CoPs—relationship building, learning and development, knowledge sharing and building, and project collaboration. The company also provides Table 1, which allocates core technical features to each focal area. Obviously, iCohere considers that its software offering provides these necessary features.

Member networking profiles;Member directory with 'relationship-focused' data fields;Subgroups that are defined by administrators or that allow members to self-join;Online meetings;Online discussions. Recorded PowerPoint presentations; E-learning tools; Assessments; Web conferencing; Online meetings; Online discussions; Web site links. Structured databases; 'Digital stories'; Idea banks; Web conferencing; Online meetings;Online discussions; Expert database and search tools;Announcements;Web site links. Project management; Task management; Document collaboration; File version tracking; File check-in and check-out; Instant messaging; Web conferencing; Online meetings; Online discussions; Individual and group calendaring.

FUTURE TRENDS

The software market for KM and IC management is competitive. Features and facilities are changing rapidly and developing in complexity. Increasingly the software for community support is being subsumed into the general KM management software, which is, in its turn, being incorporated into organisational portals. DSTP (2004) expects to see a rapid growth in the portal development market, with organisations integrating their applications to "facilitate creation, sharing and preservation, and intellectual capital management…This trend is eroding the benefits of specific community of practice tools" (p. 3).

CONCLUSION

Whilst this article was not intended as a comprehensive review of software for supporting CoPs, it has shown that many offerings lack some (apparent) essentials for a virtual community. Whilst many would be useful additions for a 'physical' community by providing shared documents and databases, few provide virtual meetings spaces and the possibilities for synchronous communication and the sharing of tacit knowledge—this latter being, of course, the prime driver behind the development of CoPs.

NOTE

The May/June issue of *KM Review* (Melcrum Publishing) also contains a useful comparison of CoP and collaboration software.

REFERENCES

BillIves. (2004). Retrieved from *http://billives.typepad.com/portals_and_km/2004/07/supporting_com.html*