

Chapter 4.13

Definition, Antecedents, and Outcomes of Successful Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Howard Rheingold's (1993) book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* was the first to bring virtual communities to the attention of researchers and practitioners. Although virtual groups have been examined previously, Rheingold's descriptions of participating in the WELL, an Internet-based bulletin board, vividly portrayed the potential of online social groupings. Rheingold told stories of people who had never met face-to-face providing socio-emotional and even financial support to each other through times of crisis and celebration.

Since then, the popularity of virtual communities (also known as online communities) has

increased. Interacting with others online became more common as organizations and society began to perceive it as a normal behavior and not one engaged in primarily by the socially inept. Indeed, virtual communities became a typical mode of interaction for both work and social purposes. At work, employees have organizationally sanctioned virtual communities such as the company listserv as well as virtual communities for professionals to interact with each other outside their organizations (e.g., Charity-HR, a listserv for HR professionals in non-profit organizations). Some organizations have even developed virtual communities for their customers. Some of these virtual communities are for users of particular products, like the wristwatch enthusiasts (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Others, however, are designed to allow customers to

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provide input for the company's new products and services (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002).

Virtual communities have also become quite common in social interactions. Many neighborhoods have developed listservs as well as electronic bulletin boards to allow neighbors to interact and share information. Social groups who interact face-to-face (FtF) may also use virtual communities to keep members informed and connected between their meetings. The most common social virtual community, however, may consist of people who are physically dispersed and never interact FtF. These virtual communities are formed around a shared interest in a particular topic. These topics range from movies, to food and wine, to pets, to political topics, and even to aspects of parenthood as evidenced by the hundreds of interactive sites on Babycenter.com.

BACKGROUND

But what are virtual communities and what distinguishes them from mere virtual groups? Ironically, the definition of community has always been a bit difficult. Even among traditional, FtF communities, there are over 71 definitions (see Jones, 1997). Among the issues in defining FtF communities is been whether communities need to be colocated, like a neighborhood, or whether they can be dispersed like a community of interest (e.g., stamp lovers).

Currently, community researchers agree that both co-located and dispersed groups can be communities. However, members of these groups must have a *sense of community* to be considered a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of community is defined as group members' feelings of belonging, identity, attachment, and influence among each other. By using this criterion, virtual communities can be defined as groups of people who interact primarily through e-collaboration technologies and who have developed feelings

of belonging, identity, attachment, and influence (i.e., a sense of virtual community) with each other.

Virtual communities have degrees of virtuality. At one extreme are dispersed virtual communities, which exist entirely online. Members of dispersed virtual communities live in many different locations and do not interact with each other FtF. At the other extreme are colocated virtual communities in which members primarily meet FtF, and the e-collaboration technology supplements their interactions. Virtual communities for employees co-located within a single organization as well as neighborhoods, and social/volunteer groups fall primarily into this type. In the middle are virtual communities that exist primarily online. Members may be dispersed or colocated; however, these members additionally interact FtF.

Virtual communities also exist over a variety of e-collaboration technologies (see Figure 1). These technologies can be asynchronous, in which communication is delayed like e-mail or bulletin boards, or synchronous, in which communication is instantaneous like instant messaging and chatrooms. Another key feature is whether the e-collaboration technologies allow one-to-one communication like instant messaging, one-to-many communication like blogs, other Web pages and some information distributing listservs or whether they allow many-to-many communications like bulletin boards and most interactive listservs. Other more advanced e-collaboration technologies allow avatars (pictorial representations of the communicators) as well as two-dimensional representations (e.g., rooms and parks) in which people can interact.

In general, virtual communities are valued because they are considered to have positive effects on both the organizations that sponsor them and within the general community in which they are used. In particular, they are believed to increase the amount of social and intellectual capital available in the organization or larger society. Social capital is defined as the networks, norms, and

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