A Conceptual Framework for Demographic Groups Resistant to Online Community Interaction

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Abstract
Demographic groups normally do not constitute communities. However, they have the potential for becoming online communities when individuals share common interests, needs and goals for problem solving and support and when they can easily find and communicate with each other and establish relationships. People in these demographic groups may be highly resistant to interacting online despite their regular use of the Internet for information gathering and email. The causes for this resistance, suggestions for mitigating it and approaches for bringing such demographic groups into online community environments and sustaining their online interaction are presented in this paper which describes a study of a demographic group of mid-life career changers. Suggested improvements in online community sociability and usability are recommended for these demographic groups to successfully interact online. In particular, the sociability and usability requirements of these demographic groups should direct the selection and implementation of technology.

1. Introduction

Community is no longer easily defined as a physical place, but, in reality, is a set of social relationships. As such, online community is a social network that uses computer support as the basis of communication among members. [6, 9] Online community consists of the people who interact socially to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles with shared purpose whose interaction is guided by tacit and explicit policies using computer systems to support and mediate the social interaction [13].

Demographic groups whose members share common interests, needs and goals are not communities because they have not established a network of social relationships. Yet, these groups could greatly benefit from an online community environment where they could establish such relationships. A previous study of a demographic group, mid-life career changers, suggested such potential benefit [1]. That study, using serial case study in-depth interviews with 25 US mid-life career changers, confirmed the literature review. It indicated that mid-life career changers have important needs for networking with peers to share information, for learning from each other's experiences and making contacts in potential new career disciplines [3,11,17,18,20]. The study findings suggested that a majority of these people are Internet information gatherers and email users. A holistic website offering a wide variety of tools of which online community synchronous and asynchronous forums are an element could expand opportunities for career change success dramatically by increasing the numbers and types of people with whom career changers can communicate and build relationships.

However, the previous study also suggested that this demographic group would much rather meet people face-to-face to establish and maintain supportive relationships. Many expressed feelings of distrust, concern about privacy and appropriateness of the online community medium. A deeper understanding this demographic group's resistance to online interaction was needed in order to identify possible ways to mitigate the resistance and design an online community solution that meets the requirements for usability and sociability for this demographic group. A second study, reported in this paper, attempted to answer five questions as clearly and accurately as possible: (1) How often is the Internet used by this demographic group and how do they use it? (2) Why do they use or not use online community discussion forums? (3) How much do they trust online community discussion forums and why do they have or not have that trust? (4) Would a technique to restrict access (i.e. subscription fee) increase trust and would it be attractive to online community? (5) What would increase their interest in using online community discussion forums - initially and in the longer term?

What is learned about mid-life career changers may be transferable to building online communities for demographic groups with similar characteristics and online interaction resistance issues.

2. Definitional Foundation