Using Technology to Build Community in Professional Associations

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Creating community through the development of social capital is critical to organizational transformation and building associations. The term “social capital” is generally credited to Lyda J. Hanifan, a supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia, who stressed the importance of community involvement for successful schools (McClean, Schultz, & Steger, 2002). Social capital was popularized by a Harvard sociologist, Robert Putnam (2000), in his book, Bowling Alone, which conjures up images of individuals working in isolation with little interest in the welfare of their communities and society at large. Cohen and Prusak (2001) defined social capital as “...the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible” (p. 4).

Social capital depends on expectations and obligations, declining when social relationships are not maintained and regular communication does not occur (Coleman, 1990). Organizations need social capital to accomplish their goals. Nurses can use an understanding of social capital to advance their policy agendas within a small setting such as a hospital or in the community at large through professional associations.

Professional associations have inherent social capital through networks and relationships within their organizations. Knowledge of social capital can be applied to the work of organizations. The example used in this article is that of technology employed by professional associations in convening members.

An association is a group of individuals who voluntarily come together to meet common needs, solve common problems, and accomplish common goals (Tecker & Fidler, 1993). The key difference between health care organizations versus associations and community-based groups is that members of the latter are volunteers. Volunteers are not required to participate; hence, capitalizing on their energy and enthusiasm is critical for success. This is paramount in light of changing demographics, a more heterogeneous work force, the anticipated retirement of Baby Boomers, and concomitant changes in values and interests. Associations must seek new ways of getting work done, redesign volunteer activities and responsibilities, allow for greater flexibility, and focus on outcome-oriented activities to inspire member involvement (Tecker & Fidler). However, it is costly to bring members together in one location and difficult for them to incorporate meeting travel time into their busy lives. Although the completion of various tasks critical for the association is important, so is the involvement of intellectual and influential leaders (Tecker, Eide, & Frankel, 1997).

Understanding differences among individuals within an organization, harnessing the power of technology,
and applying adult learning principles that have been used in delivering technological courses can facilitate the involvement of talented and powerful individuals in the achievement of an organization’s strategic outcomes. To be successful, these strategies need to reflect a marketing approach aligned with members’ needs (Wilson, 1997).

Association goals can be furthered by thoughtfully capitalizing on the dedication of volunteers. Cramer (1998) found that a civic voluntarism model significantly predicts membership in the American Nurses Association (ANA) with resources (time, money, and skills) and psychological engagement being the most accurate predictors. This suggests that using volunteers’ time effectively, creating opportunities for skill development, and promoting engagement are important in retaining members who work actively on behalf of the association. Volunteers are discerning and will donate their time as long as the association meets their needs.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES AMONG MEMBERS AND GENERATIONS

Understanding member and specifically generational differences is critical to transforming volunteer work in today’s organizations. New associations are created when differences among members are not accommodated (Teckler & Fidler, 1993). However, this does not enhance growth and may not enhance effectiveness. Even niche organizations have experienced a decline in membership (Putnam, 2000). Attracting and retaining younger members is a challenge facing many organizations. The values and attitudes of the different generations need to be incorporated into any plan for building social capital and accomplishing an association’s mission.

The four generations likely to exist in an organization include the Veterans (1920-1943), Baby Boomers (1943-1960), X-ers (1960-1980), and Nexters (1980+) (Zemke, 2001). The Nexters have also been called Generation Y, Millennials, The Echo Boom, and Generation Next. The Veterans can provide history and organizational contact information. The Baby Boomers are concerned about spirit and fairness. They call more meetings than the X-ers would like. The X-ers need feedback and flexibility without close supervision. The Nexters are optimistic and interested in working and learning (Zemke). Table 1 lists attributes of the generations and suggested meeting strategies for each.

Despite generational differences, Wieck, Prydun, and Walsh (2002) found that the emerging work force (those younger than 35) and the entrenched work force (those 35 and older) in nursing are surprisingly similar, with both groups valuing the leadership attribute of honesty the most. The entrenched work force subsequently valued high integrity, good people skills, receptive to people, good communicator, positive, fair, empowering, supportive, and approachable. The emerging work force subsequently valued motivates others, receptive to people, good communicator, team player, good people skills, approachable, knowledgeable, and supportive. The rankings of the two groups were not significantly different, suggesting that mentoring relationships might be readily established (Wieck et al.).

Sensitivity to potential cultural differences is also important for an association. Understanding how members of different cultures might respond to conflict and their behaviors and communication styles is critical.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology is becoming increasingly important for organizations both internally and in their work with the external community. For example, association members from different geographic locations can work together on a project. More challenging is building community within the organization and sustaining and nurturing social capital to advance organizational purposes when members are separated by distance or time. An important principle in online distance education has been the development of community to foster learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). This provides an appropriate model for social capital development. The focus on open communication, prompt response, and multiple learning strategies is well suited to network development and a shared understanding of trust and obligations.

The development of community through broader networks facilitated by electronic media is an emerging trend. The demonstrators at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle were linked by mobile phones, websites, laptops, and personal digital assistants, and a million Filipinos used text messaging to help overthrow Estrada’s government in 2001 (Rheingold, 2002). The Internet played a significant role in organizing protests of the 2004 Ukraine election results. U.S. presidential candidates mobilize support via the Internet. Civic engagement networks are an essential form of social capital; the denser these networks, the more likely members of a community will work together to advance their common interests (Sianni & Friedland, 2004). More recently, the ANA has created the opportunity for social networking through the establishment of a NurseSpace corner and blogs in the members’ portion of its website.

APPLYING PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING

Andragogy, a theoretical model of adult education developed by Knowles focusing on adult learners’ self-
direction, can be used as a framework for the application of technology in advancing organizational work (Knowles, Holton, & Simonson, 1998). Andragogy refers to the process of helping adults learn and the academic discipline of adult education. Knowles’ andragogical model includes the following assumptions: the need to know, adults being responsible for their own lives, providing a role for experience, readiness to learn, a task-centered orientation to learning, and intrinsic motivation (Knowles et al.).

When these assumptions are applied to the use of technology, an environment can be created that fosters the development of social capital through creativity, exchange of ideas, and personal growth. Concepts derived from Knowles’ andragogical model helpful when planning a cyber meeting include each member brings unique knowledge and competencies to the organization, members have their own perspectives on how to best advance the organization’s mission, flexibility, members want to feel that their time is used productively, members want to make a contribution to the organization, and members are excited about opportunities to advance the organization (Knowles et al., 1998).

It is important that the strategies in using technology take advantage of this energy to create community. Individuals who are actively involved in associations are similar to adult learners in that they expect to experience personal growth and often hope to gain something that can be used in their own work setting. Cutting edge practices using technology and dynamic meetings can add to the value of the volunteer experience. According to Lencioni (2004), “There is simply no substitute for a good meeting—a dynamic, passionate, and focused engagement—when it comes to extracting the collective wisdom of a team” (p. viii).

### Conducting Cyber Meetings

Cyber meetings using videoconferencing and teleconferencing can bring individuals from distant locations together to focus on projects needing collective wisdom. However, cyber meetings present unique challenges and organizers are often faced with conflicting values related to meeting format and meeting agenda. Planning and executing such meetings becomes more difficult if participants are to be both experts and influential. Members will expect these participants to be present. Cyber meetings are an excellent way to include key leaders while limiting their time commitment.

Executing a successful cyber meeting involves having a clear focus, facilitating the transition to the medium being used, experimenting with newer technologies, creating and fostering social networks through communication and collaboration, maintaining engagement during the meeting, and providing opportunities for feedback. Regardless of the type of cyber meeting, a carefully planned agenda focusing on collaboration and communi-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Cyber Meeting Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veterans (1920-1943)</td>
<td>Enthusiastic, logical</td>
<td>Personalize</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedication, sacrifice</td>
<td>Provide low stress environment to learn technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hard work</td>
<td>Specifically ask for input</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Detail oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers (1943-1960)</td>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>Give credit for accomplishments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team oriented</td>
<td>Stress opportunities for making a difference</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Go the extra mile</td>
<td>Ask for help in monitoring group process</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>X-ers (1960-1980)</td>
<td>Global thinking</td>
<td>Provide instructions, but allow to learn on own</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for creativity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-reliant</td>
<td>Include fun activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Provide positive feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nexters (1980+)</td>
<td>Civic duty</td>
<td>Stress opportunity to work with bright, creative individuals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Provide time for an orientation to group processes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collective action</td>
<td>Provide mentorship via e-mail</td>
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*Derived from Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak (2000).*
cation is critical to success. Understanding participants’ social, emotional, and psychological needs is important (Streibel, 2003). Cyber meeting options are described in Table 2.

Transitioning to cyber meetings requires a plan that takes into account members’ knowledge and skills regarding technology and the organization’s culture. If the group is used to face-to-face meetings, it may be necessary to have one-on-one conversations about the advantages of and the need to transition to the cyber meeting format. The cost of travel and the inability of key leaders to participate because of travel time can be mentioned during these conversations.

Members’ concerns about cyber meetings might include a lack of attentiveness from participants, difficulty in connecting or using the technology, inefficient group functioning, information overload, limited access to technology, and losing the human touch. However, each of these problems can also occur with traditional meetings. Addressing concerns about group representativeness in terms of the political context and organizational culture when members have varying degrees of technological competency can be a major challenge.

Strategies to facilitate transparency in technology need to be formulated so that individuals can participate without being preoccupied by the mechanics of the technology. Thus, planning can incorporate andragogical principles by structuring an orientation to the technology on a need-to-know basis and providing opportunities for members to learn either on their own or with guidance from support staff.

Teleconferencing (Table 2) allows individuals from any part of the world to participate in meetings and to build the social capital that is essential to the development of community in professional associations. Planning should focus not only on the delivery of meeting materials, but also on methods to enable participants to get to know one another. Videoconferencing may be feasible for some organizations, such as multi-site health care systems. Strategies for successful videoconferencing have been described (Zalon & Meehan, 2005). Some organizations have meeting rooms with electronic walls. Participants write on the walls and the information is automatically downloaded to their laptops. However, small organizations might not have the resources for videoconferencing. It may be expensive for members to access a videoconference site.

For organizations with limited resources, webcasts (Table 2) coupled with teleconferencing might be an effective format. This format has flexibility and speed. A teleconference service that allows individuals to see participants’ names and faces by accessing a Java applet

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Benefit</th>
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<tr>
<td>Audioconference</td>
<td>Teleconference that involves connecting participants to a single telephone call simultaneously</td>
<td>Participants can hear one another</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chat room</td>
<td>Online “room” where individuals can “talk” (type in comments to one another) in real (synchronous) time</td>
<td>Moderator may be able to limit discussants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dataconference</td>
<td>Sharing of various software applications (e.g., word processing, spreadsheets, graphics, and whiteboards)</td>
<td>Simultaneous examination and editing of work materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic meeting room</td>
<td>Equipped with electronic whiteboards and computers to record key information</td>
<td>Provides minute-by-minute changes in documents and recording of discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telepresence</td>
<td>High-definition television screens and cameras linked together</td>
<td>Gives the feeling of being in the room with other participants through visual and sound effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threaded discussion</td>
<td>Comments are entered in response to a particular question or topic asynchronously in chronological order</td>
<td>Participants can work according to their own schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videoconference</td>
<td>Teleconference that involves two-way audio and video simultaneous connection of participants</td>
<td>Participants can see and hear one another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video (audio) streaming</td>
<td>A video or audio recording that can be broadcast on demand</td>
<td>Can be accompanied by a slide presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webcast</td>
<td>Internet transmission of a televised program. Newer versions allow for more participants, whiteboards, slide presentations, polls, chats, and file sharing</td>
<td>Can be live or recorded</td>
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Note. Various options can be combined to suit a particular meeting’s purpose.
(a special program that resides only on a webpage) on a vendor’s website is another useful format. With a feature similar to chat rooms used in course software programs, it allows participants to send e-mails to one another during the conference (Table 2).

Newer technologies increasingly allow for a better conference experience. Web cameras allow for two-way transmission of video. Although web cameras are relatively inexpensive, newer computers, including laptops, can be purchased with an internal web camera enabling conference participants to connect from virtually any location. Participants must have equipment of sufficiently high quality so that images are clear. Web cameras should be tested with the conferencing system in case any compatibility issues exist. Microphones, speakers, and headsets should also be tested.

Meeting materials can be delivered via a number of formats: regular mail, e-mail, CD-ROM, or videostreaming. They can also be available on a limited access intranet in case they do not reach participants in time or participants are away from their homes or offices. When participants have different levels of expertise with the content of a meeting or with the technology, assigning mentors can be effective. Assigning mentors based on mutual needs is productive. For example, a content expert could be a mentor to a newer member with more technological expertise.

Videostreaming (Table 2) can be used to welcome participants or introduce key leaders. Videostreaming should not be used for more than 15 to 20 consecutive minutes because the lack of opportunity for interaction can engender boredom. Both videostreaming and webcasts (which use videostreaming in real time) require the use of a media player downloaded to a computer. A webpage can be prepared allowing participants to test the capabilities of their computer prior to a meeting.

Attention to the interpersonal aspects of cyber meetings is important. Listservs can be created to facilitate discussion, or a group e-mail list can be developed. Chat rooms allow for communication in real time, and threaded discussions allow individuals to post asynchronous responses to specific topics. Just as students taking an online course are asked to create a profile to facilitate interaction with their classmates, members can be asked to create a profile containing their photograph and personal information they would commonly share when introduced to a professional group. This information can be posted on an intranet.

The formulation of one or two questions relevant to the meeting’s purpose can stimulate the exchange of ideas. Examples of generic questions in keeping with Knowles’ andragogical model include, “What do you perceive to be the biggest challenge facing the committee with its assigned task?” and “What do you personally expect to gain from participating in this meeting?”

For a meeting to be productive, participants need to familiarize themselves with meetings materials in advance (Sauer, 2004). Participants should be given time to become reasonably comfortable with the technology. Practice or a dry run with the technology can ensure full group participation. Participants should be provided with clear instructions on how to join the conference and how to access online meeting materials. A dry run before the meeting is helpful if most of the participants are new to the technology. Contact information is helpful when difficulties arise.

For an extended meeting of a newly formed group, it is best to use several methods for creating community. E-mailing, sharing biographies, and scheduling a short conference for making introductions and framing the agenda can be effective. Cellular telephone numbers of participants should be available. It must be decided whether to take short breaks together or on an as-needed basis. Participants should notify the leader if they need to leave for an extended period.

Teleconferencing eliminates nonverbal communication and body language. Changes need to be made in listening, leadership behaviors, and approaches to decision making (Creighton & Adams, 1998). Soliciting responses from individuals who have been silent for extended time periods is helpful, especially when controversial issues are being discussed. In this case, the meeting process needs transparency. Committee members are accountable for completing tasks, but they are also organizational leaders. They have a responsibility to the organization to be part of a process that can withstand outside scrutiny. Clarifying requirements and voting processes in advance is helpful. A roll call vote may be desirable for a large group. Periodic summaries will help to keep the group focused on completing assigned tasks.

Clemens and Dalrymple (2005) recommend ending meetings on a positive note. Debriefing and evaluation are helpful at the close of a cyber meeting. Debriefing focuses on what has been accomplished and what each person is supposed to do and summarizes future plans. An evaluation examines the processes. In addition to an evaluation related to the meeting’s purpose, an evaluation of the communication and collaborative aspects of the meeting in relation to the technology is important. Suggestions for process improvement should be sought. Comparisons with previous methodologies can be made. The formal evaluation can be done electronically after the meeting.
key points

Building Community

1 Development of social capital is critical for building community within an organization.

2 Understanding generational differences can facilitate the development of social capital in professional associations.

3 Incorporating principles of adult education in using technology can facilitate community building.

4 Careful attention to detail in using technology for planning and convening meetings can lead to successful organizational outcomes.

It is helpful to continue the dialogue on issues that still need to be addressed following the meeting. Participants’ feedback can be sought, and they can be asked important questions about ongoing work. This will facilitate preparation for subsequent activities and help to identify areas needing further clarification.

CONCLUSION
The key to success in a cyber environment is to create as many opportunities as possible for connection and feedback in advance of meetings, during meetings, and afterward to accomplish organizational goals. Personalized interactions and group activities with attention to generational needs and adult education principles will help to create community. Technology can not only foster efficiency but also facilitate member engagement and advocacy to generate social capital on the behalf of associations.

REFERENCES


CE QUIZ ANSWERS

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