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Traversing the virtual landscape of a knowledge citizen

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1 Introduction

Whereas the notion of the knowledge worker was born out of the reality of the knowledge economy, the knowledge citizen has been represented by the writer of this column over the years as 'a personal issue, … a decision someone takes, … a behaviour that someone embraces and actively carries out' and that 'organizations should recognise that it is a serious commitment and endeavour to create environments that encourage knowledge citizenship' (Sutton 2006).

While it would be remiss to designate the title *knowledge citizen* to only those persons who are technology literate or who have access to the digital world, it would be equally remiss not to recognize the enormous impact that the Internet has had on triggering opportunities for knowledge citizens around the world, specifically in creating social networks and virtual communities.

2 World's view of knowledge citizens

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2000) raises a significant point in the discussion, which is that the often over-simplified concept of 'access' raises an important question in defining the knowledge citizen. Is anyone a knowledge citizen as long as they are simply using (including having access to) information and communications technology (ICT) for societal and/or work purposes? Or is knowledge citizenship more related to the activities performed by a person with or without ICT, that is, does that citizen perform activities that are valuable and useful both to him- or herself and to public and private society, which either cannot, or preferably, should not be automated?

Membership in communities of practice is becoming an important learning experience at multiple community levels. It engages members in the stewardship of their domain, expanding their identities through a strategic approach to knowledge at the organizational level. Community members learn to become *knowledge citizens*, involved in the *learning governance* of their organizations by representing their domain in the context of broader learning processes. The effects of this experience also spill over into members' lives more generally. Being a knowledge citizen will be a key capability for participating in a knowledge society such as is emerging in the world today (Wenger 2007).

The World Summit on the Information Society (2003) highlighted that, in the context of learning, the pupil is a citizen in the knowledge society and the pupil must be prepared and educated as a citizen of the knowledge society. The relationship between individuals and society has new characteristics in the knowledge society, particularly because of virtual communities of collective intelligence, and citizenship for knowledge societies must be invented, recognizing that life-long learning is an important component of the knowledge society.

The Ipsos Global @dvisor (2007) points out that the new knowledge consumers or citizens tend to be opinionated, demanding, empowered and ultimately disloyal. No matter where in the globe they exist or what conditions they experience or operate in, they expect results and are prepared to hold producers accountable for performance failures. They demand choices in everything they encounter and they demand accountability. The seminal global citizens are those who have the greatest force and impact on their surroundings and on the players in the global village. Where they go, the rest will eventually

follow and, when the rest follow, we reach a tipping point, which globally is often now, when the unusual can, all of a sudden, become common place. What had previously only been theorized becomes the new normal.

In light of the above points of view, let us consider the impact of technology and the Internet in the world of the knowledge citizen by exploring the concept of social networks and virtual communities.

3 Social networks and personal knowledge management

Social networks are based on the idea that there is a determinable structure to how each person is connected to another, whether directly or indirectly. While informal networks are a loosely knit group consisting of individuals who share a common interest and which comes into existence from the bottom up, a formal network represents a group of people having a specific issue or a problem to solve and its development is prompted by management.

Social networking is defined as an individual's attitude to using available technologies and services to take part in a network based virtual community. Life-long learning culture is gaining in importance as one of the most effective answers to face the challenges of the information and knowledge society. Knowledge accumulation is overshadowed by the preservation of our connections and through the catalysing and filtering effect of being exposed to those connections. The true competence for a life-long learner of the knowledge society is the ability to stay connected and belong to digital communities where interests are and can be continuously shared (Pettenati and Cigognini 2007).

Personal knowledge management (PKM) is best understood as a set of problem-solving skills that has both a logical or conceptual as well as physical or hands-on component (Avery *et al*. quoted in Pettenati and Ciognini 2007). The knowledge society requires everyone to acquire a set of PKM to take advantage of network 'affordances'. Social networking tools and methods provide a tremendous opportunity and context to seamlessly fill this gap, driving the subject into a learning and knowledge landscape in which PKM skills and competences are the enabling condition (Pettenati and Cigognini 2007).

4 Social software

Social software is the term used to designate the use of computing tools to support, extend or derive added value from social activity, including but not limited to Web logs (blogs), instant messaging, music and photo sharing, mailing lists, message boards and on-line social networking tools. Social software provides the necessary support for conversations and collaboration, for knowledge creation, sharing and publication, for identifying experts and getting access to expert opinions worldwide. It leaves the control of knowledge with the individuals owning it; each individual is able to maintain his or her own space for which he or she has complete control over the information he or she chooses to share (Avram 2006).

Social software encompasses one or more (though not necessarily all) of the following elements:

- Support for conversational interaction between people or groups, including real-time conversations such as instant messaging and slow-time conversations that occur in collaborative virtual spaces (Boyd 2005 quoted in Avram 2006)
- Support for social feedback – reputation and trust are crucial in on-line interactions as demonstrated by the importance placed by sites such as eBay on a seller's rating and reputation
- Support for social networks – many social software applications create a digital layout of a person's social network and facilitate adding new connections (Kaplan 2005 quoted in Avram 2006).

The popularity of social technologies is attributed to the increase in low-cost tools and the critical mass of millions of people who now are connected to the Internet, to the growing tendency of people to rely more on their own personal social networks than on traditional company structures and to the people's need to feel part of a community. Social software tools are easy to use and make provision for self-forming networks where virtual environments enforce much less sense of hierarchy than in the real world (Avram 2006).

The bottom up approach of social software encourages responsibility and content ownership and, at the same time, opens wide opportunities for collaboration and interaction. Professionals sharing the same interests, despite having different backgrounds, find them extremely useful for locating worldwide expertise, keeping up to date with the latest developments in multiple fields and for connecting to each other. The approach supported by this category of tools is informal, innovative and flexible, giving enhanced support to the user-centric perspective because it empowers users by bringing the tools to them and not the opposite way around (Avram 2006).

In a thriving democracy, people have the opportunity to earn a living, to grow and contribute their skills as value members of an organization and to have a purpose beyond subsistence. In a thriving democracy, the broader society is economically healthy, benefiting its individual members (Haas Edersheim 2007).

Key areas of social software include:

- **Web logs** or simply a blog, which is a Web application enabling periodic posts on a common Web page with public access (Avram 2006)
- **Wikis** are Web sites or other hypertext document collections that allow users to add to and edit the content. A Wiki enables documents to be written collectively in a simple mark-up language using a Web browser (Avram 2006). They constitute an extreme form of democracy since they are Web pages that can be edited by any reader or can have authentication set by the owner. Enabling shared authorship and delivering facilities for multiple authors to work on content, exchange ideas and connect information in a potentially sophisticated network of pages, Wikis can foster rapid and easy collaboration within business networks and can be used to create multiple workspaces (Papailiou, Apostoulou and Mentzas 2007).
- **Social networking services**, which are social network circles in which people interact and connect with other people. They transcend strict delineation between personal and business activities, and transcend organizational boundaries and hierarchies. Social networks provide the essential context needed to make knowledge sharing possible, valuable, efficient and effective (Avram 2006).

5 Virtual communities

A virtual community or on-line community is a group of people who primarily interact via communication media such as letters, telephone, email or Usenet, rather than face to face. If the mechanism is a computer network, it is called an on-line community. A computer-mediated community (CMC) uses social software to regulate the activities of participants. Although the term virtual community does not have a universal definition as many authors have differing opinions, a virtual community may be understood to be a virtual community in a social network with a common interest, idea, task or goal that interacts in a virtual society across time, geographical and organizational boundaries and is able to develop personal relationships (Wikipedia 2007).

Virtual communities have different levels of interaction and participation among members and range from adding comments or tags to a blog or message board to competing in on-line video games. There may well be a difference between traditional, structured on-line communities, for example message boards and chat rooms, and the more individual centric bottom-up social tools, for example blogs and instant messaging. Virtual communities or on-line communities are used by a variety of social groups interacting via the Internet, but this does not suggest that there are strong bonds between the members; they might remain relative strangers while the membership turnover rate could be high (Wikipedia 2007).

The prevalence of the Internet has fostered the proliferation of virtual communities, the nature of which is diverse, and while the benefits are not necessarily realized or pursued by many, it is an area in which knowledge citizens are particularly prevalent and where they ultimately benefit from the use of the Internet by either seeking help or helping others in a community (Wikipedia 2007).

People are motivated to contribute to virtual communities for different reasons and various on-line media, for example Wikis, blogs, chat rooms and electronic mailing lists, are increasingly becoming greater sharing resources. Many of these communities are highly cooperative, establish their own unique culture and often involve significant time from contributors while there is no monetary gain

(Wikipedia 2007).

6 Conclusion

While technology and the Internet have played a major role in 'surfacing' and making knowledge citizenship a transparent practice, let us not forget that knowledge citizenship is a personal endeavour, a belief and a personal practice. Whether it is a chief in a tribe passing down knowledge to young tribesman through story telling in Kenya or a knowledge manager in South Africa conversing with fellow practitioners via a Yahoo! virtual community, the motivation to share and learn is what makes knowledge citizenship a significant contribution to humankind.

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