

Chapter 9

Sense of Community in Professional Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

Sense of virtual community (feelings of identity, belonging, and attachment) is an essential component of virtual communities. In this chapter, we develop a model of how sense of virtual community develops in professional virtual communities. Based on sense of virtual community models in social virtual communities, we expect that the exchange of support, development of a group identity, and group norms will lead to a stronger professional sense of virtual community. Unlike social virtual communities, we also predict that employee/members occupational identification will increase professional sense of virtual community, particularly when the virtual community can provide support and information not available in the employee/member's face-to-face life. Finally, we propose that increased occupational commitment, professional networks, and employee performance are outcomes of sense of virtual community in professional virtual communities.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities are groups of people who interact primarily through information and communication technologies (ICT). Virtual communities and other virtual groups have existed since the mid

1980's for people both at work (Finholt & Sproull, 1988; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) and in their social lives (Rheingold, 1993). They exist over a wide variety of ICT, including forums such as bulletin boards and newsgroups, listservs, and even blogs (Blanchard, 2004a; Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). Even newer social networking sites (e.g., Facebook,

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Twitter) have the potential to support virtual communities and other forms of virtual groups.

An essential characteristic of virtual communities is the members' sense of virtual community (SOVC) (Blanchard, 2008; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003). SOVC is defined as the member's feelings of identity, belonging, and attachment with each other in their online groups. The SOVC construct is based on the sense of community (SOC) in face-to-face (FtF) groups (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). SOC has a long history as an essential component of community psychology research (Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Obst & White, 2007; Sarason, 1974) and has strong theoretical support and growing empirical base of research. Researchers have also found that SOC is important in organizations and may have a positive relationship with organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Burroughs & Eby, 1998). SOVC, therefore, may have high relevance to organizational virtual communities.

SOVC is considered a positive development for a group and its members. Like SOC, SOVC is believed to lead to outcomes such as longer membership tenure in the group, more problem-focused coping behavior, more activity, and greater social capital both in the virtual community and in members' FtF communities (Blanchard, 2004b; Burroughs & Eby, 1998; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

SOVC, therefore, can help distinguish virtual communities from mere virtual groups. Virtual communities, as opposed to virtual groups, should have members who participate longer and more frequently, who work to solve the community's problems and who are more likely to share support and trust both in and outside of the virtual community. As will be discussed below, virtual communities should have many-to-many communications in which members continually share information and support. Virtual groups are more likely to have one-to-many communications or have more limited group interactions. The key

difference remains the development of a sense of virtual community (or not) for the members.

Previous research has primarily examined SOVC in social virtual communities. These virtual communities focus on a wide variety of topics including hobbies (e.g., gardening, Honda motorcycles, marathon training), special interests (e.g., movie reviews, parenting), or even health issues (e.g., cancer, infertility). While this line of research is informative, it may not be entirely applicable to the growing number of professional virtual communities.

Professional virtual communities are composed of employees or free-lance professionals who interact through ICT about topics related to their paid work. Professional virtual communities include employees of particular companies (e.g., Disney, Radio Shack) who discuss employment policies, problems, and experiences at their particular company as well as employees from a broad range of organizations employed in a particular profession (e.g., bankers, human resource professionals, freelance writers and even medical doctors). They likely differ from social virtual communities because of the members' valid concerns about their participation affecting their professional reputations (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996)—either in general or coming back to their employing organization—or members' increased potential to interact FtF in professional conferences.

This chapter will focus on the latter type of professional virtual communities: virtual communities that support employees who identify with a particular profession. First, these virtual communities are likely to discuss particular topics unique to their professions making them more similar to the social virtual communities which have been more extensively researched. For example, virtual communities of bankers will focus on banking issues like virtual communities of marathon trainers that focus on training issues. We suggest that models of the antecedents and outcomes of SOVC for social virtual communities

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