

Building Virtual Communities, 26 November 2003

A review by Sue Ives, BT Adastral Park

26 November 2003 was one of the dullest and wettest days we have had for ages, but those attending the ISG Meeting on *Building Virtual Communities* were in for an enlivening and thought-provoking day.

The meeting kicked off with a thoughtful talk by Dr **Steve Jones**, Head of Knowledge Trading at TWI (The Welding Institute). Steve posed the question *Why Build A Virtual Community?* He explained about "Survival through Innovation" and how western manufacturing must increase innovation by 10 times and productivity by 3 times in order to stay in business. He believes we need to rethink how we use people, particularly when we have access to exponentially increasing amounts of information. We draw knowledge from this, and knowledge can be transferred through people, via staff transfers, secondments and mentoring etc.

Positive drivers of virtual communities include wealth from knowledge, intangible assets, and advantage through innovation. There are negative drivers too, such as fear of obsolescence, media hype and organisational politics.

Humans are adapted to take in so much information subliminally. What we hear takes only about 6-7% of our processing powers. We know far more than we can or may wish to tell, thus problems are rooted in communication. Our judgements are made from our ability to make sense of ambivalent terms as well as our cultural viewpoint. Western civilisations typically have fifty in an extended family and we make about 240 friends in our lifetime. But friendship requires high maintenance. Therefore, virtual communities have their limitations.

Companies need to think how they manage and collect knowledge now and in the future. Steve told us that TWI plans to use improved tools such as ontology-based search tools, mentoring for new recruits and increase direct knowledge transfer, by capturing the corporate memory.

Anne Ramsden, IT projects manager at the Open University Library, followed with a practical talk on personalisation and profiling and her experience in running a pilot virtual community project at the OU Library. Personalisation means that the digital library has some knowledge of your preferences. Customisation relates to the ability to add or remove

resources, change font colours, layout etc.

The current OU library offers no personalisation, and students feel that it is a difficult website. A survey revealed that 66% of the 2 million students access the library, but few return. It revealed a need for tailored services for user groups, a more student-focused website and a search facility of quality-licensed content. Funding by an EU grant is to develop a personalised library portal and to provide evidence of efficiency, scalability and cost effectiveness.

Anne showed us screenshots of the new website illustrating easy-to-use forms, with tick lists for the selection of resources, and to allow customisation, among other facilities.

The MyOpenLibrary website had a warm response from students and tutors. The e-metrics gained from the pilot give the team information in the use of resources which they have not had before. They concluded that the new website is scalable and efficient through the reuse of metadata and resource deployment, that users trust the library and that they want to be able to opt in and out of receiving alerts.

Carole Chapman from Ultralab gave an enthusiastic and stimulating talk on building online learning communities and also on her involvement with notschool.net. The latter project is supported by the DFES for youngsters who have been excluded from school or are unable to attend because of difficulties such as disability.

A community is composed of people who care about each other. Trust and honesty are also necessary. It is evidenced by social interchange, use of one another's names, a willingness to share information and perhaps to mentor.

Carole was involved in a project called *Virtual Heads* aimed at those aspiring to become head teachers, and *Talking Heads* a virtual community for head teachers. They are both for people to discuss current problems and solutions.

Notschool.net is not designed to get people back to school but to reawaken their interest in learning. Each student is given a computer, printer, paper etc. and access to a mentor. Mentors are recruited from ex-teachers who are lost to the profession. The DFES stipulates that they must not be poached! Within six months all students have been able to write, 98% chose to study for a certificate and only two dropped out.

Enabling Virtual Communities was **Andrew Cox's** topic. His academic approach to the subject compared two contrasting ideas of community. Communities of imagination are made up of people who share a passionate concern. Communities of practice happen spontaneously in

a group of people, participants have a shared history, and formal rules do not cover all tasks. Andrew compared Étienne Wenger's views of communities of practice with Wellman and Castell's view of communities of choice, which have a strength of weak ties, lack clear boundaries and are ephemeral. Andrew felt that virtual communities must take features from both types of communities. They must go across boundaries, be non-hierarchical, have no formal leadership and have their own rules.

Ayub Khan made us all green with envy when he showed us the plans for the proposed new library in Birmingham. He gave an enthusiastic overview of progress and how the project team plans to respond to the needs of the local citizens. The future library is very different from the dictionary definition. It will offer a virtual library with resources personalised to need, and which may be interactive, while the physical library will enable support and personal interaction. The Richard Rogers Partnership has been working on the Project for three years and the library will open in 2010. They will revitalise (digitise?) their image collections so that they can be easily accessible by the many. ICT will have a significant role. Staff will work with users instead of materials and will address research, marketing, targeting, and outreach development. They will also create and organise content.

The final event of the day was a lively presentation by **Luke Brynley-Jones** of Etribes Ltd. Luke defined online communities as a group of like-minded individuals who regularly meet on line to exchange information, ideas and experience for mutual benefit. Virtual communities enable connection, communication and collaboration and include discussion forums, bulletin boards, calendars, live chat, resource libraries, email, newsletters, personal profiles and member directories. Logins are necessary for verification purposes.

He showed us examples of effective and less effective sites. The British Epilepsy Association offers useful tools to track the sufferer's condition and people seem to know one another.

Interaction is at the head of the web. Benefits for hosts include new connections and networks, new improved services and enhanced member recruitment and retention. Users gain access to new resources and contacts and access to knowledge, expertise as well as friendship and support.

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