Creating and Maintaining an Online Community

A primer for community organizers and moderators

INTRODUCTION

"In eLearning, if content is king, then context is queen," said Elliott Masie at TechLearn 2004. This context is what helps make tacit knowledge explicit, transform best practices into training points and enhance social capital to intellectual capital within the organization. This context is built in professional relationships, collaboration and increasingly in online communities.

Businesses can use online communities to support:

- Global communities of practice.

- Distributed project teams engaged in action learning.

- Senior managers who need to touch base with colleagues during the lulls in face-to-face executive leadership programs.

- A variety of other informal learning and knowledge-sharing activities.

Although creating an online community presents attractive benefits, it is not without risk. A failed community has unintended consequences. It reinforces the attitude of "that sort of thing can't work in our culture," which very quickly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. With its failure may go the opportunity to move one step closer to becoming a learning organization, as Arie de Geus spoke about when he said, "The only sustainable competitive advantage is the ability to learn faster than the competition."

This paper is for those folks who are chartered to start an online community but do not have extensive personal experience with participating in, managing, organizing or moderating such communities online. Although some of the principles apply to other types of communities, this paper focuses on online groups and communities sponsored within a corporate setting, as well as informal learning and/or knowledge sharing.

In this paper, you will learn details about four critical success factors and four stages of online communities — what we call the 4x4 Matrix. This provides a framework for considering the issues that you will need to address as you plan, launch and maintain your online community.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

A successful eCommunity is a little bit like a three-legged stool. It requires effective **people**, **processes** and **technology**. For the stool to be useful, however, it also needs to have a **purpose**, because that will determine the way you design the stool.

The same four elements are requirements for creating and maintaining a successful online community (which we will also refer to here as an eCommunity).

Purpose

Research and experience suggest that a **shared sense of purpose** is a critical success factor for online teams. Purpose is the compass for the group. It provides direction, motivation and a standard against which to measure your success.

You can understand purpose at the abstract level of vision or mission and at the operational level of goals or objectives.

eCommunities may have multiple levels and types of purposes. At a concrete, task level, the purpose of a Knowledge and Learning Community may be to share best practices, with the goal of adding 20 new practices to the organization's knowledge management system. At a more abstract, process level, the purpose of that same group may be to build the organization's social capital.

There are two common points of failure that we see in people who are sponsoring or starting online communities. First, people often ignore the question of purpose, or they assume that the purpose exists and all stakeholders and participants understand it in the same way. Second, a group's sponsor may mandate its purpose and believe that as long as she clearly informs participants of the purpose of the group, she has dealt with the question of purpose.

Nothing can be further from the truth. Explicit purpose is essential, and you cannot assume it. Buy-in is essential, and you cannot mandate it.

In considering the question of purpose, we need to address two related questions:

1. What's in it for the sponsors? Most online communities need executive sponsorship to succeed, and most executive sponsors need to have a clear line of sight to the achievement of a business objective.
2. What's in it for participants? Remember, they are busy people, and they will be asking themselves, "What will I find or do here that I can't find or do more easily in other ways?"

The sponsor's purpose drives success metrics; participants' purpose drives utilization. Purpose is a critical success factor, and experienced eCommunity managers have methods to address this question.

People

eCommunities are like colocated communities. They are fundamentally about **people**, not about the **places** in which they meet.

In the "people" realm, there are two central factors that community organizers must manage: (1) the **skills** that people need and (2) the formal and informal **roles** that people will play.

Skills

To participate effectively in an online, computer-mediated community, participants must have certain basic skills, including how to:

- Type at a moderate rate of speed.
- Use a browser.
- Upload and download files.
- Install add-ins (if required, for example, for Web meetings or downloading .pdf or .zip files).

Even if you do not need to provide instruction in these, you may find that there are other skills unique to your community technology that you must teach many of your participants, such as how to resize pictures, post news stories and events or use special formatting commands that are unique to your collaboration software.

You may also need to find ways to enhance members' soft skills in areas such as:

- How to use humor online.

- When to choose different communications media.
- How to give feedback in a semipublic arena.

In addition, unless you have experienced staff members who already have **online** facilitation skills, you may need to upskill the people who will serve as hosts or moderators for your online community.

Roles

Our experience with online communities over the past 15 years suggests that over 80% of "self-organizing" communities (i.e., ones without moderators or hosts) fail. The moderator plays a critical role during the first three stages of a group in welcoming new members, stimulating discussions, networking members together and keeping the group vital and alive. Even more mature Stage 4 groups can benefit from a moderator, although over time her role must adapt to the changing dynamics of the group.

The organizer's role in creating the group establishes the moderator's role in facilitating it. As the organizer plans the group, he must make critical decisions regarding membership, technology and sponsor involvement. The organizer is usually involved in recruiting members, building "buzz" around the community, managing stakeholder expectations and planning the community launch activities.

The organizer may ask selected community members to take on certain roles within the group as well. During the startup phase, some may serve as "ringers" to seed discussions or respond to selected posts, and others may serve as "buddies" for new members. As the group matures, the organizer may ask selected members to serve rotating terms as content managers or facilitators.

During the planning phase, the community organizer should think through all issues related to norms and roles and create strategies for whom to involve in planning activities and how to involve them.

Process

Processes describe the way people interact within the community. In creating and managing communities, organizers and moderators need to consider the way that people **should** interact, and the ways that, in fact, they **do**.

Norms

Norms are guidelines for acceptable behavior within the eCommunity. Helping the community arrive at norms that will make the group effective is a central task of the community manager. Some of the norms include the following:

- How often will people participate?
- Which discussion topics are fair game and which are not appropriate?
- Which communications media will members choose to give feedback to one another, and how will they phrase that feedback?
- What type of humor and/or language is acceptable to the group?
- How will members share files — via email, by posting in the community space or to some other document management system?
- Which, if any, group communications are privileged and which can people share outside the group?

Practices

For the moderator to create a mature, productive community, there are three areas for which organizers and moderators need to develop guidelines and procedures in advance:
(1) participation, (2) media and (3) facilitation.

Participation. There are several factors you may wish to attend to here, including the following:

- How often do you expect members to come to the online center?

- What type of participation do you expect, e.g., is "lurking" considered a valid form of participation, or is it "taking without giving back"?
- How will you recognize waning participation?
- How will you encourage people to participate more, if required?

Media. Issues to consider here include the following:

- How will you develop a communications strategy that suggests which types of media will be most appropriate for which types of communications?
- How will you maintain interest by switching media?
- How will you guide people to use appropriate media, e.g., uploading files to the central file storage area rather than distributing them via group email?
- How will you encourage people to use unfamiliar media, e.g., Web meetings or discussion boards?

Facilitation. In our experience, one of the most common points of failure in business communities is lack of systematic facilitation by a trained, experienced online community manager or moderator. There are several questions you may wish to think about:

- Do you have in-house people who are trained and experienced?
- If not, do you have outside resources or the ability to train internal ones?
- What specific activities should the person do during the community startup and maintenance phases?
- How much time weekly will the moderator need to devote to these tasks?
- Who will provide coaching and feedback to the moderator and/or have sufficient visibility to ascertain whether there are performance variances?

Technology

Tall buildings have to be built on bedrock; they cannot rest on sand.

The technology that supports a distributed community is the bedrock on which it stands. Although you can hold face-to-face meetings even when the venue is imperfect, distributed communities are dead in the water if their technology doesn't work.

Although there are many technology issues that you may need to account for at some point, in our experience there are three critical factors you may want to keep in the forefront of your mind as you plan your online community: (1) access and compatibility, (2) sense of place and (3) communications.

Access and Compatibility

From where will your members log in? The answer to this question will drive specifications for whether you host the community behind the firewall or on an Internet site; the minimum and desired access speeds; and what type of operating system, browser and other software are required. *Hint: The best communities are available 24-7, from work, home and on the road.*

At a simple level, ensure that the operating systems and browsers are compatible with the online tools your community uses. High performing groups often find that there's a real advantage in having a common desktop suite because such features as revision tracking work best when everyone has the same version of the same word processor.

Sense of Place

As Jessica Lipnack says, "To be successful, **virtual teams** must construct virtual places." Folks who haven't actively participated in online communities often miss this subtlety.

Online communities are more like a book than a movie. You must use your imagination to fill in the gaps, rather than having a $100 million video production show you exactly how to visualize a situation. As a result, it's important that your technology and your practices support the use of spatial and human metaphors (e.g., members, not users; replies, not postings; eCommunity Centers, not portals).

It's important that your technology support moving the virtual furniture around to make your space a home and make the conversations as easily available as the polls, news and calendars.

Communities are about **people** who share these spaces, and it's important that your technology provide a sense of people as well as place. Technically called "copresence features," these may include such things as clickable links to personal profiles, thumbnail pictures of community members, a featured "member of the week" on the home page of the community center or a dynamic list of who's currently in the community center.

Communications

If communities are about people and places, they are equally about what they do together — interact, communicate and have dialogues and conversations to share knowledge and learn together.

The communication tools available to your group must include tools for individual and group interaction as well as synchronous and asynchronous conversations. You can enhance traditional tools such as telephones and email by using:

- Web meetings.
- Discussion rooms.
- Same-time chat and/or instant messaging.

You should weave these tools together, and use different ones for different purposes. Organizers should have a communications strategy, and moderators should deeply understand best practices in this regard.

It's critical to have a rich, robust set of asynchronous discussion rooms at the center of the communications web, such as those that good discussion forum software allows. This provides the group history, the equivalent of the "oral tradition," in co-located communities. The discussion room site becomes the forum for rich exchanges and dialogues; people get to know one another by the tenor of their thoughts. Social spaces allow for networking at a more personal level, and new members can acculturate by seeing the history of what has gone before.

The combination of the archives of content and context — centralized storage of files and documents — with the ability to access historical conversations creates the memory, history and traditions of the high performing eCommunity.

An abbreviated list of some of the most important things you should look for in your asynchronous discussion software includes the following:

- **Structure**: Create separate conferences or discussion rooms for different topic areas.
- **Speed**: Instantly advance to the next discussion response.
- **Rich posts**: Attach files and display pictures, links and formatted text in discussion responses.
- **Informative item list**: See the discussion titles in a conference, along with their author, number of responses and date of last activity.
- **Linear discussions**: Read the initial post and the responses to it in one transcript to facilitate deeper dialogue.
- **Read all new**: Click one link to go to all the unread material in the community center.
- **Search**: Search for all discussions having specified key words in them.
- **Navigation**: Easily navigate back "up stream" from a response to its parent discussion, to its parent conference and to the home page of the community center.
- **Subscription**: Subscribe to discussions of interest so you receive notification via email when there is new activity.
- **Moderator tools**: Manage discussions by archiving obsolete topics, moving discussions to the appropriate place and editing or deleting inappropriate posts.

- **Management tools**: See which conferences and discussions are more and less active, how often each member has logged into the space and who has read how far in each discussion.
- **Moderator access control**: Control who can access which conference and how much access each participant has. Different rooms should be able to have different moderators.

THE 4X4 MATRIX

The 4x4 Matrix helps teach managers how to create effective eCommunities. It maps the four critical success factors against four stages so you can quickly assess where your community's strengths and weaknesses are and know where to devote your efforts in creating and maintaining a high performance community.

Factors	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Purpose	Ineffective purpose	Partially effective purpose	Effective purpose	High impact purpose
People	Ineffective skills & roles	Partially effective skills & roles	Effective skills & roles	High impact skills & roles
Process	Ineffective norms & practices	Partially effective norms & practices	Effective norms & practices	High impact norms & practices
Technology	Ineffective toolset	Partially effective toolset	Effective toolset	High impact toolset

A quick assessment helps you ascertain the stage of your existing or planned eCommunity vis-à-vis the critical success factors. It can help you plan where to invest your energy in managing or building your eCommunity and where to obtain additional support from outside resources.

To use the assessment, refer to the **Criteria for the 4x4 Matrix** found in Appendix A. Rate your eCommunity against each factor and draw lines between them, as shown in the sample below.

Sample

Community Planning Assessment		1	2	3	4
Purpose		0	0	0	0
People	Skills	0	0	0	0
	Roles	0	0	0	0
Process	Norms	0	0	0	0
	Practices	0	0	0	0
Technology	Access and Use	0	0	0	0
	Sense of place	0	0	0	0
	Communications	0	0	0	0
	Group memory	0	0	0	0

Community Planning Assessment		1	2	3	4
Purpose		o	o	o	o
People	Skills	o	o	o	o
	Roles	o	o	o	o
Process	Norms	o	o	o	o
	Practices	o	o	o	o
Technology	Access and Use	o	o	o	o
	Sense of place	o	o	o	o
	Communications	o	o	o	o
	Group memory	o	o	o	o

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APPENDIX A: CRITERIA FOR THE 4X4 MATRIX

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
	The effectiveness of groups at this stage comes from good luck, not good planning.	*Groups at this stage often do not meet more than minimum stakeholders' goals. Typically, few participants are satisfied with their experience.*	*Effective groups typically begin to meet stakeholders' goals and achieve participant satisfaction.*	*High impact groups generally exceed stakeholders' expectations and begin to create rich social capital for the organization.*
Purpose	The group's purpose is unclear in sponsors', organizers' and/or participants' minds.	Most stakeholders believe they understand the purpose of the group; however, it is chartered in writing and there may not be complete alignment around it.	A written charter exists and all stakeholders are aligned with it, but a line of sight between it and day to day activities may not be apparent to participants.	People conduct day to day activities with a clear understanding of how they align with the group's purpose and charter.
People				
Skills	▪ Many participants are unaware of the available tools. ▪ Most team members are unable to use one or more available tools. ▪ No training has been provided.	▪ Training has been provided and participants are aware of available tools. ▪ Many team members still find tools awkward to use. ▪ Some team members are unable to use one or more available tools.	▪ A few team members find tools awkward to use. ▪ Most team members use basic features of tools easily and effectively. ▪ A few team members leverage tools by using advanced features.	▪ All team members use basic features of tools easily and effectively. ▪ Many/most team members leverage tools by using advanced features.
Roles	▪ No community management roles have been defined. ▪ No consideration has been given to the accountabilities of participants or whether different participant types of roles should be defined.	▪ A community management role has been defined, but the specific tasks and schedules are unclear or undefined. ▪ Participants' accountabilities have been defined. ▪ No consideration has been given to different participant roles.	▪ Community management tasks and schedules are clearly defined. ▪ Additional participant roles (such as buddies, ringers and content providers) have been defined. ▪ Informal leaders begin to emerge within the group.	▪ Informal leaders are given formal roles within the group. ▪ Tasks and schedules for the community manager change as the group matures.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Process				
Norms	▪ No discussions have been held about norms and commitments with regard to such things as frequency of participation, guidelines for file sharing and communications media to use. ▪ There may not be a name for the group. ▪ The group's composition may be unclear. ▪ Participants feel uncertain about whether they are "on the bus" or "off the bus." ▪ Participants don't identify themselves as part of this community/team/group.	▪ Group members have agreed to and codified norms and commitments. ▪ No formal or informal processes are in place to reward or sanction behavior. ▪ Community managers (if they exist) are inexperienced at socializing the group to norms in a professionally appropriate way. ▪ The group has a name. ▪ The group's composition is clear. ▪ Participants feel as if they are a part of the group but may be uncertain of their roles and what's appropriate.	▪ Formal and/or informal processes are in place to reward or sanction behavior. ▪ Community managers actively engage in socialization activities. ▪ Participants feel confident about their roles in the group.	▪ Group norms have been fully socialized and the group works with the community manager to form a self-regulating entity. ▪ Participants feel proud of the group and often talk about it to co-workers. ▪ Viral marketing has now started for this way of working.
Practices	▪ Participation is spotty at best. ▪ Files are transferred via email with cc: to all. ▪ Communication is "pushed" to receivers using legacy technologies. ▪ News is "published" by authorities. ▪ Organizers may not exist or, if they do, have little or no experience, knowledge or skill at online community management.	▪ A minority of members participates regularly; most members participate sporadically. ▪ A minority of members stores files on the website; the majority still transfers files via email with cc: to all. ▪ Communication is primarily "pushed" using legacy technologies. ▪ A minority of participants uses Web-based ("pull") communications technologies on occasion. ▪ News is "published" by authorities. ▪ Organizers exist but are often inexperienced. ▪ No toolkit or written plan for community management exists. ▪ Organizers have good intentions but do not carry out duties daily.	▪ Most members participate regularly; a few participate sporadically. ▪ Almost all files are stored appropriately on the website; the transfer of files via email with cc: to all is dying out. ▪ New and old communications technologies are woven together in accordance with group communications norms. ▪ The group itself begins to generate news. ▪ Experienced organizers use a toolkit and written plan for community management. ▪ Organizers carry out duties daily.	▪ The group finds appropriate ways to transition members out of the community and bring new members in over time. ▪ The group finds new ways to use communications technologies to enhance its performance. ▪ The group itself generates news. ▪ Organizers still maintain stewardship for the group's process but transition their facilitation activities to ones that are appropriate for a high performing, self-organizing group.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Technology				
Access and Use	▪ Access to Web-based tools is unreliable or at dial-up speed. ▪ Participants use incompatible tools.	▪ Access to Web-based tools is reliable and at broadband speed. ▪ Participants use different tools that offer basic compatibility.	▪ Participants use the same tools, providing compatibility of advanced features.	
Sense of Place	▪ No technology is available to provide the group a sense of place.	▪ A basic website is available as a "place" for the team to store files. ▪ The website does not provide spatial metaphors, copresence features or news and events. ▪ There are no integrated discussions.	▪ The website integrates file management, news and events, and discussion features. ▪ The website does not provide spatial metaphors. ▪ The website may have simple profiles. ▪ The website does not provide robust copresence features such as presence indicators, instant messaging, participant thumbnails and "featured participant" blocks. ▪ Although basic interaction features may be available, the site "feels" like a website rather than a virtual community center.	▪ The website integrates file management and content management with rich discussion and copresence features. ▪ The website may also integrate other groupware tools such as polling and decision support. ▪ Rich community management tools are available to community organizers. ▪ The site "feels" like a virtual community center rather than a website.
Communications	▪ Email and telephone are the primary or sole communications technologies. ▪ No asynchronous group communication tool is available. ▪ No synchronous Web-based group communication tool is available.	▪ Synchronous Web meeting technology is available, but no instant messaging or chat technology is available. ▪ Simple asynchronous discussion board technology is available.	▪ Instant messaging and/or chat technology may be available. ▪ Robust discussion forum technology is available for asynchronous discussions.	▪ Asynchronous discussion forums are integrated with email, instant messaging and synchronous Web meetings.
Group Memory	▪ No technology for community file sharing and archiving discussions exists.	▪ The website provides basic file storage features. ▪ There is no technology for archiving discussions.	▪ Easily managed, multilevel folders organize files. ▪ File storage is not integrated with desktop applications. ▪ Discussions are archived and simple search capability provided.	▪ File storage is integrated with desktop applications via drag-and-drop technology. ▪ Discussions are archived and robust search capability provided.

Facilitating an Online Community
A practical guide for community managers and facilitators

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this white paper is to provide a practical guide for facilitators and community managers who are creating and maintaining an eCommunity. The focus of this paper is on corporate eCommunities — groups that organizations charter for a specific business purpose and that consist of employees and occasionally others in the organization's value chain.

The principles and techniques discussed assume that your eCommunity is based in a collaboration platform such as Q2Learning's xPERT eCommunity or alternative collaboration or discussion-forum-based platforms. The principles and techniques may be less relevant to groups based in email lists or synchronous technologies such as Web conferencing software.

BEFORE OPENING DAY

PREPARING THE ECOMMUNITY

Initial Structure of Discussions

On launch, initial participants should see just enough material. There should be activity and interaction in the space, but the initial amount should not be overwhelming. Initial participants shouldn't have to work hard to catch up with a host of ongoing discussions.

What is "just enough"? Use the 3-4-5 rule. Have three discussion rooms, each with four items, each with five responses. This provides enough substance without being overwhelming. As you seed your discussions, consider two things:

- What discussions would be interesting to initial community members?
- Who might be a good candidate (e.g., interesting, important, etc.) to seed these discussions?

Additional guidelines
- Clearly state each discussion room's purpose — possibly in the room header, possibly in Item 1.
- Where appropriate, have a place for participants to introduce themselves or declare their presence. This may be in one room or in all — depending on the structure of the space.
- Have a help desk — a clear place that folks can go for help.
- On the home page, clearly indicate what first-time participants can do first to get acclimated.
- Provide a navigation aid — the first item they see might have an overview of the space in general either in text or graphically.
- Have a norms aid — again, one of the first items they see might have the 7 +/- 2 norms of the community.

Identify ringers.

Identify three-five participants whom you can call on to respond to discussions so that not all facilitator-like responses come from you.

FACILITATION

STARTUP PHASE

During the first 60-90 days of a new eCommunity, the norms and practices of the group become established, and the tone of the group is set. Although you can change these later, it's a lot easier if level setting is done from the outset. The facilitator can play a critical role in this process.

Here are some practical things that help build an active and robust community space:

Daily

Scan all discussions.

Read all posts in the site **daily** so you can see what facilitation (if any) is required.

Welcome newcomers.

It is critical that people receive responses to their initial posts. At the very least, there should be a "glad you're here" post. It's even better to have posts that guide them to discussions they might be interested in — especially with links they can click on directly in the post. The best way to make newcomers feel welcome, however, is with a call. A 20-minute tour of the space, combined with helping them fill out their profile and upload their picture, can initiate a relationship that can last for years.

> *Hint: If you don't have time for this, arrange for ringers who are willing to be buddies to three new participants.*

Ensure responses to substantive posts.

In your daily scan, make note of posts that require responses, such as requests participants have made or substantive posts they put a lot of thought into. If no one has responded to such posts within two days, email or call a ringer or other participant and ask them to help.

Weekly

Reach out to one-time visitors.

Watch for folks who come once for an experiment and then don't return. If newcomers don't come back to the community space within a week, send them an email to welcome them again. Indicate that folks have responded to them in the eCommunity, and provide a link they can click on to see the responses.

Monitor active discussions.

Look over recent postings in active discussions to ensure that the discussion is still on topic. If not, think through whether the change is a natural progression or topic drift — possibly asking the topic's author offline. Consider starting a new item and copying relevant posts into it when a new and important topic emerges, or have a ringer make a comment that brings the discussion back to its original purpose in the case of temporary drifts.

Even on-topic discussions can benefit from occasional summaries. Occasionally post a summary of the main points to date and (if they are in apparent opposition) ask about assumptions or differing experience bases that might underlie the divergent points of view.

In general, however, remember "less is more." Your role is to facilitate, not to control the discussion.

Identify inactive discussions.

Each week, identify discussions that have no new responses during the past seven days. (Good community software allows you to quickly see such discussions.) Go into each of those items and see if the discussion seems finished (or finished for now) or whether it warrants revitalizing (e.g., there are unanswered questions or the like). If so, contact the item author, a ringer or another participant to take stewardship for the discussion.

Identify inactive participants.

Refer to the user statistics each week to see which participants have not come into the site. If a participant has not come for two weeks, email or call him to (a) find out what his particular interests/needs are, (b) point him to some discussions he might be interested in and (c) find out how well the community is meeting his needs.

Contact two people offline.

The better you understand what individual participants' needs and interests are, the better you can facilitate their experience. Contact two participants by phone each week to find out how the community is working for them, what they'd like to see in it and how they'd be willing to participate to enhance the community. This can be a great way to build commitment to participation.

Seed a new discussion.

Start a new discussion each week. It might be about a news item that relates to the overall purpose of the group, events that are happening to community members or a focused discussion about best practices of interest to the group.

Alternatively, consider a new social discussion for your coffee shop:

- What movies have you seen lately?
- What books are you reading this month?
- Microsoft Word: all the nooks and crannies
- Mindmaps: a new tool for personal productivity

The idea here is to off-topic enough to have some element of fun, but on-topic enough that it relates somehow to the overall purpose of your community. Initiate a regular (e.g., weekly) fun or stimulating discussion and/or activity that members can look forward to.

MAINTENANCE PHASE

As the community matures, the tasks of the community manager and facilitator shift. Issues they must address include:

- Recruiting new participants.
- Ensuring that new participants are not overwhelmed.
- Maintaining the vitality of the space.

Orienting New Participants

New participants will find an overabundance of material in a mature, robust community. They may have the experience of entering in the middle of the movie because discussions have been going on and old hands know who's who, understand each other's personalities and may even use acronyms and references that are unique to the community. Here are some techniques to address these issues:

Welcome center

Have a discussion room that is just for new folks, and make sure to facilitate it well by staff, including some "older" participants. Have items for participants to introduce themselves as well as items for technical support and for navigating a potentially confusing space.

Buddy system

Institute a buddy system in which an old hand calls the person, finds out her interests/needs and walks her through the space to show her where discussions of interest might occur.

Navigation

Show new participants how to just see the most active discussions and the ones relevant to them, and show them how to best ignore the other material on the site.

Pruning and Organizing

As time goes on, discussion items and possibly even discussion rooms proliferate. Many, in fact, become inactive in the natural evolution of the community. Without pruning, this dead wood clutters the community, making it harder to keep it robust and vibrant. Consider the following strategies:

Quarterly retirement

Retire inactive items, and possibly even inactive discussion rooms, periodically. Post a list of items that you will retire within a few weeks unless someone posts a response in them.

New discussion areas

Create a method whereby community members can request the creation of new discussion areas, if there is sufficient interest. If the facilitator controls the creation of individual discussions (discussion topics), again have a method whereby community members can request new ones.

Notification

As the community matures, individuals' interest waxes and wanes. Pushing community happenings to their desktops can help maintain the robustness of the community. Consider a monthly email newsletter that participants can subscribe to. It might contain a list of discussion rooms, with a sentence about three or four interesting discussions in each. The descriptions, naturally, should link to the eCommunity space so participants have an easy way to find out more — and re-enter the community.

TERMINOLOGY

Executive Sponsor

The executive sponsor is the senior manager who charters (and funds) the project and appoints the community manager.

Community Manager

The community manager creates and maintains the eCommunity. This may be the same person as the facilitator, but it doesn't have to be.

Content Manager

The content manager keeps content fresh in the eCommunity. This may or may not be the same person as the facilitator.

Facilitator

The facilitator is responsible for the day-to-day process aspects of the eCommunity — ensuring participation, mediating disputes, organizing discussions, etc.

Moderator

Not always used in eCommunities, the moderator approves individual postings before they are published.

FACILITATION CHECKLIST

eCommunity Facilitation Checklist		
Daily		
	☐	Scan all discussions.
	☐	Welcome newcomers.
	☐	Ensure responses to substantive posts.
Weekly		
	☐	Reach out to one-time visitors.
	☐	Monitor active discussions.
	☐	Identify inactive discussions.
	☐	Identify inactive participants.
	☐	Contact two people offline.
	☐	Start one new discussion.
Monthly		
	☐	Email newsletter.
Quarterly		
	☐	Retire old discussions.

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Q2Learning provides end-to-end solutions for corporate training, based on our unique and powerful blended learning approach. Our solution includes a complete methodology and platform to implement high impact blended learning programs to your employees and customers. Dr. Bill Bruck is the lead solutions architect for Q2Learning. A clinical psychologist and best-selling author, Dr. Bruck has written The Essential Microsoft Office 2000 Book, Make Your Mouse Roar, and eight other books on the effective use of information technology that are translated and sold internationally.

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