

Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 3. OPTIONS, CHOICES, TOOLS AND APPLICATIONS

LESSON 3. ASSESSING TOOLS AND APPLICATIONS

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:

- describe “total cost of use” (TCU) for the various tools, to the organization and to community members;
- understand how tools affect online community building;
- distinguish the specific areas of impact of tools on the community;
- be aware of the likely impact that different tools could have on your community.



Introduction



The tools utilized in your community will affect:

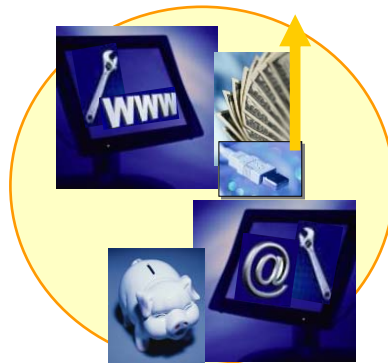
- the total cost of use (TCU) to you and community members; and
- the nature of the community itself.

In this lesson we will provide a basic description of **TCU of an online community**, both to the organization and the users.

Furthermore, we will present the specific **areas of impact** of tools on the community.

Community tools TCU

In general, **web based tools are more expensive to implement and have a higher ongoing cost to community members than e-mail based tools.** This is because of the higher connectivity requirements.



For example, if members are already equipped and connected to the Internet, initial set-up costs will be minimal; if not they may be very high.

If members are already familiar with a particular tool, training costs will be little or nothing, while the cost of learning a sophisticated tool from scratch may be high.

The relative cost to your organization and to the community members will depend on the context.

Community tools TCU

For each tool estimate the Total Cost of Use (TCU) to the organization and to the members of the community.

	(A) TCU to organization	(B) TCU to members	(x) Low	(x) Low
1) E-mail	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	(y) Medium	(y) Medium
2) Web sites	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	(z) Medium/High	(z) Medium/High
3) Forum and Newsgroups	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>		

Click on each option, drag it and drop it in the corresponding box.
When you have finished, click on the Check Answer button.

Community tools TCU

TOOL	COST TO ORGANIZATION IMPLEMENTING ONLINE COMMUNITY			COST TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS		
	INITIAL SET-UP	TRAINING OF STAFF	ONGOING	INITIAL SET-UP	TRAINING OF MEMBERS	ONGOING
E-mail	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low/Medium	Low
Mailing lists	Low	Medium	High	Low	Low/Medium	Medium
E-newsletters	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Web sites	High	Medium	Medium/High	Medium	Low	Medium
Online directories	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
Forum and newsgroups	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Low/Medium	High
Blogs and wikis	Medium	Medium	Low/Medium	Medium	Medium	High
Chat tools	Low	Low	Low/Medium	Low	Low	Medium
Online calendars	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
Collaborative workspaces	Variable, according to particular tools used					
FAQs	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
Q&A services	Medium	Low	High	Low/Medium	Low	High
Electronic decision support tools	Medium/High	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
Site update alerts	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low



The table looks at TCU to the **organization** implementing the online community project and to **community members...**

Community tools TCU



Since data mentioned are based on broad estimates, you will need to supplement it with specific reflections on your own community's context.

In order do this, take a look at some key factors described in the documents below.

-  Potential costs to the implementing organization/s
-  Potential costs to community members

Impact of tools on the community



As we said, the tools you adopt will affect not only the costs to you and community members, but the nature of the community itself.

In fact, the tools can help the community to achieve its objectives, or they can actively obstruct it.

For example, tools which are too difficult to use, or too costly, or which require too much time to learn to use effectively, can actively prevent your community from achieving its objectives.

Both **cost and usability** factors can affect the **impact of your online community**.

Impact of tools on the community

The case of "The Network for Country School Librarians"

The Network for Country School Librarians was set up to promote the exchange of information between librarians supporting schools in rural areas.

The project set up a web based discussion forum for community members, using the latest web forum software.

Unfortunately, because most of the community members used older computers and had only dial-up Internet access, they found it slow and costly to access the forums. Few members participated actively in discussions, and after a year the network fizzled out.

Impact of tools on the community

Examples of unsuitable tools for users with connectivity problems

- Web sites that use too many graphics (photos, illustrations, decoration) and as a result take a long time to load. While some graphics are useful they should be kept to a minimum and "optimised" so as to reduce their size as much as possible.
- Web sites using unnecessary animations. These will slow down page loading and cause users extra costs. Animations can also require users to download extra software in order to use the web site properly (e.g. plugins or updated browsers).
- A public unmoderated mailing list that is overloaded with spam or becomes dominated by postings that are not relevant to the community. This causes mailbox overload and makes it expensive to download messages.
- A mailing list that accepts large attachments. These are expensive for participants to download and may even be unusable if they depend on unavailable applications.

Impact of tools on the community



Although we cannot identify all factors relating to impact, there are some considerations about the most suitable tools you can take into account.

These are based on the following **specific areas of impact**:



- **Participation**
- **Learning and knowledge sharing**
- **Social and professional interaction**
- **Decision making**

Let's see each of them in detail...

Areas of impact

- Participation
- Learning and knowledge sharing
- Social and professional interaction
- Decision making



Participation

If tools are too difficult or expensive to use, there will be little active participation in your online community.

In theory, online communities are structured horizontally: everyone participates on the same level, regardless of their position in the community, background or experience.

In practice, differential levels of technological access can give members from "resource rich" organizations an advantage.



Good tools are those to which all members have good access. It could be enough to provide only one tool (such as e-mail) to which all members have good access, or a variety of tools for accessing the community (for example, access to discussions via both e-mail and the Web).

Areas of impact

- Participation
- Learning and knowledge sharing
- Social and professional interaction
- Decision making



Learning and knowledge sharing

In a community, members find other people, other visions, and all sorts of unexpected treasures: they learn the route, acquire the skills necessary to belong, learn new rules for interacting with others, learn to master mysterious new machines.

Using appropriate tools is a key part of strengthening this learning process.

For example, in a community that uses a mailing list without an archive, it will be harder for participants to learn effectively.

They may join the community later on and cannot read through previous postings to get a feel for how the community works.

Other members of the community may want to refer back to older postings that contained useful information or references, and will not be able to unless they keep their own records.



Appropriate tools in this area are those which support archiving of messages and other content, which make it easy for community members to locate resources, and which are accessible to all community members.

Areas of impact

- Participation
- Learning and knowledge sharing
- Social and professional interaction
- Decision making



Social and professional interaction

Online communities are gathering places for people, and people are bound to develop social and professional relationships outside the primary purpose of your project.

Since technology has provided them with the opportunity for gathering, it is only natural to expect that they will regard it also as a valuable tool for socializing.

In some contexts your initiative might have been the main reason for putting people in touch with the technology. But they are likely to want to continue using it for other purposes.



Some good tools in this area are: a directory of members included on your community's Web site and personal information spaces, such as blogs, that members can make available to the rest of the community.

Areas of impact

- Participation
- Learning and knowledge sharing
- Social and professional interaction
- Decision making



Decision making

Some online communities - for example, online working groups and advisory bodies - may need to make decisions together online.



In this case the most indicated tools are the synchronous ones, such as chat rooms or instant messengers. To be more effective these tools should include an archiving facility, so that decisions can be recorded and decision-making processes tracked.

Areas of impact

Try to match each area of impact with the corresponding tools.

A

Tools to which all members have good access

Tools which make it easy for community members to locate resources

Personal information spaces, that members can make available to the rest of the community

Synchronous tools such as chat rooms or instant messengers

Social and professional interaction

Decision making

Participation

Learning and knowledge sharing

1

Click on each option, drag it and drop it in the corresponding box.
When you have finished, click on the Check Answer button.

Predicting the impact of tools

This table offers some general information about **the likely impact** of particular tools on your community.

TOOL	IMPACT AREA			
	Participation	Learning and knowledge sharing	Social and professional interaction	Decision making
E-mail	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Mailing lists	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
E-newsletters	Low	High	Low/Medium	None
Web sites	Low	Medium/High	None	None
Online directories	Low	Low	None	None
Forum and Newsgroups	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low/Medium
Blogs and wikis	Medium	Medium	Medium/High	Low
Chat tools	Medium	Low	Medium/High	High
Online calendars	Low	Low	Low	None
Collaborative workspaces	Depends on tools			
FAQs	Low	Medium	None	None
Q&A services	Low	Low	None	None
Electronic decision support tools	None	Low	None	None (no impact on group decision making)
Site update alerts	None	Low	Low	None

Summary

- The tools used affect not only the cost of setting up and maintaining a community, but help to shape the nature of the community itself.
- Web based tools are more expensive to implement and have a higher ongoing cost to community members than e-mail based tools.
- For the TCU of the tools you can count only on generic estimates, which need to be supplemented with reflections on your own community context.
- You can distinguish four specific areas of impact of tools on the community: Participation, Learning and knowledge sharing, Social and professional interaction, Decision making.

If you want to learn more...

Online resources

Marc Osten. What is the Total Value of Technology?
http://www.summitcollaborative.com/npq_tvo_html

Taking TCO to the Classroom: Tools to Estimate the Total Cost of Technology
<http://classroomtco.cosn.org/index.html>

Christian Talbot, D.R. Newman (1998), Beyond Access and Awareness, Evaluating Electronic Community Networks. <http://www.qub.ac.uk/mgt/cicn/beyond/baa.html>