

# The Role of Trust in Virtual and Co-Located Communities of Practice

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## INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become popular in enabling organisations to work virtually, allowing them to organise and leverage their human assets in new ways. Numerous advantages are offered to organisations in the virtual world, including the ability to bridge time and space, and utilisation of distributed human resources without physical relocation of employees (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). However, flexibility for organisations also comes with many challenges due to its own inherent characteristics. With the separation in time and space, possibly no history of working together, and communication options that are limited, working virtually can lead to undesired outcomes. There are many fundamental factors that not only drive knowledge sharing and transfer in virtual communities, but are believed to be important in their success and failure. One of these fundamental factors is trust. The literature on trust in co-located environments suggests that the establishment of trust is of importance in the working relationship (e.g., Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Furthermore, it is argued that trust also leads to more open communication, cooperation, and a higher quality of decision making and risk taking (Lane & Bachmann, 2000). Lipnack and Stamps (2000) argue that the success of sharing and transferring knowledge virtually begins with trust, since trust functions as a mechanism to hold individuals together.

The aim of this article is to discuss types of trust and explain mechanisms of trust development in light of research on organisational dynamics. Although there is little standardisation in the trust literature, this

article will attempt to critically assess contributions to the debate, illustrating points through references to communities of practice.

## BACKGROUND

### Communities of Practice and Trust

Wenger (1998) first coined the term “communities of practice,” which refers to a theory that builds on learning as social participation. Within these communities, individuals actively participate in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. These communities of practice do not have to be co-located or meet face-to-face at regular intervals, as through the use of technology they may just purely exist virtually. As long as the community has a common set of interests and is engaged in a work practice, it can be defined as a community. Furthermore, if the members of the community are learning and engaged in the practice, be it virtually or co-located, it can be defined as a community of practice. Thus, it is possible for communities of practice to function in distributed environments through the use of technology, though co-located contact may be essential for the further development of the community (Gamble & Blackwell, 2001).

Many organisations are beginning to realise that the knowledge their employees possess is their most valuable asset, but few firms have actually begun to actively manage their knowledge assets on a broad scale. Communities of practice offer organisations the opportunity, through the use of ICTs, to share knowl-

edge in virtual environments. ICTs facilitate more than just information exchange between community members. Shared *cultural objects* can be created by communities through continuous communication in virtual environments, which can help bring about a sense of togetherness and trust among those who have never even met each other in the past—enabling a shared sense of belonging within communities (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough & Swan, 2002). It has been argued that initial trust has also been based on the competencies of community members and the fact that they are engaged in the same practice within the community (Boisot, 1995; Wenger, 2000).

Trust has been defined as “the expectation that a partner will not engage in opportunistic behaviour, even in the face of countervailing short-term opportunities and incentives” (Nootboom & Six, 2003, p. 4). This definition emphasises that trust is one’s own belief that the partner, with whom the relationship is taking place, will not fail to meet his/her expectations. Trust has been shown to be beneficial, as it enables cooperative behaviour (Gambetta, 1988), promotes adaptive organisational forms such as network relations (Miles & Snow, 1992), reduces harmful conflict, decreases transaction costs, facilitates rapid formulation of ad hoc workgroups (Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996), and promotes the effective sharing of tacit knowledge. Furthermore, high levels of trust are also associated with a higher degree of economic performance. It is believed that trust provides organisations with greater flexibility, enables information exchange, increases product and technology quality, and expands productivity and profitability (Nootboom, 2002). It also allows for the development of long-term relationships. Similarly, Bradach and Eccles (1988) emphasise that trust is “viewed as a precondition for superior performance and competitive success in [the] new business environment” (p. 1).

Trust builds up one’s social capital, which includes “the features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that can facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 160). Fukuyama (1995) argues that social capital can only develop when individuals interact together in an organisation on the basis of trust, and the lack of such forms of trust are likely to lead people to maintain

their relationships through other mechanisms, for instance through legal rules and regulations.

## **MAIN FOCUS: COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE ELEMENTS WITHIN TRUST**

The rise of globalisation and the increased technological developments that have taken place in recent years have led to the emergence of virtual environments in organisations. Virtual environments enable people to communicate with each other across geographical boundaries through various technologies, such as, e-mail, videoconferencing, intranets, chat rooms, voicemail messages, and so on. In such environments, trust is a desirable prerequisite in order to build relationships between community members. Additionally, participating within a community of practice can be seen as a long- or short-term objective; it is more likely that trust will need to be developed more promptly where there are short-term objectives. In order to achieve this, members of communities need to be committed to their tasks, focus on regular communication, and display a sense of loyalty and understanding towards all community members.

In the context of communities of practice, trust should be represented as a multidimensional construct, with both cognitive (conditional) and affective (unconditional) elements (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Jones & George, 1998). Research studies have discovered that trust develops from cognitive processes, referring to the calculative and rational characteristics demonstrated by trustees in newly formed relationships. These characteristics include integrity, perceived competence, responsibility, and professionalism (commonly characterised by affiliations with professional bodies such as the General Medical Council or the Law Society) (Mayer et al., 1995). The argument appears to be that cognitive trust fills the knowledge gap when beginning new relationships, which is vital for facilitating interaction where fellow trustees’ values are unknown (Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002). Cognitive trust does not however explain the observations of Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999), who demonstrated that teams show high levels of trust without having adequate information upon which to base judgements.

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