

# **Information Management Resource Kit**

## **Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks**

### **UNIT 1. ONLINE COMMUNITIES: A NEW OPPORTUNITY**

#### **LESSON 3. KEY FACTORS FOR A SUCCESSFUL ONLINE COMMUNITY**

##### **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:

- identify the critical social, cultural, technical, environmental and organizational factors that influence the success of the online community building process.



## Introduction

It is easy to think about online community from the technical point of view. Of course Internet access and the appropriate software are critical. But there are many more **factors that influence the success of an online community**. Most of them are non-technical, but often less apparent.

Think of an iceberg. Only a small part shows above the water. In online communities:

- the **tools and technology** are the top of the iceberg; and
- the **social/cultural**, and **organizational/environmental** factors are the bigger, unseen piece "below the visible water line!"

In this lesson you will explore these factors, starting with social and cultural.



### Social and cultural factors

Community is a social interaction between people.

That is why it is profoundly influenced by the social and cultural factors within the community.

These factors focus on the interactions between individuals. Let's take a look at some of these factors such as the following...



- Identity
- Membership
- Culture
- Language
- Attention
- Power and Control

### Social and cultural factors

In the online world, our identity is less visible. How we "show up" to others depends on how the community is designed. The most obvious way **someone's identity shows up is by their e-mail address or login name** for a Web site. But these may not always be the person's real name and people can hide their names.

What does it mean in terms of communication and trust building?

Sometimes people's identities are based just on the words they share on an e-mail list. This can be good for focusing on content, but challenging for forming relationships.



- Identity
- Membership
- Culture
- Language
- Attention
- Power and Control

Some communities develop practices around telling more about themselves or creating online directories where pictures and biographies are posted.

How much time you spend supporting identity and the development of relationships depends on the purpose of your community.

**Identity and relationships** are important:

- more in long-term communities; and
- less for short-term events.

### Social and cultural factors

Defined membership is a way of creating boundaries around an online community. A community can also be open to anyone.

In our face-to-face (F2F) communities, we can usually point to who belongs to what. Online it is much harder to see, so **one of the social dynamics is to define membership**. This may mean:

- making an online community closed to only those who belong (meaning only they have access to the e-mail list or Web site); or
- attach some symbol of membership in communities that are open to public view.
- list the members.

Listing the members can be useful, particularly when the list includes other information about the member such as contact information, organization, interests and location.

Another perspective on membership is if and how you foster a feeling of community, group and ownership. Sometimes you simply want to facilitate interactions among individuals. Other times, that "feeling of group" is critical. These suggest different design approaches.



### Social and cultural factors

Because the Internet can allow us to connect with people outside of our culture, it is important to consider the effects of bringing together people from diverse cultures.

We can benefit from the richness of different cultures, but we also have to find ways of **bridging our different styles and practices**. Some cultures are formal, some less formal. Some are attentive to relationship, others to task, and others to time. This provides the benefits of diversity, but can also lead to misunderstandings.



Surfacing and sharing cultural preferences and norms can help a community adjust and find ways that work for the members rather than imposing one culture upon the whole community.

### Social and cultural factors



- Identity
- Membership
- Culture
- Language
- Attention
- Power and Control

English has been the predominant language of the Internet, but that is rapidly changing.

Still, diverse groups most often work in one or two languages at a time. There are groups that work with multiple languages, but that is both a time consuming and technologically complex approach.

The end result is that often in global online communities many or most members are working in a second language. This suggests attention to modeling simple language and inclusion where possible of images that can augment the text.

### Social and cultural factors



- Identity
- Membership
- Culture
- Language
- Attention
- Power and Control

If it can be hard to get and hold people's attention face-to-face, it is even harder online.

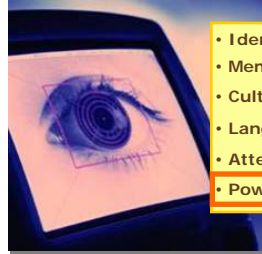
Making sure that your online community provides value to participants and respects their needs and conditions helps hold attention. If they are getting value, they will pay attention.

Sometimes focusing on something specific for a short period of time helps draw in people's attention and can be useful in refocusing if it feels like people are paying less attention.

### Social and cultural factors

Power and control are familiar issues offline. Online, however, where we can't see each other's body language and tone, issues of power and control can feel more intense, even if not intended.

Who "controls" the community's technology may have more control in some ways. Who is a fluent writer (fast typist, strong linguist, fast reader) may have more power than they might have offline. **The environment can change the dynamics of power and control.**



- Identity
- Membership
- Culture
- Language
- Attention
- Power and Control

Communities often can't be "controlled" in the formal sense. Online, if someone doesn't like what is happening, it is easy to just disappear. So communities must pay attention to:

- balancing control (keeping things organized); and
- emergence (letting the community evolve and grow).

One way to understand this is to be as explicit as you can in your communication and to pay attention and intervene if the power gets out of balance, or the community gets either too controlled or not controlled enough.

### Organizational and environmental factors

The social factors focus on how people participate with each other as individuals.



But most people in an online community belong to other organizations and communities, which can affect their online community. They live in countries with laws. They have their "ways of doing things" that may vary among the members.

These organizational and environmental factors can influence the behaviour and outcome of the community. So paying attention to the dynamics of the organizations involved is useful.

In some sense, when you design or lead an online community, you are stepping into the role of **organizational development**. What organizational influences are at play can influence **how best to help the community reach its goals**.

### Organizational and environmental factors

#### Key factors for a successful online community

#### ORGANIZATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS: SOME USEFUL QUESTIONS

- How does organizational power and control show up within and around the community? Does one organization have more influence than another and will that impact our community?
- How will member organizations support or not support individual participation? (Will they give them time to participate, support access, etc.)
- How does information and knowledge move within the community membership and their organizations? Do some people hoard or protect information rather than share it because of their organizational culture?
- What legal and political factors can impact the success or failure of the community? Is there a law against using VoIP tools (voice over internet protocol) making it inadvisable for you to choose that as a community tool? Are there laws in one member's country about how children can participate in online communities and will there be children involved? Are there restrictions about how much advocacy a group can do that impact some of your members?
- How do socio-economic factors impact your community? What if some members can less afford to spend time online than others? What if some are criticized at home for their involvement? How can those people fully participate? How might this impact the sustainability of your community?

### Technical factors

Without the Internet and interaction software, online communities would not exist. So the availability, cost and speed of Internet access are crucial.

The **choice of tools**, the **way you choose to use them** and **how members are supported in learning how to use them** can influence a community's success. There will be more details later in the module but here are some general factors to consider:



- Access



- Potential tools and technologies



- Purpose before tool picking



- Training and Support

Let's examine them in details...

Technical factors

Access



The first technological factor is often the one that determines if you can have an online community at all.

Online implies at least some **Internet access**. You need to know if your intended members have access, or if some don't, that you have alternative mechanisms for participation, such as printing online content to share offline, CD ROMs, or blending online with F2F interactions.

Use your imagination. But it is important to not just use online community because it is new or "cool." Use it if it makes sense!

Technical factors

Potential tools and technologies



There are a variety of technological tools. Some of them support certain types of online group interactions better than others.

Based on your assessment of the social/cultural and environmental/organizational factors, you can determine WHAT your community needs to do together, and then pick the best tool.



Technical factors

Purpose before tool picking



Sometimes you will have only one choice: e-mail. But often you have more choices. It is important to **let the purpose drive your technology choice**, not let the technology drive the purpose or the community.

One of the key distinctions in tools is if you need **interactivity** or not:

- Delivery of information with no feedback or changes does not require interaction; on the contrary
- Creating new ideas, working together and many forms of learning do.



Online communities and the tools associated with them benefit from interactivity.

Technical factors

What do you think static web pages are useful for?

- Sharing information that does not change too frequently
- Building new knowledge
- Listing community purpose and guidelines

Please select the answer of your choice (1 or more) and press Check Answer.

Technical factors

Training and Support



Having the access and the tools is just the first step towards actual use.

Consider if your members will need training and support using the online tools.

These are very important aspects and should be part of your considerations.

Technical factors

When planning and designing for an online community for policy makers in national ministries of health, which factors might be most important. Please order from most important to least important.

- There will be up to 50 potential members of the community.
- There are many different cultures involved in the group.
- Not everyone is familiar with the tools that have preliminarily been identified for the community. Some people are afraid of looking incompetent.
- Health policy issues in some national ministries is considered confidential information that should not be leaked out until finalized.
- Some members don't have desk top access to the Internet.

Please order these items using the dropdown boxes and press "Check Answer".

### Learning from each other

Online community building is a relatively new practice, so learning from each experience and from each other is very important. It is very helpful to write up and **share what you learn** and to engage with other community builders. A simple **report** on what you did, why you did it and what happened can be a powerful contribution to other communities.



These can be shared with the **IMARK programme** or other programmes designed to support communities and particularly those interested in supporting communities with ICTs, such as the following:

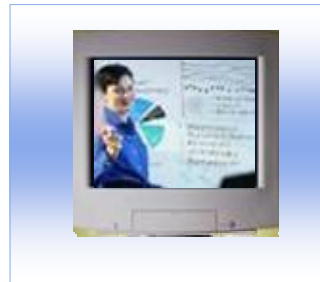
- [IICD](#), International Institute for Communication and Development;
- [APC](#), Association for Progressive Communication;
- [OneWorld.net](#), a civil society network online;
- [The Communications Initiative](#), a space for more effective development communication practice;
- [CIVICUS](#), World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

### Learning from each other

There are groups and communities that are Communities of Practice that focus on skills for designing and facilitating online communities. These are a great place to learn about supporting an online community. You can also contribute back the lessons you've learned.

Some of these include:

- [World Bank Site on Running E-Discussions](#);
- [International Institute for Communications Development](#);
- [Bellanet](#);
- [KM for Development](#);
- [The Online Facilitation List](#);
- [The Emoderator's List](#); and
- [Making the Net Work](#).



## Summary

- Online communities have created an opportunity for individuals who are widely dispersed to "connect" and accomplish goals together in new ways.
- Although facilitated by technology, these communities are profoundly influenced by social, cultural, environmental, organizational and technical factors.
- The social and cultural factors that mostly influence a community are: Identity, Membership, Language, Attention, Power and Control.
- Some general technical factors to consider are: Access, Potential tools and technologies, Purpose before tool picking, Training and Support.

## If you want to know more...

### Online resources

- Bernal, V. (2001) "Building Online Communities: Transforming Assumptions Into Success" <http://www.benton.org/publibrary/practice/community/assumptions.html>
- McQueen, R.J. (1995), Electronic group communication for cultural support: Maori electronic networking in New Zealand. Proceedings of the 1995 Pan Pacific Conference on Information Systems, Chuan, C.H. and Dhaliwal, J.S. (Eds), pp. 371-373. [Publisher: Department of Decision Sciences National University of Singapore, Singapore] <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/bmcqueen/WEBDOCS/pubs/pacis95.pdf>
- Sorbello, E. "Virtual Communities - Social Interaction" [http://wiki.media-culture.org.au/index.php/Online\\_Social\\_Interaction\\_-\\_The\\_Virtual\\_Community](http://wiki.media-culture.org.au/index.php/Online_Social_Interaction_-_The_Virtual_Community)
- Wellman, B. (2002) "Little Boxes, Glocalization, and Networked Individualism" Pp. 10-25 in Digital Cities II: Computational and Sociological Approaches, edited by Makoto Tanabe, Peter van den Besselaar and Toru Ishida. Berlin: Springer, 2002. <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/littleboxes/littlebox.PDF>
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- White, N. (1999, 2005) "How Some People Have Tried to Describe Community" <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/definingcommunity.htm>
- White, N. (various) "Online Community Toolkit" <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitymanual.htm>
- White, N. (2003) "Designing Online Events" <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/desingonlineevents.htm>
- Wikipedia, Definition of "Social Networks" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_networks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networks)
- Wilcox, D. (1997) "An (archive) toolkit for online communities" <http://www.partnerships.org.uk/internet/index.htm>