Listserv Implementation and Sense of Community:

The Relationships with Increased Knowledge and Face-to-Face Interaction

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how a listserv affects its members' sense of community (SOC) with the sponsoring organization. It was expected that the listserv would increase members' knowledge about and participation in the sponsoring organization department, which, in turn, would increase their SOC. The study examined listserv members and non-members before and after implementation of the listserv. As expected, listserv membership increased knowledge and face-to-face activity, and knowledge and face-to-face activity increased a sense of community. However, ironically, there was no effect of listserv membership on sense of community. These findings challenge previous theories about the development of sense of community while nonetheless demonstrating the positive effects of listserv membership.

Keywords: educational technology; online community; online relationships; organizational communication; quasi-experimental study; social support; telecommuting; virtual community

INTRODUCTION

Organizations can use one way, information-dispersing listservs, to keep their members informed and connected. Listservs are group distribution e-mails in which members conveniently can send messages to one e-mail address, usually the listserv name, instead of all of the indi-vidual members' e-mail addresses. Sometimes, organizations assign members to listservs. But often, members choose to join a particular listserv in order to stay informed about the organization or topics relevant to the organization.

Work organizations can use listservs to keep employees updated on policies,

announcing the entry or departure of key personnel, changes in benefits, and upcoming social events (e.g., the company picnic). Educational organizations can use listservs to inform students about upcoming classes, research and internship opportunities, and extracurricular student activities (e.g., clubs). Social and professional organizations can use them to inform members of club-relevant announcements, involvement opportunities, and upcoming face-to-face (FtF) events. For example, alumni clubs can make announcements and promote viewing parties for athletic events; professional networking clubs can promote job opportunities and their monthly meetings.

These organizations may expect that this type of listserv keeps listserv members informed and active in the organization. However, how does the listserv affect the listserv members' greater attachment to the sponsoring organization? Researchers believe that electronic collaboration technologies such as e-mail and the Internet can increase members' attraction to and affiliation with their communication partners (Adams, Price, & Chandler, 2000; Meier, 2000; Walther, 1996). Does this relationship extend to increasing affiliation with the larger organization?

This article will examine the relationship between an informational listserv and an employee's organizational affiliation. Specifically, it will examine how a listserv affects the amount of information that members feel they have about the organization sponsoring the listserv, the amount of face-to-face interaction they have with other members of the organization, and, subsequently, a particular form of organizational affiliation — organizational sense of community. The next section examines the research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and organizational sense of community.

Organizational Sense of Community

Sense of community (SOC) has a long history within the community psychology literature. Sarason (1974) was one of the first researchers to identify that community members' feelings about each other and the community itself are important to the community's successful functioning. SOC leads to satisfaction with and commitment to the community and is associated with involvement in community activities and problem-focused coping behavior (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed the SOC construct by defining it as an individual's feelings of membership, identity, belonging, and attachment with a group. Their descriptive framework of SOC has been accepted widely because of its theoretical base and its qualitative empirical support. This framework has four dimensions:

- **Feelings of Membership.** Feelings of belonging to and identifying with the community.
- **Feelings of Influence.** Feelings of having influence on and being influenced by the community.
- **Integration and Fulfillment of Needs.** Feelings of being supported by

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