

Chapter 1.10

Click Connect and Coalesce for NGOs: Exploring the Intersection Between Online Networks, CoPs, and Events

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 90s, there was much energy around virtual communities. They were touted as the ultimate web deployment, the key to online commerce and to online education. Early adopters swarmed and websites racked up hits in the millions. Then there was a deafening silence. Commerce and media sites began closing down their discussion boards. Even busy boards like those at CNN were shuttered. Was the online community movement dead? No, it was just transforming itself, settling down and maturing into a space where it had value and applicability.

The bottom line is that online community or online interaction is not the goal. It is one means for helping groups achieve their goals. It is not necessarily about online community but about the conditions and process needed to enable communities to use the online environ-

ment. Now networks, groups and communities of practice (CoPs) are realizing the promise of the late 90s. This is not just a trend or tool for business; there are particular opportunities for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs). For NPOs and NGOs, online interaction offers a way to support a distributed community by widening their depth and potentially enriching their learning.

CONNECTION: THE OPPORTUNITY

It can start with a single email. Someone wants to know something and they click on Google, search for a keyword, find a person and draft an email. They send out a little beacon hoping they can connect with someone who can help. The email hits the mark and connects—a response comes back with some links, a few more names. Soon

that first email has multiplied and tapped into a network. Questions and answers are exchanged, background shared and connections established. Has a community been born? Maybe. Perhaps just a quickened pulse, a single fleeting burst of activity within a network but the knowledge was shared—and it started with a single email. At once, we have a compelling manifestation that online interaction can support networks, groups and communities. In a catalytic email connection, the power of a network is realized. In the continuation of that relationship, the birth or growth of a group or a CoP may be stimulated.

A group is a collection of individuals with some shared interest. CoPs are particular types of groups where the members share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Networks in this context are social networks: people and organizations connected by some common thread or interest. The connection may be geographic, but with the spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs), networks have become global, dispersed and online. Rheingold and Kimball (2000) coined the term online social networks to describe networks that emerge wholly online rather than springing from an existing offline network.

The business world has recognized that both knowledge and the network of people that hold the knowledge are key assets, particularly in an information economy. Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth and Toffler (1994) wrote:

As humankind explores this new electronic frontier of knowledge, it must confront again the most profound questions of how to organize itself for the common good. (Dyson et al., 1994)

Businesses are well past the first phase of knowledge management (KM) that confined knowledge to databases and are focusing on the

knowledge networks created and used by people. NGOs are now also rapidly moving in this direction. The World Bank, through the World Bank Institute (2003), has embraced KM and internal CoPs. The EDC Global Learning Group has been exploring the role of communities and CoPs in continued learning for over a decade. The United Nations Development Program has reorganized a significant amount of its work around CoPs. BOND (2002) (a network of more than 270 United Kingdom based voluntary organizations working in international development and development education) in the UK has also recognized the role of CoPs in its work.

Thematic groups and special interest groups (SIGs) are mentioned more and more in organizational plans, as noted in the 2002 ICT Network notes of the UN, the web pages of the International Water and Sanitation Center and many others. They are particularly useful for tapping into the often under-utilized knowledge of the “Southern” or “Two-Thirds World” countries where knowledge has historically been seen as the domain of donors and developed nations. Governments are thinking about how networks, communities and CoPs can enhance civic participation. This is evidenced by workshops and websites such as those by Unicom, the World Bank, Community-Builders in New South Wales and the Canadian Government’s emerging CoP initiatives.

CoPs can be effective tools for learning and working in and across organizations. The focus on learning together is of great importance. One can point to cases that show the value of sharing ideas that reduce “wheel reinvention” in a time of scarce resources. Envision people working on similar projects within NGOs or across organizations: AIDS educators sharing tips for reaching target populations, Information Technology managers working through software problems or agricultural researchers sharing data on field trials. These are learning communities and CoPs, which, even though they may be distributed, support specific local community goals like preventing

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