Engaging Organisational Culture to Overcome Social Barriers in Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in the technical development of information systems and their implementation have influenced academics to focus on specific aspects, particularly those systems that enhance and support organisational communication under physical limitations. The purpose of these ICTs is to bring together parties who are separated by those factors and allow them to collaborate and communicate for the purposes of their work without actually feeling the effect of time and distance. These tools have particular use for virtual organisations that operate in environments that are undefined physically in terms of space and time, yet allow information and knowledge to flow freely, therefore bridging the gap that is experienced by space, distance, and time. In traditional methods of face-to-face work, people are able to see and feel one another, factors that although may not seem so obviously important to begin with, are actually essential to cooperation and collaboration, because it is based on these physical cues that people begin to form the basic impressions and opinions upon which they base their trust of one another (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003). Within the context of virtual work, particularly where people have never met, the basis for initial trust is missing and it seems that the success of working in virtual environments, or lack thereof, is fundamentally due to this.

WHAT IS A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY?

The phrase virtual community conjures up images of cyberworlds where people are engaged in mind-altering activities using bizarre contraptions fitted to their head and hands. Indeed, cinema and television have shaped considerably our perception of virtual reality but the virtual world is still a few steps away from Hollywood’s somewhat warped version of it. Going back several steps, in terms of the organisation, the virtual organisation is one that is limitless physically but that operates across vast space, distance, and time, and readily continues to perform the same functions as its red-brick counterpart. Raybourn’s (2001) view of collaborative virtual environments encapsulates not only the act of work but the social aspect of these structures: “[they] can be pro-social multi-user worlds that provide friendship, intimate relationships or business partnerships as a result of synchronous, pseudo-anonymous computer-mediated communication” (p. 247). For tradespeople, the most obvious of these are of economic, financial, and market orientation. In the context of work, the liberation of physical boundaries has posed several major issues but also simultaneously presented lucrative opportunities; looking more closely at this opening of borders, we see that organisations are taking advantage by capturing these opportunities but not always in ways that would be most productive. Whereas in the “old days” collaboration would require the creation of temporary groups that would work whilst together and disband once the life of that work came to an end, the “new style of work” allows the translation of this structure into another level, where members do not meet, speak, or work face-to-face but in a virtual space facilitated by ICT. These types of groups are becoming more and more common given their time and cost-saving benefits, but their popularity remains to be asserted.

A community is formed, intentionally or unintentionally, when individuals who share a common interest come together and wish to share knowledge and information to learn or solve problems (Lechner & Hummel, 2002; Wenger, 2000). Fernback and Thompson (1995) defined a virtual community as a set of social relationships created in cyberspace through repeated contacts within a specified boundary. Gusfield (1975) identified two levels of community: geographic and relational. As virtual communities are not bound physically, they fall mainly into the second category, where the community is defined by the relationship or interaction on which it is based. That is not to say people working in the same location cannot be classified as being part of a virtual community, because they can be, depending on the nature of the communication that takes place. More than structure, it is the nature of communication that serves to identify virtual communities. The emphasis here is that a virtual community is one that is lifted from physical boundaries and engages actively in communicating and working through the members’ common interests by electronic, digital, or virtual media. Despite slight differences in definitions, the literature
agrees that this cyber or virtual physically undefined cloud of space, through which the contact takes place, is the key to appropriately defining and identifying virtual communities. Koh and Kim (2003) take this a step further to define a virtual community as “a group of people with common interests or goals, interacting predominantly in cyberspace” (p. 76), thereby encapsulating communities that have already established themselves off-line, and then translated this structure into an online context.

The absence of face-to-face contact can be a major issue here. Physically co-located communities develop a sense of trust and cooperation, which stems from the fact that they can see and hear, and therefore identify and relate to, each other, thereby establishing the most basic level of trust in the first instance that is required to facilitate collaborative ventures. People feel more committed and obliged to reciprocate because there is a natural sense of loyalty to the community where there is physical presence. In the virtual world, this is not the case, a reason that has possibly contributed to the lack of popularity of working in that medium. However, preliminary findings of Raybourn’s (2001) work at the BT Labs has suggested that the lack of physical presence might even enhance social awareness by allowing people to explore identity and power in a nonthreatening environment, and that culture, and “knowledge of a tacit culture” may support organisational trust (Raybourn, 2001). A connection is forming between communication, interaction, collaboration, and culture here, claiming that the absence of basic trust in a communication transaction in a virtually collaborative environment can be overcome by the engagement of the shared symbols and artifacts that constitute an organisational culture, thereby sparking a curiosity (Raybourn, 2001) to explore and learn more about the other participants and create an environment where interaction can successfully take place. This supports the view taken by Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, and Haythornthwaite (1996), that when technology and people connect, a computer-supported social network (CSSN) is formed.

There is evidence to suggest that off-line communication, or face-to-face contact, plays a critical role in enhancing the inherently low social presence of computer-mediated environments (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). This finding is consistent with earlier studies that demonstrated that strong ties among members cannot be sustained without physical cues (Beniger, 1987). However, given the ubiquitous nature of virtual communities, this physical contact is nearly always nonexistent. Therefore, the question remains as to how virtual communities can match and maintain the interaction and level of trust that is required to facilitate collaborative ventures. I propose that the answer lies in engaging organisational culture to link members at the cognitive level, and providing a basic connection that will automatically be used to identify one another. Essentially, what I believe the purpose of organisational culture to be, is to bring together the thoughts, ideas, and social behaviours of organisational members; and in a sense, train them into a common, shared mode of conduct which serves as their organisational identity.

**EXPLORING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE**

There have been many studies and investigations into the nature of organisational culture, resulting in various almost synonymous definitions (Brown, 1998; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Handy, 1991; Hatch, 1993; Martin, 2002; Ott, 1989; Sathe, 1985; Schein, 1992). Residing at the cognitive level of the organisation’s structure, there is consensus in the notion that those things that constitute

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**Figure 1. Definition of virtual space in relation to traditional physical space**