Chapter 4
A Family of Invisible Friends:
Cultivating a Sense of E-Community Among Virtual Work Teams

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ABSTRACT

E-communities (i.e., virtual communities that are established and interact primarily via the internet) are more significant than ever in today's modern workplace. Despite the potential advantages offered by e-communities, however, their formation and maintenance are often hindered by feelings of mistrust, unclear group processes, and limited technical expertise. This study analyzed nearly 2,500 survey responses from 600 students spanning 25 colleges/universities in order to develop practical implications for cultivating a sense of e-community among virtual work teams. Thematic results of our study revealed the significance of brand awareness, interpersonal facilitation, user-friendly design, fiscal barriers, and mobile accessibility. Based on these results, this study concludes with five corresponding implications for cultivating a sense of e-community in the modern workplace: increased integration, expanded physicality, supplemental training, financial entrée, and utilized flexibility.

INTRODUCTION

Online communities (i.e., "e-communities") continue to gain in use and popularity. Characterized by Rheingold (2001) as a "family of invisible friends," e-communities offer a way for people to find connection in a world that often feels disconnected, and meaning in an seemingly meaningless society (see also Brown, 2002; Kim, 2000; Plant, 2004). Consequently, participation in online communities has risen exponentially in recent years, with 84% of internet users reporting they have personally reached out to an online group (Horrigan, 2001). Furthermore, approximately 80% of these users have chosen to remain in contact with at least one e-community on a regular basis, and nearly half (49%) say this process has enabled them to build a personal sense of community with others (Zhou, 2011).

E-communities show promise for the modern workplace as well. This is especially evident when it comes to virtual work teams. A sense of e-community has shown to positively correlate to job fulfillment and satisfaction, while increasing creativity and efficiency among employees (Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017). Without the space-time restrictions of previous workplaces, e-communities also empower colleagues from around the globe to converge around professional expertise and result in increased cultural and technical diversity (Griffith & Neale, 2001). Such a reality saves employees on travel time and expense, while allowing them to collaborate asynchronously around the clock (Solomon, 2001; see also Kock, 2005).

Despite each of these potential advantages, however, a sense of e-community has proven especially difficult to cultivate in professional settings (Berry, 2006; Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Timmerman, 2000). This difficulty arises – in part – from a lack of nonverbal cues and interpersonal subtleties among virtual members, combined with technological demands and the ever-present potential for soft/hardware malfunctions: "The use of virtual teams adds complexity for management in many organizations because virtual teams are sociological and social systems just as is any team, but virtual teams also have their work processes intertwined with technological systems" (Berry, 2011, p. 192). This difficulty is especially significant because virtual teams that lack as sense of connectedness are also less likely to be satisfied with their work (Kirkham et al., 2002), less likely to prioritize online tasks (Klein & Barrett, 2001), and less willing to collaborate with one another during the *norming* phase of a work project (Hinds & Weisband, 2003).

The present study analyzed nearly 2,500 survey responses to develop practical implications for cultivating a sense of e-community among virtual team members. Through an expanded variation of Vorvoreanu's (2008) *Website Experience Analysis* (WEA), we engaged 600 undergraduate students at 25 universities throughout southern California to reveal their views toward seven of the most popular virtual collaboration programs in use today: Basecamp, Dropbox, Google Drive, iDoneThis, Join.me, Skitch, and Skype (Sharma, 2015; see also Hyatt, 2015). After offering a brief context for virtual collaboration and the role of e-communities, we discuss each of these seven groupwares in more detail. Next, we outline our study's methodology, and then reveal its five thematic results: (1) brand awareness, (2) interpersonal facilitation, (3) user-friendly design, (4) fiscal barriers, and (5) mobile accessibility. We conclude with five corresponding implications for how virtual users can increase a sense of e-community, and how software developers cano lead the way in this cutting-edge field of telecommunications.

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