

# Knowledge Communities and Interorganizational Networks

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## INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities and interorganizational networks are both overloaded concepts. Although it is assumed that they are related, there is some lack of clarity in their scientific and professional use. In this article, a contribution for the differentiation between the concepts of virtual knowledge community and interorganizational network is made, and we also shown how intertwined they are. Furthermore, we explain how communities can emerge from networks and discuss their main management issues. Finally, some definitions of related key terms are given.

## KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY CONCEPT

There are many definitions of virtual community. For example, Amy Jo Kim in her book *Community Building on the Web* defines community as “a group of people who share a common interest or purpose; who have the ability to get to know each other better over time.” Many other authors highlight that a community cannot only be viewed as a group of people that interact in some place (even if it is virtual), but that there are relations between their members and these relationships are about something; that is, they have meaning. Thus, we focus on the notion of communities as social entities comprised of actors who share something in common: this common element may be geography, needs, interests, practices, organizations, or other bases for social connection. Communities are considered to be a basic unit of social experience.

Knowledge is also a common element shared within a community. When the perspective is centered on knowledge, communities can be defined as groups where knowledge and best practices in a given field are developed, nurtured, and transmitted through the

social interaction of its members (Cornejo, 2003). Still considering a knowledge perspective, a community should have mechanisms to support a high level of personalization of the information, and the user (1) supports more efficiently the current activity of the knowledge worker by knowing her current focus, goal, and role in the organization; (2) selects and delivers knowledge in a way that maximizes its impact; (3) exploits the individual and social motivation of the user (people are driven by personal goals and believe that they have some strong influence on their commitment and therefore the quality of their work) (Nabeth, Angehrn, et al., 2002). Within this scope and based mainly on the work of Cornejo (2003) and Porter (2004), but inspired also in other references in this area, like Mueller-Prothmann and Siedentopf (2003), Blanchard (2004), or Burnett and Buerkle (2004), the main types of knowledge communities are addressed. A first classification of community can be based in the type of utility perceived by their members and in the type of relationship established either of individuals' point of view or organizations' point of view (Cornejo, 2003) (see Figure 1).

Individuals can derive two different types of utility from their participation in a community, defined by their effects on the individual's observed behavior (Cornejo, 2003): (1) objective utility (when the knowledge received can be directly applied to the improvement in the execution of the individual's job or even of the individual's economic situation); and (2) subjective utility (this is provided by knowledge that cannot be directly related to the improvement of the economic situation or working abilities, that is, encompasses knowledge that can state the individual's curiosity or sustain the individual's need for a sense of belonging or appreciation). Different behavior in organizations is substantially determined by two types of utility: (1) direct utility (when the organization can perceive and

measure and put in direct relationship with improvements in processes and operations, it will usually derive from the knowledge acquired by members of the organization); and (2) indirect utility (when the organization knows that it is benefiting from the acquired knowledge but cannot identify the mechanism with clarity, and it therefore cannot find a reliable way to measure and value it).

Based on this classification of utility, Cornejo (2003) built a basic predictive model that allows us to better understand the dynamics of the different types of communities with particular relevance for those that can generate some type of utility for someone. Just as markets work by aggregation, the dynamics of communities will depend on the aggregations of the motivations of their users. Utility on the model is represented by degree in which it belongs to one or other type. To this model was defined with the following types of knowledge communities: community of practice, community of interest, project community, and amorphous community. To this model, we added hybrid community (of practice and interest).

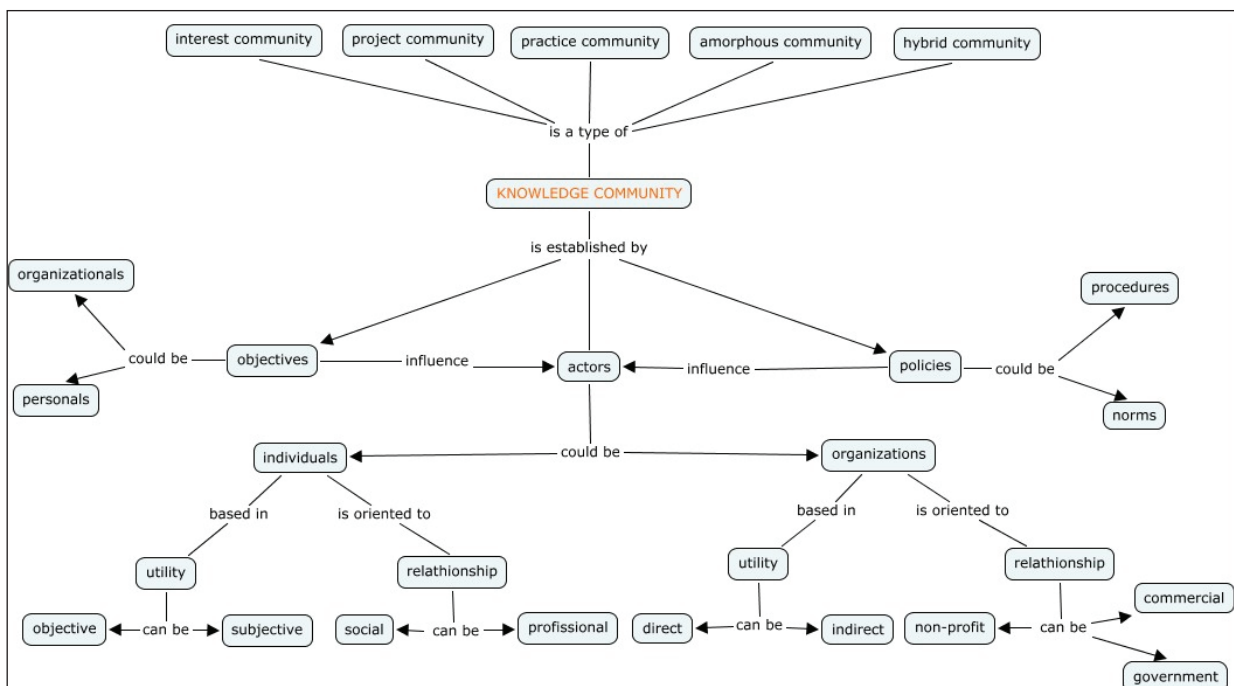
According to the above and oversimplifying, we can say that the benefits of running a knowledge community for an organization or a group of organizations depends on the utility that both individuals and organizations can

get from it. This is very much based on the individual and collective perceptions of a set of issues:

- **Organization:** The way in which activities related to the community will be managed.
- **Integration:** The community's role in the organization (what will it be responsible for, what departments or structures is it related to, and how).
- **Resources:** Allocation of the relevant means to the community.
- **Intellectual property:** Treatment of knowledge assets used by, and generated through, the community.
- **IT support required:** Integration in the IT infrastructure of the organization and impact on its strategy and design.
- **Value:** Identification of the value goals that the community should be measured against.
- **Price formation:** That value can be measured in money and therefore charged to value recipients (whether consumers, partners, internal departments, or other initiatives).

Based on the typology of virtual communities proposed by Porter (2004), knowledge communities

Figure 1. Definition of knowledge community



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