

# Chapter VIII

## Knowledge and Knowledge Sharing in Virtual Communities

### **INTRODUCTION**

Knowledge management and knowledge sharing are topics best addressed in a different book. This chapter is intentionally introduced in the book to introduce the reader to knowledge management and knowledge sharing and to think about these growing areas where there are potential opportunities to apply social capital to solve real world practical problems. Though the use of social capital and knowledge management was briefly introduced in Chapter III, by reiterating these two issues here it will broaden the reader's understanding of the critical role social capital plays in enhancing knowledge management through knowledge sharing in virtual communities. In addition, this chapter discusses some of the most important challenges to knowledge sharing in virtual communities. Furthermore, this chapter describes the basic concepts often associated with knowledge management and social capital.

### **THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE**

The term knowledge is subject to differing philosophical and semantic interpretations. The Webster dictionary defines knowledge as a fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience. It is a fact or condition of

being aware of something; it is also the circumstance of apprehending truth or a fact through reasoning or association. The lowest level of known facts is data. Data has no intrinsic meaning. It must be sorted, grouped, analyzed, and interpreted within some context.

When data is processed in this manner, it becomes information. Information has a substance and a purpose, however, information does not have meaning. When information is combined with experience and put into concrete context it becomes knowledge. Consequently, knowledge is a combination of information, context, and experience. Context, as far as knowledge is concerned, relates to an individual's framework for interpretations of facts and information. When knowledge is transferred from one individual to another, it is drawn into the receiver's context and experience and so the new knowledge is interpreted according to the receiver's values, context and experiences. If the receiver does not have an appropriate background or context for interpreting the new knowledge, the new knowledge will not be interpreted correctly and the knowledge will have little or no value. For example, if a person does not have experience interpreting certain procedures involved in the process of learning how to swim, they will not understand why people are able to float in water. Subsequently, they find it challenging to learn how to swim from just reading books. At the same time, if an author of a book on swim uses a poor symbolic representation of the knowledge about swimming, the reader will be misled or may even be unable to understand what is expressed in the book and the proper techniques needed to bounce and float in water.

While there is no agreed upon standard definition of what constitutes knowledge, knowledge can be conveniently classified into two broad categories; the 'silent' or tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge, one that can be deliberately shared, documented and communicated. Polanyi (1962) distinction between tacit and explicit is perhaps the most highly recognized. This distinction, which is described in Table 8-1, has major implications for virtual communities.

## **Knowledge Management**

Knowledge management is central to the success of many organizations. In its general theoretical sense, knowledge management as a discipline helps the conceptualization and implementation of knowledge of individuals or groups or systems across organizations in ways that directly affect the production of good and services. At its best observations, the primary goal of knowledge management is to envision getting the right information within the right context to the right individual at a right time and better yet for the right business purpose.

Moreover, it has been repeatedly stressed that organisations implementing knowledge management systems have several benefits including; the ability to

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