



Chapter XXIII

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

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ABSTRACT

This chapter notes the shift of focus from “online communities” to more purposeful and focused online groups, including distributed Communities of Practice (CoPs). The author identifies the value of CoPs for Non-Governmental and Non-Profit organizations, and suggests that CoPs are formed, stimulated and supported by catalysts, and are richer when contained within larger, more diffuse networks of people.

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 environment. 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:

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