

Care for the community

Inspired management of intelligent communities can increase agility and competitiveness, and that's not all...

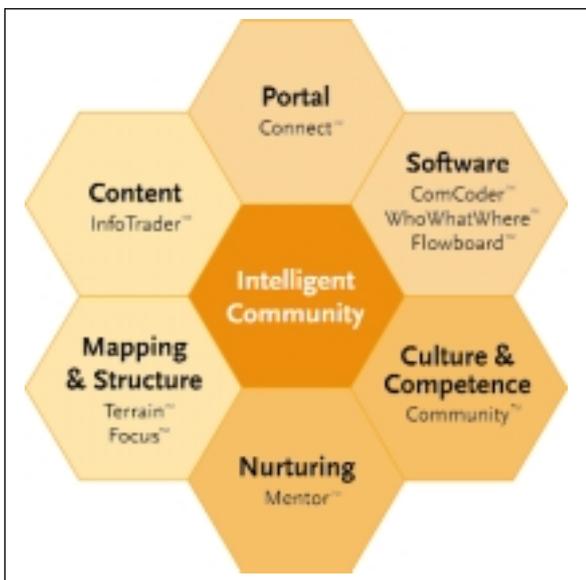
In a knowledge-driven society there are only two key assets to manage. The first is the competitive information your company possesses. The second is the individuals who, for every minute that passes, increase the value of small pieces of information by adding experience, knowledge and associations in order to produce other, even more valuable pieces of information. This cycle continues endlessly and the companies and managers who succeed in making a given information cycle work to their advantage will be the winners of tomorrow.

Operating intelligent communities gives the following benefits, and more:

- it builds internal competence
- it ensures continuity
- it keeps the company in pace with, and ahead of, the market
- it gives instant responsiveness
- it creates an easy to use world-wide contact network for your company.

'People networks', 'networked

Figure 1



organisations', 'process management', 'knowledge management', and many other management concepts have been introduced with the goal of increasing the business value of what has, in the past few decades, been put forward as the most precious of all company assets – people. Still, companies are struggling with the definitions and processes they need in order to truly leverage the combined knowledge their people possess.

In this article, a management concept is introduced that bridges one of the most important hurdles in leveraging people value – the combined management of people and information through 'intelligent communities'. It is a management concept that bridges the old gorge between IT and HR, and that also brings the newest of business supporting technology deployment out from the IT department and up to the strategy and CEO level of the company. An intelligent community can be defined as :

A network of trained knowledge workers who systematically work together to maximize the value of their combined knowledge.

In the business world, 'information' tends to mean 'structured information' such as accounting data, sales statistics, etc. However, from a human perspective, two out of five senses are pure information receptors: sight (visual, graphics, text) and hearing (audio information). The three remaining senses – taste, smell and touch – require a more direct physical or chemical interaction to be activated. Still, if we would like to convey any experience from the latter three senses to someone else without actually creating an equivalent experience, we can rely only on the two information receptors of our counterpart by using speech or drawing/printing pictures or text. Such information is usually referred to as 'unstructured information' and is an increasing part of the core information

assets that organisations possess. It contains, for example, emails, voice mails, videoclips, written documents, etc. Furthermore, this is the type of information that people are used to dealing with in their daily lives and it is also the type of information that, when transmitted in any way, is seen as communication.

The information management challenge in building and managing intelligent communities is to embed a relevant business structure in the unstructured information that exists in the form of organisational communication or documents. This structure, however, is not general, but needs to be created for each organisation, since the information needs and information usage patterns differ and in themselves contain potential competitive advantages.

Seen from a company macro perspective, there are two distinctive determinants of information needs:

- the company's view of its environment
- the company's strategy

In very simple words: 'What do I see when I look out my window and what do I plan to do out there?'

On an executive level, the information needs will be anything that verifies or falsifies the current view of the business environment. This will enable executives to decide and communicate the company's direction as well as the assets (people, information and traditional assets) needed to pursue the outlined direction.

On a tactical business level the information needs will be any information that enables, for instance, an account manager to maximize long-term profit on his/her accounts.

This model assumes one critical aspect of internal communication in the company – that the corporate strategy and direction have to be transparent to all throughout the company. Furthermore, information needs are never constant. As soon as the environment changes, so

do the information needs. It can be described as never-ending cycles of identifying the gap between perceived environment and strategy (with the information at hand) and the continuous tuning of information needs accordingly on the other (see Figure 1).

The core of communities is people and the major challenge in building intelligent communities is not creating an IT system, but the managerial aspect. We can say that an intelligent community is created by enabling a given group of people communicate about given tasks. Hence, community-building is all about communication, not information structuring and storage – the latter are merely necessary facilitating tools.

Most humans suffer from agoraphobia to some extent. It's been in our genes since time began not to be too far away from shelter, in case a predator shows up at the other end of the field. This fear of uncontrolled exposure seems to have followed us into the communications arena.

Bringing this psychological insight into the business environment of a large company will help us understand the managerial challenge in creating communities that actually perform effectively.

In setting up intelligent communities, a change in behaviour we have chosen to call the 'information carrier wave' has been experienced – a concept built on the interaction between people management and information management.

In order to bypass agoraphobia one needs to provide a steady flow of information onto which each individual can add their personal opinion, should they have one. Hence, rather than focusing on executives' needs and seeing the employees only as sources, as is often the case, one should focus on the employees as users and use the professional business information industry as the key source. By applying the structure we identified in the needs analysis to a significant flow of information from news companies, industry researchers and financial analysts, we provide a 'carrier wave' of information to everyone in the company. Each little topic in the identified structure will thus have some information activity on a daily or weekly basis.

From a community management perspective, however, each little piece of information created by a community member, together with other equally small pieces of information, make up the internal

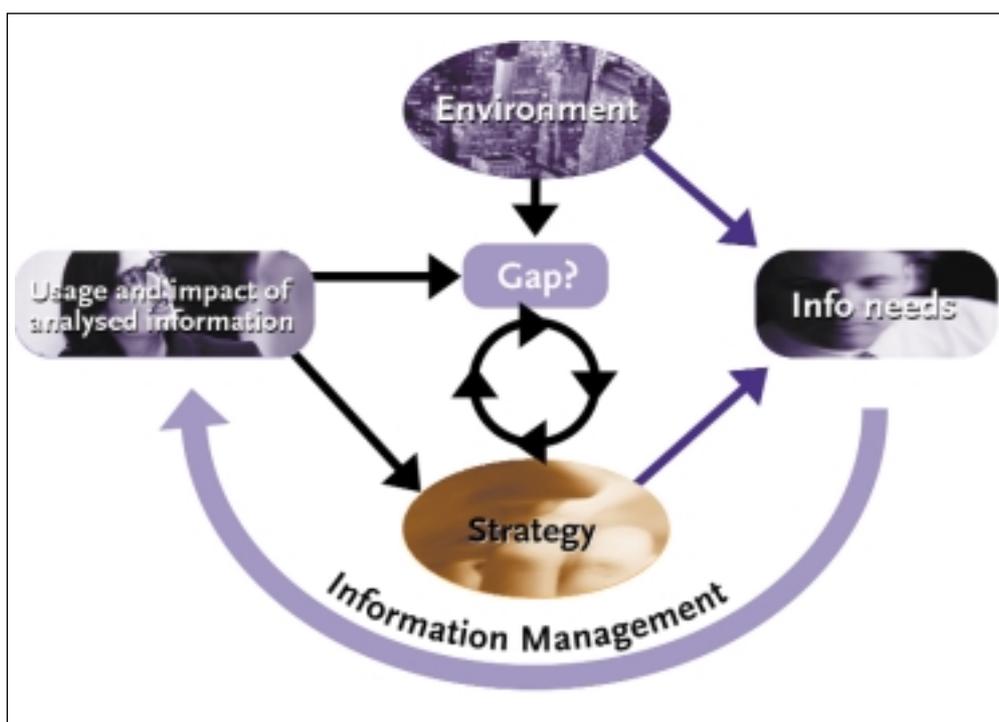


Figure 2

flow of information that is systematically circulating among communities in the company. Even if the volume of such information rarely exceeds 2-5% of the 'carrier wave' information volume, it is still that 2-5% that will develop into this particular company's competitive advantage. It becomes the information asset that *cannot be copied by any competitor*.

Managing intelligent communities differs from regular line management or project management, although it rather leans toward the latter. The major difference from line management is that the community participants would typically not report formally to the community manager and the major difference from project management is that a community is not limited in time. Hence, community management is about managing people over whom you have no line authority over an indefinite period of time. Challenging, yet perfectly possible and immensely rewarding from a people management perspective.

A community is supposed to work on its own. As a community manager it is not your main task to assign tasks to the community. The tasks that the community deals with can and should be triggered from any corner of the community. This triggering of course includes the community manager, but not to any greater extent than any other participant.

Furthermore, each task very rarely will

involve more than a few community members at each time. This means that each individual, finding him/herself in a business situation requiring community support should be able to:

- immediately choose the right community (one can participate in multiple communities), and
- within that community immediately be able to find the team that can solve this particular issue in the most efficient and competitive way.

Now, this may sound straightforward enough, but it is really where community management comes into play. Not helping in each particular instance, but ensuring that each community participant, anytime and anywhere, is enabled to do this. That means making sure that the community structure is crystal clear at all times and that community participants are happy to assist with such tasks. It also means managing the agreed modus operandum in the community in order to ensure that each team would not need to spend time on the question of how issues should be dealt with, but rather be able to instantly focus on the business issue at hand.

Managing a community is really about managing three particular company capabilities. These are the same disregarding the type of community but the content of each capability might very well vary. The three capabilities are utilisation of information resources, utilisation of ►

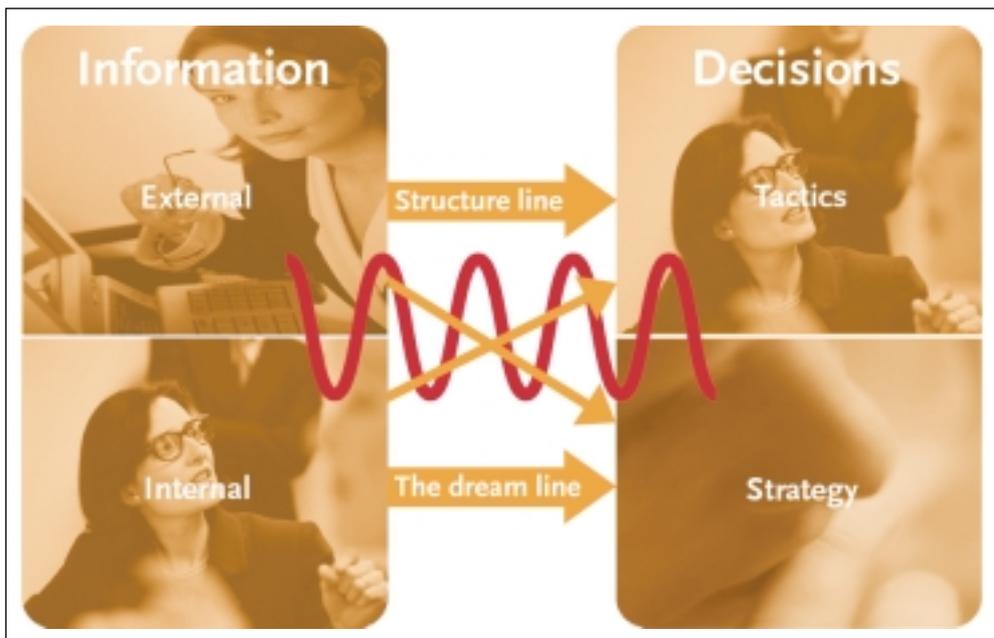


Figure 3

◀ human resources and the usability and impact of the community output.

So far our focus has been on creating the platform and information flow. A key part of community management is to make sure that this asset is also being used properly. Half of the work in enabling this capability was done by structuring the information and communication platform according to business requirements. The second half will be a continuous task for every community manager – training and internal marketing of this resource.

Managing communities is really all about people management – incentives, careers, mandates, responsibilities and all the other facets we have learnt about in our line management or project management roles. The major difference is, however, that in the line and project management roles, you tend to be assigned the co-workers and they are assigned to you as a manager. As a community manager, however, you are continuously on the recruiting track. Participants choose you, not the other way around. Of course, you do have some possibility of refusing participation, but even that is hard in most cases.

Hence, the key management issues are to attract, inspire, offer alternative career paths and make sure that by joining this particular community certain qualities will come with it.

The 'attraction component' can be built in many ways, but two key characteristics need to be recognised:

- Will this help me do my current job better?

- Will I learn something new?

Unless the answer to both of these questions is yes, you are likely to fail in keeping the community in operation.

The 'do my current job better' factor is created through the value-adding networking aspects that come with community participation. The more I put into the community, the more I get out, by a factor 5:10.

The learning aspect requires two particular actions from the community manager. It is the responsibility of the community manager to ensure that advanced training programmes, which always keep community participants abreast of their users in their field of specialisation, are available in-house or through outsourced activities. Secondly, in order to achieve continuous learning one must also ensure that the tasks dealt with by the community go beyond a certain level of complexity. A community that deals with simple tasks will not attract those you are looking for. The key measure to take is to make the users trust the community's competence and thereby require more and more advanced output. It is also the responsibility of the community manager to ensure that the group strategy is available to all community participants.

Usability and impact are the capabilities that so many companies forget to address when new models, procedures or communities are being introduced. Yet they are perhaps the most critical of all for a successful venture – the capability of ensuring that the output from the community actually makes a difference

in the business and the strategy of the company. The key issues to address are: Who are the people that will actually change a decision, or be affected in their decision-making by the output from the community? How should that impact on their decision-making occur on a day-to-day basis?

In managing this capability, the community manager must focus on a combination of issues:

- the decision-makers' knowledge and understanding of the community's operations and output
- the level of trust and rapport between community participants and decision-makers in general
- the direct relation between each participant and his or her primary 'customer' among the decision-makers.

This is both a question of training and the management of expectations. Usually one key element in the growth of the business value is the improving communication between the community and its main users. Hence, the level of expectation must be set at the right and reasonable level from the beginning, but, equally importantly, it must be gradually increased over time with the improved abilities of the community.

Intelligent communities as a management concept require big changes in management thinking. It is a matter of allowing and nurturing small businesses within the big business but always with the company's targets as the driving force. Company hierarchies, as we have known them, will forever be changed and the number of people you have reporting to you will cease to be a measure of corporate power. Many companies have now started to adopt intelligent community-like approaches. The agility and competitiveness such changes will deliver to organisations will make them so much more responsive and competitive than traditionally organised companies that the latter will soon be extinguished if they do not rethink their people and information management approaches entirely. 

More on intelligent communities can be found in Comintell's white paper on the topic. It can be found on the company's web site: www.comintell.com.

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