

## **The Importance of the Online-Community to Current and Future Facility Managers**

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Facility Managers (FMers) face a myriad of complex interdisciplinary problems that require heterogeneous knowledge and integrated solutions. FMers are integral members of interdisciplinary teams whose missions are to successfully complete complex technological projects within limited time, budget, and quality constraints. FMers provide continuous feedback to a variety of professional disciplines effectively identifying problems, describing feasible solutions, negotiating consensus resolutions, and implementing timely adaptations. FMers are taught that they do not have to re-invent the wheel; they just need to know where to go to find the answers. Therefore, FMers ask the same questions: Who else is facing a similar problem? When did they encounter the problem? What method did they use to identify the preferred solution for the problem? How much did the preferred solution cost to implement?

Today, one approach that FMers can employ to find proven solutions for their technical problems is to become an active member of a supportive and collaborative online professional networking community. The psychological need for FMers to connect with their peers from their office environments is more pronounced in the current financial environment of shrinking travel budgets. The inadvertent impact from these shrinking budgets is that FMers are unable to attend professional conferences; where informal interactions are an essential part of the conference experience. I believe that the existing online social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Ning, etc can be challenged to develop mechanisms for increasing the effectiveness of communications as part of the traditional professional networks.

Online social networks serve as community bulletin boards for targeted sub-populations such as teenagers, college students, etc. These sub-populations connect on a regular basis through various communication mechanisms such as adobe connect, instant messaging, blogs, etc. I believe that social network platforms can provide the foundation for developing effective professional networks to efficiently enhance interaction opportunities among colleagues. These online interactions can be designed as part of a collaborative community setting, which is similar to the informal interactions found in a traditional conference setting.

The fulfillment of the psychological need for human interaction requires a collaborative community setting to facilitate a supportive atmosphere where individuals are encouraged to talk freely among their colleagues. The *American Heritage Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> College Ed.*, defines “collaborative” as working together in a joint intellectual, literary, or scientific effort. “Community” is further defined as a group having a common interest, identity, or possession. Therefore, for FMers, a “collaborative community” setting should provide a “supportive atmosphere for group interaction through joint participation in common intellectual, literary, or scientific efforts.” FMers who participate within an “atmosphere of collaborative community” enhance their opportunity to develop innovative solutions for the complex technological problems.

Is an “atmosphere of collaborative community” important to FMers? Human beings have a strong sociological need to be part of a supportive community is a widely accepted paradigm for successful living. Human beings deprived of nurturing relationships during their formative years are often psychologically stunted and unable to assimilate adequately into society. The individual, as a member of a supportive community, will exhibit courageous traits in the face of uncertainty through strong relationships formed by trusting other community members. It is generally recognized that there is a positive correlation between those who have experienced strong mentoring relationships and those who are contributing community

members. The growing memberships and increasing demands for online social networks such as iPhones, blogs, Twitter, Ning, Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, LinkedIn, WIKI, YouTube, etc indicate a significant need for a supportive and collaborative community across the educational, business, mobile, and web environments.

Is an “atmosphere of collaborative community” beneficial to FMers? Human beings are joining online social networks in large numbers to participate in meaningful and relevant relationships with peers. Whether blogging, messaging, emailing, learning, mentoring, tutoring, socializing, dating, teaching, or sharing, these online social networks provide the digital and communication protocols to facilitate an “atmosphere of collaborative community” among their users. Online social networking significantly increases an individual’s sphere of influence among colleagues, mentors, and friends by fulfilling the need to connect with and engage others on a personal level. Online social networking allows the traditional classroom learning environment to be extended so that members are able to develop supportive relationships from their homes and/or offices at any hour of the day.

Is an “atmosphere of collaborative community” essential to FMers? FMers have traditionally belonged to several different professional associations such as IFMA, PRSM, AFE, ASHRAE, ASME, BOMA, and APPA. Currently, these professional associations operate in an environment of separation meaning that information is not collaboratively transferred across associations. Online social networks offer an effective means to overcome this discrepancy. Social media industries are currently developing digital technologies, which are useful for facilitating an “atmosphere of collaborative community” among FMers. Gnyawali et al (2010)<sup>i</sup> found that existing social networking companies base their core business strategy on the participation of and contributions from their respective memberships. The study found that in 2005 none of the top ten internet sites were socially-based. However, by 2008 six of the top ten internet sites were socially-based, which illustrated how rapidly the social media sector is growing. Gnyawali et al (2010) also found that to create perceived and real value for users the social media businesses must engage third-party partners and contributors. These joint ventures create value by leveraging shared knowledge and expertise to develop new applications and products that expand markets for existing applications and services. Gnyawali et al (2010) concluded that the web-based (Web 2.0) social networking industry is changing the way people communicate and socialize with one another. These companies are implementing innovations in digital technologies such as text, chat, video, file sharing, blogging, email, and group discussion to enhance the “atmosphere of collaborative community.”

Finally, I challenge you to begin building an “atmosphere of collaborative community” with your colleagues. Focus on incorporating these new communication mechanisms into your daily work habits. Remember that you are never too old to learn new tricks that will continue to ensure a culture of professionalism throughout the Facility Management community

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<sup>i</sup> Gnyawali, D. Fan, W., and Penner, J., *Competitive Actions and Dynamics in the Digital Age: An Empirical Investigation of Social Networking Firms*, Information Systems Research, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 2010



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