

Chapter 1

Virtual Community Building and the Information Society: Current and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an investigation into the life cycle model needed to develop information systems for groups of people with fluid requirements. For this purpose, we developed a modified spiral model and applied it to the analysis, design and implementation of a virtual community for a group of researchers and organizations that collaborated in a research project and had changing system requirements. The virtual knowledge community was dedicated to support mobilization and dissemination of evidence-based knowledge produced by the Disability Rights Promotion International Canada (DRPI-Canada) project.

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities (VCs) have drawn attention of researchers since the inception of the web. Health Virtual Communities (Health VCs) started to take shape in the mid of 1990's. Nevertheless, even though Health VCs share advantages and challenges with other types of VCs some of the advantages they present and the challenges they face are health care specific. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a *Health VCs assessment*. People form virtual communities in order to achieve a certain aim, e.g. playing, chatting, discussing, researching, collaborating, etc. Chat rooms, bulletin boards, and email groups can be considered as virtual communities that allow people to gather and bond. VCs received a visible level of attention from the research community in many disciplines: Computer Science, Sociology, Psychology, and other disciplines. Preece (Preece, 2000) suggests that a virtual community is shaped of: (a) socially interacting *people*, performing special roles or satisfying their needs, (b) a *purpose*, which is the reason behind the community, (c) *policies* to govern people interaction, and (d) a *Computer Systems* that support social interaction.

The Problem

While Virtual Communities are well defined and virtual communities modeling has been giving fair attention it is by definition assumed that the *purpose*, aims and objectives of a community members are well defined in advance; it follows that the inherent assumption - from an information systems perspective - is that existing development life cycles can be followed when developing any virtual community. Though, in a fluid environment, such as a situations where participants can change their role/situation/position in their participation, in multidisciplinary research and collaborative teams, or when the environment is evolving with the time (some external parameters are changing), little – if any - concrete systems

objectives, other than the general ‘purpose’ of collaboration, are defined in advance. Indeed, the concrete requirement needs are revealed as the project progresses or even during the community’s life. To the best of our knowledge, there has not been an attempt to explore the system development life cycle model needed in projects where requirements are not only not well defined but also fluid and changing in nature. This paper is an attempt to draw the first sketches of such model in the context of a multidisciplinary collaborative virtual knowledge community. Our approach is general and is based on our experience in virtual communities for Human rights monitoring and for health prevention. Most of our examples will be taken from this first domain of application; however some requirements cited will illustrate our second domain of application which contains some additional characteristics (for instance information gathering based on sensed data).

Virtual Communities for Human Rights Monitoring

Framework of Disability

Disability activists and scholars refer to disability rights as “...the equal effective enjoyment of all human rights by people with disabilities” (Disability Rights Promotion International (DRPI), 2003). The majority consensus is that “disability” is a consequence of negative social conditions rather than an individual’s specific medical impairment (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999; Fougeyrollas, Cloutier, Bergeron, Côté, & Michel, 1999; Rioux, 1997, 2001; Shakespeare, 1999; Thomas, 2002).

A review of international human rights literature shows that, unlike areas such as women’s rights (Callamard, 1999a, 1999b), disability rights monitoring is relatively underdeveloped (International Disability Rights Monitor, 2004). Mobilization and dissemination of evidence-based knowledge produced through monitoring

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