

Motivation in Online Communities

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MOTIVATION AND SUCCESSFUL ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The subject of how to encourage people to share their knowledge has long been a theme within the domain of knowledge management. Early studies showed that company employees, for example, are often reluctant to share their knowledge (e.g., Ciborra & Patriota, 1998). A number of possible reasons exist for why this takes place, including: lack of personal incentives to share expertise; an organizational culture that does not reward or encourage sharing; and lack of trust that shared knowledge will be put to good use (e.g., fear of exploitation).

Research identifying these types of barriers to effective knowledge management is well established (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 2000); however, within the context of online communities it is more recent.

The term “online community” tends to be applied in a general sense to refer to large-scale groups that regularly exchange information through mechanisms such as e-mail, weblogs, discussion lists and Wikis. These types of communities can take a variety of forms, some of which mix face-to-face contact with computer-mediated interaction (e.g., some types of “communities of practice,” CoPs), while others are more likely to be wholly online and involve people who have never met (e.g., “networks of

Table 1. Summary of five case studies examining motivation in online communities

Study	Type of communities	Main findings and conclusions
Hall and Graham (2004)	NoP set up with the purpose of sharing information relating to a code-breaking competition.	Initial motivation was to discover information for personal benefit. Later on, the network took on a more collaborative nature, with members more willing to help one another.
Wasko and Faraj (2003)	Three NoPs (Usenet groups) set up to discuss topics related to computer programming and databases.	Opportunity to engage in the exchange of ideas and problem solutions were the main reasons for taking part. Participation was seen as fun and providing an opportunity for dialog and help for others. Members saw the community as a way of gaining respect and visibility.
Feng, Lazar and Preece (2004)	Simulated NoP based upon instant messaging between participants.	Communication between participants was partly determined by the degree to which discussions were empathetic and supportive. Responses that accurately inferred the content of participant's thoughts and feelings led to higher levels of online trust.
Breu and Hemingway (2002)	Small CoP situated in a commercial company in the utility sector. CoP mostly involves face-to-face interaction with some communication via e-mail.	CoP acted as a way of bringing members together partly due to a feeling that the company was failing to satisfy their needs for affiliation and interaction in general. Members felt motivated to take part in the CoP to provide better social cohesion in the company.
Waterson, Avram, Kerr and Punter (2004)	One CoP, one NoP and a Wiki-based community that mixed aspects of these two types of online community. The communities were in the domains of software and aerospace engineering, as well as one community for supporting the activity of scientists.	Several factors motivated individuals to take part in their communities. First, the communities helped participants form a common identity and a sense of belonging and commitment to its values and norms. Second, participants felt encouraged to join since they could benefit from the variety of information that could be retrieved within the communities. Third, many participants mentioned that they experienced a sense of fun and personal enjoyment through sharing their ideas. And fourth, some participants mentioned that the community raised their profile within their organizations.

Table 2. Practical strategies for motivating participants to take part in online communities

- **Provide content at the launch of the community:** This is one of the most important strategies; however, it is one frequently overlooked. Without content, an online community is largely redundant. Content in the form of reports, lists of FAQs and a regular newsletter “kick starts” the community and helps to create (initially, at least) passive use. Active use is more likely to occur when other functionality is added (e.g., Wiki pages, weblogging facilities) at a later stage.
- **Stage the roll-out of the community and plan ahead:** Most of the literature on online communities mentions designing communities for later evolution and development; however, very often providing too many facilities or being too ambitious (e.g., expecting users to be active from the start) proves to be common and leads users to visit only once and then rarely return. Each phase of the community should be planned; this should cover questions such as: What extra facilities could be added (e.g., chat facilities)? What do new users require? What has proved to be less successful than expected? Where is the most activity in the community located?
- **Moderate the community:** Alongside some initial content, the community will need someone to moderate and make sure requests are answered promptly and new information is posted as soon as it becomes available. Moderating a community requires a lot of effort; however, it pays off in terms of establishing the community. At a later stage, this role should be taken over by other members of the community and should be “owned” by them. Transferring ownership may in itself take some time.
- **Monitor and evaluate the community over time:** Monitoring the activity within the community means more than keeping track of usage statistics and profiles. It also means regularly asking what members require, as well as how generating debate by posting topical material and/or questions on message boards, weblogs and so forth works. Listening to the community and not taking their views – or indeed, in some cases, their apparent silence – for granted also helps to sustain activity and establish trust over time. Regular updates of material similarly make the site more interesting and increase the likelihood of occasional visitors becoming regular and active users.
- **Encourage users to tailor their own functionality:** It may be useful to encourage users to implement their own ideas for the community. This could partly be achieved by exploiting the many open-source tools that exist for constructing blogrolls, Wikis and other Web-based materials.
- **Take account of the domain and context of use:** The core domain of the community can make a big difference to the type of motivation community members have. In this case, the passive/active distinction may be important. Transforming passive users into active users may in some cases be in vain, particularly where the primary motivation of users is information retrieval. Similarly, evaluating how the community changes over time will help to determine what further strategies are appropriate in order to sustain continued use and satisfy the motivations of users.

practice,” NoPs). One of the key aspects of knowledge sharing within online communities is the issue of motivation. On the one hand, this can be taken to relate to personal motives (i.e., intrinsic motivation); on the other hand, motives that may be influenced by external rewards and incentives (i.e., extrinsic motivation). These two types of motivation have recently led researchers to focus their attention on two particular questions. First, what motivates people to take part in online communities and engage in knowledge sharing? And second, how can motivation be encouraged and sustained to make a community successful in the longer term?

WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO TAKE PART IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES?

A number of studies examining motivation within online communities have been conducted over the last few years. Most of these have examined motivation from the point of view of a number of interrelated social, organizational and psychological factors, including organizational citizenship (i.e., a feeling of commitment and belonging to a company), trust, empathy and personal enjoyment.

Table 1 summarizes some of these studies and their main findings.

HOW CAN MOTIVATION BE ENCOURAGED AND SUSTAINED?

Understanding why people take part in online communities affords a number of insights into the various strategies that can be used to promote, encourage and sustain motivation to participate over time. The various key texts and writings that exist concerning communities (e.g., Preece, 2000; Wenger, 2004; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) contain a number of recommendations for maintaining and sustaining communities. These cover such topics as mentorship and stewardship of the community, as well as methods for measuring sociability and general activity within the community once it is established. Table 2 provides a summary of these recommendations partly based upon this work and other research in the area.

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