

Participation in Professional Communities: Antecedents and Outcomes of Interpersonal Exchange

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Participation in Professional Communities: Antecedents and Outcomes of Interpersonal Exchange

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Objective of the study

The aim of this thesis is to build a comprehensive understanding of professional communities and the dynamics within. This will be done by first examining the antecedents of knowledge sharing between professionals and then focusing to the outcomes of such activity. In addition, the practices of participation focusing on what is shared, where and how, are analyzed. By choosing these approaches the intention is that the thesis would give a good view on the role that the peers and partners in professional communities have when succeeding with career and tasks. In accordance with the exploratory take on this thesis, the purpose is not to form strict generalizations, but rather a solid understanding of the phenomenon. Academically the objective is to approach knowledge sharing with a novel angle by taking it to the professional context. In addition, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature of business networks by bringing a perspective of individual to the analysis.

Research method

Two distinct methods for gathering data were employed. Semi-structured interviews were used to cover the meanings that professionals give for professional communities. This data was complemented by using netnographic methods. The interaction between professionals was observed in virtual communities non-obtrusively in its natural setting. The data was analyzed by using procedures of open coding. The data was first conceptualized and then categorized by comparing the characteristics and properties of the concepts.

Findings

This thesis provides findings about the premises directing behavior in professional communities. In addition, the research detects the benefits achievable in professional communities and points out how those are exploited. The major finding is that the positions of participants in professional communities affect the perceptions and behavior regarding knowledge sharing the most. This means that informal interaction between representatives of competitors is hindered and open knowledge sharing frozen by rule. In contrary, knowledge sharing may be extremely fruitful between professionals working in different industries. Consequently, avoiding conflicts with company interest is the major barrier for participation. The results of the thesis suggest that with the help of knowledge gained and social capital derived from professional community one can increase efficiency of performance, business possibilities, career opportunities and individual social power. In addition, the contacts with peers can form a safety net decreasing the future risks. The findings suggest that people often opt out from professional interaction because of the possibility to lose valuable knowledge and therefore competitive advantage. However, it is argued that exchanging information may be beneficial if it is given organizational justification. By exploiting the benefits efficiently both individual and the company can receive value.

Keywords

Participation in communities, professional communities, virtual communities, knowledge sharing, knowledge management, social exchange, cooperation in business networks, netnography

Tutkimuksen tavoitteet

Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena on muodostaa käsitys ammatillisista yhteisöistä ja niihin osallistumisesta. Tutkimuksessa kartoitetaan ammattilaisten välisen tiedonvaihdon asetelmia sekä lopputuloksia. Lisäksi tavoitteena on selvittää tiedon jakamisen käytäntöjä: mitä jaetaan, missä ja milloin. Päämääränä on syventää ymmärrystä, miten vertaiset voivat olla hyödyksi ammattilaisen uralla ja tämän hetkissä työtehtävissä. Tutkivan tutkimusotteen mukaisesti tarkoituksena ei ole tehdä yleistyksiä vaan muodostaa laaja ja kattava ymmärrys aiheesta. Akateeminen tavoite on tutkia tiedonvaihdon uudesta näkökulmasta käsittelemällä sitä ammatillisessa yhteydessä. Lisäksi tutkielma pyrkii osallistumaan liiketoimintaverkostoja koskevaan akateemiseen kirjallisuuteen tuomalla yksilön näkökulman yritysten väliseen yhteistyöhön.

Tutkimusmenetelmä

Tutkielman aineistoa kerätessä on hyödynnetty kahta erillistä menetelmää. Puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla kerättiin aineistoa, jonka avulla selvitettiin merkityksiä, joita ammattilaiset antavat vertaisyhteisöille. Haastatteluaineistoa täydennettiin käyttämällä netnografisia menetelmiä. Ammattilaisten välistä kanssakäymistä havainnoitiin virtuaalisissa yhteisöissä. Täten ilmiötä voitiin tarkastella luonnollisessa ympäristössä ilman tutkijan vaikutusta. Ymmärrys aiheesta on muodostettu käyttämällä analysoinnissa avointa luokittelua. Aineisto käsitteellistettiin, minkä jälkeen luokkia muodostettiin vertaamalla käsitteiden ominaisuuksia keskenään.

Löydökset

Tämä tutkielma tarjoaa löydöksiä ennen kaikkea tekijöistä, jotka ohjaavat käytöstä ammatillisiin yhteisöihin osallistuttaessa. Lisäksi tutkimus erottelee hyötyjä, joita yhteisöistä voi saavuttaa, sekä käsittelee näiden hyödyntämistä edelleen. Merkittävin löydös osoittaa, että muiden yhteisön jäsenien asemat vaikuttavat osallistumiseen huomattavasti. Epävirallinen kanssakäyminen kilpailijoiden edustajien välillä on rajoittunutta, ja avoin tiedonvaihdanta estynyttä. Sitä vastoin tiedonvaihdanta voi olla erittäin hedelmällistä eri aloilla työskentelevien vertaisten välillä. Näin ollen rikasta tiedonvaihdantaa tapahtuu ainoastaan, kun se ei ole ristiriidassa edustetun yrityksen etujen kanssa. Tämän tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että yhteisöistä ammennetun tiedon ja sosiaalisen pääoman avulla ammattilainen pystyy lisäämään työnsä tehokkuutta, liiketoiminta- ja uramahdollisuuksia, sekä sosiaalista asemaansa työyhteisössä. Lisäksi laaja vertaisverkosto auttaa kohtaamaan tulevaisuuden epävarmuutta vähentämällä riskejä. Löydöksen mukaan merkityksellisen tiedon ja täten kilpailuedun menettämisen seurauksena ammattilaiset osaltaan välttävät tiedonvaihdantaa vertaistensa kanssa. Tutkimuksessa muodostetun ymmärryksen myötä voidaan kuitenkin sanoa, että vertaisten välinen yhteistyö voi olla hyödyksi, mikäli siihen suhtaudutaan strategisesti. Hyödyntämällä ammatillisia yhteisöjä tehokkaasti sekä yksilö, että edustettu yritys voivat hyötyä niistä.

Avainsanat

Yhteisöihin osallistuminen, ammatilliset yhteisöt, virtuaaliyhteisöt, tiedonvaihdanta, sosiaalinen vaihdanta, yhteistyö liiketoimintaverkostoissa, netnografia

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Due to a recent turn in the working culture, the approach to one's career has become more and more project-oriented. Employers are seen as steps on the career path which can be conceptualized as an enterprise of an individual aiming for expertise. In the past, working for the same employer throughout one's professional career used to be common. Nowadays, as the attitude towards employers has become less loyal, the role of peers, colleagues and partners is becoming more and more significant.

Reflecting this cultural turn, communities as vehicles of learning and knowledge creation are also seen valuable in the professional context. However, as pointed out in the previous literature, there is a strong paradox in knowledge sharing. Wasko and Faraj (2005) ask '*Why Should I Share*' in the headline of their article; knowledge and its possession are perceived as sources of power (Wernerfelt 1984), so why to share it? In the professional context the issue becomes even stronger as knowledge possessed by an individual can be regarded to construct competitive advantage of both individual and company. Despite the possibility to lose the power, virtual professional communities, for example, are full of lively communication where knowledge is openly shared. Professional also get together in educative seminars discuss about insights and experiences.

At first glance, sharing knowledge to outsiders fits poorly to the company operating in a competitive business network. Knowledge is traditionally seen to be one of the most valuable resources for the company (Wernerfelt 1984, Mowery, Oxley & Silverman 1996). According to Wernerfelt (1984) some of the competitive advantage is lost when specific expertise is leaked beyond the organizational boundaries. As organizational knowledge is embedded in the employees (Von Hippel 1987) individuals sharing knowledge in professional communities would be then harmful for the organization. Despite the competitive setting, cooperation between direct and close competitors occur (Bengtsson & Kock 1999), and the encounters between parties where knowledge is transmitted unintentionally (Brown & Duguid 1991) are inevitable.

All these aspects build the premises for an extremely interesting and multidimensional phenomenon of professional communities. The context is full of paradoxes and conflicts between interests of company and individual. These fascinating characters are yet to be understood, which raises a need and extremely interesting premises for this study.

1.2. Research Gap

The dynamics of communities as vehicles for knowledge exchange (e.g. Brown & Duguid 1991, Wenger 1998, Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998) and the drivers and barriers for contribution within (e.g. Ardichvili, Page & Wentling 2003, Wasko & Faraj 2005) have been under research constantly. Nevertheless, the studies have been focusing on the communities that have emerged among consumers or within organizations. Thus, there is a lack of analysis about knowledge sharing in communities that are formed in business to business context. Scholars having researched the inter-firm relationships (Bengtsson & Kock 1999, Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004, Mowery *et al.* 1996) have limited themselves to analyze business networks and left the individual actors out of their analysis. This study will focus the analysis on the individual as an actor in professional context. Hence, this research is positioned between business networks and knowledge sharing of an individual.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this thesis is to build a preliminary, yet comprehensive understanding of professional communities and explore the dynamics of the phenomenon. In this manner, the antecedents and outcomes of interpersonal collaboration in professional context will be mapped out.

The lack of previous literature on similar subject supposes to have an exploratory approach in this thesis. The purpose is to draw an expansive illustration that would form the starting point for future research and provide insightful managerial implications. In addition, the aim is to widen the discussion of knowledge sharing to concern also professional context; in

particular, crossing organizational boundaries. This research will sketch conceptualization that will be beneficial when further examining the phenomenon with more specific approach.

Because of the recent turn in the working culture the topic is in current interest among managers. This thesis intends is to provide insightful managerial implications on how to exploit the professional communities as a part of business. As this study will build on understanding of the knowledge sharing between professionals, the findings will help managers reacting to such in an advantageous way.

1.4. Research Questions

What kind of a role do peers in professional communities have when succeeding with tasks and career?

The aim of this thesis is to draw an overall picture about the phenomenon of professional communities. By untangling the role peers having on professionals, the grounds on which the phenomenon is built on will be revealed.

The research question will be supported by the following sub-questions.

What kind of drivers and barriers do people have when participating in professional communities?

When mapping the antecedents for participation, the focus will be on the drivers and barriers of an individual. However, the perspective of company is brought to the analysis as professionals are representatives of their employers. Understanding the prerequisites will form the platform on top of which it is possible to explain the behavior of an individual acting in such environment.

In what kind of circumstances and conditions, and how, does knowledge sharing between professionals occur?

Answering these questions will help understanding the characteristics of setting, where interaction between professionals takes place. The picture is been clarified by describing what is shared, where and how. At the same time the essential conditions for exchange between persons and firms are examined in order to grasp an understanding of elements forming sustainable exchange relationships.

How do professional communities reward the participants?

When describing the role that peers have on professionals it is essential to examine how they benefit from interacting in communities. Therefore it is reasonable to research what do individuals gain by participating in professional communities and for what they exploit the benefits.

2. Participation in Communities

This chapter of the study focuses on theories regarding social interaction and interpersonal exchange of resources. These will be put into context first by defining the frame of reference of community. Afterwards the past literature regarding social behavior as exchange is reviewed. At the end, the focus will be put on building an understanding about the conditions that enable interpersonal exchange.

2.1. Defining Community

Wenger (1998, 2000) has created a framework, community of practice, for a community where the members are bound together by shared practices. There are three features that define such a community (Wenger 1998). First, communities are joint enterprises formed by the member's common sense of belonging. Second, communities lean to the reciprocal relations that are based on the mutual engagement. Third, community is defined by the communal repertoire that its members have produced together over time such as language, documents and routines. The underlying thought is that an entity in accordance with the definition is rather informal by nature and its boundaries are hazy (Brown & Duguid 1991).

It is in great importance to make a distinction between communities and the groups that are purposively formed and given to the members as such. An example of the latter one could be an initiative formed to foster cooperation between companies. The initiative itself does not form a community, but through the shared practices and created common repertoire the members form a sense of belonging. In this way, the members form a community that does not acknowledge the original initiative as such. As the communities are seen merely informal structures existing in the minds of the members (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003), participation is perceived voluntary (Brown & Duguid 1991). Groups forming these communities are considered not to be explicitly recognizable and canonical (Brown & Duguid 1991). The form and the nature of community is not dictated by any party, neither planned in beforehand, but is shaped over time by the participation of its members (Brown & Duguid 1991)

Lately Wenger's framework has been applied to meet the present reality better. The concept of community of practice assumes that the members know each other, continually communicate and typically meet each other face to face (Wenger 1998). Looser concept of communities has been applied in recent literature when communication in wider networks has been researched. A concept applicable for this study, networks of practice, share basic features with communities of practice, but the strength of the ties between members is looser (Brown & Duguid 2000) The assumption is that the members are loosely knit together and might not ever get to know each other, which means that there is less requirements of common background and shared understandings (Brown & Duguid 2000, Wasko & Faraj 2005). It is argued that communities built around weak ties (Granovetter 1973) have potential for fruitful knowledge exchange as there is a little overlap in participant's prior knowledge (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998).

2.2. Social Behavior as Exchange

In the past literature there is a converging theoretical discussion that brings an exchange approach to social behavior. The concept that gathers the interdisciplinary discussions together is called Social Exchange Theory (Emerson 1976, Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). What is worth pointing out, social exchange theory is rather perceived to be a frame of reference than a consistent theory (Emerson 1976). This frame of reference holds plenty of contrary arguments within it as scholars have applied different disciplines such as psychology (Homans 1974) and sociology (Blau 1992) in their analysis. The conjunctive factor in social exchange theory is that social interaction is seen to be set of interdependent actions between two parties that generate obligations (Emerson 1976, Blau 1992).

According to the scholars (Homans 1974, Emerson 1976, Blau 1992) the trigger for social interaction lays at the anticipation of ensuing rewards. Homans (1974) has stated four general propositions to explain social behavior that all stem from the expectations of the value of rewarding reactions:

1. Success proposition: For all actions taken by persons, the more often particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to

perform that action

2. Stimulus proposition: If in the past the occurrence of a particular stimulus, or set of stimuli, has been the occasion on which a person's action has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimuli are to the past ones, the more likely the person is to perform the action, or some similar action, now.
3. Value proposition: The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action.
4. Deprivation-satiation proposition: The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the less valuable any further unit of that rewards becomes for him.

Table 2 – Homans' Propositions for Social Behavior (1974)

It is noticeable that there is strong assumption of rationality embedded in the propositions. Rationality refers to a supposition that an individual makes a decision based on the analysis of available information in order to maximize utility (Emerson 1976). Among other scholars, also Blau (1992) has a rational approach in social exchange as he argues that social behavior consist of actions that are conditional for the rewarding responses of others. On the contrary, some scholars (Gouldner 1960, Emerson 1974, 1987) do not acknowledge social interaction fully as a cognitive and rational process as such approach is too strict. It is argued that some interaction is based on habitual and sentiment behavior that involve little or no conscious weighing of benefits (Emerson 1976, 1987). Therefore it may be concluded that exchange approach to social behavior allows, but do not require rationality and conscious actions.

As social behavior is driven by the expectations of returns, thought of reciprocity must be included in the process to sustain the exchange relationship. Despite of this, Molm (2000) suggests that individuals are involved in exchange without exact knowing of the return or

even certainty of being reciprocated. Here it can be seen that exchange process is based on trust, loyalty and mutual commitment. Therefore the parties need to obey certain norms and rules of exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). Trust and norms of reciprocity will be analyzed more in the section of this study related to conditions of exchange.

2.3. Social Capital Enabling Interpersonal Exchange

When analyzing the phenomena of professional communities, it is in essence to understand the underlying conditions that enable social exchange. A model by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) explaining intellectual capital creation will give structure for this section of the study. The essential building bricks of social exchange are then reviewed under the typology provided by this model. It is perceived that the model is applicable when explaining also other forms of interpersonal resources than intellectual capital.

The model by Nahapiet and Ghoshal stems from the presumption that social capital is the main ingredient enabling fluent exchange and creation intellectual capital. Hence, defining the concept of social capital in the beginning of the section is suitable. Afterwards analysis is guided by the three distinct dimensions of social capital present in the model (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998); structural-, cognitive- and relational dimension.

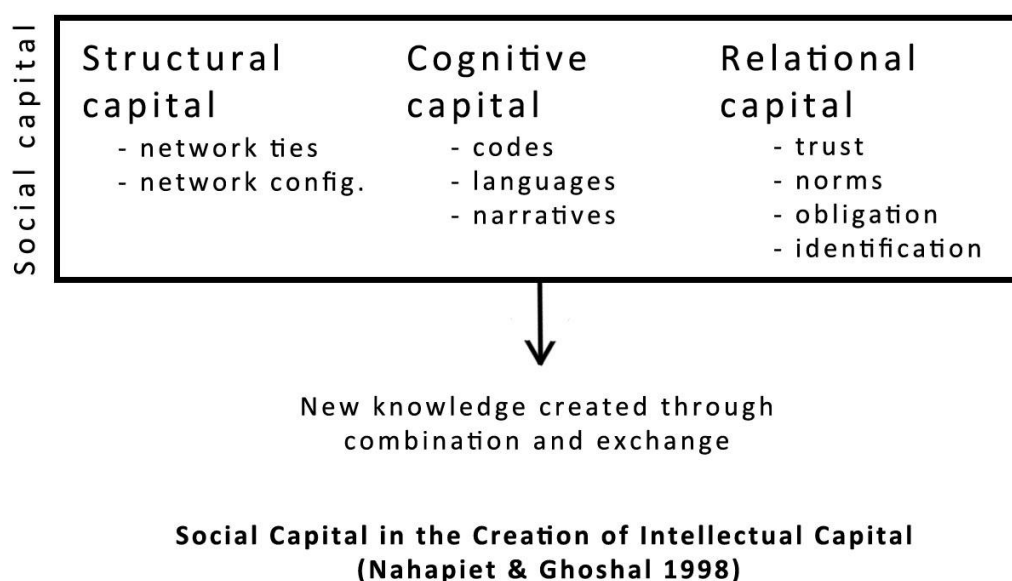


Figure 1 - Social Capital Enabling Creation of New Knowledge (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998)

2.3.1. Defining Social Capital

Social phenomena have been explained using the concept of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) and Burt (1997) see social capital containing networks of strong relationships that have emerged over time. It is argued that social capital as such is a resource facilitating social affairs (Bourdieu 1986). Some scholars, Baker (1990) for instance, put emphasis solely on the structures in form of interpersonal relationships when analyzing the concept of social capital.

Another vantage point is a resource-oriented view on social capital. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) define social capital as the sum of the resources that are embedded within, available through and derived from the relationships. The first point refers as well to the structures, but the other two to the role that social capital has when enabling access to the resources held by the network. Also Bourdieu (1986) includes the community owned resources accessible by help of social capital in his analysis. In addition to the resources, the community is able to provide social capital in form of social status such as reputation (Bourdieu 1986, Burt 1997).

Concluding the previous, in this research social capital is regarded as a media for and the product of social interaction; structures, interpersonal contacts in other words, as well as resources provided, such as reputation and recognition, are forms of social capital.

2.3.2. Structural Dimension

Structural dimension of social capital takes social system and networks in concern as a whole. It refers to the pattern of all the linkages, connections between actors and to their impersonal configuration (Burt 1992, Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). Hence, structural dimension of social capital refers to strength of interpersonal ties, but also to how the ties are structured. The strength of the ties is defined according to the emotional intensity, intimacy, reciprocity and the amount of time that characterize the relationship (Granovetter 1973).

Social network enables sharing of resources between parties. This sharing is facilitated by strong and well-functioning ties. Here, participants are concerned with the availability of resources in the community (Bourdieu 1986, Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998), which has a great influence on the expected rewards. Indeed, well-structured network leads to a cost-effective access to resources (Wasko & Faraj 2005, Chiu, Hsu & Wang 2006).

Structural social capital can at the simplest refer to the number of direct ties to other members. Wasko and Faraj (2005) suggest that those members of a community that are in central location, in the network are more likely to engage in a community. Centrality is also proven to increase rank and social status within communities and organizations (Lincoln & Miller 1979).

2.3.3. Cognitive Dimension

Shared language, codes and narratives facilitate the favorable conditions for meaningful communication (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). Relationships strong in cognitive dimension of social capital are effective in knowledge creation as the social behavior is interpreted similarly.

Wasko and Faraj (2005) suggest that common language, codes and narratives help an individual in interpreting the environment where the interaction takes place. According to them, when able to understand the practices and procedures, individuals feel their expertise to be adequate and are therefore more willing to engage in the community. Common language forms a domain for participants of a community to understand each other and subsequently for effective communication and learning (Chiu *et al.* 2006) Narratives hold plenty of seemingly insignificant details, but the practice of storytelling facilitates exchange of tacit cultural artifacts and therefore fosters the knowledge sharing (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998).

Relevant information is defined and detected according to mutual values (De Long & Fahey 2000), and the exchange happens through practices that are common and inherent for the

participants. This strengthens individual's self-confidence in social situations as well as ability to gain rewards.

2.3.4. Relational Dimension

Relational capital refers to the respect and friendship that is embedded in relationships. It consists of perceived obligation to participate in the community, strong identification with the community, trust to other participants and ability to recognize and obey the reciprocal norms of cooperation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998, Wasko & Faraj 2005). Strong relational capital makes individuals eager to help and willing to share knowledge, even though the members of the community were strangers (Wasko & Faraj 2005). This is detectable in the solidarity that people sense, in this case, towards fellow professionals. For example, Ardichvili *et al.* (2003) found that engineers are willing to share to peers to foster the culture of common profession.

The concept of trust is widely discussed in the studies related to social behavior. Trust is defined as belief that results of intended actions by another are appropriate from one's point of view (Misztal 1996). Wasko and Faraj (2005) suggest further that the history of past positive interactions encourages for future dealing. This is in line with Homans' value proposition (1974). Trust between individuals in loyalty and mutual commitment enhances the exchange relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). In addition to this kind of knowledge-based trust between trustor and trustee, Zucker (1986) underlines the significance of institution-based trust. This refers to trust in the integrity of community, competence of its members and in the network configuration. When both knowledge- and institution-based trust are present, individuals are more likely to engage in communities as they can lean to the belief that their interaction will not cause any harmful consequences.

Institution-based trust is related strongly to the presumption of reciprocity in social behavior; for the exchange relationship to be sustainable, the parties must trust that their actions will be rewarded. As simplest reciprocity is seen as a set of interdependent actions where action of one leads to other's respond (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). Often reciprocity is not seen as this kind of straightforward responsive set of actions, but instead

more as a norm. Gouldner (1960) insists that social behavior is driven by *a folk belief* according to which everyone gets what deserves; in the end of the day participants of a sustainable relationship will reach equilibrium. Reciprocity is also referred to be a cultural norm where the participants sense a great obligation and ought to reciprocate supplier of rewards (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). The requirement of trust towards reciprocity may be reinforced by turning the norms into explicit rules, but it is suggested that exchange is more effective when reciprocity is inherent and unforced (Molm 2000). Foa (1971) has included the strength of ties to the analysis. He suggested that contributions are expected to be rewarded in a short span when the exchange partner is not anyone particular. As a conclusion, reciprocity is seen as an obligation created in social interaction. Equilibrium is not pursued consciously, but reciprocal actions are essential for sustainable interpersonal exchange.

3. Knowledge Exchange in Business Networks

In this section of the study, the antecedents affecting companies' attitude towards professional communities is studied. This will be done, by providing an overview on the past literature that has tackled the topic of interfirm relationships and knowledge sharing in business networks. At first characteristics of business networks are discussed in general. Second, different types of business relationships are described from the base of typology provided by Bengtsson and Kock (1999). Thirdly, role of knowledge and learning in business networks is examined. This will be done by focusing to the academic discussions relating to the differing views of the firm and thus to the way how the value of knowledge is perceived.

3.1. Defining Business Networks

No company can be seen as an island. Indeed, for a firm, probably the most important part of the business environment is the other firms (Easton & Araujo 1992). In this vein, defining the term network is of paramount importance as it refers to the long-term relationships where two or more organizations are involved (Thorelli 1986).

Networks emerge when an intensive interaction between two or more organization constitute a subset of a market (Thorelli 1986). According to Webster (1992) networks depend on negotiations over market-based processes. These two statements suggest that networks are located between hierarchies and markets. For a network to exist, firms involved in a network must have at least some overlap in their strategic domain (Thorelli 1986, Bengtsson & Kock 1999). What is more, also the theory of strategic groups (Porter 1979) infers that networks are more likely to emerge between firms that have similarities in the strategic approaches. Having their focus on non-economical exchange between companies, Easton and Araujo (1992) are in line with the scholars mentioned above. Similar strategic domains play a significant role in their viewpoint as they argue that non-economical exchange is most likely to emerge in inter-competitor relationships.

According to Thorelli (1986), networks are located in-between the open markets and self-sufficient firms. The networks are able to cross boundaries of markets, but simultaneously,

the focus can be narrowed by analyzing only close players at the same product market (Bengtsson & Kock 2000). Thus, the statement by Thorelli (1986) is supported as there can also be many competing networks within one market. Although networks and markets might be similar by structure, they should be separated in analysis because of the irregular occurrence of networks. In this study, business networks are seen likely to cross market boundaries because professions are far from being market or industry specific.

The relationships within networks can be put under two categories depending on the nature of exchange. Either the exchange is dominated by economical or non-economical commodity (Easton & Araujo 1992). It is obvious that buyer-seller relationships are based primarily on economical exchange as distribution of products is often in the core (Easton & Araujo 1992). In the other hand, inter-competitor relationships do so rarely and are more often built upon non-economical exchange, which is often either knowledge or social exchange (Bengtsson & Kock 2000). Examples of these could include transfers of technology, exploitation of trust and diffusion of expertise and knowledge (Thorelli 1986). A good way to make the distinction clearer is to state that economical exchange demands a visible, tangible transaction, which is not required in non-economical exchange (Easton & Araujo 1992). Network is the framework, which enables the exchange, but is also the result of it as a non-economical exchange fosters the structures (Bengtsson & Kock 2000).

According to Thorelli (1986) networks consist of structural positions and the bonds between them. Subsequently, positions are locations of power, which influence decisions of the others around. Bonds are links between the structural positions enabling the exchanges (Thorelli 1986). In this vein, through a network the firms are seen to influence each other directly (Easton & Araujo 1992). This is in contrast to the conventional neoclassical conception of business relationships where the connection between two firms in the same industry is reflected through common buyer, supplier or suchlike (Bengtsson & Kock 1999).

Thorelli (1986) points out three distinct but interrelated constitutive aspects, that holistically affect the position of a firm in a network; power, influence and trust. Here, power refers to one's ability to influence the others' decisions, wherein influence can be seen as the actual implementation of power. Moreover, trust refers to the assumption that the parties would act alike or at least in a respective manner when conflicts or problems occur.

3.2. Types of Relationships in Business Networks

In this section of the research the nature of different forms of relationships between companies are examined. As the aim of this study is to understand exchange of knowledge and social commodities, the focus here will be on the business relationships that are rich in non-economic exchange. This leads to further focus on horizontal relationships. This is justified as vertical relationships where economic exchange is dominant leave little or no room at all for non-economic exchange (Easton & Araujo 1992).

One significant aspect defining the nature of both vertical and horizontal relationships is the distance between the companies in the business network. The degree of distance in the business network is the actual or perceived dependency between actors (Thorelli 1986, Easton & Araujo 1992). It can be said that companies that have similar strategic approaches and occupy the same markets with similar offering, are located close to each other in the business network. Therefore they are highly dependent on each other's actions.

In the following, the types of business relationships are described from the base of a four-point typology by Bengtsson and Kock (1999). Their model is a modification of the correlation dimension (Easton and Araujo 1992) where the relationships are positioned depending on the level of harmony and conflict. The types introduced here are competition, co-existence, cooperation and, an emerging theoretical concept, co-opetition. To serve the purposes of this study, emphasis will be put on explaining the nature of cooperative relationships.

3.2.1. Competition

Competition occurs between two actors in a business network when their goals, stipulated independently, are in conflict with each other (Easton & Araujo 1992, Bengtsson & Kock 1999). This means that the objectives can be achieved only by acquiring the resources of common third party, in most cases customer (Easton & Araujo 1992)

Most of the interaction between competitors self-evidently happens through indirect links, but also direct communication and exchange occurs. The type of exchange in competitive relationship is merely non-economical (Easton & Araujo 1992). Direct interactions loaded with conflict could be announcements of innovations, when the aim is to intimidate the competitor. Harmonious interactions can include implicit negotiation of norms and rules-of-play (Bengtsson & Kock 1999).

3.2.2. Co-existence

When the goals of two companies are purely independent their relationship is based on co-existence (Easton & Araujo 1992). The situation can come from ignorance or from conscious decision to reach independency. Nevertheless, only direct links can be independent, as actors in the same network are always interrelated (Thorelli 1986, Easton & Araujo 1992, Håkansson, Havila & Pedersen 1999).

Co-existence in business networks is more likely the bigger the distance is between the two actors (Easton & Araujo 1992). The parties are aware of each other but decide to rather interact with players that have a closer position in the business network (Bengtsson & Kock 1999). The decision not to establish any stronger relationship is based on mutual, quiet agreements and informal norms (Bengtsson & Kock 1999). Both sides trust the other not to interfere and break these rules (Easton & Araujo 1992, Bengtsson & Kock 1999).

3.2.3. Cooperation

Cooperative relationship can emerge when two or more parties within a business network share mutual objectives (Easton & Araujo 1992). Types of cooperation are at first classified, in practice rather imprecisely, depending whether the nature of the relationship is formal or informal. Formal cooperation is described to be visible and planned. The activities are often performed by employees and are managed from above (Easton and Araujo 1992). In contrast, informal cooperation is random and takes place amongst individuals and is unplanned (Easton & Araujo 1992). Informal cooperation demands high levels of trust, which

is in contrast to formal agreements to cooperate as they can be established even though distrust was dominant (Bengtsson & Kock 1999, Håkansson & Johansson 1988).

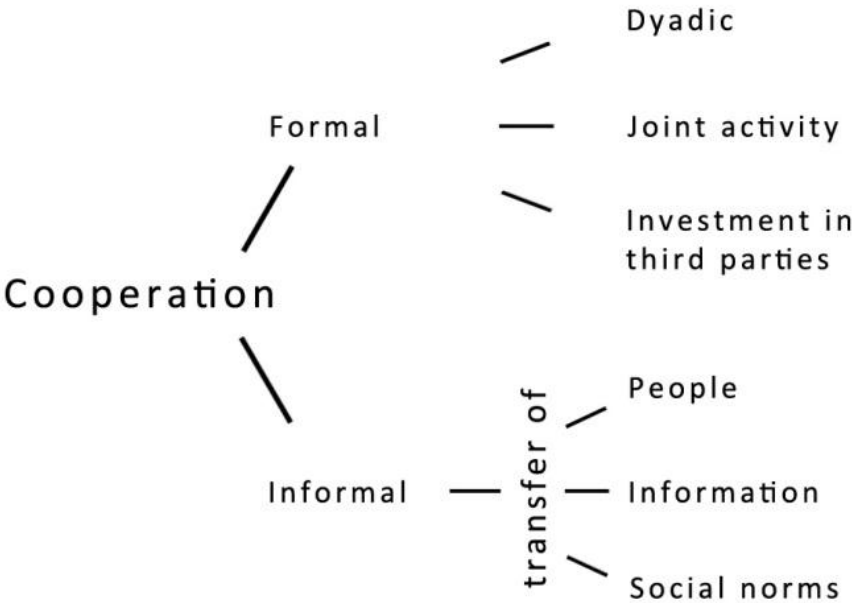


Figure 2 - Types of Cooperation within Business Network (Easton & Araujo 1992)

The three types of formal cooperation indicated in figure 3 fit to the views of Bonoma (1976) as he pointed out three levels of dependence between parties cooperating. First, the two sides with conflicting major objectives can cooperate with some common intermediate goals. These can be matters of production or interlocked R&D, which are carried out as joint activities. Secondly, together, they can lobby a third party with an objective, for example taxation concerns, being advantageous for the whole industry. In the third type of cooperation the relationship might be the base and aim for the business itself. Logistic support by a major company being the empowering element for minor business is an example of this.

Informal cooperation is based on exchange of non-economical commodity; people, information and social norms (Easton & Araujo 1992). Many industries are characterized to be ‘incestuous’, meaning, that the skills of an employee are highly valued amongst the competitors, which causes intensive flows of labor within the business network (Easton & Araujo 1992). When people shift employers, also know-how is transferred as knowledge is embedded in individuals (Von Hippel 1987). In addition to the previous, tacit negotiations of

mutual expectations and rules-of-play as well as exchange of attitudes and perceptions fall in the category of social norms (Easton & Araujo 1992).

3.2.4. Co-opetition

Bengtsson and Kock (1999) have introduced a concept called co-opetition, which gives a name to the relationships between firms where both conflict and harmony occurs and cooperative and competitive characteristics are visible.

The concept comprises heavily conflicting logics of interaction. While competition is based on the assumption that individuals and organizations try to maximize their own interest, the common goals are reached through collective action (Bengtsson & Kock 2000). The firms are forced to compete because of the structural conditions in a business network whereas the social structure and the dependence that follows explain the tendency to cooperate (Bengtsson & Kock 2000). Håkansson and Johansson (1988) state that all inter-firm relationships are cooperative to some extent. Their view can be easily supported as trust, and thus harmony, is one of the essential building bricks in networks (Thorelli 1986).

The common goals are jointly stipulated in cooperation and supported by clear norms and formal agreement. At the same time in competition the norms are created silently and conflicting objectives are stipulated independently (Bengtsson & Kock 1999). The tasks that are dealt with cooperation are often processes that are distant to the customer (Bengtsson & Kock 2000).

3.3. Learning and Knowledge in Business Networks

The major objective for cooperative actions is the possibility to access resources that otherwise would be out of reach (Mowery *et al.* 1996, Das & Teng 2000, Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004). In this study the interest will be put on the role that knowledge has in these partnerships.

The nature of learning depends strongly on the orientation how knowledge is perceived. Valuing knowledge is examined by focusing to two differing views of a firm; resource-based and knowledge-based view. These different approaches to the topic are useful from the view-point of this study as these affect the antecedents for businesses to cooperate with each other.

3.3.1. Resource-based View of a Firm

Resource-based view of a firm sees the company as an entity holding resources that are sticky and difficult to imitate (Wernerfelt 1984). Hence, knowledge is seen as the major competitive resource being an essential brick when building competitive advantage. The emphasis of organizational learning is in acquiring new knowledge and capabilities by expanding the existing knowledge stock. March (1991) calls this kind of knowledge generation 'exploration' of resources. Exploration of resources results the firms' capabilities to overlap and thus converge (Mowery *et al.* 1996). The convergence of resources partly invalidates the early-mover advantage that would be provided for those with unique offering (Grant and Baden-Fuller 2004).

3.3.2. Knowledge-based View of a Firm

A knowledge-based view has emerged from the basis of resource-based view (Mowery *et al.* 1996). Grant and Baden-Fuller (2004) base their view on the argument that the benefits of interfirm cooperation lay in accessing knowledge, and further, in firm-based skills to integrate and utilize the accessed resources. Knowledge-accessing view suggests that firms are not intending to appropriate external capabilities. Instead, competitive advantage is sought by integrating additional knowledge to perfect their own specialized base of knowledge (Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004).

The idea behind knowledge-based view of a firm is in line with the statement by Håkansson *et al.* (1999) as they infer that in the end of the day companies, have access to similar technology, products and equipment. In this vein, competence of a company is

fundamentally a matter of using and utilizing the accessed resources effectively. Knowledge-based-view of a firm acknowledges those firms superior of integrating external knowledge (Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004). Firms accessing the partner's stock of knowledge to deploy complementary capabilities is called 'exploitation' (March 1991). What is more to this, in contrast with acquiring knowledge, applying and integrating it to the existing resources will cause the capabilities to diverge (Mowery *et al.* 1996, Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004). In this vein, knowledge sharing can be encouraged as competitive advantage is not lost.

According to Håkansson *et al.* (1999) learning is the more effective the more the competencies of the companies are complementary. This is based on the relevancy of the possessed resources held by the partner. This supports the views of Porter (1979), Thorelli (1986) as well as Bengtsson and Kock (2000) that cooperative actions are more likely to evoke between companies with similar strategic approaches.

4. Outcomes of Participation in Professional Communities

In this chapter the outcomes of participation in professional communities are examined in two sections by reviewing past literature. In the first section the perspective of an individual is examined from the grounds of literature that focuses on participating in knowledge sharing communities. The second section deals with advantages and disadvantages of cooperation, thus knowledge sharing in business networks.

4.1. Benefits of Individual

According to the results of past studies, participation in communities derives value in two ways. The participation itself is seen to provide satisfaction and derive hedonic value (Schau, Arnould & Muniz 2009). In addition there are external rewards such as expanded knowledge and social capital that the participation offers (e.g. Wasko & Faraj 2005, Ardichvili *et al.* 2003). Therefore it is justified to label the benefits either extrinsic or intrinsic. The division is based on academic literature of motivations. Extrinsic motivation implicates that the activity is motivated by some separable outcome as is the case when studying for the approval of teacher (Ryan & Deci 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to situation where behavior is performed for the pleasure and satisfaction as it is inherently interesting (Vallerand 1997, Ryan & Deci 2000). Osterloch and Frey (2000) suggest that extrinsic motivation refers to indirect rewards as intrinsic benefits provide immediate satisfaction. Having a motivational approach in the analysis is suitable by leaning to the theory of social exchange according to which social behavior is determined by anticipation of its outcomes (Emerson 1976, Blau 1992).

4.1.1. Extrinsic Benefits

The past literature indicates that participation in communities provides members with an access to new knowledge, a possibility to create new knowledge in a communal manner and a chance to capture social capital that the community derives.

Knowledge can be accessed intentionally or unconsciously. The unconscious knowledge accessing refers to the learning that happens by performing common practices (Brown & Duguid 1991). The practices performed in communities carry common understanding, norms and codes that are unfolded by being engaged in them (Wenger 2000). This way the members get familiar with culture and normative procedures typical for a specific group of people (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003).

Knowledge can also be pursued intentionally. In their study Ardichvili *et al.* (2003) point out that a virtual community can be either used as a sort of encyclopedia or as a platform for consulting the peers with an issue. The archived discussions carry plenty of valuable knowledge on best practices, results of experiments and lessons learned (Wasko & Faraj 2005). Community can also be used as a locus for knowledge creation and problem solving. This is because the communities have the wisdom of the crowds (Sureowiecki 2005); it is likely that either some in the mass of participants know the answer to a question or the mass is able to generate the best possible answer in a cooperative manner. It is said that if the community is strong in the structural dimension of social capital, the effectiveness and quickness of accessing and creating knowledge is perceived to be better (Wasko & Faraj 2005). Subsequently communities are seen as superior sources of knowledge (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003).

One significant benefit of participating in communities is the possibility to improve individual social capital. Past studies have proven that communities provide its members formal and informal recognition and reputation (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003, Wasko & Faraj 2000, 2005). Wasko and Faraj (2005) imply that participants strongly perceive their active presence to improve their status and reputation in the profession. The social capital gained in communities is also a source of power. Others become dependent on the resources that one has the possibility to access (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve & Tsai 2004). At the same time an individual become less dependent on other's as the numbers of mediators of information decrease when knowing whom to contact (Brass *et al.* 2004). With the help of this power, one can increase an organizational rank by participating in communities (Lincoln & Miller 1979).

4.1.2. Intrinsic Benefits

At times the reward for participation in communities can be the activity itself (Vallerand 1997). Feel of integration to a community and the debates around interesting topics provide the participants significant hedonic value (Wasko & Faraj 2000, Schau *et al.* 2009) In addition, Wasko and Faraj (2000) suggest that learning and sharing of insights is seen pleasuring and fun in general when it's done in a collective manner.

The findings of past studies suggest that people tend to participate in communities in order to identify and self-evaluate themselves (Wasko & Faraj 2005, Schau *et. al* 2009). The challenging questions and tasks will test competence and prove skills to themselves, but also to the community in order to gain social acceptance. Boost in self-confidence is thus seen pleasurable.

People sense satisfaction when knowing that contributing time and knowledge to the community will be worth the effort (Wasko & Faraj 2005). Helping others even if it caused personal costs, in other words altruistic behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005), provides pleasure and feel good. Making oneself useful is satisfying as it fulfills obligations that individuals feel towards peers (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003).

4.2. Benefits of Company

The theoretical discussions related to strategic alliances are extremely rich in describing the benefits for inter-organizational cooperation. The concept of strategic alliance refers to the agreements between two or more firms when establishing substantial, long-term collaboration within which firms sample their resources in order to achieve common goals (Teece 1992, Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004). This chapter will focus on reviewing this literature pointing out the benefits of interfirm cooperation. The benefits mentioned across the literature can roughly be put under three categories: expanded knowledge, reduced risks and coordinated markets.

According to Mowery *et al.* (1996) strategic alliances are great sources of new skills and knowledge. This is due to the characteristics of firm-based capabilities as they are mostly tacit knowledge and thus not good for being market commodity. The knowledge can be reached through formal agreements to cooperate in certain processes, but also through informal communication as a part of natural social interaction (Mowery *et al.* 1996).

Grant and Baden-Fuller (2004) suggest that cooperating with other companies helps facing the uncertainty of future knowledge needs and requirements. Inter-firm collaboration provides a way to avoid the risks of developing new technology by distributing the costs (Mowery *et al.* 1996). Strategic alliances also reward the member firms with early-mover advantages as through collaboration they are likely to identify, and quick to integrate the new set of knowledge (Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004). Mowery *et al.* (1996) argue that through strategic alliances companies have possibilities to coordinate and set the standards for products.

Market coordination happens through non-economical exchange of information and social norms. For example, the coordination includes standardization of processes and products (Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004). Easton & Araujo (1992) suggest that inter-buyer connections are used to diffuse certain innovation. Exploitation of common norms will increase the trust amongst the parties, which will reduce indirect costs of all actions happening in the market (Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004).

4.3. Disadvantages

The previous literature mainly focuses on describing the advantages of knowledge sharing rather than pointing out the disadvantages. In this subsection the disadvantages of both interpersonal and interfirm collaboration are examined.

Both in interpersonal and interfirm knowledge sharing, the most significant disadvantage is the risk of losing competitive advantage. When valuable knowledge is leaked, the resources of two companies will converge, thus competitive advantage is lost (Wernerfelt 1984). When being a member in knowledge sharing community also the risk of giving out confidential

information increases (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003) as some knowledge is being transmitted unintentionally.

In the study by Ardichvili *et al.* (2003) the disadvantages of knowledge sharing in community relates to the misuses when contributed was eventually used against the members. Another form of misuse is freeriding. In communities where the reciprocal norms are not obeyed, freeriding becomes a crucial issue which hinders the willingness for future contributions (Wasko & Faraj 2005).

5. Theoretical Framework

In this part of the thesis the theories applicable are summarized. The conceptual framework, illustrated in the figure 3, shows the simplified relations between the concepts. The framework has been constructed from the basis of the literature review and refined continuously during the further stages of the study. The framework explains the theoretical lens through which the phenomenon of professional communities is seen through. It provides structure for the empirical part of this study and directs the analysis and interpretations of the data.



Figure 3 - Framework

According to social exchange theory the expectation of outcomes sets the premises for social behavior (Emerson 1976). Therefore, when examining the antecedents for participating in professional communities, it is justified to focus on the anticipation of the outcomes. The expectations are affected by the realized outcomes of past interaction or observed outcomes of others. The assumption of the effect of past experiences is based on Homans' value proposition of social behavior (1974): the more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action. The arrow of feedback indicates this relation in the figure 3.

It is perceived that the decision process of individual is affected in addition to one's own interest by the interests of the presented company. The interest of an individual can be said to be constructed of the extrinsic and intrinsic (Vallerand 1997, Ryan & Deci 2000) benefits as well as of disadvantages of participation. In this study it is perceived that the perspective

of company towards individual's participation in professional communities derives from antecedents for cooperation in business network. The position of a company in a business network dictates the level of harmony and conflict between companies (Thorelli 1986, Easton & Araujo 1992). Co-existing companies in a business network (Bengtsson & Kock 1999) are not dependent on each other. Thus interaction between employees of such companies is regarded more with indifference. Attitude towards cooperation with direct competitors is stricter (Easton & Araujo 1992, Bengtsson & Kock 2000). In such situations the company regulates more of the drivers and barriers of an individual to participate in professional communities.

The concept of community is defined loosely in this research. All interaction creates and fosters links between professional (Wenger 1998). The overall network of these ties further form professional communities. The definition of communities of practice by Wenger (1998) is followed. However the definition is loosen by taking networks of practice (Brown & Duguid 2001) in account as well as it may not be assumed that the members continuously interact and know each other in person. What is more, this study differs from the past research (i.e. Wasko & Faraj 2005) by not making a distinction between behavior in virtual and offline environments.

The social behavior theories indicate that the decision process for participating in communities can be conscious and based on rationality (Homans 1974, Blau 1992). However, the participation includes common practices through which knowledge is flown even if unintentional (Brown & Duguid 2001). Hence, the approach in this study allows rationality in the decision process partly cognitive but do not require it.

In addition, participation fosters structures between members of a community that allow further, more effective exchange of resources (Bourdieu 1986). Participation increases the awareness of others about existence and resources held by one, but also participant's awareness of resources held by the community (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998).

6. Methodology

In this chapter the progress of research will be explained. Each step will be clarified in detail, alongside which the justifications for the chosen methods will be stated by leaning to the literature of methodology.

The research has been conducted in an abductive manner. Instead of following the linear theory-before-research approach (Berg 1995) the proceeding can be described to have been spiral. The stages of revising theory, data collecting and analysis have never been left behind completely. The steps have been returned and revised constantly from the grounds of insights accumulated from other stages.

6.1. Literature Review

At first a thorough and interdisciplinary literature review was conducted in order to build a comprehensive understanding about dynamics of the phenomena. In the beginning reviewing the literature was driven by a rough idea of the research subject. Two first interviews were held already in the very beginning ensuring the correct focus in studying theories and disciplines. These interviews were extremely wide by covered themes and topics.

A literature review has both a negative and a positive function (Silverman 2006). The function mentioned first refers to learning from the weaknesses of the past studies and mapping out the restrictions that have been followed. As a positive function, literature review provided a good understanding on the subjects that have been covered by the academics and revealed ignored and undefined areas and approaches. From these bases the research subject and questions were refined.

An interim theoretical framework was formed from the basis of literature review. The framework guided the design of the further steps of the research process.

6.2. Data Collecting

To ensure the richness of the data two distinct methods were used in data collecting. Primal source of data was thematic, semi-standardized interviews (Berg 1995). The data was widened by using emerging netnographic methods (Kozinets 2006).

Semi-standardized (or semi-structured) interviews are formed by sets of predetermined questions or special themes (Berg 1995). These questions are expected to be covered in all interviews, but the researcher is allowed to go beyond the scheduled questions. The role of the interviewer is to encourage the interviewee to richer descriptions by probing further from the basis of previous answers (Berg 1995). What Silverman (2006) points out, probing is used while constantly keeping the aim of the research in mind.

The data from interviews was complemented by observational data gathered by using netnographic methods. Netnography helps to understand certain phenomena in-depth by observing and analyzing behavior in virtual environment (Kozinets 2006). The method of netnography has evolved from the conventions of ethnography, which have been used when researching sociological and cultural topics (Kozinets 2006). The underlying principal in these methods is that the researcher observes people's behavior and ways they construct everyday lives in a setting natural for them (Silverman 2006). The data is collected by paying attention to practices, meanings and artifacts that certain social group carries (Kozinets 2006).

In netnography the focus is on the discussions between the members (Kozinets 2006). The method was chosen to be implemented in this study because it allows observing the cross-participant interaction. In addition this can be done non-obtrusively in a natural setting (Kozinets 2006). These features validate using netnography in order to complement the data gathered by semi-structured interviews. Three community members were contacted by email in the late phase of data collecting. They were provided a short list of clarifying questions that further helped the interpretation of the observations.

These complementary methods will provide rich data that includes individuals' meanings given to the social world. Thus it is ensured that the phenomenon can be researched in depth and breadth.

6.2.1. Sampling

Purposive sampling is a well validated method as the aim is to explain a specific behavioral phenomenon (Miles & Huberman 1994, Marshall & Rossmann 2006). The population for possible interviewees was set to include marketing and media-related managers in major companies. Using a strict focus in this is justified in two ways. First, examining the dynamics of the previewed target group let implied that the requirements for rich data collection would be well met. Second, through building a comprehensive understanding of the operational environment of a specific profession helps the researcher to reach the rich levels of data in the interview setting. This meets the requirements for researcher set by Fontana and Frey (2000: 654): *researcher must understand the language and the culture of the respondents*. In addition, the analysis is stronger and more accurate when data was reflected to the background information assimilated.

The purposive sampling was conducted by first familiarizing with the backgrounds of possible interviewees. The suitability for being an informant was ensured by reflecting the characteristics of the candidates with the literature review findings. Contacting was always done after the previous interviewees had responded. This ensured that the sample frame would be diverse by attributes. Equal amount of men and females from diverse industries were aimed to be represented in the final sample frame.

The enclosed table lists the interviewees, their titles and industries of their companies as were expressed by themselves.

	Position	Industry	Years in Business	Gender
Preliminary interviews	Sales Director	Marketing and Advertising	N/A	M
	Senior Planning Manager	Marketing and Advertising	18	M
Semi-structured interviews	Marketing and Communications Manager	Clothing	6	F
	Producer	Event Production	5	M
	Media Director, Marketing Vice President	Food Production	23	M
	Marketing Assistant	Food Production	7	F
	Press Officer	Art Industry	16	M
	Brand Manager	Food Production	11	F
	Senior Adviser	Public Bureau	14	F
	Industry Head	Internet Industry	11	M
	Email-interviews	Senior Technical Writer	Gambling and Casino	25
Creative Director		Maintenance Merchandise	7	F
Communication designer		Marketing and Advertising	13	M

Table 2–Overview of Interviewees

Purposive sampling was used also when selecting the online discussions to be observed. The selection was led by the guidelines stated by Kozinets (2006). According to him, the communities must be relevant to the topic, has high traffic in posting, wide base of contributors, descriptive data and is rich in cross-member interaction.

The online communities chosen to be observed were ‘Digital Marketing’, ‘CREATIVE DESIGN PROS’ and ‘Online Advertising Professionals – North America’ facilitated by LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>). These communities are excellent context for this study as they meet the requirements set by Kozinets (2006); the discussion is vivid, stem from a specific and the participants have diverse backgrounds but shared interests. These communities were observed from May to December in 2011.

6.2.2. Conducting the Interviews

As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, in the stage of literature review two interviews were conducted in order to gain a pre-understanding of the premises related to the phenomena and the sample group. One function of these interviews was to provide the researcher practice of the interview techniques. After evaluating the data collected from these interviews, one of these two interviews was decided to be included in the final data. The other one provided valuable insights and was in significant role when refining the research subject and approach.

Including the interview in the early stage of this study, all together nine semi-standardized interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted averagely for 57 minutes, ranging from 36 to 85 minutes. The setting for interviews was decided by all interviewees to be the office of the represented company. Each interview began by asking permission for recording, as well as reviewing the purposes of the research. None refused recording. The interview situations were gone through with only interviewer and interviewee being present without any disruptions excluding the recorder running out of battery once. This was immediately noticed and no more than a couple of sentences were lost.

The semi-standardized interviews were designed from the basis of the literature review. The themes covered reflected the topics that were brought up by the past studies being in essential role explaining the dynamics of the phenomena. These themes were *operating in business network as an employee, succeeding with everyday tasks* and *advancing with individual professional skills*. A dialogic setting was striven in the interview situations to apply natural probing. By probing beyond the structured questions, the interviewees were encouraged for narrative descriptions of their practices related to profession. Dialogic approach is justifiable as it is argued that knowledge cannot directly be conveyed to the researcher, but instead, the interviewee is an active constructor of knowledge (Flick, von Kardoff & Steinke 2004).

Two of the online communities observed are closed and the permission needed to be asked. The access was granted after contacting the admins explaining the premises. The

observation was done non-obtrusively as the discussion was let to have its natural form without participating in content creation. Three community members were contacted in the late phase of observing. Their behavior was not disturbed in the first place either. The observation in communities focused on the discussions between the members. Emphasis was put on the sorts of topics are opened and on the ways how those are replied. This gave valuable data on the features that keep the discussions alive. In addition, message histories of individual members were analyzed. This was done to bring up the patterns, symbols and meanings that are embedded in one's behavior (Kozinets 2006).

6.3. Data Analysis

The first step proceeding towards actual analysis is to modify the form of the data to be more understandable (Berg 1995). The nine interviews were transcribed by an external service provider. These transcripts were afterwards evaluated by the researcher. The validity can be described to be on excellent basis. The field notes of netnography comprised of direct extracts from the discussions as well as more lengthy descriptions of observations. In addition whole threads were downloaded as parts of field notes.

When beginning the analyzing process five out of the nine interviews were conducted. The initiative analysis affected the remaining interviews and purposive sampling employed, when pursuing for as rich data as possible. Strauss (1987) explain that the later stages of data collection is always affected by initial analysis as the process begins inevitably already after the first interviews.

Open coding procedures were employed in the analysis of the data. By this method the data is conceptualized by "*scrutinizing the fieldnote, interview, or other document very closely line by line*"(Strauss 1987; 28). By reading the transcribed data over and over again, the parts of the data that related to the research questions were noted down. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, the focus was not put on the actual words, phrases and statements that the interviewees expressed, but rather to the meaning they contained. By reflecting these labels towards the perceived phenomena and the themes within proposed categorization was done. New categories were formed without restrictions in either quantity or content. In

order to understand derivative relationships between the categories they were refined by comparison and use of questioning. The purpose of these procedures is to open up the data by tackling deep into properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin 1998). To make sure that the meanings were not modified, the raw data, transcripts and field notes, were constantly reviewed during the process.

The process of data analysis was inspired by the principals of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998). The exploratory approach and purposes of this study are supported when no specific theory is striven to be proved. Rather what is relevant to the subject is allowed to evolve through systematic data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1998). However, this research differs from the fundamentals of grounded theory as instead of inductive, an abductive approach was employed; theories and earlier understandings guided the data collection as well as analysis. Also findings were used to refine the theoretical framework.

7. Findings

In this chapter the findings of the research are presented based on the structure of the theoretical framework. The first part will tackle the perceptions that the professionals have for the outcomes of participation in communities. The second part will more precisely deal with the dynamics of participation itself. The chapter will provide answers to questions, what is shared, how, and where. In the last chapter of this section, the actual outcomes are examined. Emphasis will be put on how the benefits gained from the communities are exploited.

7.1 Expectations of Outcomes

The grounds of this chapter are in the drivers and barriers to participate in professional communities. As Homans' value proposition (1974), *"The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action"*, suggest the anticipation of outcomes greatly dictates the decision whether to attend the communal activities. The elements in professional communities that positively affect one's decision-making are called drivers. In a similar vein, those that have a negative impact are called barriers.

7.1.1. Drivers

Cultivating Professional Knowledge

Professionals perceive communities of peers as great sources of knowledge. According to the data, cultivation of professional skills can be done from two directions that in practice cannot always be separated; absorbing the information from others or being the teacher oneself.

As sources of knowledge, communities are seen to be superior compared to many other sources with respect to the relevancy of the available information. People are overwhelmed by the overflow of available information in all kinds of sources such as blogs, journals and magazines. Most importantly, picking the relevant and valuable information from the cornucopia of available sources is seen to be extremely time-consuming and difficult. The following quote describes this issue well and explains how professional communities help solving it:

“The amount of information out there is increasing exponentially. There is just no way to follow that many sources without some kind of humane filter in between there who knows that this is the stuff that you might be interested and this is what we have discussed earlier on.” (M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

The issue described above is increased by the doubt of one’s own abilities to make the call what is worth studying. In the narratives of interviewees it was evident that the relevancy of information given by the peers was almost unquestionably perceived relevant. Topics or pieces of information that are brought up by other professionals, who often are uncritically seen as authorities, are perceived to be weighty and credible.

Interacting in communities is seen rewarding also when sharing the knowledge for others. Contributing to the community provides a chance to revise own insights. This is well illustrated in the next quote by manager who wants to be active among other experts in order to stay on track with the latest trends.

“It is nice to hear, especially from students or fresh graduates whether this (his insights) is relevant or not. Is this interesting, does it feel like I’m telling you yesterday’s news?” (M, Senior Planning Manager, Media Agency)

This quote also implies that communities are used as platforms for sparring. Correctness and reliability is checked with the help of peers alongside the natural interaction. When being exposed by a wealth of information, one gets to refine own insights with the help of the peers.

Getting Inspired

The communities are pools of inspiring ideas as they are rich in narratives about past experiences and incidents. The communities can feed creativity and innovative thinking, but also communal problem solving takes place at some circumstances.

By participating in professional communities one can hear and see what others have done and apply those practices. The following two interviewees are keen on taking inspirations from the communities back to their every-day tasks:

“...we [colleagues from different industries] talked for example about product development and...yes, about dealing with customer feedback. It’s just about picking potential ideas and inspirations related to product development for myself [refers to the daily task at the employer].”(F, Marketing Assistant, Food Company)

“When getting to know how someone did something, you can get the Eureka!-feeling, like, they did it like that, but what if I did it like this...it could work even better!”(M, Event Producer)

Certain profession related communities can be extremely rich with regard to the backgrounds of participants. The interaction with a representative of another industry or profession is seen to be rewarding because of the different perspectives that can be gained. The interviewed press officer said to attend in events outside his own industry with pleasure:

“Once in a while I strive to attend meetings which are not related exactly to this industry. - - (The meetings) do not need to be specific to this industry as long as they are in some way related to my work. I just don’t want to become blindly overspecialized.” (M, Press Officer, Art Museum)

These kinds of events are perceived to keep one’s mind fresh as they force to widen the focus and question the conventions one is used to. The inspirations picked from other fields are seen to be extremely valuable because the novelty of practices is perceived to be tied to the industries.

Giving out knowledge often provides inspiration for own thinking through the challenges that first need to be tackled. The next statement was brought up when discussing about lecturing in professional events:

“...you learn when you teach. I could say that I’ve got probably the best insights...kind of...most significant applying realizations as I’ve been telling something to someone.” (M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

Therefore a driver for participation is teaching other. Before one is able to give out knowledge in an understandable form one must go through the thinking process with the topics all over again.

Leaving a Business Card

Communities are perceived to be places where to build a professional identity and a base for gaining reputation and recognition. Many interviewees said that they are aware about the fact that everything they do will have an effect on their image. This was well expressed by an interviewee

“Whatever you do, it’s like leaving a business card behind you”. (M, Event Producer)

Impressions are made by socializing in professional communities, but the image is also built indirectly by the footprint that the efforts leave behind and by the subsequent spread of word. Taking care of the public image is seen important as word of both good and bad reputation is told to spread quickly across professional networks.

At the minimum, attendance in professional communities means proof of existence. It was expressed by the industry head of an Internet-company that *‘If you’re not there, you are as good as dead’*. His line refers to having an account in LinkedIn- online community, but can also be applied to participation in professional communities in general.

In particular, having an account in LinkedIn seems to be a somewhat irrational decision for many: even though the value that LinkedIn provides was highly questioned among

interviewees, all of them have accounts in the service. The professional behind the following quote has a LinkedIn-account even though she reckons it useless for her:

“It’s just good to have one (an account) [laughter], but I really don’t use LinkedIn actively...maybe it’s just that I don’t see it providing me any particular benefit, but then, maybe it might come in handy at some point.” (F, Assistant Manager, Food Company)

Having an account seems to be done as it is accordance with the conventions of the profession. The netnographic data reveals that many accounts are not updated and therefore are rather weak presentations of the holders. This and the quote above suggest that many professionals are not looking for further rewards from LinkedIn, but instead, the presence is a proof of existence and an expected thing to do.

Existence relates to visibility in the community and again to the awareness of others about an individual. Certain industries are extremely strict when it comes to competitive setting between individuals. In order to stay alive *‘in the pond’* the interviewed industry head said that he consciously participates in public discussions and events. Moreover, each encounter with a community member is a possibility to make an impact. The senior planning manager expressed that an existence, rather a solid and well-known identity, within a network is a necessity for success as solo efforts performed in a bubble would seldom advance anyone’s career.

Feel Good

The rewards gained from the professional communities are not always something that could be utilized in the future. The actual participation can be seen rewarding as it simply provides pleasure.

This dimension of the rewards seems to be particularly significant for ‘profession-enthusiasts’. Being with mind-likes having similar interests is naturally seen pleasant. Keeping oneself busy with the profession-related discussions is perceived as entertaining by many. Another vantage point to this is that communal activities and interaction is natural for

human beings. As the interviewed manager said, in the end of the day social contacts are a necessity. He continues:

“As I’ve been the manager here, and as I know what it’s like to be a manager in this industry, I’ll say that it can get quite lonely. That is why it is at times just fun to have someone to have a chat with; how have you dealt with this and this case...”
(M, Senior Planning Manager, Media Agency)

When talking with him about the participation referring to the expectations of rewards, he turned such a viewpoint partly down:

“Those could be significant too, but then there are all these communities where it’s fun and pleasant to participate...it is just fun to have a chat, to share...to meet up with people” (M, Senior Planning Manager, Media Agency)

As the quote above suggests, the setting of interaction itself could provide pleasure. The interviewed senior technical writer, who is an enthusiast LinkedIn-user, shares similar insights as for him the environment and dynamics of the activities are inspiring:

“I find the dynamism interesting, entertaining, and very informative. The sheer volume often generates new ways of thinking for how to solve a problem. I enjoy participating in active discussion, which reminds me debate classes back in uni.”
(M, Senior Technical Writer, Gambling and Casino)

The feeling of being present when the discussions reach the yet to be explored paths is perceived to be exciting, which is increased by the possibility to share the common experience with mind-likes.

Taking the floor in professional events was compared to exercise efforts by the interviewed industry head of a major Internet-company. In beforehand one can be sure that it will hurt, but in the spot the pain is rather enjoyable. Afterwards the feeling of successful performance is pleasant because by proving own skills the self-confidence gets a boost. This is further accelerated by the possibility to gain attention from peers. The pleasure that the recognition gained from peers was told by the public bureau representative to be among the best feelings that one can achieve in the profession.

Helping others can arouse feel-good in many ways. When interviewing the more experienced professionals, it could be sensed that they feel a great obligation to the communities that have once helped them. This could be the whole occupational community or a more specific group of experts as brought up in the following quote.

“I share my knowledge with the mindset, that if there’s something I’ve learned about this world, whether it comes to my profession, education or practice, I gladly give it all forward” (M, Senior Planning Manager, Media Agency)

This refers also to a point brought up by another interviewee who pointed out that it is nice to help someone when knowing that own footprint will in some way remain in the efforts of others. It is in great importance to notice that activities can be directly enjoyable themselves, but also the outcomes could provide feel good as well. The same senior adviser of public bureau said to be sincerely pleased when later on seeing someone that she has sparred and coached to succeed.

7.1.2. Barriers

Leaking Knowledge

After the analysis it can be argued that reluctance to give out knowledge for others is the main reason for opting out from professional socialization. There are two separable aspects to this issue: either the individual is cautious by the thought to lose own competitive advantage or then it is the employer’s advantage and interests that cause the hesitancy. Examples of these dimensions are given in the following.

Typically the concern of leaking knowledge is related to the information that is seen to be property of the company represented and therefore an element in competitive advantage. In one extreme case brought up in an interview, a company had given regulations to not to talk about anything related to daily tasks during the lunch hours. *‘There could always be the bad ears around’*, was said to be a reason for the arrangement in question. The ‘bad ears’ mainly referred to the direct competitors that often go to the same cafeterias, but also to

much wider audience. Professionals are aware that the information given out can carry indirectly over to the competitors.

Confidential and other delicate information, such as sales figures, are strictly excluded from the shared stack of knowledge, but also more inconsequential pieces of information are kept to oneself. Hoarding information was referred to be a part of a healthy competitive setting:

"The interaction between competitors can surely be sincere, but not everything is talked about. As I said, there is a healthy competition between us, not anything root and branch kind of a thing [laughter] - - but surely there's things that are kept to ourselves."(M, Press Officer, Art Industry)

Some interviewees reflected their own attitude towards open share of information and considered it irrational to some extent. This can be noticed in the next piece of discussion:

A: *"It's a bit...funny at times. For example, listed companies are quite open and public...There is not all that much such valuable information or knowledge that competitors could take gain of or do something radical if exposed."*

Q: *"Do you reckon people being too cautious..?"*

A: *"Yeah, indeed. When thinking about my own behavior...I really don't know if I had any information that would be in some way significant for the fellows at the competitor. (M, Industry Head, Internet Company)*

Another vantage point is that generous share of knowledge is thought to lead losing own professional advantage over the peers:

"...especially when being here in a small city...it makes me wonder if it's worth sharing any of the own competitive advantage. It could very well be that these persons then would be applying for the same opening sometime in the future." (F, Brand Manager, Food Company)

The findings suggest that the fear of losing own competence is tied to the level of self-confidence. Answers of the respondents high in confidence reflected that they count on

more person-specific abilities when building their competence, such as passion, eloquence, fast thinking and ability to conceive the overall view.

Lack of Trust

As argued in the previous literature, trust is one of the essential building bricks in the conditions for fluent flow of knowledge (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). The barriers to participate in professional communities may have grounds in the distrust towards the community itself as an institution (Zucker 1986), or to the one between persons, *trustor* and *trustee* (Misztal 1996).

In the case of participating in professional communities institution-based trust refers to the community's ability to reward for actions as expected (Zucker 1986).

"I find it grim to always be on the giving side...I mean there has to be the common understanding that this is a two-way-street" (F, Brand Manager, Food Company)

This quote above includes two facets of institution-based trust. Firstly, contributions are, at time unconsciously, expected to be rewarded in one way or another, sooner or later (Emerson 1976). If people sense that the community is not able to reward them, they tend to opt out from communal activities. In a discussion on LinkedIn professionals tell stories how their contributions have left without reward. The conclusions of the discussion can be condensed to the following two quotes.

"I felt used, and slighted on a personal level."

"Since then, I have gotten more careful with determining who is using me to learn and who wants to hire me-."

These expressions support the Homans' (1974) value proposition as past negative experiences cause unwillingness for future actions. The personal bother and cost of unrewarded efforts raise strong barriers for participation in professional communities.

The inability to reward the contribution may as well refer to the fact that other members lack the significant competence to provide relevant knowledge in exchange or are too

distant to carry social capital. The previous quote by the brand manager refers secondly to the integrity of the community. The interviewees implied that if the participants lack a common mindset and attitude towards the communal activities, the climate does not encourage to any kind contribution.

Respectively, there needs to be trust between the participants. As the previous chapter suggests, people tend to keep the information to them to make sure it was not used against them or their employer. Common background and continuous interaction is seen to increase trust and therefore lower the risk for misuses (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). The requirement of past experiences is well brought up in the following quote:

“In this industry there are events where it (open interaction) is facilitated just for the sake of, like ‘now we sit here and talk’, but then if we weren’t in touch otherwise, it would require quite an effort that the people would feel like ‘this is my group, these guys I can trust’.” (F, Brand Manager, Food Company)

The issue relates heavily to the belief that everything one says may be consciously or unintentionally misused. One interviewee suggested that in many professional communities there are the ‘back-stabbers’ who intentionally get the meanings wrong. The media director of a major food company expressed that he consciously avoids joining some discussions as there is a risk that his sayings would be taken from context and used against him.

Trust is a requirement for knowledge sharing (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998), but also an outcome. This is evident in the practice as the partners used for sparring are often fellow professionals with whom a shared history is expansive.

Time Costs

Interviewees had a clear insight that gaining significant rewards from professional communities requires investing time. The decision to participate in communal activities is made by comparing the time investments and the value of expected rewards. The responds by interviewees suggest that there is a trade-off between participation in professional

communities and, both, private spare time and daily tasks. These two dimensions of this issue come out clearly in the following comment:

“Right now I have the most intense stage in my life - - I have my own job, which I try to do as well as I can, and then of course I have my family. It goes like...I’ve somewhat strictly decided that currently I wouldn’t put any time to things that didn’t relate directly to these two things.” (F, Brand Manager, Food Company)

Especially profession related events are seen often as extra-curricular activities that are additional to the obligations back at the daily job. As is the case in the following quote, people usually have hands full of work which cannot be by seminars or informal socializing with peers.

“...and just a while ago there was this interesting event that I really wanted to join. But then again, I have all the other stuff that need to be done. This far I’ve prioritized those in front of the events.” (F, Marketing and Communications Manager, Clothing Company)

In addition to this comment, one of the interviewees indicated, somewhat bitterly, that his employer surely encourages him attending in industry events, but not at the expense of obligated tasks.

As the previous arguments point out, a lot of the socializing with peers is expected to be done outside the general working hours. This then forces people to decide whether to devote part of their spare time to their profession. This dimension has again two facets: the private life and need for relaxing.

Most of the rewards from communal activities demand time to be capitalized and do not directly contribute to any specific tasks. Because of this, people short of time tend to opt out from less obliged events and rather invest the time to succeeding in everyday tasks or to private life and relaxing.

Worthless Rewards

The value of the rewards that participation in professional communities provides is naturally one of the dominant factors in the decision-making process to participate. The findings suggest that professionals perceive that professional communities being for some value, but not just for significant enough to be active participants.

In the interviews it was often expressed clearly that peers outside the organization borders are not needed to success with the current tasks. Marketing assistant working for a food company expressed that the situation in her career is stabile; she succeeds well in her tasks and enjoys working for current employer. The marketing and communications manager of a clothing company said that if in need for help and support, their communities within organization is more relevant to her than external peers. In these situations, the social capital that the wide community of professionals could provide is seen to have low value. It was doubted if recognition and status gained outside the company helped them at all in current duties. Even an interviewee working hard in self-branding questioned the worthiness of social capital gained through generous sharing of knowledge, such as blogging and lecturing:

“But does it (recognition) really count? Can it be capitalized at some point? If I wanted to apply for a new job, would someone ever remember me? At which point does the brand actually matter?” (F, Senior Adviser, Public Bureau)

The relevancy and quality of knowledge gained was also at times questioned. In general, people have trust in the expertise of peers, but are not sure if they will ever find or reach the valuable information.

“Then there’s a challenge, like, how to end up finding the most interesting network for myself, the most interesting people...the ones that are the most informative and beneficial for me. - - I guess there’s no harm being active in many communities...except the lack of time.” (F, Marketing and Communications Manager, Clothing Company)

By this comment the interviewee referred to her experiences of professional events where the contacts made have not provided her any significant value. Another vantage point to this

issue is that the knowledge reachable without significant effort is perceived to be irrelevant and worthless. Investing time and effort in order to get to the deeper subject is seen too costly.

The findings imply that the value and relevancy of rewards is knit to the nature of current tasks and the stage of the career; at times support by peers is the thing to reach for and at times, the situation does not require all that much help from the outside.

Doubting Own Abilities

There are two dimensions on the personal abilities that hinder participation in professional communities. An individual might doubt, first, the suitability of personal characteristics and second, the perceived insufficiency of own expertise when opting out from the communities. The data suggests that these two aspects cannot be completely dissociated as they are related and feed each other.

Activity in professional communities requires being extrovert to some extent and therefore is not natural for some. In the interview settings it was noticeable in the respondent's behavior that hiding behind the personal, definite, characteristics offers a good protection when the articulation of more specific reasons for opting out caused struggles.

It was suggested that the general attitude towards open knowledge sharing varies between the generations. In the following quote the interviewee reflects to his perceptions regarding sharing information for peers outside the organization.

"Maybe it comes to a some kind of a gap between the generations...After all I've grown up in a time and an environment where people were more guarded - - to openly talk about stuff than they are nowadays." (M, Marketing and Media Director, Food Company)

The comment gives cues that the attitudes of individuals have changed during the time, but also connections to a company culture can be drawn. The interviewee further continued that the transparency of a company as a strategic choice is strongly deviant compared to the

principles that once were common. As a whole, the data gives cues of behavioral differences between generations, but cannot confirm them.

Taking the floor in communities is widely referred to performing. Just like any other type of performing, this requires certain attributes that people often insist lacking. An example brought up by an interviewed brand manager of a major Finnish company illustrates this issue clearly. In industry seminars where there is *'a hundred'* peers in the same hall, the audience performed for is simply too big for uninhibited behavior. This referred to be uncomfortable and unpleasant. As a result many tend stay on the background and follow the activities of others. The passive participants often referred lowly to the practices of active contributors by telling, for instance, that there is no need to be *'shouting out loud'* in events.

In many cases a thin line between natural shyness and lack of confidence to own expertise could be drawn. These two things are not completely overlapping, but seem to be correlating with each other. Leaving out from knowledge sharing because of lack of expertise can be both conscious and unconscious. The rather experienced marketing and media director for major company who had recently acquired a new position said that he is eager in learning from peers but does this from a distance:

"I'm just a fresh novice in this field...I rather keep my ears than mouth open." (M, Marketing and Media Director, Food Company)

With this comment the interviewee referred to learn more effectively when observing, but it also reflected to his new position. When being new to his position, he implied not to having sufficient competence for contributing in the discussions. Judging the relevancy of own information is often loaded by self-criticism. The public bureau representative active in online environment said to be constantly worried that the posts in a blog or discussion boards could possibly be rejected by the crowd because of irrelevancy.

The culture in communities contains implicit norms (Wenger 2000) which newcomers are cautious on breaking (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003). Not being familiar with the rules of play in the communities hinders the participation as well. The interviewed senior technical writer compared being a new member in a community to being a new guest at someone's home. People tend to opt out from communal activities when unsure what is appropriate behavior.

At its extreme this uncertainty is evident in narratives of two interviewees regarding corruption. When doubting own ability to make the call in accordance with norms, it is easy to ignore invitations to professional events because of the risk to corruption doubts.

Show-off Stage

Despite the value that the professional communities provide, the attitude towards the concept can be reserved and prejudiced because of the side effects of the phenomenon. The data shows that self-righteous behavior and superficiality of interaction irritate people the most.

The negative perceptions about networking in professional communities could be clearly sensed already from the phrases used by the interviewees. Expressions such as *brags* and *big-mouths* were used from extroverts. Being active in profession circles was referred to be *showing-off* and *boasting*.

Self-promotion irritates people particularly for two reasons. Egoism is seen to be inappropriate, and such behavior does not contribute to the discussions. The issue is seen clearly in the headline of a LinkedIn-discussion "FREEDOM OF SPEECH II. Any topic goes! NO SPAM OR DIRECT SELF PROMOTION PLEASE! ". The same source of annoyance is met both in off- and online environments. The irritating egoistic behavior is well described in the following:

"... (in professional communities) it really gets revealed how awesome and gorgeous people think that they are - - It's like 'look at me fellows, I'm here and see what I've succeeded with!' " (F, Brand Manager, Food Company)

Another interviewee told that he nowadays avoids attending in certain type of seminars and conferences because they have turned to consist mostly of personal marketing speeches:

"There were speeches and workshops but I think the large majority of the people was too much self-referential. In general I think that - both online and offline

events - people talk too much about themselves...” (M, Communication Designer, Freelancer)

As the take on this section of the research suggests, people attend in professional communities in order benefit out of it in some way. Participants are aware of this approach to some extent, but they do not perceive such behavior irritating until the benefit-oriented attitude becomes too intrusive. According to the data the thin line is crossed when the sense of personality is lost; the interest is not in the person but rather on what she or he has to offer. This kind of pretense of caring irritates people strongly.

7.1.3. Conclusions on Expectations of Outcomes

These findings suggest that the participation in professional communities provides extrinsic and intrinsic benefits. Extrinsic benefits are related to improved knowledge and derived social capital. Intrinsic benefits can be said to include the hedonic value that the participation provide. Knowledge and social capital are beneficial both for the individual and the company. In contrary, intrinsic benefits can only be exploited by the individual. Exploiting the benefits for individual and company purposes are further analyzed in discussion section of this study.

From the barriers it can be seen that the interests of company affect only the fear of leaking knowledge. Other barriers are based on individual’s preferences and priorities. However, it is noteworthy that the risk to conflict with the company interests can be stated to be the dominant barrier according to which the behavior is adjusted.

7.2. Participation in Professional Communities

This chapter will focus on describing the behavior regarding the participation in professional communities. At first the circumstances and practices for sharing knowledge are described. Later in the chapter deriving social capital is dealt in a similar manner.

7.2.1. Knowledge Sharing in Professional Communities

The behavior and practices around knowledge sharing differ depending on the premises of the interaction. The major differences come evident when comparing the occasions where the knowledge sharing itself is in primal reason for the interaction with those where the knowledge sharing happens on the side when advancing with a common interest. However, it is first examined how the position of other participant affect the knowledge sharing.

Positions of Others' Affecting Knowledge Sharing

The findings suggest that the behavior in professional communities depend highly on who are the other participants and what companies they represent. It may be stated that informal knowledge sharing between competitors is strongly hindered, if not frozen, by rule. Each interviewee had either similar perceptions or experiences about exchanging information with someone working for a competitor. The following quote by the Internet-company representative describes the general attitude among professionals well:

"I've been to forums where competitors are gathered in a roundtable discussion to talk about challenges of the industry...like, if I was told to reveal what my company is doing or something, it will get quite quiet. When it comes to own challenges [refers to both personal and those of company] and such, people tend to be really, really quiet in front of competitors." (M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

The phrases and expressions of interviewees suggest that sharing knowledge with direct competitors is seen to be morally low. The media director of a major Finnish food industry

company referred to a situation where neither people, nor knowledge is transferred between competitors by *'people having high hygiene'*.

Even though the interaction would not happen between direct competitors, the knowledge share is hindered because of the indirect contacts in the business network. The event producer said that he gets a lot of information of doings of a competitor from subcontractors. This makes him aware that in a similar manner information of his company is carried to the competitors. People regulate their knowledge sharing when knowing that in tight knit communities the information of both what is known and not known will carry eventually indirectly to the competitors.

In the other hand, the narratives by interviewees imply that knowledge exchange between professionals working in different industries can be extremely fruitful. The interviewed marketing professionals have often had their best experiences on knowledge sharing with peers that deal with similar supporting processes, such as communications and marketing, but work in another field. In such occasions the delicate topics such as processes of the core businesses can be easily left out of discussion. The professional in following quote participates in an initiative for Finnish consumer brands.

"It's a little easier when not working in the same industry, when like, not being direct competitors. But at the same time we are great benchmarks for each other."
(F, Marketing Assistant, Food Company)

What fosters the fluent flow of knowledge is solidarity among the peers dealing around the same expertise. For example, two interviewees stated that they feel that their teams and tasks are not respected inside their own organization and are rather seen as 'oddballs'. Hence, they are eager interacting with peers despite some competitive tensions. The observational data shows that in virtual communities there are evident practices to foster solidarity. Mutual background and profession specific conventions are made jokes of and distinction between 'us and them' is given strength by blaming the common opponent. An example of the first practice would be a discussion opening by a graphic designer: *"Unbelievable..... Client asked me if a pattern in an illustration I did contained "hidden words because graphic artists do that kind of thing."* The replies by other designers consisted expressions of laughter and light-minded further jokes about the supposed hidden messages

and crooked minds of graphic artists. In another discussion the self-esteem of professional designers is boosted by making distinction from and questioning the amateurs working for crowdsourcing services. Senior planning manager implied that the feeling of belonging to a community with equals further encourages in giving out information in the name of obligation to the profession.

Knowledge Sharing as a Natural Part of Business

A lot of the interaction between professionals happens during natural encounters while doing business together; the event producer is constantly communicating with subcontractors, marketing director of a clothing company meets the press representatives, media agency inviting advertisers for informal gathering, brand manager of a food company planning a marketing campaign together with advertising agency and so on. When advancing with such a common interest, the knowledge sharing can be said to be a side product of interaction.

When the interaction has a primal focus on advancing with common interests the topics covered are highly related to the task in hand and are specific by nature. The richness of quiet sharing of knowledge was well brought up by the interviewed marketing and media director. When he was new in his position all he needed for learning was to stay in touch with media agencies, media-partners and advertising agencies.

“...meeting up with media companies and listening to what they have to offer, chatting with them and asking questions...little by little I got hold of things. And then when I buy services from media agencies, I get to be in touch with guys who have been in the industry for long. This way the overall picture of things becomes better and better when getting an access to knowledge.” (M, Marketing and Media Director, Food Company)

This suggests that by sticking around heterogeneous actors one gets to absorb knowledge and thus cultivate personal skills and understanding of the dynamics of industry.

According to the data, even the strictest competitors co-operate with each other when having a common goal. Lobbying is a prime example of this. The interviewee working in art

industry said that the conflicts between the fierce competitors would be forgotten if it came to the issue of government's culture funding:

"...this surely applies to the whole art industry...like public funding...if there was intention to cut that, I believe that everyone (in this industry) would suddenly become like-minded. There certainly would be a common will that it (funding) should be continued". (M, Press Officer, Art Museum)

In addition, coordination of processes, such as scheduling of campaigns is done both explicitly and tacitly in order to avoid harm for the companies and remain certain harmony in the industry. What is significant, lobbying happens often together with close actors that typically do not seek explicit interaction.

Knowledge Sharing as a Primal Intention

In other occasions the knowledge sharing itself is the primal reason for interaction and is therefore often facilitated. Examples of these would be educative seminars, conferences and virtual discussion boards. The data collected suggest that these kinds of events are most often attended in order to increase personal knowledge. In addition, expanding personal knowledge stock can also be in significant interest in formal initiatives for company cooperation. The narratives by interviewees imply that forums facilitated for cooperation between organizations are often turned to be platforms for more informal knowledge sharing. For example the initiative for Finnish consumer brands that the interviewed marketing assistant is part of is readily used for having wider discussions and peer support. Her comment clarifies that the exchange of knowledge seems to be most enjoyable for the individuals when it actually happens outside the formal agenda:

"We've had these meetings for developing the initiative further, but it's been nice to notice that when there are people from other well-known companies, the discussions just get carried away at times as we compare our thoughts, ideas and [past] product launches." (F, Marketing Assistant, Food Company)

As the formal agenda is built based on the interests of the companies represented, people do not personally benefit that much from the formal topics. This leads to a tendency that the discussion often makes its way to side paths that are more fruitful for individuals. Nevertheless, according to the interviewed brand manager, agenda is important as she explained that making the first moves in a reserved community is always easier when having something to warm up first with.

In settings where the knowledge sharing is intended the discussion relates typically to wide topics regarding the expertise. It was described that the topics deal with challenges *'that everybody knows that everybody is struggling with'*. A good example of this is an extremely vivid LinkedIn discussion dealing with a challenge all colleagues deal with. She asks the community: *"How does stress, and life affect you when you need to work on a creative situation? What do you do to turn the creative switch on when you are under stress?"*. The popularity of this topic started by a visual designer is explainable as many have personal experiences on the subject and the contributions are beneficial for all as the problem is not tied to specific task or company. The interviewed marketing assistant further expresses the nature of the topics discussed with peers which represents the tendency of the whole data extremely well:

"It has nothing to do with things that would relate to our competitive advantage, like what we are planning and intending to do and launch. It's more like dealing with the burning issues of the day that someone is having in mind. - -We never discuss about any specific product or service or so...it stays more on a general level." (F, Marketing Assistant, Food Company)

This further strengthens the idea that the knowledge sharing is at its richest when it deals with supportive processes outside the core businesses. Applying social media in marketing efforts has for instance been recently such of a hot topic. The topic is popular as the issue is relevant in time, thus common for many and does not concern core processes.

Regardless of the nature of the setting, tacit knowledge such as profession specific language, norms and silent agreements are quietly created and diffused further. The senior manager of a media agency explained that the natural and inevitable encounters between industry representatives have created a set of rules that the actors obey. This practice is evident as it

was further explained that the newcomers in the industry often have troubles following these norms that have been established tacitly over time.

The collected data implies that there is a clear practice of sharing knowledge through narratives as a lot of the information is embedded in the stories told. Storytelling carries the best practices and results of new experiments widely to the members of an industry-specific community. In the following the nature of questions asked in events where open discussion gets encouraged is described. The example questions are excerpts from a longer stretch of discussion.

“Have you tried SMS-direct marketing, how did you succeed? - - How is the updating of Facebook pages handled in your company?” - - “Where do you get the content on your webpage?”. (F, Brand Manager, Food Company)

From the questions above it can be detected that the questions are expressed in for encouraging to narratives.

According to the interviewed event producer, also encounters with suppliers are rich in stories about what different companies in the industry have done and performed lately. Similar practice is evident in LinkedIn-discussions. In the discussion about QR-codes, the digital marketing managers pool their insights based on their own experience and observations of what others have done. In the following excerpt two members of the community give examples of the worst practices.

“Most QR codes I have seen send the user to a lousy page, often not even optimized for a smartphone. I have seen print ads with QR codes. That space in the ad could have instantly conveyed the advertising message without a user having to get out their phone, scan the code and go to a website only to find out there was no additional value from the visit.”

“- - And don't forget TV. I saw a code in a television ad once, which was laughable. Many of the older smartphones can't even capture codes off of screens, PLUS there's the added inconvenience of getting up to walk closer to the TV in order to scan, PLUS what person jumps up at the first sign of a QR code and rushes to grab it before the commercial is over? Very few, if any, I would imagine.”

In online discussions the stories from multiple sources are collect and refine. Therefore, archived discussions of online communities can be said to be storybooks of best practices and lessons learned.

According to the data the generous story telling of past experiments and achievements has grounds on the novelty value of innovations. Among the interviewees there was a solid perception that ideas are the key ingredients when building the competitive advantage. However, once the ideas are executed all the value is lost except the possibility to gain recognition and attention by sharing them. Achievements and executed innovations are therefore generously given available to the community to be told further.

7.2.2. Deriving Social Capital in Professional Communities

The practices in professional communities include deriving different forms of social capital. Three distinct categories of social capital relevant in professional communities were brought up in the analysis of the data. In the following it is examined how recognition and reputation are given out and pursued. Also the practices regarding creation of contacts are analyzed.

Reputation

The interviewees perceive that the most significant way to gain reputation is doing each task superiorly and let the quality of the result speak behalf of the professional. The event producer told that the word of successful implementations will spread unrestrainedly in his industry. Doings of other companies are sharply observed and discussed. Thus reputation is evolved even though there were no direct encounters. One of the interviewed managers expressed to believe that his reputation is based on doing things that have left a visible footprint and thus are easily noticed when observed:

“What is always linked to these big professional profiles is the way how they put themselves to the frontier in a big way...that’s of course part of my job description as well. - - If everything goes smoothly, people will get interested in what we have

done and said and this way it will leave a footprint and spread further.” (M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

As expressed earlier on in this study, own achievements are also generously presented in different occasions. The brand manager of a food company said that the members of her team were eager in attending profession related events by the time they had succeeded with groundbreaking marketing campaigns. In addition to the brand marketing for the company, presenting achievements is done in hope to personify the success to own character.

The reputation is highly tied to specific communities and it cannot be transferred to apply in other affiliations. The interviewed senior adviser expressed that despite she is highly thought of among peers, when attending professional events outside her expertise the reputation is not for any use. This would not however affect the aspiration for learning and gaining recognition when sharing knowledge.

Respectively, also negative reputation spreads, believably even more unrestrainedly than positive reputation. The event producer referred to this by saying *“you’re just as good as what you do”*. Reputation as a trustworthiness partner has grounds on following the common rules of play. The comment by the media agency representative describes the role of negative reputation in doing business:

A: “It’s like, you’ll find what you have once left behind, that’s why you should play according to...treat people like you’d wish them to treat you. It is so that in this industry the bastards are well known...”

Q: “Do people talk about them beh... (ind their backs?)”

A: “Openly, oh yes! They are named, explicitly...they are known and people know to avoid them.”(M, Senior Planning Manager, Media Agency)

What is more to this, the followed conversation with the interviewee manifested that backbiting and gossiping about these ‘bastards’ is a common and even enjoyable practice performed among peers.

Recognition

Practices related to recognition are particularly detectable in the LinkedIn-boards. The discussions are rich in phrases where recognition and gratitude are expressed. It is typical that members not having contributed to the discussion in any other way, praise the quality of answers, agree on opinions and express their thankfulness sincerely. For example, this designer breaks into the discussion without any previous comments: “- -, thanks so much for your comments and feedback on this discussion“. The respond by the interviewed senior technical writer implies that these expressions are significant as they seem to keep the discussions alive.

Also the features of LinkedIn support deriving recognition. There is an easy way to give thumbs up for the valuable comments. In addition, the most active members are listed in “Top Influencers of the Week“-chart on the front page of each group. Even though the chart counts only the quantity of posts, the feature is in accordance with the thoughts of the interviewed industry head:

“...and of course everybody wants, in the own group of peers...whether it is horse betting, programming or whatever it is, to be sort of a guru within the own framework.”(M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

Despite the chart’s simplicity it derives visibility for the most active members and therefore raises awareness of own existence among the other members. The feature provides also a function how one can be regarded being better than another, which is important when building self-confidence.

There are practices of giving out recognition, but acknowledgements are also strongly pursued after. In LinkedIn discussions there is a clear practice of showcasing own accomplishments. There are posts that can be categorized as overt self-promoting. Self-promoting takes place among general discussion as the way of expressing oneself often turns to be bolstering up own professional image. A good example of this is a discussion where a digital marketing professional asked advice for increasing the open rate of the emails sent in marketing purposes. In the first post she talked lowly about the relatively great rate that she had accomplished to reach. All the comments to the post gave valuable

hints to increase the rate as asked, but the discussion opener returned with a post where she seemed to be offended by the lack of recognition and now promoted her original success: *"I've heard that 20% is a great response"*. This example describes the practices done in pursuit for recognition well as the substance to the discussion is in secondary interest when more important is to highlight own presence and abilities.

Recognition may have difficulties to be exploited further, but the value lays in the boost of self-confidence and pleasure that it offers. What is significant in contrary with reputation, the value that recognition provides is instant and direct. The senior adviser representing a public bureau expressed that the recognition from all colleagues is meaningful because *'they get the real thing'*. The expertise of a professional might have developed to be so narrow that people within own organization are not able to provide recognition because of the lack of understanding. Therefore the support is sought from the group of peers outside the organization. The interviewee regarded the recognition gained from peers to be the best reward that one can get after succeeding in work related efforts.

Contacts

Retelling Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) the social capital in form of contacts refers to the network ties that provide access to resources. Creating these contacts is referred to be networking. In addition to raising awareness about the others in the community and their skills, through networking people also impose own existence to be known.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991) all participation in communities creates ties and linkages between participants. In the same vein all activities performed within professional communities can be loosely said to be networking. In discourses networking is often referred to practices in occasions outside formal agendas. The perceptions regarding mingling were rather negative amongst the interviewees. The brand manager of a food company said that mingling consist too much of the attitude of *'how can I take advantage of you'*. Instead of persons the interest is rather in mapping out the capabilities and resources that the individuals have.

Moreover, networking is imprinted by the practice of pretense. Pretense and the subsequent superficial nature of interaction irritate people, but at the same time these practices are widely applied and therefore quietly accepted. This issue including the antecedent reasons comes out extremely well in the following quote by the interviewed industry head:

“...and then it comes to the significance of pretense, like, mannered fascination...an unfortunate fact is that succeeding requires acting and being interested even though...you know, you wouldn’t care less at that point. - - So, every encounter counts, interested or not...but behaving nicely will...you just never know nowadays where you will meet this guy again, or the ones who know him.”
(M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

Another justifying reason for such behavior is that one is evaluated as a person by the way how he or she treats those unable to provide rewards. This shows that people are aware that reputation diffuses easily and indirectly in tight communities.

After building the premises for the contacts, the role of networking lies on fostering the base of trust. Because of the between the companies, shared experiences and sense of proximity are indispensable before getting the access to the resources held by others. The role of networks came out clearly as the Internet-company representative said that simply by knowing people everything related to doing business is easier. This insight is supported in the following comment where the significance of past interactions when contacting in the future is underlined:

“When in need for help, I can tell you, it’s by far easier to contact someone that you know than call randomly some sales manager out of the blue. - - The most important thing in hanging out together in communities is the possibility to get to know people.” (M, Senior Planning Manager, Media Agency)

In LinkedIn the practices of networking are for the most part passive. Self-presence is primarily done through the profile. Therefore the presentation is constant and the information of the resources one is able to provide is always accessible. In the discussions the networking and mingling happens in a bidirectional manner, but also there the self-

presentation is often passive. Some discussions have turned to be best described as card files of contacts as the questions for references are filled with simple descriptions of the offering of an individual and the represented company.

The contacts are not always formed specifically between two persons. According to the data the ties between distant actors are attached primarily to the community as a whole. Therefore the contacts and relationships are rather impersonal by nature. For a member of a LinkedIn-group the community appears faceless and therefore it is not significant who solves the problems or give out recognition and gratitude. The nature of the observed behavior in LinkedIn and the responds by interviewees imply that the contacts formed through participating in communal activities provide awareness of the expertise and abilities that the community itself, not the individual members in particular has to provide. In the same vein, as the interviewed event producer expressed, attending in industry exhibitions is done in order to map out the general offering, not anyone special's abilities. Although he is not aware of the people present in beforehand he perceives the events as great sources to find new ways for implementing productions and contacts such as subcontractors that would not be straightly linked to event producing business.

The practice of pretense describes the nature of contacts the best; even though currently not needed, networking is done as an investment in order to get prepared for the future. Networking is thus done primarily in order to advance own interests. Consequently, networking is a communal activity that is contrary to typical tendencies done without expectations to be reciprocated.

7.2.3. Conclusions on Participating in Professional Communities

From the chapters above it is clearly seen that the behavior in professional communities varies heavily depending on who are the other members. It is evident that behavior in professional communities is regulated by the competitive setting. The tensions in communities derive from positions held by the represented companies in business network (Thorelli 1986). The dependence is at strongest between direct competitors and respectively weak when businesses operate on different markets.

When the relation has competitive characters (Easton & Araujo 1992) the behavior of individuals is very reserved as they avoid conflicts with company's interest. When companies are co-existent (Easton & Araujo 1992), the interpersonal knowledge sharing is less hindered. According to the data, the sharing is most fruitful between persons dealing with similar processes as the knowledge is detached from the core business.

	Strong Dependence	Weak Dependence
Accessing Knowledge	Increasing the Know-How of the Firm	Improving Personal Skills and Knowledge
Creating Knowledge	Community Triggering Organizational Innovation	Community as a Locus for Open and Collective Innovation
Deriving Social Capital	Reputation, Contacts, Organizational Status	Community Recognition, Networks

Figure 4 – Drivers in Regard to the Dependence between Presented Companies

The findings of this section are concluded in the enclosed figure 5. From the figure it can be seen how the drivers presented in previous section branch off and change characters according to the level of dependence.

7.3. Consequences of Participation in Professional Communities

It is stated in previous chapters that benefits gained from professional communities can be said to be extrinsic or intrinsic by nature. In addition, the participation will provide hedonic value. This chapter focuses on describing the role of these benefits on an individual and subsequently the overall consequences of participation.

7.3.1. Performance

Professional communities provide valuable resources and tools to increase performance of professional in every-day tasks. Professional communities provide the possibility to acquire information to increase one's own expertise. This exploiting of new knowledge makes the completion of current tasks more successful, i.e. more effective and better quality. In addition to the knowledge itself, professional communities provide individuals inspirations and ideas that are used and applied in own projects. Examples of these would be innovative marketing practices that are formerly implemented within foreign markets and can now be applied in own tasks.

In the analysis of the data two significant ways of accelerating the performance with the help of professional communities were brought up. These are presented in the following.

First, the community is perceived to be a superior source of knowledge both in quality and time-efficiency. The reason for this is well described in the following quote:

“The amount of information is increasing exponentially...there is just no way to follow personally that many sources without a humane filter there in-between who says and knows what is hot and interesting.” (M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

The quote among other insights by interviewees implies that there is a presumption that the knowledge possessed and shared by the peers is high in quality and relevant in time. From the grounds of this, people use less effort for monitoring the quality of the information received in exchange.

Second, in addition to the time-efficiency a professional can accelerate performance by exploiting the capabilities of the contacts created. With a wealth of contacts one knows whom to contact in order to solve the issue in hand (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998, Wasko & Faraj 2005). As it simplest this refers to a clear understanding of who are the individual actors that are relevant for succeeding in one's task. This is the case with the marketing manager of the clothing company when networking with reporters and other interest groups. The marketing and media director of major Finnish food company explained that recruiting processes are efficient when knowing some of the capabilities of the potential candidates already in advance. The narratives of achievements shared generously within communities provide valuable recommendations of people and service providers. The art industry professional expressed to save time and nerves when he does not need to specifically search for example for capable catering services.

The online communities are used as tools for problem solving which hastens succeeding with tasks. The problem is given to the community to be solved, in other words the solution is crowdsourced (Howe 2006). In the studied LinkedIn groups that were targeted for marketing professionals, anything from hardware recommendations to logistics solutions were asked from the peers. In all these cases responses both in quality and quantity was on a level that would self-directly be time-consuming and challenging to reach. Also contacts for cold contacting and survey responds were effectively collected in these communities. Asking references for an advertising agency provided a list of hundreds of contacts.

Hedonic value gained from participation certainly increases the performance. Interviewed media agency representative as well as marketing and media director expressed to value the sparring by peers highly. They feel that the peers refining the correctness of their insights increases self-confidence. This proof of performance can be then harnessed in other venues.

7.3.2. Business Possibilities

The ties created in professional communities raise awareness of capabilities that the professional and the represented company are able to provide. The contacts together with created reputation open doors for future business possibilities. The social capital in form of

contacts and reputation can be referred also to being existent in a network. Without a noticeable presence in professional communities doors for potential future business are kept close.

Being distinguishable in LinkedIn has provided the interviewed graphic designer several new projects. This includes new clients for the company that she represents, but also freelance tasks directed for her. In its simplicity, keeping the LinkedIn-profile presentable and updated is important by those looking for business partners. The industry head of an Internet-company said to always go through LinkedIn-profiles before deciding whom to contact to offer a business partnership. LinkedIn-profile can be referred to be a shop window where the persons and their skills are continuously on view for the interested ones to pick them.

Many interviewees perceived that the most significant offering of communal events and encounters is the possibility to get to know people. This way premises for possible future business are created as successful business relationships largely requires common experience in advance. The manager working for major international media agency refers to the possibilities of doing business with someone that is already known through informal encounters:

“...instead (of cold contacting) I can call this Mister B., with whom I’ve met and probably spent together a night out at the bar. We already know each other a bit...that already makes it easier for building up something together.” (M, Senior Planning Manager, Media Agency)

When able to harness the resources held by the community the set of tools with which to do business increases.

The spread of word about reputation and offering of one produces business possibilities. The event producer expressed that by a big part of their commissions stem from the success of past doings. This has consequently created word-of-mouth and thus increased their reputation and fame among professionals.

7.3.3. Safety Net

It can be seen in the data that participation is largely thought to be an investment for the rainy day. Building a network of contacts is expected to function as a safety net when in urgency. This is a good example that the expectation of the time span for capitalizing the rewards is often expanded.

Participation is about creating and maintaining the ties between participants in order to keep the channels open for possible future contacting. It was impressed that the wide network of contacts are in great importance in event producing:

“You got to have great networks if you’re about to make it, because there are times when your performer cancels when the event is already running. If you don’t have the network through which you begin carrying off the issue within the very same hour, you are screwed.” (M, Event Producer)

In the same vein, with a strong network one is more prepared to tackle future challenges and requirements of the tasks. The media agency representative expressed that the contacts built in the communities help facing the uncertainty of the future. He says to be prepared for this unpredictability of the future requirements and wishes of clients by constantly creating new contacts. He does this in order to map out the community’s abilities that possibly can be harnessed in the future. This is said to require less effort than keeping own skills on the requisite level. What is more to this, according to the event producer, the community events are valuable forums because there he gets to know professionals whose favors he can need already in his next project.

The aspect in hand is strongly related to solidarity. The sense of belonging in certain profession makes people willing to support the peer in need of help. In the hour of need the individual’s fair reputation among peers comes for value as there is a tendency that past actions are reciprocated at some point in the communities (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Solidarity is particularly evident in LinkedIn discussions, where the peers are keen on helping each other without a promise of reward. Example of this is a case where a LinkedIn user working as director of an advertising agency was running out of time when rebranding a local pet shop. Lacking the name of the new brand he turned to the peers asking for

suggestions and received plenty instantly. Relating to sincere helping of a peer, an interviewed senior technical writer expressed that certain level of civility and solidarity is thought to be embedded in professionalism by default.

7.3.4. Social Power

The findings of this research suggest that the social capital created in professional communities increases social power (Blau 1992) of an individual within the very same community, but also within own organization.

The successful performances in professional communities creates an expert status, which is not necessarily tied to the position or title within the own company. In the following quote the interviewee reflects the significance of her past efforts in wider professional community. Even though her position and title are rather vague, the status reached supplies her credibility in front of certain audience.

“...in some event there might be the top level bosses present, who are there because of their title, who have been in charge of some development project for long, and then in a way, where you’ve been visible and audible, what’s your history, this everything suddenly counts. - - even though my name can’t be found from any list of executives, my opinion is being heard.” (*F, Senior Adviser, Public Bureau*)

In the same vein, after reaching widely acknowledged status further efforts for pursuing visibility becomes easier. By the help of status one can participate in the public discussions within an industry, as the interviewed industry head is prone doing, as a credible voice. In the best case these efforts lead to achieving media coverage and buzz. This can again be harnessed for advocating employer’s interests or personal matters.

The contacts built in the professional community are personal resource and poorly transferable for someone other. Based on the benefits of contacts described in previous sections the greater the network of contacts and access to resources within, the more dependent the employer is on the employee. For example, the contacts are essential part of

the interviewed event producer's expertise and therefore the success of the company is highly dependent on him. According to the data it can be stated that being distinguished in communities is also perceived to be excellent brand marketing for the employer. The employer's dependence on the benefits that the employee brings on from the communities increases the social power. This can be said to improve the negotiation position in internal structures of the company.

7.3.5. Career Opportunities

The interviewed professionals have a shared insight on the essential role of professional communities when looking for a new job. By participating in communities one gets easily information of available openings, but also showcases own skills for potential recruiters.

The industry head of Internet-company pinpoints the importance of contacts and reputation in advancing in one's career and getting the interesting tasks. His background is a prime example of this matter as he has never been recruited from the base of open application, but through recommendations and contacts. During his career he has been working for companies within the same industry, which reflects the importance of reputation as a succeeding and accomplished professional. In the next quote he tells how he was pulled to work for his first major employer by his peer student:

"...during the student years we used to do stuff like group work together, so certain trust came along there...like, this is a good fellow, this guy is capable of carrying these things off and also gets along with people. But also, this is important, only being the nice guy is just not enough. - - You need to show that you have the substance as well." (M, Industry Head, Internet Company)

The comment well clarifies the necessity of the requirements and abilities, but also the common stock of experience and trust.

Networking is perceived to be a practice of boosting own professional image among professional communities. The interviewed marketing assistant expressed that she perceives networking as *'a personal thing to be done for my own life'*. This suggests that the focus is

largely in one's future career when networking. She said that instead of networking with people aiming to advance in her daily tasks, she focuses on mapping out the potential future employers and make a personal impression on them. The narratives by interviewees about their public speeches and presentations of achievements let to state that the impression is striven to be made also in reach for recommendations by professionals having strong status.

The significance of visible existence when seeking for new employer and tasks is widely acknowledged among professionals. Two interviewees stated clearly that they polish their professional image by being more active in communities, both off- and online, if decided to seek for new openings and apply for them.

7.3.6. Conclusions on Outcomes of Participation in Professional Communities

It is evident that the rewards gained can be beneficial both for individual and company. What is noteworthy, the benefits of individual. However, outcomes that benefit the individual might be cause conflicts with the company interests. In this section the outcomes were listed in a suggestive order according to the harmony between individual consequences and those of company.

The increased performance and business possibilities are beneficial for both sides. The improved expertise increases the efficiency of professional and the explicit knowledge can further be transferred to be available for the company. In contrast to the transferability of knowledge contacts are regarded more as personal commodity. The personal relationships cannot be exploited by the company directly. Therefore the professional community being a safety net does not conflict with company interest, but neither can it be used by others in the company.

In the other hand, social power might be used against the employer. The external social power of an individual is beneficial for the company too as the employee has a better access to community owned resources. However, company's increased dependency on favors improves the individual's negotiation position. Therefore internal social power is a disadvantage for the company. At its extreme professional communities open career

opportunities for individuals. In such case all knowledge and social capital embedded in the individual is lost, which evidently is in conflict with the company interests.

This issue of harmony and conflict of outcomes will be discussed deeper in the next section. This will be done by analyzing the findings of this section together with the insights gained earlier on in this study.

8. Discussion

8.1. The Diverse Roles of Different Kind of Professional Communities

This chapter will discuss how different kind of professional communities benefit the individual differently and further who takes the advantage of the gained benefits. The findings about the drivers to interact with peers in relation to the type of community, presented in figure 5, will form the basis for this chapter. To set the premises for the comparison, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the communities regarding the level of dependence between presented companies.

It was stated in the findings section that the behavior in communities is regulated by the dependence between the presented companies. This division to weak and strong dependence relates interestingly to the co-relation dimension (Easton & Araujo 1992) and to the typology by Bengtsson & Kock (1999). Their defining variable has been the way in which the objectives of the parties relate. It is straightforward that the companies in competitive relationship are highly dependent on each other. However, the employees from businesses in cooperative relationships do not necessarily form a community with weak dependence. In fact, the case is often quite opposite. According to Easton and Araujo (1992) cooperation happens most often between vertical actors within the same industry. In this thesis communities where vertical actors are present are regarded to have high levels of tension. The communities with weak dependence relate more with the relationships that are based on co-existence (Easton & Araujo 1992). Instead of the dimension of harmony – conflict, the division used in this study would be supported by a dimension of conflict – indifference.

Because of the high tensions between competitors, employee behaves according to the company interests in the community. When the companies presented are indifferent with each other, the employee gets to act according to his or her own will. From this vantage point it is worth pondering who takes the primal advantage of the benefits gained. From the base of previous chapters some insights to answer this question can be stated. This issue is discussed further in this section.

8.1.1. For what is Knowledge and Social Capital Exploited?

Analysis of the data let to infer that professionals perceive to have two distinct roles when participating in communities. The offset is that in professional contexts one appears as an employee of company. In addition to the role of a company representative, professionals cultivate their personal skills which can be conceptualized as an enterprise of an individual aiming for expertise. This division gives cues that the primal gainer of benefits achieved from professional communities varies as well.

As it is evident in the chapter of consequences of the participation, in most cases both company and the individuals benefit from the reward. Hence, definite statements regarding this issue must not be done.

The analysis implies that the primal gainer of the benefits varies depending on the tensions set by the competitive advantage present in the community. When it comes to accessing and creating knowledge, it may be suggested that the participation in communities with strong dependence between the participants primarily benefits the company. As it is sketched in figure 6, the setting shifts when the dependence becomes weaker.

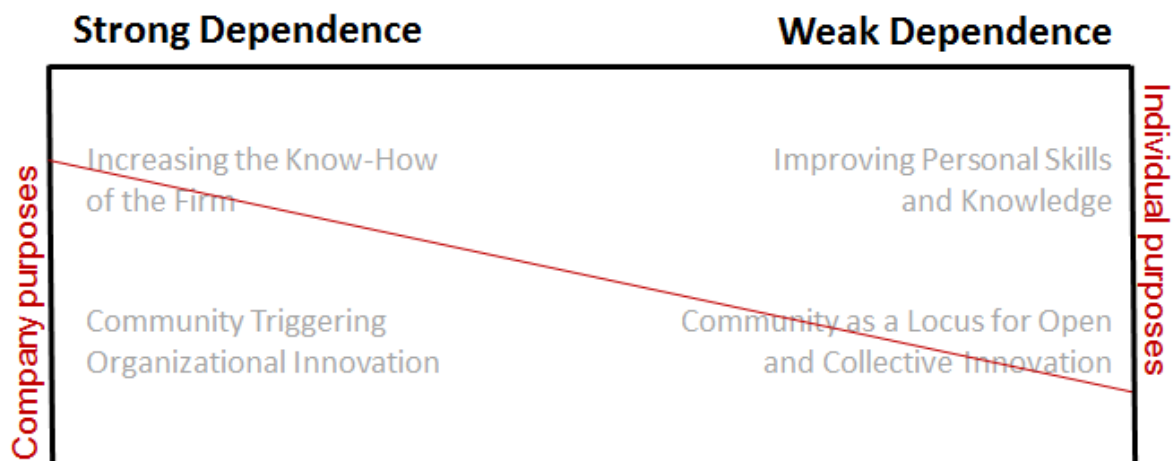


Figure 5 – Outcomes of Accessed and Created Knowledge

In particular with competitors the interaction happens on the terms of competition setting, which hinders the informal knowledge sharing. Thus, knowledge sharing is done to advance with company interests. As explained in the previously industries lack communal innovation

as early mover advantages would be valueless when shared. The inspirations gained originate from experiments and implementations of others in the industry and thus serve best the innovation processes within the organization. Therefore the primal focus is to meet the interests of company and only secondary benefit can be said to be personal assimilation of knowledge.

According to the findings the communities grouping coincidental professionals together are harnessed to improve personal expertise and consequently enhance professionalism. These findings are greatly in line with the results of studies of consumer- or organizational communities (Wasko & Faraj 2000, 2005; Ardichvili 2003, 2008). When the tension between participants is gone, the communities are readily used for sources of knowledge and platforms for problem solving.

The discussed topics for instance with group of marketing professionals do not necessarily contribute to any specific tasks directly, but serve gaining an overall understanding. The improvement of expertise is then exploited to succeed with the daily job with effective performance. The efficiency explains the eagerness to use the communities as problem solving tools. It requires less effort to discuss about relevant topics with peers than collect and absorb the information from multiple sources. The nature of questions asked is in line with the aspect of efficiency. Support for personal hunches is looked for in order to avoid pointless work. In same vein, problems are given to the community to be solved as it requires minimal effort to get the solution in this manner.

An extremely interesting and noteworthy point is that social capital benefits in the opposite way. Social capital is most meaningful for individual when gained from close contacts, whereas from distant actors, it benefits mainly company purposes. This is illustrated in the figure 7.

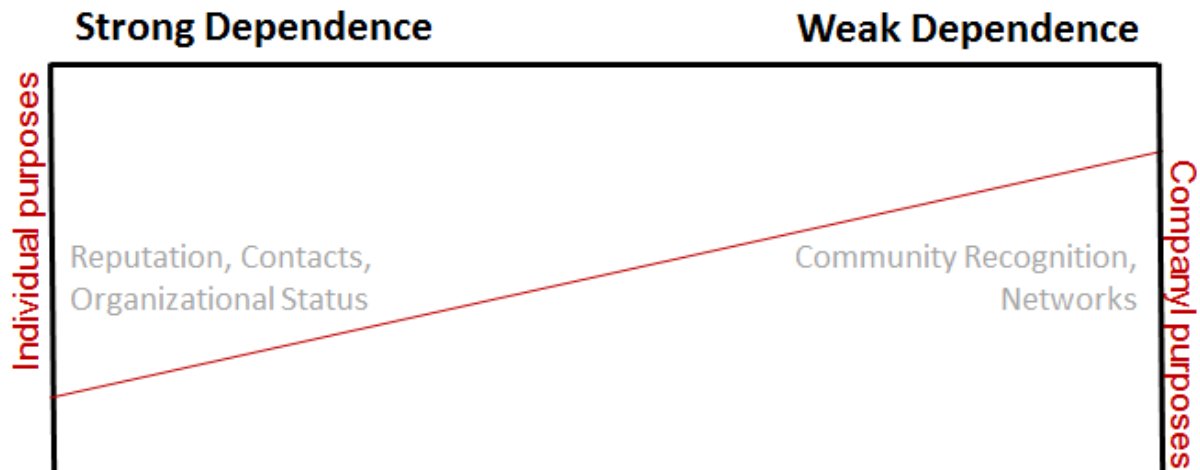


Figure 6—Outcomes of Derived Social Capital

The social capital gained from communities with strong dependence benefits primarily the professional. The results of analysis support the views by Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) as social capital does not evolve effectively when interacting with distant actors. Recognition provides hedonic value when consumed instantly, but cannot be transformed by time into meaningful reputation because of the weakness of ties. Therefore the most significant value lies in the network of contacts that helps the company facing the uncertainty of the future. Awareness of the resources held by the network can be capitalized when looking for future business partners.

The professionals working in the same market are most likely to appreciate successful performance (Easton & Araujo 1992) and therefore are prone providing recognition. In addition, the ties in these communities are strong enough for reputation to be built. Therefore contributions in tight knit communities are often regarded as investments. This is interestingly in line with the statements by Foa (1971) as it is seen that contributions in expectation of particularistic resources are done in open ended manner without direct reciprocity. Also diffusion is efficient in communities with close participants. As it is shown in the histories of interviewed professionals the reputation and contacts have crucial impact when advancing on one's career. The individual benefits from the improved internal rank gained through social power. The strong professional image brings also new business

possibilities, which benefits the company, but also individual as little effort is needed for finding future business partners.

8.2. The Roots for Negative Perceptions

This research has drawn an extremely interesting, somewhat contradictory picture about the phenomenon of professional communities and about the role that the communities have on professionals. The professionals are capable to detect the benefits that participation in communities can provide, but the attitude towards the phenomenon as a whole remains largely reserved.

What hinders the participation in professional communities is, firstly, the fact that professionals sense to be responsible for avoiding risks harming the represented company. Secondly, the potential of communities, in particular of those, towards which the company is indifferent, remains unsolved for many. Professionals do not know how to respond to the rules and norms set either by the community or the company represented. Thus, when uncertain, people tend to opt out from professional communities. These issues are further affected by the lack of strategic approach towards the communities.

8.2.1. Information Hoarding as a Convention

The first issue is highly related to the two views of knowledge management; knowledge-based view (Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004) and the resource-based view (Wernerfelt 1984). The insights by most of the interviewed professionals imply that knowledge is widely perceived according to the resource-based view; once the knowledge is leaked, a piece of competitive advantage is lost. In this vein, open knowledge sharing would be in heavy conflict with interests of company. According to the analysis, this is the major explanatory aspect for the reserved attitude towards cooperation with peers. As knowledge is perceived to be power, it is not something to be given away with vague promises of reciprocity. Knowledge-based view which leans to the thought that information becomes valuable when integrated to the

existing stock of knowledge (Grant & Baden-Fuller 2004), is somewhat left without take in the every-day practices in business environment. However, the data gathered for this research suggests that the reality would support more generous sharing of knowledge. As the manager that a major Internet-company expressed, there is a wealth of information available nowadays about everyone and everything, but the information is worthless without the company-specific expertise to exploit it.

This contradiction and the embedded irrationality imply that reserved behavior regarding knowledge sharing is often unaccountable, habitual and respectful for conventions. This is particularly noticeable in industries where the competition seems not to be fierce. Even though interacting would not cause negative consequences for the represented companies, opting out from open knowledge sharing is still common. This applies to the personal experiences as well. Professionals are afraid that their knowledge would be used against them or taken unfair advantage of. However, the interviewees had very little, if any, experiences to proof that such behavior actually takes place in professional communities. Therefore the information hoarding can be stated to be habitual and cautious, not based on rationality. These perceptions appear to be linked to certain rules of play that are universal; the bonding between competitors is perceived to be inappropriate. Rather, reserved attitude towards competitors is readily regarded as a quintessence of a healthy competition. In an environment like that, open sharing of knowledge with someone in the industry is against the moral obligations to the peers of own organization.

8.2.2. Obliviousness Causing Resistance

The conventions regarding professional communities that are not formed within certain market or industry are rather undeveloped. Particularly virtual communities are still a relatively novel phenomenon and therefore the established role and position is sought. This hazy role of distant professionals is further fostered as occasions in offline-environment where open knowledge sharing would be inherent are rather rare. The observed attitude of interviewed professionals reflects that it is natural to respond to obliviousness by

reservation. Even though some were not experienced in using LinkedIn the service was quickly judged from the grounds of presumptions and prejudice.

This kind of resistance fits well to the views by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) that knowledge sharing relationships needs to have social capital embedded in them. As encounters with distant actors do not happen naturally, the communities lack the structures. Hesitancy for participation particularly in LinkedIn is partly caused by the lack of established and common practices as and norms.

8.2.3. Lack of Organizational Justification

What is linked to both issues described above is that exploiting professional communities lack strategic approach consistently. What is consequent, first, the participation in communal activities is not encouraged by employers, second, the rules of participation remain unclear and, third, the benefits gained will not be harnessed fully.

It is noteworthy that in many companies the participation in professional events is not regarded as part of professional's job description. The attitude towards the interaction with peers may be favorable, but it is not given any resources. When having hands full when coping with daily tasks, extra-curricular activities do not appear appealing. Neither is the networking and discussing in virtual communities perceived as official tools for working. This is evident as LinkedIn is mainly used outside the working hours.

As discussed in previous section, knowledge sharing is hindered because there is a risk to conflict with interests of company. The behavior of interviewees suggests that professionals tend to stay on the safe side when not exactly knowing what kind of interaction is permitted with peers. The norms including expectations and supposition of the role of professional communities as well as explicit rules of participation remain unclear when not dealt with explicitly within organization.

The third aspect that the lack of organizational acknowledgment causes is the inability to harness the rewards. Knowledge-based view of the firm (Grant and Baden-Fuller 1004) impresses the necessity of systematically integrating the knowledge that individuals have

gained to the existing resources and processes of company. When this is not taken in account the value of rewards remains low. This fosters the arguments behind resource-based view (Wernerfelt 1984) as the value of gained rewards stays short, but knowledge is been leaked outside the company.

8.2.4. Indifference towards the Use of Peers

It is indicated in this research that the professional communities provide tools for succeeding on one's career. However, it is worth pointing out that for some professional the role of peers is not significant. The attitude towards professional communities cannot be described as critical, rather indifferent.

The communities are left alone in the first place as it is seen that being reciprocated in the future will demand a lot in current situation. The professionals rather save themselves from the effort as they perceive to already possess the required tools for succeeding with the tasks.

The indifferent perception tends to rely on the way how individuals identify themselves as professionals. Those who live and breathe the profession are prone to inherently interact with peers. When striving to advance in career the role of peers is more significant. Less passionate professionals who do not reflect themselves much through profession respectively do not necessarily require the support from peers to meet the set level of ambition.

9. Conclusions

The results of this thesis have been satisfying as the research objectives are well met. The understanding achieved is great in width and depth. As it is discussed in the previous section, when advancing with career and succeeding with tasks the communities of peers have the potential to be for great help. However, the potential is not exploited all that widely. The professional communities provide an extra set of tools for succeeding; those are not necessarily needed, but come in handy when looking for brilliant outcomes.

In this section the thesis are concluded by discussing managerial and academic contributions.

9.1. Managerial Implications

This research provides managerial implications for two separate sides. Firstly, it gives valuable insights for the companies that are sponsoring or planning to sponsor a professional community. Secondly, implications for knowledge management can be drawn for the companies to benefit more from the communities.

9.1.1. Sponsoring a Community

It may be suggested that clients and other interest groups can be harnessed for crowdsourcing solutions for sponsoring company. By facilitating a forum for open innovation a company can gain new solutions for instance for marketing and sales. By enabling open interaction with and within the clients, the processes and offering will better serve their wishes and demands.

This study helps detecting the barriers of individuals and companies for hindering effective and fruitful knowledge sharing. Attention should be casted on planning the group dynamics to form a community where level of conflict is low. The findings here suggest that open knowledge sharing and innovation is most fluent when it deals with supporting processes and happens between professionals from different markets. If the interaction is to concern

core business, the behavior becomes reserved which freezes open share of knowledge. At the same time, the solidarity between peers could be harnessed. It is clear that professionals enjoy communicating with mind-likes and appreciate the support provided by peers and colleagues. Hence it may be proposed that sponsored communities should focus covering one specific field of business, which would bring together professionals working in similar positions, in different markets.

When sponsoring a community, there is a critical line which must not be crossed. Overly taking advantage of the contributions of the community must be avoided. Rather the sense of cooperation and collaboration needs to be promoted. As it is brought up in the analysis, knowledge sharing is most fluent when beneficial for all involved parties. Even though, the intention was taking advantage of interest groups to serve own processes, the benefit must be shared. It is important to reciprocate the contributions for the innovation community to be sustainable. Cooperation in business environment is extremely fragile if the contributions are misused and taken advantage of unfairly. Therefore all benefits created communally ought to be available openly for all to foster the feeling of teamwork beneficial for all parties. One way to reciprocate is to acknowledge the role of the community's contributions on achievements. Recognition will fulfill partly the expectations of reciprocity. Coming up with valuable innovations in a communal manner and communicating those clearly to the participants will foster the sense of belonging. This solidarity strengthens the social capital of the community and enhances the future interaction. Collaborative processes will engage the client with the company, which further makes the ties stronger.

Facilitating the forum for professional interaction could be used as a business model. This research points out characteristics of communities that professionals find appealing. Descriptions on the behavior and practices provide valuable cues for constructing the facilities enabling natural and inherent interaction. From the grounds of the findings, it can be stated that individuals perceive professional communities positively when they feel those concerning them personally. In this vein, the facilitator should have a role of a gatekeeper. Closing the community fully is not necessary, but the members should get a feeling of being special when allowed and able to participate in such a forum. The findings imply that when professionals perceive to benefit from the communities personally they are more eager to contribute. Hence, it may be suggested that the members should be treated as individual

professionals instead of company representatives to capture the enthusiasm. The group dynamics and ensuring fulfillment of reciprocity that are discussed in previous chapter are applicable in this context as well.

9.1.2. Knowledge Management

This research will give insights also for strategies regarding companies' knowledge management. It is strongly suggested that professional communities can be advantageous for company if harnessed right. The knowledge sharing between peers could provide value for company if it had more strategic justification compared to the present situation.

The cornerstone here is the culture in the company. For beneficial knowledge sharing, the knowledge should not be seen as a resource building the competitive advantage, but rather as a commodity in interfirm and interpersonal exchange. The leak of knowledge causing harm for competitive advantage should not be concerned. Instead, the emphasis should be put on harnessing the exchanged knowledge more effectively than the competitors do. This relates mostly the efficiency in internal communications. The focus should be on capturing the value of knowledge that individuals have gained and make it available for everyone in the company. However, the possibility that the participation would conflict with the company interests must not be forgotten. The terms of knowledge sharing should be made clear at the same time as trust between employer and employee evolves alongside by organization culture cherishing transparency.

Employees opt out from communal events or informal interaction because they do not feel having time or justification to such. For a company to gain benefits from communities, resources must be given to employees. This would mean to acknowledge the communities as tools for working and succeeding with the tasks. Some resources could be allocated to be used for community participation instead of pricy consulting services as peers are a great source of knowledge and platform for problem solving. The observations tell us that in LinkedIn fellow professionals are willing to consult and help with questions even though the solution would serve only the asker.

The results of the research help detecting the reasons why professionals perceive the achievable rewards valueless. Negative perceptions seem to rest on past encounters with fellow professionals where the interaction has been loaded by shallow informative content and irritating behavior such as overt self-marketing and pretense. It is hoped that by the help of this research managers would be able selecting the right forums and venues for the employees and themselves to attend. In addition, the rewards and benefits brought up here will give hints of the ways in which the communities could be harnessed. After the analysis done, it can be stated that the professional communities are able to provide notable benefits if knowing what the participant is looking for and how the rewards are further exploited effectively.

9.2. Academic Contributions and Suggestions for Future Research

Because of the exploratory approach, this research did not particularly contribute in any theory, but expanded some discussions by providing a novel angle to the analysis.

The major academic contribution to business to business literature is the affect that the interfirm dependence has on the antecedents for knowledge sharing. The issue has been tackled earlier on with co-relation dimension (Easton and Araujo 1992) and the subsequent typology by Bengtsson and Kock (1999). Focusing on the dependence has an antecedent level in the analysis and therefore offers new tools for further research. This approach is extremely applicable when the knowledge sharing is less strategic, informal and therefore difficultly detectable. In such case the observations of the phenomenon can be easily classified according to the level of dependence.

This research aimed to position itself between business to business context and the studies regarding individual's communal behavior. This was succeeded with as the analysis and results have an approach of individual exposed by the regularities of business networks. The study expands the understanding of knowledge sharing by taking it to a novel field. The results are greatly in line with the findings on interpersonal knowledge sharing within organization (Ardichvili *et al.* 2003) and within electronic communities (Wasko & Faraj 2000).

However, the business to business context brings an extremely interesting twist as interest of the company is brought to the analysis.

As this subject lacks previous academic literature, this study can be described as being an exploratory research. This study has provided an expansive illustration of the phenomenon professional communities and has sketched a preliminary conceptualization about the behavior in those. However, this broad overview on the topic has raised an intriguing need for further research.

Further analysis and conceptualization requires deeper and wider sample group. This study is heavily affected by the purposive sampling. For the exploratory purposes of this study the method is justified, but it limits building a further, generally applicable, understanding. It is suggested that the sample would cover unrestricted number of professions and industries. This research shed light on the role that the peers have on managers and professionals in decision-making positions. The illustration drawn might differ radically if the sample group was expanded to involve professionals working in operative level.

The phenomenon has multiple layers and variables. Therefore, the narrowing the subject of the research is reasonable. Focus could be casted on either the role of gained social capital or accessed knowledge. Narrowing the subject would allow going deeper in the analysis, which would enable reaching more insightful conceptualization.

After analyzing the interviews, there was a craving for data regarding the actual practices of participation in offline content. The data provided by interviews is always a result of how the informants construct their realities. It is researcher's task to analyze the data to draw a picture what actually is there. It is suggested that ethnographic methods would be brought to complement the data and to support the analyzing process.

10. References

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