

## Chapter XXII

# Cultivating a Public Sector Knowledge Management Community of Practice

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### ABSTRACT

*ActKM is a Community of Practice for people interested in public sector Knowledge Management. Having begun in 1998, the community now numbers more than 550 members and is nurtured and maintained predominantly, but not exclusively, online. Utilising the Cynefin sense-making framework (Snowden, 2002a), this chapter analyses the ActKM community and provides a practical account of its history, purpose, guiding principles, goals, characteristics and dynamics. The chapter concludes with a summary of the lessons learnt from the ActKM experience that others might find useful in cultivating a vibrant Community of Practice of this type.*

### INTRODUCTION

In 1998, a handful of people interested in the topic of public sector Knowledge Management (KM) met to discuss how they might learn from one another. By 2003, this group had grown to become a community of more than 550 people. On a daily basis, members of this community participate in an online

discussion forum, with some members meeting face-to-face on the first Tuesday of each month in Canberra, Australia. Now called ActKM (pronounced ‘act KM’), this Community of Practice (CoP) continues to thrive and enhance its members.

This chapter describes the factors that have led to the success of ActKM. To ensure that a variety of perspectives is considered, the characteristics and dynamics of ActKM are examined in terms of Snowden’s (2002a) Cynefin sense-making framework. The chapter: (i) provides a brief history and account of the purpose of ActKM, (ii) describes its characteristics and dynamics and (iii) concludes with generalised lessons learnt from the ActKM experience that others might find useful in cultivating a medium-sized (primarily online) CoP.

## HISTORY AND PURPOSE

The idea of developing ActKM arose in response to the burgeoning KM literature, including numerous case studies that focused entirely on private sector companies. At this time, research rarely addressed the question of how public sector organizations were dealing with KM. Indeed, the literature of the time seemed to assume that the experiences, problems and solutions of the private sector could be directly transposed to the public sector.

Some practitioners in the field, including the present author, were sceptical that this was the case. In search of expertise from the public sector, a meeting was held with Kate Muir of Centrelink (Australia’s social security agency) in late 1998. The idea was to build a CoP focused on KM in the public sector. Kate was the perfect person to act as co-founder of such a community. She was a senior and respected manager in the Australian public service and was a prominent and effective proponent of KM. Indeed, she was one of the few people in the Australian public service to include the term ‘Knowledge Management’ in her title. Kate’s background and expertise complemented the interests and background of the author, a KM consultant with IBM who has spent most of his career consulting with public sector agencies.

In the summer of 1999, the first meeting of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Knowledge Management Forum was convened (this name later being changed, in 2001, to ‘ActKM’ to remove the reference to a single geographical location). In attendance were eight people from the following public sector agencies: Australian Federal Police, ACTEW (a local government utility), Department of Health, Department of Finance and Administration, Department of Immigration and Centrelink. The first two decisions of the group were that meetings would be rotated among the members’ various organizations and that it would be useful to establish an online discussion forum. Through word of mouth, ActKM grew to 60 members by December 1999.

## GOALS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

After about a year of informal monthly discussions, during which time a better understanding evolved of what ActKM wanted to achieve, a simple goal and a set of guiding principles emerged. The goal and principles are included in ActKM's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document and are posted to every new member.

The purpose and goal of ActKM is:

- ActKM is a learning community dedicated to building knowledge about public sector knowledge management. Our ultimate aim is to be a key source of knowledge regarding public sector knowledge management.

In pursuit of this purpose and goal, the members of ActKM support the following guiding principles:

- **Primacy of Knowledge:** Knowledge is the essential resource that an organization must harness to achieve its objectives.
- **Drive to Learn:** People are born with an innate, lifelong desire and ability to learn, which should be enhanced by all organizations.
- **Learning is Social:** People learn best from and with one another; participation in learning communities is vital to the effectiveness, well-being and happiness of people in any work setting.

## CHARACTERISTICS AND DYNAMICS

The characteristics and dynamics of ActKM are examined in this chapter through the Cynefin sense-making framework (Snowden, 2002a). This framework recognises multiple domains in a system whereby each domain is understood as a result of a unique constitution of characteristics and dynamics requiring its own set of models, tools and decision-making approaches. George Box (1979, p. 202) made the observation that: 'All models are wrong but some are useful.' The Cynefin framework is useful because it expands the possible perspectives from which an issue can be investigated.

The Cynefin framework defines four domains:

- **Known:** knowledge in this domain is explicit and understandable by the widest possible audience. Everything is known and explicable to those who share a common context (such as working in the same organization). This domain is the legitimate home of best practice, documented lessons learnt, the corporate intranet and training programs.

- **Knowable:** knowledge in this domain is knowable to those who have the time, energy and intellect to understand specialised topics. The language is abstracted, thus providing efficiencies for those who understand the specialist terminology, but excluding those who do not and who are therefore unable to converse with these experts.
- **Complex:** people in this domain operate in a complex network of mutual obligations, trust and close relationships. Knowledge, beliefs and values are shared through stories and mutual experiences. This domain of the organization has been referred to as the ‘shadow side’ (Egan, 1994), indicating that many of the activities in this domain remain unseen by the formal organization and paradoxically would not exist if they were made visible.
- **Chaos:** in this domain people lack any experience to guide their actions. The situations they face are entirely novel and confronting; people will do whatever they can to get out of this space. This space provides huge opportunities for the creation of new knowledge.

The purpose of the Cynefin framework is to enable better sense-making by increasing an awareness of borders and by triggering, through a border transition, different models of decision-making, leadership and community (Snowden, 2002a).

A description of the key characteristics and dynamics of ActKM, from the perspective of the Cynefin framework, is presented below.

## KNOWN—THE BUREAUCRATIC AND STRUCTURED DOMAIN

The features of ActKM associated with this domain are: (i) community roles, (ii) the online discussion forum and (iii) community demographics and growth.

### Community Roles

A significant aspect of ActKM, in terms of providing a support structure, was the evolution of a core team composed of members who were passionate about KM. These people kept the community moving forward. The concept of the core team gained clarity early in ActKM’s development, but its development did not occur because of shrewd planning. Rather, it occurred through an incidental activity that was primarily aimed at developing credibility.

In mid-1999, when ActKM consisted of about 50 members, the founding members thought it would be beneficial to be associated with an already established Knowledge Management association. The intention was to increase

our credibility with a view to attracting more members and increasing the ‘buzz’ in the community. After some searching, the Knowledge Management Consortium International (KMCI) was identified and it was decided that ActKM should become a chapter of KMCI. This required ActKM members to elect an executive board consisting of a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and two executive board members. Elections were organized and all the positions were filled. This elected group became known as the ‘executive’ (now known as the ‘core team’). Shortly after the elections, the relationship with KMCI disintegrated and ActKM ceased to be a chapter. The official titles of office-bearers never sat well with the executive and the roles were therefore renamed with everyone in the core team being known as a ‘convenor’.

By 2002, the title of ‘executive’ had been removed because members held a perception that this group exercised executive powers. This perception is understandable in view of the fact that the majority of members had come from public sector agencies and such organizations traditionally have powerful executive bodies. Many members thus felt that they needed to seek permission from the ‘executive’ to post some messages, initiate special interest groups and make announcements. In fact, the ‘executive’ had never intended to exercise such powers and had never done so. Terminology definitely affects behaviour, especially terminology that carries certain implications of perceived roles, and the original label of ‘the executive’ undoubtedly inhibited the flow of information and curtailed members’ initiative.

The main function of the core team is to decide the events and activities to be developed for the members. The core team meets approximately once every two months, usually over lunch. Originally voted as the Secretary, Amanda Lee has been vital to ActKM’s success. Amanda ensures that there are speakers for the monthly meetings, organizes catering (wine, cheese and biscuits), moderates messages on the online discussion forum and schedules meetings of the core team. The ‘community advocates’ and ‘thought leaders’ are also vital. These people pose questions, suggest speakers, promote the forum and provide ideas, references and links among people and organizations.

## **Online Discussion Forum**

An online discussion forum has been a feature of ActKM from the beginning and provides ActKM’s rhythm of activity - its heartbeat. A significant proportion of ActKM’s codified knowledge resides here and there is now a member initiative under way to create a useful resource by editing and indexing the nearly 2000 messages on the forum.

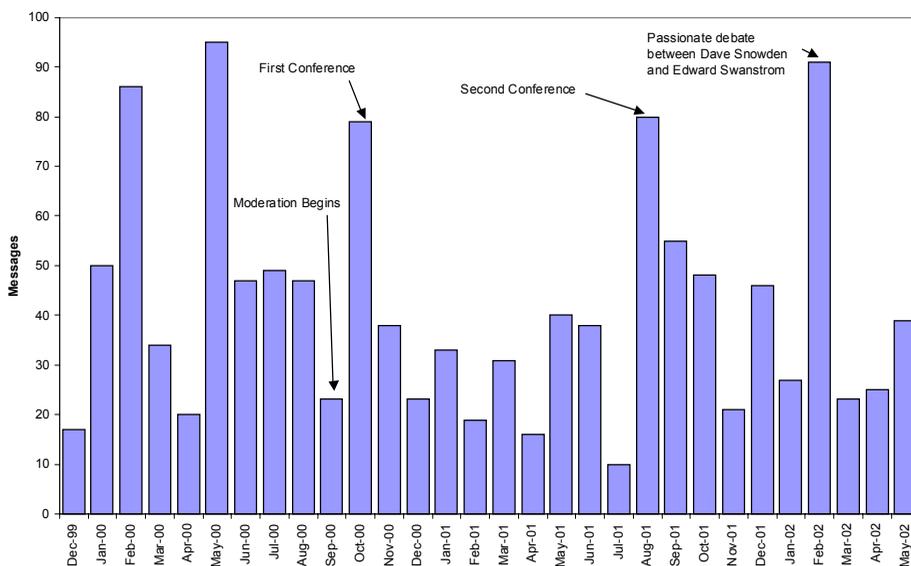
The online discussion operates using ‘Yahoo Groups’. This web-based collaboration service provides the technology needed for a community that is international and not for profit. Yahoo Groups is free, members sign up themselves, they decide how much email they want to receive and there is also

a group calendar that notifies members of events. The core team can also invite members to join ActKM. This feature has been used to invite thought leaders to join the community with a view to increasing the quality of the online conversation. This has been an effective strategy and ActKM now has pre-eminent KM thought leaders from around the world participating in the online discussion.

The online discussion forum was difficult to establish and sustain. In fact, in the first twelve months, the online conversation was contrived by rostering members of the core team to post messages to ensure that there was at least one message going out to members every week. This activity became less contrived over time and eventually became unnecessary once the community reached about a hundred people. Message volume also increased as relationships grew and became established among the members. Face-to-face meetings seemed to accelerate the development of these relationships - a fact observed in other research (Hildreth, Kimble & Wright, 2000). After personally meeting an online colleague, a member could then visualise that person posting a message and therefore felt more at ease in responding.

Traffic volume on the online discussion forum is variable (see Figure 1). Key events, such as the annual conferences, significantly affect the number of messages posted in any given month. There also appears to be a relationship between the number of messages and the occurrence of vigorous online debate - such as the intellectual tussle between Dave Snowden and Edward Swanstrom in February 2002 (see ‘A vigorous debate’). Although many of the messages in

Figure 1: ActKM Online Discussion Traffic Volume



February 2002 were directly related to the Snowden-Swanstrom debate, many others were introducing new unrelated topics. The excitement generated by the debate seemed to inspire other members to contribute to the online forum.

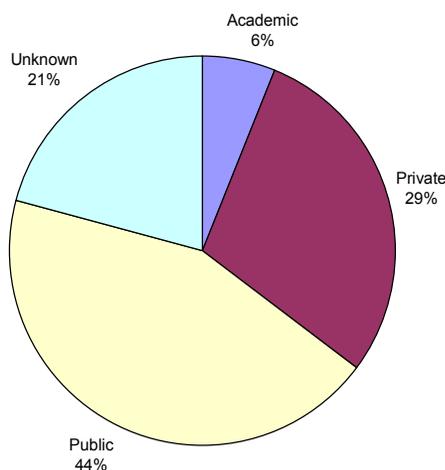
In the beginning, the online discussion was unmoderated. This was a mistake. In August 2000 a member's auto respond feature ('I'm out of the office') malfunctioned and generated more than a hundred messages within a minute. Many members left ActKM that day, particularly those who download their email over a telephone line. Each message is now moderated. In addition to avoiding problems of the type described above, moderation has provided an additional benefit in allowing us to capture emails designed as a personal response or those that are blatant advertisements. After moderation, the traffic volume diminished, but quality increased.

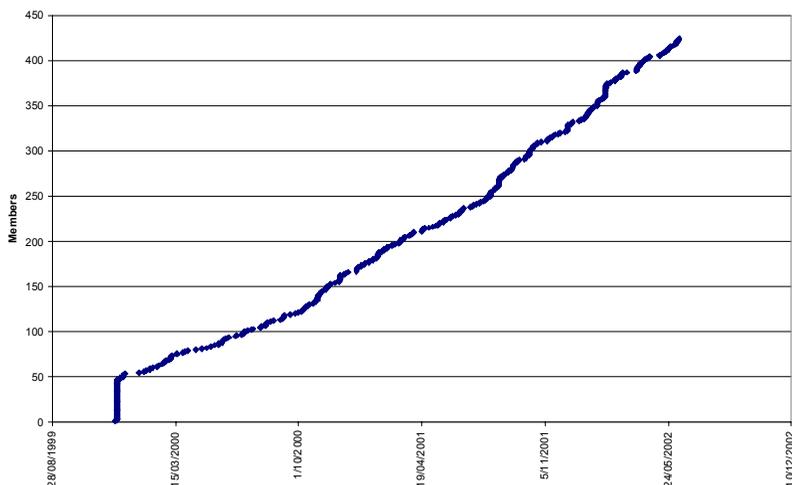
## Community Demographics and Growth

Based on email addresses, it is apparent that ActKM has a mix of public, private and academic representation (see Figure 2). The 'unknown' component reflects the significant number of anonymous Yahoo and similar web-based email addresses in the membership.

It is important for ActKM membership to be predominantly from the public sector to ensure that the community achieves its stated purpose. Although members have not been screened or selected, the membership is principally derived from the public sector. This results from: (i) the focus of discussions held in the forum, (ii) the stated intention of the community and (iii) the prescribed composition of the core team (which has always had at least 50% of its members from the public sector). There are few rules that govern the operation of ActKM, but this prescribed composition of the core team is one of them.

*Figure 2: ActKM Demographics*



*Figure 3: ActKM Growth*

The size of ActKM has consistently increased. The data illustrated in Figure 3 starts at the point when the online forum began. The first 50 members were loaded on the first day of using the system, thus producing the vertical growth to be seen in Figure 3.

When people leave ActKM, an automatic message is sent to them asking the departing members to describe, in brief, their reasons for leaving. The responses are usually of two types: their interests have changed or they are feeling overwhelmed with email and are getting rid of some of their listserver memberships.

## **KNOWABLE—THE PROFESSIONAL AND LOGICAL DOMAIN**

Within the second domain of the Cynefin framework - the knowable domain - there are three components of ActKM to consider: (i) face-to-face meetings, (ii) annual conferences and (iii) expert discussions.

### **Face-to-Face Meetings**

The core team understood, based on the available literature on communities (for example, McDermott, 1999 and Lesser & Prusak, 1999), that it was vital to hold face-to-face meetings on a frequent and regular basis. The core team was determined to create an environment, both online and face-to-face, in which people created relationships in order to enhance the knowledge flows throughout

the community. With this objective of improving the personal relationships among people in the community, monthly meetings were initially rotated among various government agencies. However, after the first six months, the core team felt that this approach had a considerable management overhead in finding venues and in notifying people of the time and location of the next meeting.

From the beginning of 1999, meetings have been held on the first Tuesday of each month, starting at 5:30 pm and usually finishing at 7:30 pm. The predictable scheduling of the monthly meeting is deliberate. The objective is to ensure that at the same place, day and time each month there will be a gathering of people with common interests and that a member can be fairly certain that the discussions will be relevant and interesting. This form of routine helps to create and maintain ActKM's identity and assists new members to understand ActKM's patterns of behaviour. Experienced members thus know what to expect and new members quickly become comfortable with the workings of the community.

There are always refreshments at a monthly meeting, for which members pay \$4. The meetings are usually informal - sometimes the participants merely gather around a table for a discussion with wine and cheese at hand. The average attendance is 20 - 30 people and the composition of the meeting varies from month to month.

Whenever possible, KM practitioners from the public sector are scheduled to speak about the tangible initiatives that they have implemented, followed by a discussion among the attendees of the lessons learnt. Less frequently, a vendor is invited to describe his or her offerings. This focus on public sector practitioners ensures that the community maintains credibility and relevance.

The relationships developed at the meetings definitely affect the conversation that occurs online. When people get to know one another offline, a more relaxed and less adversarial interchange occurs online as trust begins to develop. Members comment on the friendly and welcoming culture that is evident online. Linking face-to-face meetings and the online discussion is a critical success factor in nurturing ActKM.

## **Annual Conferences**

ActKM held its first conference in October 2000. Attendees were charged \$220, which covered the room hire and catering costs and left a modest profit for the community to use for other events. The first annual conference attracted 70 people. The topics covered were mainly definitional, with various techniques and sub-branches of KM being discussed. These included knowledge mapping, business intelligence, knowledge strategy and learning histories. The content discussed at this conference reflected the community's relatively immature understanding of KM. The second annual conference was held in August 2001 and attracted more than a hundred delegates. At this conference, the conversation changed. Whereas the 2000 conference had been about definitions, 2001

focused on case studies of practical initiatives and their results. The 2002 conference was another resounding success, with more than a hundred delegates participating in a multi-stream program.

The annual conferences provide another opportunity for face-to-face interactions. In many cases, attendance at a conference is the first opportunity for members from interstate to meet one another and meet people from the core team. There have been instances of members from the same geographical area meeting one another for the first time and deciding to create a chapter of the community in their home state, thus extending and integrating the social network.

## **Expert Discussion**

Dialogue among KM experts is one of the key features of ActKM and is one of the main reasons for members signing up for the online discussion forum. To draw experts out on issues, the author and other core team members post controversial and current topics and then watch the experts swarm around these ideas. The number of regular contributors to the forum can be as low as 5% of the total membership. Based on personal anecdotal evidence, it appears that many members relish watching a debate unfold and then continue these debates with their colleagues in the workplace.

Successful online debates require trust and mutual respect. The contributors must trust the forum not to misuse posted information - for example, by quoting the conversation out of context. The expert contributors must also trust one another to behave courteously in a robust discussion and to seek understanding of alternative points of view. Finally, the rest of the forum must trust the expert participants to convey their thoughts and the ideas of others with accuracy. As Charles Handy (1995) has pointed out: ‘virtuality requires trust to make it work’.

## **COMPLEX—THE INFORMAL AND INTERDEPENDENT DOMAIN**

The features of ActKM associated with the complex domain include: (i) informal meetings and discussion held outside the forum and (ii) the development of the core team.

### **Informal Meetings and Discussions Outside the Forum**

The least visible, but probably the most valuable aspect of ActKM, is the formation of new working relationships through face-to-face meetings outside the discussion forum or formal ActKM events. This aspect of the community is fostered through a value that permeates ActKM - that the only thing we ask of members is that they make themselves available to other members.

The culture of the public sector - with its emphasis on hierarchy and accountability - is conducive to these informal offline face-to-face discussions because many members are unwilling to recount, publicly, what has happened in their agency, especially if the story has negative connotations. For example, one government agency had designed and implemented a program to manage tacit knowledge more effectively. This program was in direct response to a series of failures within the agency that could be traced to a poor use of this type of knowledge. The program designers were asked whether they would like to present their experiences to an ActKM meeting, but they respectfully declined the invitation because they were concerned about revealing the agency's earlier failings. They were, however, quite happy to talk privately with other public sector colleagues and share what they had learnt. An open discussion of this innovative program never appeared online, nor at any other public event. People became familiar with it through informal channels, with subsequent benefit for the overall ActKM community.

These informal meetings can take on a range of other forms:

- A member might see a posting and then organize to meet the posting's author with a view to discussing a specific topic (such as records management or collaboration).
- People might meet to get a better understanding of what is happening in KM in the public sector.
- Joint projects between agencies might be developed.
- Meetings might occur on a regular basis with members meeting for coffee and a chat about the philosophy and practical aspects of KM.

Whatever form they take, all of these informal meetings benefit the community as a whole by strengthening the social networks.

## **Developing and Sustaining the Core Team**

The development of the core team can also be viewed from the perspective of the complex domain in that it displays emergent characteristics and is continually evolving. The core team emerged, as discussed above, from a discussion between Kate Muir and the author. Others joined the group. These were drawn from trusted colleagues and associates who shared a passion for the topic and with whom we enjoyed working. Members are able to join the core team at any time - simply by attending meetings of the core team and becoming involved in fostering the community. New members of the core team, however, do not appear from nowhere. These people usually become increasingly prominent in the online forum and monthly meetings, get to know the core team and then decide whether they want to become more involved.

## Chaos—The Uncharted and Innovative Domain

There are many activities that can be viewed from the perspective of the unpredictable and uncharted chaotic domain, but two stand out: (i) the debate between Dave Snowden and Edward Swanstrom and (ii) running the first ActKM conference.

### A Vigorous Debate

In 2002, between 9 February and 14 February, ActKM witnessed a passionate and sometimes personal debate between Dave Snowden (Director of IBM's Cynefin Centre) and Edward Swanstrom (Secretary General of Global Knowledge Economics Council). A misunderstanding sparked the debate. Swanstrom had thought Snowden was attacking scientific method while arguing for the use of complex adaptive systems, whereas in fact, Snowden's sights were aimed squarely at scientific management. This initial confusion resulted in a series of detailed and informative posts that enthralled the online membership but also left people feeling uneasy regarding the personal nature of some of the comments.

For the first time, ActKM members observed an interchange that was both passionate and at times personal. As Hubert Saint-Onge (2002) pointed out to Snowden during the debate:

*“Changing mindsets is a worthwhile cause that requires some level of ‘bloody-mindedness’: it is not always pretty but it is certainly edifying.”*

Members posted numerous messages to one or other of the protagonists (on and off the listserver), variously supporting their views and encouraging the forthright nature of the discussion. It was the personal nature of some of the comments, however, that made the core team uneasy. This was uncharted territory for the forum. In one of the more personal interchanges, Swanstrom (2002) commented:

*“You also seem to believe that scientists would not jump at the chance of developing ‘better’ science if it was made available to them. I do not think you have been in a scientific lab for a while.”*

To which Snowden (2002b) replied:

*“I’ll happily go back to the lab if you read some history.”*

The coordinators of the discussion list thought that they might have to intervene. However, before it became necessary to make this decision, the debate was over. The system self-organized and the protagonists sensed that

they were in danger of alienating the discussion forum with their strong interchanges and therefore closed down the discussion by agreeing to disagree.

It was interesting to note that, as the debate became personal, Snowden and Swanstrom each exerted additional effort to persuade the other and the wider forum of his point of view. As a result, more detailed posts were made, replete with references to books, articles and other researchers' work. For the interested onlookers, these posts provided a wealth of background material on the topics of complexity, economics, management theory and standards.

This initially chaotic event quickly moved to the knowable domain as the core team came to understand how these types of debates could stimulate the community. A similar debate ensued in October 2002 between Steve Denning and Chris Kimble - again sparked by a misunderstanding. On this occasion, the core team knew that this was a good thing, in that it would help to create the excitement that helps sustain such a community.

## **The First Conference**

The first ActKM conference is another example of activities that began in the chaotic domain and moved relatively quickly to knowable and known space. The core team had never organized a conference. The members of the organizing committee volunteered their services and one of them had very clear ideas of how things should be run. Unfortunately, these ideas were at odds with the rest of the organizing committee and, two weeks into preparing for the conference, this person resigned in displeasure when others did not agree with her.

The team got back on track but two weeks before the conference faced a second crisis when it was discovered that only 25 people had registered for the conference. Because we needed 50 to break even, the organizing committee was on the verge of cancelling the conference. However, in the next couple of days registrations then began to roll in.

As noted above, this first conference turned out to be very successful and the organizing committee thus learnt that members wait until the last minute to register. The same pattern was repeated in the following year but, by then, we had moved to the known domain and therefore handled the situation without stress.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Cynefin framework is helpful in analysing ActKM. Its domains encourage an analysis of certain aspects of the ActKM CoP that might otherwise have been overlooked. It is apparent that all four domains of the Cynefin framework are represented in various characteristics of the ActKM community. Conversely, each characteristic of ActKM can be described in

terms of the known, knowable, complex and chaotic domains of the framework.

This account of ActKM has demonstrated that an online community does not evolve without encouragement and nurturing. Success relies on the members developing trust based on relationships. If members can meet face-to-face, this accelerates the development of trust. However, in a dispersed international forum such as ActKM, such face-to-face meetings are difficult to organize. In the absence of such personal meetings, the tone and thoughtfulness of messages determines the extent to which people build trust in those whom they have not met.

The online discussion forum thus bonds the community and provides a rhythm of activities that defines its identity. It is prudent to moderate the posts to ensure that unwanted messages (for example, advertisements and personal responses) do not appear. The online discussion forum is the locus of the community's expertise and serves to alert members to the presence of people they might wish to engage - either by posing a question or by meeting face-to-face. From the experience of ActKM, it is apparent that such an online discussion becomes self-sustaining once it reaches a certain critical mass, but that it requires pump priming to reach this point.

The core team orchestrates and influences the environment in which the community operates. The members of this team volunteer their time and knowledge because they are passionate about the concept and dedicated to its success. It is apparent that the provision of opportunities for members to meet and discuss KM in a public sector context fosters the emergence of new patterns of thought and enhances the sense of excitement within the community.

The technology that supports the community is simple, but effective. An international community such as ActKM essentially requires an infrastructure of collaborative technologies that enable on-line discussion, facilitate the storage of documents and provide an accessible group calendar.

The regular schedule of face-to-face meetings provides certainty and an opportunity to build relationships. A variety of novel and relevant topics attracts healthy attendances. The importance of these meetings should not be underestimated - even for a community that is predominantly on-line. The relationships developed at these meetings are later reflected in the quality of online discussions and this, in turn, influences and encourages the wider community.

The future of ActKM appears to be bright. Membership is growing and the conversations are becoming more sophisticated. For those who are interested in learning more about ActKM, the web address is: <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/act-km>>.

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