Setting up an online community as an enterprise information tool[†]

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In this paper I advocate the use of online communities as enterprise information tools, and I give some practical tips to managers and knowledge professionals interested in setting one up for this purpose. The paper concentrates on strategy rather than on individual technologies.

Key learning points of this paper are:

1. Online communities within the enterprise usually fail if they are created using a top-down, hierarchical approach.

2. Begin your online community with hand-picked members.

3. Make sure that you can demonstrate concrete results.

Setting up an online community as an enterprise information tool

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Why set up an online community in your enterprise?

Raw information is rarely useful by itself. For most practical tasks, information needs to be selected, edited, summarized, contextualized, and built on. Moreover, even knowing which raw information to look for in the first place is not necessarily easy. Despite considerable efforts by Information Theory researchers to produce machines that are capable of doing this, there is no danger so far of software replacing all human knowledge workers. A normal way of accessing and processing information as a human being is to seek out people who can act as guides, filters, editors, and adaptors for information sources.

In the past, the information received from these guides, filters and so on would either be accessed through traditional media, or through face-to-face contacts. Traditional media offers only very limited possibilities for interaction, and on the other hand face-to-face meetings require the people involved to be in the same place at the same time. Online communities have the advantage that they allow many-to-many interactive communications at a distance or where the participants are not available simultaneously.

Two recent developments have highlighted the possibility of using online communities for these knowledge-work tasks within the enterprise. The first is the mainstream adoption of enterprise intranets and inter-company online discussion groups. The second is the growth of the numbers of - and amount of publicity about - blogs. Blogging began in 1999, and by the end of that year there were a couple of hundred blogs. By 2002 there were 100,000, and now in 2004 Technorati [12] estimate that there are about 275,000 blog updates every day. Technorati track 3 million blogs, of which 1.65 million are regularly updated. As for publicity, according to Google News [8] there were about 3,510 news articles with a mention of weblog(s) or blog(s) in July 2004 – that's 520 more than Madonna, and only 140 fewer than Britney.

The driving factor in the success of blogging is not its underlying technology – which is just a very simple piece of content management software – but its social characteristics. The authors of the most popular blogs provide to their readers a service consisting of search and selection of information, and also give a human context to that information. As the prize-winning blogger Tom Coates says [3], "Individuals don't identify with sites anywhere near as much as they identify with other people," and as a result online information that is selected and contextualized by a human being can be particularly compelling and easy to use. The comment feature of blogs allows bloggers to maintain public dialogues with their readers – and in some

cases (particularly, though not exclusively, in the case of group blogs) readers of a blog have public dialogues with each other within a single blog. Moreover, bloggers comment on the information in each others' blogs, and on each others' comments, thus constructing multi-way conversations distributed over several blogs.

Blogs are just one of the newer technologies that can be used to support online communities. Other technologies allowing many-to-many online communication include online discussion groups, chat rooms, wikis, file sharing spaces and shared archives, email lists, and integrated combinations of these.

Social network analysts such as Mark Granovetter [9] divide social relationships into strong and weak ties. Typically, an individual will have about a thousand social contacts, defined as people with whom they have conversations. Of these, between 1 and 50 (depending on the individual and the stringency of the definition) will be strong ties, ie. close friends and family members. The rest will be weak ties. Online communities are particularly useful for expanding the number of weak ties available to an individual.

Research by social network analysts has identified that within an enterprise, weak ties can bridge structural gaps within the organization, monitoring the environment and introducing new ideas and innovations to parts of the enterprise that otherwise would not have heard about them. This increases the social capital and effectiveness of the enterprise, team, and individual. Ronald Burt [1] describes case studies comparing people with the same role within an enterprise (for example managers, or researchers), and looking at whether these individuals have contacts that bridge structural gaps in their organization. The studies show individuals with such contacts receiving better performance evaluations, earning higher salaries, earning higher bonuses, and being promoted more quickly.

Why a top-down approach won't work

So, now that I've argued that a gap-bridging online community would be a good thing for your enterprise and for you, how should you go about building one?

Let me tell you first what doesn't work. I've been researching this area for years and have heard about attempts by managers in many enterprises to create an online community by using a top-down, hierarchical approach. Most of these attempts have had only a very short-lived success, or have failed entirely. Here are some reasons why.

Senior managers may have an incentive to restrict the flow of information. If the official flow of information between two structural areas passes via them, through a hierarchical structure, this gives them power and influence. If they are rewarded according to the performance of their teams and enterprise then they should welcome increased direct information flow between the areas; but if they are evaluated on criteria that are too narrowly individual, they may have an incentive not to assist online communitie s that directly link these areas. If you are a senior manager and are thinking of encouraging a gap-bringing online community, think of the possible spin-off consequences if the community was successful, and make sure that these would be advantageous for you too.

Although managers may be the *official* information bridges between different structural areas, the *actual* major bridges may be people who are not in managerial roles. For example, Charles Perrow [11] points out that it is often administrative assistants who span the most structural areas within an organization. Moreover, it is normal for some pairs of structural areas to have no official direct communications at all; information flow between these pairs of areas operates through informal social contacts. Online communities that are created top-down tend to replicate the official enterprise structure, and hence miss out these contacts.

Finally, online communication tends to be most conducive to the communication and development of new ideas if the tone of the communication is that of an informal conversation between peers. This may be because this tone allows for more uncertainty, speculation, and experimentation.

As Manuel Castells shows [2], the productivity improvements given by the information society have only been possible because of a change in the structure of the enterprise, from top-down hierarchies with heavily controlled information flow towards flatter organizations in which knowledge workers have direct access to information. Online communities should be seen as a tool to assist this structural change.

Tips on setting up an online community

If you can't impose an online community top-down, how do you grow it bottom-up? Well, the easiest way to grow a bottom-up community is to start with a bottom-up community. Begin by investigating the informal cross-sector communication that is already happening within your enterprise. Don't look for it principally in reporting links: concentrate on peer-level communications. Find out which employees are already performing information selection and editing roles for their peers, and design the technology – with their input, naturally - to support their needs.

Begin your online community with these employees, and with other enthusiasts. Let them invite other individuals in that they think would be good to have in the online community, but don't do general publicity of the community within your enterprise until it has got past the initial phase. If you start with these people, you have a chance of ensuring that when the non-enthusiasts arrive they will find the online community already running well, with useful content, and with positive norms of online behaviour.

Rather than producing one general online community for the whole company, focus on a particular organizational need. For example, the purpose of the online community might be to link together field engineers with research engineers, or people working on two product teams whose products interact, or to bring together everyone interested in a particular topic (network security, for example) that does not have its own niche in the official structure of your organization.

It's a good idea to begin with a small, specific, collaborative task for the online community. This focuses the online community at the beginning. It also means that you can point to a concrete outcome. Once this has been achieved you can move the

community on to new specific tasks (which may be suggested by community members), and/or to more broadly based knowledge sharing. You can publicize the initial successful outcome, to encourage its further use by existing and new members.

When you design the community infrastructure, include tracking tools and metrics, so that you can provide ongoing demonstrations that it's actually working. These are especially important for online communities that aim at long-term interactions, rather than only being focused on concrete short-term tasks. Examples of metrics to track might include for example the number of active members, the frequency of messages, the percentage of members who create content rather than just reading it, how many times messages are read, moderation time spent per message, mentions of or links to content in the online community in (internally-circulated) enterprise documents, and (if the object is to bridge a structural gap between two different areas of the organization) the frequency of active interactions between the two areas. As Dan Dixon points out [5], you should choose metrics that are key performance indicators for the specific outcomes you are trying to achieve, rather than automatically choosing standard ones that other online communities use. Tracking metrics can protect a successful community from the fate of several e-commerce related online communities opened during the dot-com boom, which were closed down by senior management because the employees responsible for them could not demonstrate that the online communities would add anything to the bottom line. However, remember that results from metrics may not be as important as the quality of the interactions, which is difficult to measure objectively: and that the most convincing demonstration you can give that an online community is useful is to point to a task successfully achieved by the community.

Make sure that one or more employees have the task of moderating and maintaining the online community. Make this an official part of their job, so that they get recognition for it. Their job includes: publicizing the community, making sure the technology is working smoothly and that there is enough technical support for members, welcoming members, instilling a friendly, informal (but polite) online atmosphere, encouraging/rewarding good contributions, organizing online and offline events for the community, feeding relevant enterprise information and the results of community-instigated actions back to the community - and training their eventual successors. For some practical advice on these tasks, see for example [7,10].

Employees other than the moderators are much more likely to participate in the online community if it will help them in their current jobs rather than being extra work. So try to ensure that it will work smoothly with their normal means of information exchange. For example, as Dori Digenti recommends [4], one action that managers can take in order to promote the use of an online community is to ensure that documents relevant to the community's topic are always made available within the technology that the community uses, rather than being initially circulated and/or commented on via some other technology.

Finally, if you are setting up or running an online community, keep contact with other people who are doing this; they can be an invaluable source of support. You can consult - and assist - fellow online community professionals online, through the e-mint association [6], for example.

Key learning points

The key learning points of this paper are:

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Acknowledgement

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