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 article 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 to 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.

KEYWORDS
Digital Communication, Electronic Self-Help, Modernity, Motivation, Self-Help Groups, Sociology

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. Such groups also seem to be suitable for discussing matters believed to be of a private and shameful character (Bjerke, 2010). 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 paper 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 topic 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 (Selvhjelp på videokonferanse. Sluttrapport, 2009). The project itself was carried out in cooperation among 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 by the Patient Education Resource Center of Helse Sunnmøre.

A number of patient organizations, hospitals, rehabilitation 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 (Selvhjelp på videokonferanse. Sluttrapport, 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 to 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 to be as few and low as possible. After a while, the free data applications proved to have their weaknesses. The most important one was a lack of stability, and the quality of live images also was very vulnerable, especially on home broadband connections. A decision was made to leave the live picture out of the project and run the groups as audio communication only. The project group considered this as an important “result,” though a disappointing one. Skype™ was chosen, as this solution was considered to be user-friendly and one of the most widespread ones available. Considerable time and resources were spent on reaching this conclusion, which affected the project as a whole (Selvhjelp på videokonferanse. Sluttrapport, 2009).

The second challenge described in the report is related to matters of privacy. Neither in the application nor the letter of a grant from the Directorate this was mentioned, but during the planning process, it became clear that there were substantial legal concerns involved. Investigating what departments that needed to be applied to for approval, made it clear that the project strictly speaking only had to be registered with the Sunnmøre Hospital Trust, and they sent it to the Data Inspectorate of Norway. There were a number of details that needed to be outlined, such as how to handle lists of names, confidentiality for the professionals, the design of the web-based evaluation form, information security was especially challenging due to the fact that a number of private computers are involved. Organizations involved in self-help are partly obliged to follow the same or similar guidelines when
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