Virtual Communities in an MBA

Françoise Dushinka Brailovsky Signoret
Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Mexico

THE CONFLICT

Have you ever felt desperate because of mutually inclusive demands on your time? For example: You have to meet with your case group for a Master of Business Administration (MBA) class, and as you are leaving work, your boss asks you to prepare a report that would take at least an hour to finish. I am sure this has happened to many of you on several occasions.

This conflict exemplifies why it is so important that we, as workers and/or students, start to make use of information technology and virtual communities.

This article presents some background, including definitions about virtual communities, the sense of virtual community and groups that have been created to follow an Internet connection, including e-MBAs. The use of technology in an MBA program is described as a practical application. Then the article suggests a future path to resolve the conflict, and finishes with the conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Technology has shaped the discourse of education and schooling from its earliest history (Roberts, 2004). However, worldwide this trend is rapidly evolving, due to the availability of digital technologies that directly impact classroom learning in areas such as literacy (Leu & Kinzer, 2000).

Nevertheless, the use of technology as an educational tool to create global networks of students and teachers is not a novel idea. During 1924, in the rural mountain village of Le Bar-sur-Loup in southern France, Celestin Freiner initiated an exchange between her classroom and the classroom of a colleague in Brittany that transformed their teaching and paved the way for the founding of the Modern School Movement (Roberts, 2004).

Continuous technological breakthroughs in the mid-to-late 1980s (see Table 1), including the personal computer, workstations and communications networks, enabled an even broader diffusion of database management, marketing and telemarketing tools. Furthermore, new networking capabilities provided the ability to distribute and share information with other organizations and individuals more easily (Turner & Dasgupta, 2003).

In April 2002, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) developed its first release of a standard, the Platform for Privacy Preferences (P3P), which offers privacy policies that should improve user trust significantly (Turner & Dasgupta, 2003).

In addition, collaborative work is being done increasingly in a distributed fashion. People work together, sometimes across great distances, using readily available information technology like the World Wide Web (WWW) and the Internet. The Internet certainly suggests that future developments in information networks will be directed along the lines of interactivity, time-space and cost-space convergence (Sawhney, 1996). However, in this collaboration, participants do not act simply as individuals. Collaborators are dependent on one another as members of professional communities, in which they share goals, interests and norms, among other things (de Moor, 2002).

Researchers define the virtual professional communities in which this joint work takes place as communities of professionals, whose collaboration on activities requiring the realization of shared goals is mostly or completely computer-enabled. In these communities, work is organized in the form of more or less structured workflows (a recurring unit of work of which the coordination, control and execution can be partially or completely automated) (de Moor, 2002).

It follows that the development of information systems for virtual professional communities requires a con-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Era (Turner &amp; Dasgupta, 2003)</th>
<th>Capabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information age</td>
<td>Compilation, manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network age</td>
<td>Compilation, manipulation, communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet age</td>
<td>Compilation, manipulation, communication, workflow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile age</td>
<td>Limited compilation and manipulation, global communication and positioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.