
On-line communities: helping them form and grow

*Joseph Cothrel and
Ruth L. Williams*

The authors

Joseph Cothrel and Ruth L. Williams are both Research Directors for the Next Generation Research Group, Arthur Andersen Knowledge Services, Chicago, USA. They may be contacted at joseph.p.cothrel@us.arthurandersen.com and ruth.l.williams@us.arthurandersen.com

Keywords

Discussion forum, Internet, Intranet, Knowledge sharing, On-line community, Virtual team

Abstract

The rise of e-mail and other computer-based communication technologies has enabled members of global organizations to collaborate and exchange information to an unprecedented degree. The term "on-line community" (OLC), coined in the early days of computer networking, is now being applied to groups of employees with common professional goals and interests who seek to add value by extending themselves virtually. However, the performance of these corporate OLCs has not always kept pace with their lofty aspiration. To find out why, Arthur Andersen's Next Generation Research Group, in cooperation with Anheuser-Busch, The Mutual Group, and Shell US, studied 15 very different OLCs. Among the questions we sought to answer were: how successful are OLCs in achieving their state purpose? What distinguishes a truly successful OLC? What are some pitfalls that everyone is encountering? This article presents findings and lessons learned from our in-depth interviews with the organizers of these virtual groups.

It is hard to pick up a business publication today without seeing some reference to the word "community." Whether it is proposed as the best way to target product sales, transfer critical knowledge across an organization, or even remedy the ills of a rootless society, community is viewed as a panacea. Nowhere has mention of community been so ubiquitous as in the virtual world.

The first virtual communities debuted with the advent of networked computing in the 1970s. In the 1990s, the convergence of e-mail, groupware systems, and the World Wide Web has given many more people the experience of participating in groups where they have little or no face-to-face interaction. Globally dispersed organizations, in particular, have placed high hopes on virtual communications tools and the groups that use them. Even when "community" is not part of the corporate lexicon, managers talk about the increased effectiveness that groups can achieve through virtual sharing. But making this dream a reality eludes many organizations.

What makes some on-line communities (OLCs) passionate, active, and productive, while others collapse under the weight of their own apathy? What can organizations do to foster on-line conversations and facilitate the work of groups that seek to extend themselves virtually? To answer these and other questions, Arthur Andersen's Next Generation Research Group and three sponsoring organizations – Anheuser-Busch, Shell US, and The Mutual Group – joined forces to conduct a study of OLCs.

Our approach

We began with a literature review that identified 35 OLCs worthy of further study. Communities within business organizations were our primary focus. However, we did not limit our research to intranet-based OLCs. Many of the most successful OLCs operating today are found on the Internet. Could these communities offer useful lessons for corporate OLCs? We also chose to study several extranets – networks which extend access to people outside the organization, such as customers, suppliers, or channel partners. Extranets are a particularly active realm today, inspired by *Net Gain*[1] and other books and articles whose premise is that the most effective e-commerce model will be community based. Extranet communities hold additional

interest because in an increasingly boundary-less world, extending membership to those outside the enterprise is something most OLC organizers will ultimately need to consider.

The study team narrowed the list of 35 communities to 15, using criteria ranging from “relevant organizational challenges” to “opportunity for out-of-the-box insights” [2]. (Figure 1 shows some of the characteristics of these OLCs.) In each case we identified one individual who was responsible for managing or coordinating the OLC. These individuals filled out a pre-interview questionnaire with statistics about community size, frequency/nature of participation, technologies used, and resources required in setting up and maintaining the community. We then conducted structured telephone interviews with each OLC manager, which included questions on the history of the community, roles and responsibilities, motivations of members, current challenges, lessons learned, and future plans.

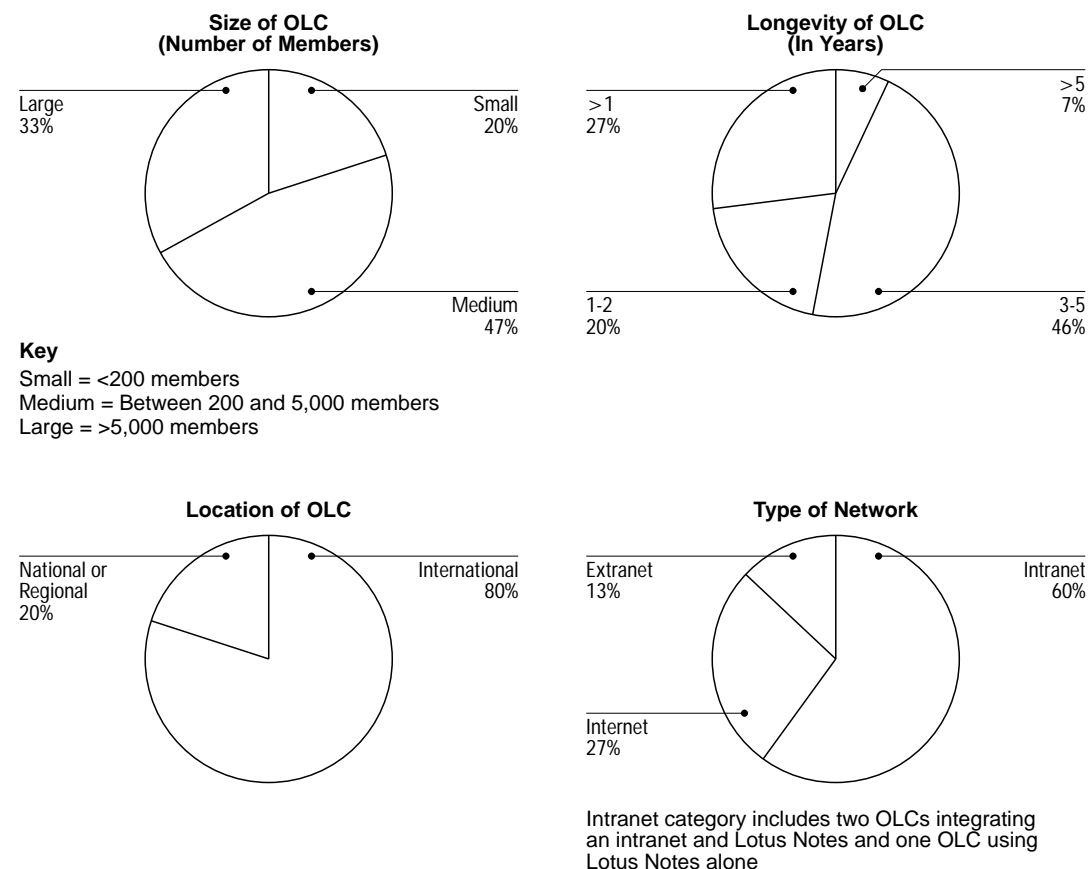
What is an on-line community, and what makes one successful?

An on-line community is a group of people who use computer networks as their primary

mode of interaction. Unfortunately, this is not a particularly useful definition, principally because it neglects to define that slippery term, “community.” Community has many meanings, and at the outset of our research we were reluctant to settle on one that might limit our thinking. Therefore, we decided on an incremental approach. In the literature review, we looked for evidence of many-to-many communication as an indicator of community formation. Later, in the interview phase, we probed more deeply into the nature and extent of this interaction. We also asked OLC managers how they defined community, and how it was defined by others in their organization. Thus, instead of starting with a definition of community, our goal was to end with one: to define what community means for those who are trying to achieve it today in a virtual setting.

What is success for an OLC? Strictly speaking, a successful OLC is one that achieves its purpose. The 15 OLCs in this study had a wide range of purposes, from “hard” targets like creating a new methodology, to “soft” ones like leveraging collective intellect. Some goals were measurable and some were highly resistant to quantification. As a practical

Figure 1 Characteristics of OLCs in study group



matter, most OLC managers are just beginning to think about how the value generated by an OLC can be measured.

Granting that performance measurement for OLCs is at a relatively early stage of development, and given the diversity of purpose among these 15 OLCs, what measure of success might be applied across these organizations? To achieve their purpose, all communities must first meet one basic requirement: they must engage and involve members. This is as true on the Internet as it is on intranets and extranets. When OLC managers accomplish this goal, it signifies that something else is happening as well; some kind of value is being created for members. Therefore, though mindful that they are “input” rather than “output” measures, we used amount and quality of participation as the primary indicators of success.

What works in facilitating OLCs?

OLC managers cited numerous lessons learned, and many of these were common to more than one community. Following is a sampling of what works in facilitating OLCs:

1. Invest in the means rather than the ends

On the Internet, community-building is generally seen as a “no-brainer” business decision. Community is what makes the sites “sticky” – keeps people there for long periods of time or gets them to come back. For corporations, on the other hand, attracting users is not an end in itself. The goal is to have people share information or contribute ideas, and community is a means of achieving this goal. Consequently, corporate efforts tend to focus less on the dynamics of community and more on the expected results. This may be a mistake.

Ironically, Internet-based OLCs, such as The Motley Fool and Fast Company, are far better at fostering member-generated content than most corporate OLCs, even though this is not their primary objective. It appears from our research that attention to community building may well be the key: OLC managers whom we interviewed, including those responsible for internal corporate OLCs, said that a sense of community or belonging is essential to achieving a high level of participation.

In some organizations, community seems to exist with little intervention on the part of

OLC managers; in others, explicit community-building activities are critical. Where natural communities exist, OLC managers tend to focus on providing members with the on-line tools they need to establish better connections with one another. Where a sense of community is less strong, OLC managers use more facilitative approaches to connect members – either face-to-face or through some other medium, such as telephone conference calls.

Many businesses may be reluctant to invest time and resources in the kind of “nurturing” activities that constitute community building. But if this is the case, an expectation that establishing an OLC will result in sharing, contribution, and member generated content is ill-founded. Instead, the organization would do well to consider other tactics for capturing and transferring knowledge. For example, best practices can be written up and shared via a “publication” model rather than the “contribution” model that is inherent in OLCs. Of course, a publication model requires greater investment in content developers, knowledge managers, corporate information specialists, etc., who create content and place it in a meaningful context.

2. Focus relentlessly on the needs of members

In successful OLCs, managers and their staff are obsessively focused on the needs of members – not the needs of sponsors, executives, administrators, or technologists. They devote significant time to understanding who members are, what work they do, where they work, what tools and skills they have, who they work and share knowledge with, and, most importantly, what kinds of knowledge, tools, and relationships they want and need. Then, they dedicate themselves to meeting those wants and needs.

One common characteristic of successful community managers is their origins: they were (or are) members of the group they now facilitate. This gives them an in-depth knowledge of what members want out of the community experience and helps solidify the one-on-one relationships that managers need to succeed. Similarly, supporting roles such as discussion moderators, knowledge managers, and help desk personnel are often filled by recruiting from the membership. In many cases, people fill these roles on a part-time or voluntary basis without relinquishing their regular responsibilities. Such practices

demonstrate that the community is not something separate from “real” work and relationships.

A deep understanding of member work habits and needs is essential for facilitating collaboration. Like other communities, OLCs have some members who are actively involved in building and sustaining the community, and others who are more passive, using the community as a resource. The former represent a relatively small percentage of total membership (see Figure 2). Many on-line initiatives emphasize the importance of contribution, to the point of penalizing members who take but never give back. However, several interviewees expressed a belief that both “givers” and “takers” contribute to the vibrancy of their community. To some, penalizing “takers” looks uncomfortably like punishing the very knowledge-seeking behaviors they should be rewarding. More importantly, they recognize that a given individual may play both roles over the course of his or her membership in the community. For many people, the experience of obtaining valuable knowledge builds a sense of indebtedness that ultimately will be expressed in contributions when that person has something of value to share.

3. Resist the temptation to control

Many elements of community are at odds with the standards and practices of a traditional business enterprise. Start with the term itself. “Community” is not a word that fits comfortably within the language of business. Dig deeper and things get even messier. Communities are about human relationships and the emotions that go along with them. The kind of personal passion that fuels many Internet communities would be considered

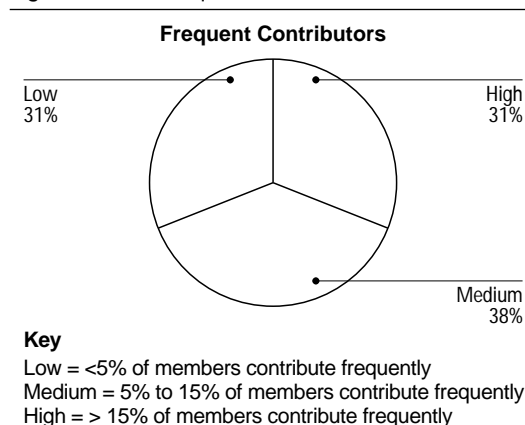
inappropriate by some if it occurred in an intranet-based discussion space. How do corporate OLC managers and sponsors deal with this tension between the freewheeling aspects of community and the “nose to the grindstone” business environment?

Outright attempts to control OLCs can kill them or send them underground. Several managers talked about their experiences in trying, at the request of senior management, to restrict or eliminate discussions that were deemed unrelated to business issues. In one case, e-mail systems and internal web sites were searched to identify non-business uses. The senders, receivers, or sponsors responsible for the offending material were instructed to delete it to avoid disciplinary action. An example of a non-business use was a discussion group where people interested in exploring the Internet shared their discoveries. Needless to say, such actions have a chilling effect on exactly those people who are most critical to community formation: the ones who take a leadership role in encouraging knowledge-sharing, and those who contribute something they believe is of value. The question is whether the benefits of control are worth the potential drawback of dampening the creative spirit that fosters innovation – one of the reasons for having OLCs in the first place.

If controls are a bad idea, how do OLC managers help ensure that community interactions are focused and appropriate? Here is one piece of advice from OLC managers: lighten up and stop trying so hard. Are non-business or off-topic discussions so frequent or extensive that they pose a real problem? Trust that your members are professionals and adults who are aware that the main purpose of the OLC is to achieve business goals. And take a page from some of the Internet communities: consciously allow social interaction and non-business exchanges (even make a “space” for it). Only 20 percent of the OLCs we surveyed had no social component whatsoever. A third (33 percent) explicitly encouraged social interaction. Keep in mind that socializing may be part of the glue that holds the OLC together. After all, we socialize and talk about personal matters “in place,” why not “in space”?

On the other hand, rules and guidelines are not a bad idea. Almost all of the OLCs in the study had them. In half the cases, the rules were implicit rather than explicit. A common source for implicit rules in intranet-based

Figure 2 Level of frequent contributors



communities were standards of conduct for the organization as a whole. The principle is, “don’t say anything on-line you wouldn’t say in the office or with clients or customers.” In other cases, implicit rules for physical teams provided a reference point for virtual groups as well. Some implicit rules were essentially protocols for using electronic tools effectively (e.g. post large files rather than e-mailing them, use standard file formats). Others were conventions or protocols for how to treat certain kinds of communications (e.g. mass mailings should be used for sharing information, one-on-one mailings are better when asking for assistance).

4. Don’t assume the community will become self-sustaining

There is a debate about the time and effort required to support an OLC. Some say that once the community dynamic is created, the community takes care of itself. The analogy is that of a party: the sign of a good one is that the host can leave the room and the conversation continues. It is true that some OLCs exhibit a remarkable level of self-management. In one organization we studied – where community members have a high level of subject-matter knowledge, comfort with technology, and access to a superior technology infrastructure – the OLC appears to be almost entirely self-sustaining. However, in most cases, the OLCs required a significant investment of time and effort to maintain. As shown in Figure 3, this effort is almost always greater than the effort required to launch the community.

Who is involved in supporting the OLC? In most cases, they fall into two categories: people with formal roles and responsibilities relative to the OLC, and others who take on informal,

voluntary roles. These categories sometimes overlap. The most commonly cited formal roles among our OLC interviewees were:

- Subject-matter expert.
- Knowledge manager.
- Moderator/facilitator.
- Help desk.

“Knowledge manager” is a broad term that refers to people who do some kind of manipulation of on-line content, ranging from editing to categorizing and archiving. Knowledge managers may also have other responsibilities related to supporting the OLC.

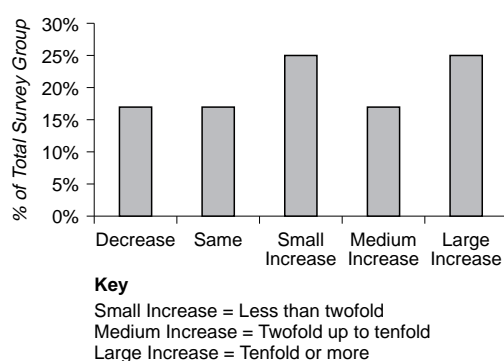
A number of OLCs are experimenting with new roles. In some OLCs the start-up phase involved active, one-on-one recruitment of members. Often, OLC managers personally solicited participation from individuals who they thought could offer value to the community. As a variation on this theme, one organization created a role called “social weaver” – someone who was responsible for initiating a small number of members into the OLC. Such roles may be one key to bringing (and keeping) people on-line.

5. Consider environmental factors

In addition to understanding members, OLC managers need to analyze other factors that may help or hinder their efforts. One such factor is the industry in which the organization operates. In industries characterized by rapid change, OLCs tend to be more active. People struggling with complex new products are compelled to seek out others with more experience. In turn, those with experience may be less protective of their knowledge because they know it will soon be outdated.

Cultural factors are softer and harder to pin down. One example is leadership style. Will leaders in the organization operate effectively with on-line tools, or will they cling to old habits, marginalizing the on-line effort? More than one OLC manager observed that introverts and extroverts adapted very differently to on-line tools – a fact that has significant implications when we think about leadership in the on-line space, since most leaders in physical communities tend to be extroverts. The consensus was that introverts sometimes take a more active role in on-line vs. off-line discussions, depending on their comfort with the technology and confidence in conveying their thoughts in writing. By contrast, extroverts often struggled to adapt

Figure 3 Change in effort from launch phase to ongoing



to the on-line environment, since their strongest temptation is to “pick up the phone and call someone.”

Some who have studied on-line interactions have speculated that this dynamic may change the nature of leadership in organizations. However, the majority of OLC managers in this study reported that the on-line space mirrored the physical one: those who take a leadership role on-line tend to be people who take the same role off-line. Cultural norms and values were also viewed as mapping fairly accurately from the physical space to the virtual one.

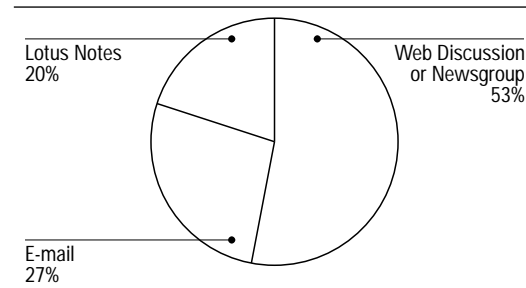
6. Extend community building beyond the discussion space

OLCs are sometimes treated as synonymous with discussion groups, but reality is much more complicated than that. True, discussion applications are a common tool for many-to-many interactions in OLCs, including 80 percent of the communities in this study. But most OLC managers were more inclined to talk about their groups as physical communities – albeit geographically dispersed – which happened to use discussion forums as one of the ways in which they communicated.

Community organizers who have set up newsgroups or discussion spaces as the centerpiece of community activity often find that users do an “end-run” around these spaces: members use them to establish initial contact but have their most valuable exchanges via e-mail. In some cases we found that LIST-SERV, distribution lists, and the like had become the de facto “town hall,” while discussion spaces, if used at all, were mostly populated by the knowledge-poor rather than the knowledge-rich.

Absence of activity in a designated on-line space is not necessarily the sign of a failed OLC. Rather, it may be that the definition of the OLC should be broadened so that all the interactions can be recognized as potentially value-creating, not simply those that take place within a defined space. For example, we found that more than one quarter of the on-line communities use e-mail as their primary mode of many-to-many communications (see Figure 4). These included the longest running OLC and two OLCs expressing high levels of member satisfaction. In all cases the organizers were entirely comfortable with the idea that a productive and vibrant community

Figure 4 Primary platform for many-to-many interaction



existed even if their discussion spaces were underpopulated.

In addition, those who viewed the on-line space as the primary community tool frequently went outside the space – often into the physical community – to build interest and participation. The majority of respondents said they have used some kind of event to build traffic or increase participation in the OLC. Three-fifths (6 out of 10) of these were on-line events – either on-line training or Web events in which members were able to hear from experts, ask questions, or air views. One organization even held an on-line party. Physical events included “promotional tours” to introduce the OLC to prospective members and a celebratory event that recognized participation of leading members.

Two of the organizations holding physical events contravened traditional practice whereby on-line discussion forums are used after a physical event to maintain the momentum. Instead, these organizations used OLCs to build momentum and initiate relationships that in turn supported and increased participation in the physical event. These face-to-face relationships, once established, later enhanced on-line conversation and exchange.

Clearly, OLC managers need to think of their role as facilitating overall community effectiveness, rather than building traffic in a discrete on-line space.

7. Seek out and support members who take on informal roles

Informal roles are a good indicator of the health of a community. When members are willing to serve as experts, mentors, information sharers, even critics or devil’s advocates, it indicates that the community is something people value and want to be part of. Some common informal roles include:

- *Community advocate*: members who are major supporters of the on-line community often take an active role in encouraging

others to participate. Sometimes the role consists of “bugging” other people to get involved. Sometimes it means just using the on-line space more than anyone else, to set an example or to demonstrate how effective it can be. These people also get involved in setting guidelines or organizing community activities.

- *Leader*: perhaps more than other groups, OLCs tend to be meritocracies. Those who possess superior knowledge and expertise are respected and acknowledged by other members, and they play an important role in how the community evolves. Experts serve as informal leaders and are essential in creating the boundaries of discussions. While their peers may take other members to task for off-topic postings, experts are permitted to stretch the boundaries, thus allowing the discussion to grow and change over time. As the discussion changes, so too does the community’s idea of itself and its work. The presence of these experts is also one of the many draws that brings other members on-line – knowledge-seekers go where the answers are.
- *Instigator*: other members distinguish themselves by their willingness to raise important but controversial issues. This role is more common in Internet communities, but can occur in any on-line group.

Interestingly, informal roles tend to belong to the community, not the individuals who fill them. That is, the faces may change, but the roles are always filled. The challenge for an OLC manager is how to leverage the energy of people who assume an informal role in supporting and promoting the OLC.

Are OLCs right for your organization?

For OLCs, as for any other business tool, one size rarely fits all. “Going virtual” is not necessarily a matter of course. Certainly any globally dispersed organization – in fact, any organization which requires employees to be out of the office – will rely increasingly on electronic communications networks. But sending one another electronic mail is a far cry from establishing an OLC. For those considering the launch of an OLC or for those looking to facilitate growth of an existing OLC, it is critical to ask the right questions.

The answers can spotlight potential landmines or identify important leverage points. They can also help set realistic expectations about what a particular OLC can hope to achieve. For example:

- Are members relatively isolated from one another? This can spur the need for online interaction.
- Do members share information among themselves already? If so, the OLC must complement or improve on current ways of communicating.
- Do members need information to do their work? If not, it may not make sense to invest in developing customized content to lure people on-line.
- Do the people who lead or influence the members of the group support the idea of on-line collaboration? If not, the effort might be doomed from the start. If so, are these people comfortable with technology and will they be personally involved?
- Is the subject of their work or common interest something they can be passionate about? If so, momentum may be easier to build.

Not all internal OLC managers we interviewed thought of the groups they managed as “communities.” To some they were simply “people getting work done.” Yet it was clear from their responses to our questions – including those covering purpose, expectations, and activities – that something more than “doing work” was going on. In fact, a definition of community finally did emerge: a community is a group of people who are willing and able to help each other. In this sense, community is more than a way a group of people defines itself: it is a capability that can be developed and improved over time.

Notes

- 1 *Net Gain: Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities*, John Hagel III and Arthur G. Armstrong, Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997.
- 2 The authors would like to thank the organizations that participated in this study: Amoco, Awakening Technology, Buckman Laboratories, Fast Company, Ford Motor Company, GrandNet, Hewlett-Packard, Kaiser Permanente, The Mining Company, Monsanto, The Motley Fool, Snap-on Tools, Swiss Re, Sun Microsystems, and US West.