



Chapter 11

The Virtual Community: Building on Social Structure, Relations and Trust to Achieve Value

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The growth of the Internet and its extensive use at work and in private life has offered new opportunities for communicating and staying in touch with others around the world. The Internet enables people to form virtual communities in addition to a social community such as one's local church. A social community can be distinguished based on shared experiences of members, where language and culture may be important ingredients for mutual understanding. A virtual community represents a communal experience whereby people may not necessarily know each other very well nor meet in person very frequently, if ever. Instead, communication and exchange are done through a mediator, namely the information technology and electronic networks. Another characterization distinguishes voluntary and non-voluntary communities, such as virtual task forces and, as importantly, communities that can impose controls to reduce free-riding, where members benefit from others' contributions while not contributing themselves (de Jasay, 1989).

This chapter advances our understanding about a virtual community sponsored by a not-for-profit association and including members from around the world. In particular, this chapter (1) addresses similarities and differences between social and virtual communities, (2) outlines how an inter-

routine domain of virtuality and social capital theory may help explain levels of trust, structure, understanding, and free-riding in a virtual community, (3) describes a specific virtual community, its focus and the efforts undertaken to motivate its members, and (4) provides some preliminary data about how this virtual community works on a daily basis in cyberspace.

SOCIAL COMMUNITIES VERSUS VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Communities have been around as long as humans have been on this earth. While in the past a community may have represented a small group of settlers trying to live in harmony, today a community may be based on a neighborhood or a local church. However, 'groups of everybody' might easily become 'groups of nobody' if there is not some cohesion attained by following norms and rules of the community.

Defining a Social Community

A social community has the following components: (a) personal relationships making up a social network; (b) simple and open access to the community for interested parties; (c) personal meetings and understanding of each other; (d) dialogue, feedback, and shared experiences; and (e) a common history (Gattiker & Hedehus, 1999). Besides shared cultural experiences, e.g., having grown up in the same neighborhood, a social community member may have also been exposed to the same, or at least similar, media such as TV shows or newspapers. A social community member has to fit in to be accepted, e.g., a club of folk dancers may require an interested individual to apply for membership. Acceptance may depend upon current members' feelings that the new member will fit the group, add new talents and/or share the group's interests and values. A social community might also try to limit the number of free-riders. Hence, a theatre club may use a member roster to assure that everyone volunteers as an usher at least once during the theatre season, thereby contributing one's share to the success of an event and thus the club's mission (de Jasay, 1989). Other examples may be that one has to attend a certain percentage of monthly or weekly meetings to be a member in good standing.

Defining a Virtual Community

Some of the characteristics of a social community may also be inherent in a virtual community. However, virtual communities rarely encompass all of these characteristics and may contradict some of them. Key characteristics

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