

Chapter 11

The Amazing Impossibilities of Technology: Factors that Inhibit Participation in Skype™ Based Self-Help Groups

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ABSTRACT

A project in Norway attempting to start self-help groups based on Internet video conferencing experienced severe problems in recruiting participants. The chapter discusses how to interpret the project and compares it to other projects and trials. Theoretical perspectives on self-help and technology in a late modern context contribute to a tentative model of motivation for getting involved in Electronic Self-help Groups (ESGs). Anthony Giddens' contribution on the high modern society is central for our model of motivation. Also, the relationship between technology and social practice discussed by Ian Hutchby plays an important role. Both constrainers and enablers of such practices are considered in the theoretical model.

Using this model of motivation, five factors are suggested which may either enable or constrain engagement. These factors are (1) synchronicity, (2) identification, (3) specified diagnosis, (4) organizational trust, and (5) accessibility.

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic Self-help Groups (ESGs) seem to attract a substantial number of persons and the background for the rising number of such groups varies: practical convenience, social anxiety, health condition (Bjerke, 2010). Such groups also seem to be suitable for discussing matters believed to be of a private and shameful character (ibid.). The project “Self-help on Internet based Video Conference” (SIVC) was carried out over a period of two years. One of the main objectives was to make use of Skype™ for self-help purposes and to investigate the experiences of the participants. This kind of technology has grown more affordable and widespread recently. Another developmental trait in recent decades is the self-help groups that have emerged as an increasingly more vital part in many people’s lives. However, perhaps especially in rural districts and for very busy people, opportunities to take part in groups like these are limited. Hence, one of the objectives was to find out whether these sorts of groups could be beneficial for the participants and what they would require with regard to technical support, organizational structure and group starting/leadership, information etc. How do these groups form themselves? The main objective of this chapter is: *What are the preconditions for recruiting persons to Electronic Self-help Groups? What factors enable such practice and what have a constraining effect?* By looking into the experience of the SIVC and other projects/trials the matter will be discussed and a tentative model of motivation for engaging in ESGs is suggested.

BACKGROUND

The SIVC project was initiated by a resource group associated with the National Center of Patient Education (NCPE) in Norway. NCPE received a grant from the Norwegian Directorate

of Health to carry out the work and the Patient Education Resource Center (of Central Norway) was given the project management (The final report “Selvhjelp på videokonferanse”, henceforth: SPV 2009). The project itself was carried out in cooperation between a number of partners; The National Center of Patient Education, The Norwegian Center for Integrated Care and Telemedicine, Volda University College, The National Union of Organizations for Disabled in Norway and The Norwegian Self-help Center (Selvhjelp Norge). It was managed through the Patient Education Resource Center of Helse Sunnmøre.

A number of patient organizations, hospitals, rehab centers and others cooperated to recruit persons for the groups. An Internet site provided the necessary information for both learning how the groups were supposed to work, how to sign up, how to use the technology and other information. For those who did make contact a package of information, data software, other necessary items, instructions and an agreement for signing was prepared (SPV, 2009). Despite the efforts made to contact people assumed to be interested, very few signed up and no groups were initiated.

The final report identifies three major challenges during the project process. The first one concerns practical and technological issues. Originally this was intended to be based on groups meeting on Internet-based video conference. After testing the existing applications that could be considered useful, the project group concluded that none of them was suitable for this purpose. Both freeware and commercial applications were considered. The commercial ones were not really suitable as they required high-quality broadband for all users; furthermore, a certain financial support is needed to put them into use and there are organizational challenges associated with this. As a central point in the project was to develop methods and solutions that user organizations and “techno-lay people” may benefit from, technological, financial and organizational obstacles needed

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