

Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 4. DESIGNING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

LESSON 1. INTRODUCING ONLINE COMMUNICATION IN YOUR WORK

NOTE

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the IMARK courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.



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Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- understand how to integrate online communication with existing forms of communication; and
- identify approaches to overcome people's resistance to electronic networking.

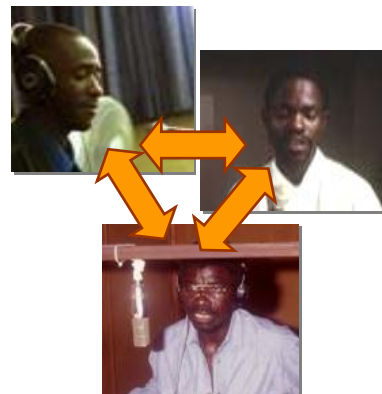


A shared history

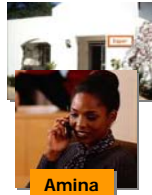
A community is made up of **personal relationships** that grow over time. You cannot develop or implement a community from the outside.

The foundation of a community is a shared history: when you start preparing for your **online community**, you have to build on the existing history of people and organizations working together.

This history can be an **interest or need shared** by an informal network of individuals or organizations.



A shared history



Let's consider the example of Keper, an international non-profit organization aiming to support and serve radio broadcasters in Africa. Amina coordinates the project of building an online community of radio broadcasters.

She knows that broadcasters are used to receiving information about topics of general interest through a traditional newsletter distributed by mail. On the other hand, they use the telephone to call Keper to solve urgent technical problems.

Which of the following practices would be more consistent with the existing communication practices?

- Keper could distribute new resources via e-mail to all members of the group.
- Keper could provide a list of technical Web sites as resources for finding technical support.
- Members could use a mailing list to discuss the problems members face every day.
- Members could use an Instant Messenger to ask Keper for help in solving technical problems.

Please select the answers of your choice (2 or more)
and press Check Answer

Forms of online and traditional communication



As we have seen, knowing the communication needs of your users helps you to better focus on the **possible use of online communication** for the community.

Moreover, a thorough understanding of the **benefits of online communication** should be the cornerstone of your strategy.

Forms of online and traditional communication

Which of the following features are key advantages of online communication compared with traditional (face to face, telephone, fax) communication?

- There are lower barriers to participate than face to face.
- It is cheaper than fax or telephone.
- It allows you to communicate at your convenience, in contrast with communication by telephone.
- It provides a much higher rate of interaction than face to face.
- It increases creativity through more effective connections between community members.
- It increases ways to capture, organize and share information from and with your community.

Please select the answers of your choice (2 or more) and press
Check Answer

Forms of online and traditional communication

We need to define how online communication will supplement or support other forms of communication.



Although online communication has many advantages, it **cannot replace all other forms** of communication.

Especially in situations in which the use of the Internet is widespread, using another form of communication may reflect **importance, status, or intimacy**.

Moreover, remember that a discussion of online communication as a replacement for other forms of communication may be interpreted by some as an implicit way to remove certain tasks, maybe even jobs, in an organization. This may lead to resistance to the introduction of online communication.

Forms of online and traditional communication

Let's have a look at how different forms of communication are used in different aspects of organizing a conference:

ELECTRONIC NETWORKING	TELEPHONE	LETTER BY FAX OR MAIL
Discuss conference themes and programme; identify and organize tasks.		
Announce date, venue and programme; receive confirmations of participation.	Confirm with key note speaker; ask the president of the organization if she has special needs; discuss travel arrangements with both.	Invite keynote speaker and guests of honour (by mail).
Coordinate tasks.	Support co-coordinator who is balancing work and a sick child at home.	
Contact conference venue, caterer, multimedia support.	Discuss last minute changes with venue, caterer, multimedia support.	Contracts for rent of venue, multimedia equipment, catering (by fax).

Forms of online and traditional communication

Other reasons why you may need to use other forms of communication are when you encounter situations that need **urgent attention** such as **conflicts**.

Let's consider the following example concerning a community of radio broadcasters.

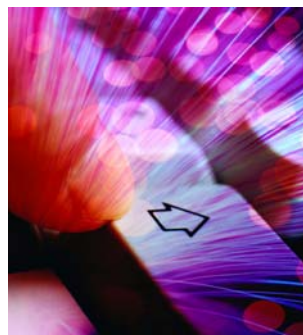
Community members coordinate their efforts in lobbying for favourable legislative environments through consultative bodies.

One day, Mulalo and Sefu have a quick exchange of irritated e-mail messages over the interpretation of a report on establishing an advocacy campaign.

This has happened before, but this time the tone of the messages becomes more angry.

Mulalo's tone is sarcastic.

Sefu responds with an accusation that challenges the future of the whole coalition.



Forms of online and traditional communication

Chiuma, the online facilitator, feels that all their hard work over the past months is at stake. What will she do?



1) Chiuma sends a private e-mail message to Mulalo and calls for calm. She asks him to write back to her or to call her by telephone.

2) She sends a message to the mailing list in which she calls for calm and understanding. She attaches the file with communication guidelines they all have accepted as part of their membership. There is no response from Mulalo.

6) The project coordinator and Chiuma write a joint message to the mailing list in which they confirm and praise the coalition's strengths and achievements, and the personal involvement and commitments of the participants.



3) She calls the project coordinator. He is in a meeting. She leaves a message, saying it is urgent.

5) Chiuma speaks with the project coordinator. They agree that Chiuma should call Mulalo. Mulalo tells her that his radio was not considered in the report. He threatens to take his organization out of the coalition.

7) The project coordinator calls Mulalo and asks about his radio. They discuss how they can prevent these kinds of exclusions in the future. He then calls Sefu and discusses this.



4) She sends a fax to the project coordinator. She knows that the fax machine stands on his desk. If she sends him an e-mail, he may not read it until the next day.

8) The project coordinator starts organising a face-to-face meeting of the coalition. The organization needs to refine its work protocols to prevent this kind of conflict. Letters of invitation are sent to the Directors of all member organizations.

Forms of online and traditional communication

On the other hand, in many situations electronic networking has become the preferred form of communication:



Announcements and alerts

Unlike telephones and fax machines, you don't need to know the individual addresses of all people you want to reach. Post your message in the relevant online communities and ask people to forward your message widely.



Discussions and conferences

Unlike face-to-face conferences, online discussions and conferences can continue for a longer period, allowing more people to participate and at their own convenience.



Information dissemination

Unlike paper brochures, reports, pamphlets, and newsletters, electronic documents can be distributed more cheaply and faster over the Internet, reaching a much larger audience.



Organizing and mobilizing

Unlike telephones and fax machines, electronic networking is an effective tool for reaching many people in a short period. Additional background information can be sent with the same call for action.

Overcoming resistance to change

During the needs assessment phase, you should have gained a good understanding of who within your organization, stakeholder community and online community may be resistant to electronic networking.

You may experience, in particular, resistance to issues related to **technology, power, and culture.**

Remember, resistance is not just a negative response to your project. Addressing the resistance in a positive manner will result in a better project.



Would you like to know more on resistance to change?

See Annex 4.1.1 for a mini-lesson illustrating reasons for resistance to change.

Overcoming resistance to change

It is important to understand why people resist. Let's consider, for example, what has been happening in Keper.

Jeanette writes all her reports on her own computer, but has to use Aisha's computer for e-mail. Jeanette has almost given up using e-mail because Aisha usually says she is too busy to let Jeanette use her computer.

In a meeting Jeanette hears that all broadcasters will get their own Internet connection. Because everyone knows how to use e-mail, they decide that they will start with an electronic mailing list. Jeanette is asked to become a member of the working group. She refuses.



What could you have done, as the online community project coordinator, to prevent these negative responses?

- Clearly communicate the importance of the project to all people involved in it.
- Assess and develop the capability of people to implement the project.

Please select the answer of your choice

Overcoming resistance to change

Strategies for overcoming resistance to change include strategies to develop...



1) AWARENESS for change

Your main tool in your strategy to develop awareness about change is **communication**: you need to explain your project and why you need the change. Remember: **actively seek feedback** so you can address issues and questions that remain unclear.



2) ABILITY for change

Even when the awareness of the need for change is high, **practical problems** may hinder the ability to change. Developing this ability takes **time, practice, and support**. You can support people by providing them with **training and mentoring**.

Overcoming resistance to change

STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP AWARENESS FOR CHANGE

You have probably learned great deal during your needs analysis of what people feel and think about the online community project. Next, you need to **explain** what the change is all about:

- How you network now and why this needs to change. What will happen when you don't change.
- What the online community is about: Vision, goals, objectives, timeframe, impacts.
- How the use of electronic networking will affect your organization and participating individuals and organizations: How will it affect their time, status; how they will be able to get training and support; how they can give feedback.
- How you will report on the progress of the project.

Other ways to develop awareness is to **show** what the change is. You can do this by providing a presentation and training in electronic networking. Let your colleagues experience an online community and organize a discussion in which you can map the advantages and disadvantages of electronic networking.

STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP ABILITY FOR CHANGE

Change cannot take place if the people and organizations involved do not have the required knowledge and skills to participate in change. It is important to understand the real causes for the lack of ability. The ability to participate in an online community involves knowledge and skills that are found in different people and departments of your organization. For example, people may resist change because they don't feel they have the proper **hardware or the technical support** to participate.

You have to accept that for some people it will take a lot of time and effort to participate in the change, even if their desire and awareness for change is high. Effective communicators can become hesitant when they need to communicate via a faceless computer. Efficient organizers can feel disempowered in a virtual network. Personal **coaching** may help to encourage them. Provide **opportunities** for transforming existing experiences into new online skills.

Overcoming resistance to change



Introducing electronic networking in an organization may result in concerns related to **security, privacy, and control**.

Management may feel that the organization as a whole will be more vulnerable when some of its staff participate in an online community.

For example, what will happen if staff accidentally share sensitive information in the online community?

And how to ensure a centralized control in an online community?

Overcoming resistance to change



Management needs to understand what the possible risks are and how they can be prevented or dealt with.

One way to ensure control is to use online community issues such as **membership, facilitation and moderation**.

Moreover, you should learn about methods to deal with risks related to **online security and privacy**.

Summary

Like any community, an online community is built on **personal relationships** and **cultivated by its members**. This process takes time and effort.

Electronic networking **supplements other forms of communication**, strengthening your overall communication strategy.

The introduction of electronic networking can result in a **resistance to the changes** that it brings in the organization. Resistance to change may indicate valid points that need to be addressed.

Introducing electronic networking in an organization may also result in concerns related to **security, privacy, and control**. You can use some online community issues to deal with these risks, such as moderating the community and using methods to ensure security and protect the privacy of the online community.

If you want to learn more...

ONLINE RESOURCES

Benefits of electronic networking for your communication strategy

Making the network: Creating online networks

<http://www.makingthenetwork.org/>

Guidelines on the use of electronic networking to facilitate regional or global research networks

http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-33951-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

The community benefits of electronic networking

http://www.scip.org.uk/resources/learn/community_tool/benefits.asp

What is the value of participating in an online community?

<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/whyparticipateonline.htm>

Overcoming resistance to change

Conditions for Change – a short assessment

<http://refresher.com/conditions.html>

After discovering fire: easing into using technology.

<http://www.indstate.edu/sketches/sketches02.pdf>

Technology Attitudes - Articles and worksheets

Summit Collaborative Strategic Technology Toolkit: Resources to help you in collecting information on stakeholder attitudes about technology

<http://www.summitcollaborative.com/cwpm.html - attitudes>

Annex 4.1.1 Mini-lesson: Resistance to Change

Introducing change may affect people and resources at all levels of an organization. It is important to identify conditions for change and reasons for resistance.



Conditions for change are:

- The stakeholders have the **awareness and desire for change**.
- The organization has the **ability for change**; it has the skills and resources to support change.
- The project organizers have the **permission for change** from management.



There are many **reasons for resistance to change**:

- **Power**: the change empowers some and/or disempowers others.
- **Lack of information** about what is going to happen.
- **Lack of awareness** of the benefits of electronic networking or the need for an online community.
- **Lack of support**: lack of resources or skills to participate in the proposed online community.
- **Personal preferences**: "We've always used conference calls to communicate, why change it".
- **Ethics**: loss of jobs in the organization, loss of status because of less formal communications in electronic networking, or loss of organizational values such as collectivism when everyone is working behind a personal computer.

When you start planning your online community, you may experience, in particular, resistance to issues related to **technology, power, and culture**.



Technology presents many things: value, access to power, status, progress, and control. The **introduction of technology** in an organization can lead to wide-ranging change, from the organization of workspaces and the control over information, to the status of people in the organization.



An online community can change the **power relations** between participating individuals and organizations. In an online community, everyone can have access to the same information at the same time. Differences in class or gender may work out differently online than in face-to-face meetings.



The particular culture of your existing network of colleagues or partner organizations, **the way you communicate and work together**, may change drastically. Some people will feel disempowered in their ability to communicate now that they have to use a computer. Others feel they are 'liberated' from certain cultural constraints. Older people may feel that they lose **status** and face, as the younger generation is more adept in electronic networking.