

Discovery – The Greatest Value of Professional Networking Technologies

What is Discovery (and for that matter, what is a professional network)?

If you understand the definition of discovery in the professional network context, you will probably understand immediately why it is arguably the most valuable aspect of professional networking technologies, and the most compelling argument for their deployment in an association. So let's define discovery – and before that, professional networking.

Professional networking technologies take their cue from social networks such as facebook and myspace. Those networks, and others, have taught us that very powerful social connections can be achieved between people when a critical mass forms around a common interest, and is supported by appropriate communication tools. Likewise, **professional networking technologies** support **professional** interactions among people who share common professional interests (for example, members of the same profession).

Discovery is one of the primary (if not the primary) benefits of professional networks. Discovery, in this context, means finding something or someone of value to you in your job or profession, which you would not likely have found were it not for the professional network technology deployed in your association. Immediately the value begins to become apparent, but let's articulate it now.

Why is discovery valuable (for the individual and the profession)?

The definition of discovery above (finding something or someone of value to you in your profession), leads us very quickly to the value of discovery, both to the individual, and to the profession. Looking at the definition it becomes apparent that discovery is really a prelude to education. If I find someone or something of value to me in my work, it is of value because I have learned something from it that enhances my ability to do my work. It may be some information related to a project I am working on, or some information regarding professional advancement, or a group of people who have useful knowledge and experience for collaboration on my current project.

The reason this is so important in large associations is because as a professional body grows so do natural barriers to communication. In a small professional community it is easy to keep track of what all practitioners are working on and where relevant information can be found. This ability disappears in a

profession with large numbers of practitioners, and is exacerbated by the physical distance which is sometimes present between them.

Therefore, it becomes inevitable that good work is often reproduced rather than reused or built upon. Professionals are doomed to learn only from their own mistakes rather than benefit from the lessons already learned by others. Existing information is continually recreated rather than created once and reused because the existing information is not easily accessible (discoverable). Outstanding work in the profession has only a local effect instead of a profession-wide effect. In short, large professions effectively become a collection of largely disjoint islands of communication and innovation, each one possibly functioning well internally, but largely in isolation with respect to one another. Professional knowledge assets (both in documents and in the minds of the practitioners), which cost a great deal to produce, and which have tremendous value, are rarely widely leveraged. Practitioners who would benefit by sharing knowledge or collaborating, cannot. The lost opportunity is as great as the inefficiency.

If there was a way to greatly enhance the ability for any practitioner in a large profession to easily “discover” the lessons already learned, the outstanding work already done, the useful information already created, and a cadre of people who possess needed experience or expertise, then each practitioner is able to benefit from the efficiencies created by scale, yet not be subject to the corresponding communication and knowledge barriers.

In essence, “discovery” ensures that practitioners have access to the full benefit of the relevant professional knowledge “asset” retained in documents or in the minds of other practitioners. Innovation, intelligence, hard work, knowledge and experience are not trapped on communication islands. Instead the best of these can be discovered and leveraged profession-wide, increasing efficiency and reducing costs.

Meaningful Discovery

Meaningful discovery occurs when the connection between people, or between a person and information, is highly specific and relevant to the people involved. Interestingly, the discovery model of the popular professional networking site LinkedIn may not very specific or relevant and often, therefore, not very useful. In LinkedIn, each member has a set of “connections”. Two people are connected in LinkedIn simply because they know one another. This is not a specific, relevant connection. If person A knows person B, and person B knows person C, then there is very little likelihood that A and C will find a specific, relevant reason to form a connection. These non-specific connections often work in purely social networks, but are far less useful in professional networks.

Instead, meaningful connections are formed when people have a specific and relevant interest in some common information, or some specific and relevant common interest. For example, if A is highly interested in industry compliance regulations, and B is interested in those same regulations, there is a very good chance that A and B will have a specific and relevant reason to interact. They are likely to be

able to learn from one another, may wish to pool some aspects of their knowledge, and possibly will find efficiencies in working together.

Of course, persons A and B must first discover one another in order to begin their interaction, knowledge sharing and knowledge pooling.

AssociCom Discovery

AssociCom Discovery Foci

In AssociCom, there are two primary foci for discovery – the information library and groups.

The AssociCom library is both a shared and personal resource for professionals. Professionals can add any information to their AssociCom library area (information can be a word document, excel, image, a web site, etc). When information is added, two important things happen. First, some metadata is associated with the information in order to enhance its discoverability. This can include a description, tags, topic descriptors, a title, etc. Second, unless marked private, all information added to a professional's collection is also added to the global collection accessible by all professionals.

AssociCom groups are collections of people sharing common interests. Groups consist of members, the group information library, group discussion areas, groups polls, questions and so on. Groups also have metadata associated with them to enhance their discoverability. This includes a group name, description, topic descriptor, tags, etc.

Discovery Without AssociCom

A typical usage scenario may transpire as follows. A practitioner new to the profession, person A, is contracted to write a manual detailing best practices for some procedure. In a normal scenario, person A would draw on their professional knowledge and published resources, ask personal professional contacts if anyone knows of someone experienced in the area, might form a focus group, would likely do a web search, and would otherwise gather information to best define and describe the procedure. In a small profession where all practitioners know one another, person A will have likely found all the relevant existent professional information. However, what if the profession has 5,000, 10,000, 20,000 or 30,000 practitioners? The likelihood of A having found all the relevant existent knowledge and expertise within the profession is very unlikely. This undiscovered knowledge and expertise was expensive to generate as a professional asset, but cannot be leveraged. Opportunities for both person A and anyone he or she may have collaborated with are lost.

Discovery With AssociCom

The same scenario with a professional networking tool like AssociCom is quite different. With AssociCom, person A would do a search on the professional association's AssociCom network using keywords that describe the procedure being written about. This search might yield some documents which already exist which cover the procedure to some degree. They might also yield an area in the library devoted to reference documents on this procedure, and possibly even a group of people who are interested in the procedure.

Let's say the procedure is difficult to search for and person A is only able to find one document covering that procedure. The first thing person A does is add this document to his/her own AssociCom library area in order to facilitate quick future access. The document itself is of some use. However, then person A sees that each document in AssociCom has some interesting information associated with it. First, A sees that there is a discussion area for this document which has been contributed to by 10 other practitioners. Person A clicks the "subscribe" button so that he/she will be instantly informed of any future activity in this discussion. The discussions are somewhat useful in themselves, however, of even more use are the 10 names of professionals who clearly have a strong enough connection to that procedure to weigh into a discussion on it.

In addition to those 10 names, person A also sees a list of other professionals – the people who have also added this document to their own personal AssociCom library areas. This list contains 12 people – some of whom had commented on the document. In total, there are now 18 unique practitioners across the large profession who have a significant interest in, and some knowledge about this procedure – all of whom person A can instantly contact.

Person A also discovers that this document is also in the library of n AssociCom group. Person A clicks on the group name and finds a wealth of highly relevant documents and discussions in the group library. Person A joins the group so that he/she will be instantly informed of any new discussions or library items in that group.

Before contacting any of the people he/she has discovered, person A clicks on one of them. Presented with that person is their complete personal AssociCom library – categorized by topic. Person A then filters the list of library items by the relevant topic and discovers 5 other documents which are just as useful as the one originally discovered. Each of those documents has a list of collectors, a set of discussions, and possibly some related groups. Each of those points to other highly related and relevant information, people and groups.

In short, AssociCom is a web of highly specific connections between people and information. Person A has followed this web to discover the relevant information in the profession, and along the way has inserted him/herself into that same web to be discovered by other practitioners. Person A has gone from a single document, to a list of relevant people specifically interested in that information, to the other related documents those other people have found, leading to yet a second tier of relevant people, leading to other documents, and so on. In doing so, AssociCom has created an accessible network of tightly interconnected and related information, and the people who work with, know about, and are interested in that information.

AssociCom takes a large profession and dynamically organizes its knowledge assets (both documented and held in the minds of practitioners) into an accessible, valuable resource. It brings together all related sharable information which would otherwise be trapped inside the many companies and offices of the profession. It makes the full professional knowledge asset discoverable, and creates opportunities for efficiencies and collaboration.

AssociCom enables association!