

Community building and effective use of collaborative platforms

Recommendations for increasing online community engagement

Joinup 2015

Introduction

The communities of Joinup are an ideal space for eGovernment professionals to share their experiences, success stories and ideas. They function as an important source of news and information through contributors who report on the latest developments in various areas of interest. They offer the possibility to create dynamic and long lasting collaborations with other eGovernment professionals, enhance users' learning experience and professional growth on the one hand and awareness for the subject on the other. These communities complement the catalogues in which interoperability solutions are developed, hosted, reused and implemented.

This short guide provides information about community management and best practices which can help Joinup facilitators in the animation and management of their communities.

The Facilitator

The facilitator is the driving force behind the community. To make a community successful, the facilitator needs first to create an active and informative environment which users and members find worth visiting and contributing to.

Secondly, keeping up-to-date with the latest news and events on the topic of the community is fundamental to be perceived as a reference by the members.

Not all facilitators have enough time next to their daily commitments. If time is limited, establishing a routine can be enough to manage a successful community. Setting a couple of appointments (a weekly discussion topic, for example) is enough to feed the community with new inputs, even if the time at disposal is limited.

Finally, it goes without saying that openness, kindness and passion for the 'job' are all relevant attributes of a good facilitator.

Four rules for creating content

Content is the main reason users visit the Joinup communities. Content updates are what will convince users to become members and members to keep visiting and contributing to the community. Therefore, content should be worth reading, sharing and revisiting as a resource, in a word, it should be useful.

Relevance

Content should be shaped around the interests of its members and relevance to the theme/subject of the community. It's the community members that the facilitators should try to engage with. Posting content, answering a question from the community, developing a topic launched by the community or supporting the community members professionally are all different ways to provide valuable and relevant content.

Moderated

The facilitator should make sure that the content published on the platform is high-quality.

It is therefore recommended to remove in the community content that does not add value or stops the conversations. Facilitators should ask contributors to provide feedback and explain how content can be improved to the benefit of the community. In addition, it is important that community conversations are focused on the defined community objectives. The lack of focus can prevent members from coming back as their member's experience loses value. The facilitator should therefore, select, highlight, value and stimulate good content by curating the content posted.

Creative

Valuable content comes in every shape, size, and media format. Any web asset developed is content. If it fulfills a purpose, it's valuable. Varying the format of the content is important to keep people and members interested. The same content can be easily reused just changing its format. For example, a short article can be converted into a colorful infographic that is more likely to be shared on social media.

There are several online tools that allow to easily create infographics and colorful content in a few clicks.

Consistency

To keep members visit the community more often, the creation of a content calendar would be highly recommended. Setting, for example, regular publishing days and time is usually helpful because it creates a routine within the community.

Here are some recommended frequencies for content publication

- **News:** E.g. every week, this could vary from updates in the field to links of other interesting articles.
- **Events:** whenever an event around community topic is organised.
- **eLibrary** –every two weeks or once per month a new eLibrary item should be posted, this could be in the form of a case study or other publication relevant to the community's topic.

Engagement and interaction

Engagement is the hardest goal to achieve for a facilitator of a new community. It takes time, effort and patience. Very often the right formula is achieved by trial and error. However, here below are some important principles facilitators should keep in mind to increase their engagement rate.

Be present

It may seem obvious, but the first rule to foster engagement is simply “being there”. Facilitators should respond to members’ questions and comments. In order to be aware of what is going on in a community, a facilitator needs to visit its community.

Here are some guidelines to guarantee a well-balanced presence:

- Visit the community minimum 3 times per week for around 30 minutes.
- Answer your members’ questions in a timely manner (within 24 hours)
- Be aware when members are the most active during the day (e.g. in the morning and early afternoon) to give them a chance to react.

Be pro-active

Participation needs to be encouraged and facilitators must foster it. To do so, it is necessary to commit to a pro-active attitude rather than simply react to members’ inputs. Organising informal events to meet and get to know members, asking for comments and contributions are some examples to interact with members. Facilitators should anticipate interests and needs, actively start conversations, search and connect with members. Stimulating and sharing user-generated content that makes a difference is also a way to take a step forward the members and reward them for their contribution with online visibility.

Building a network

Although each community dynamic is different, in all communities there are a few members that stand out for their active contribution. These members are a great resource for facilitators as they can provide new insights and feedback on community dynamics, content quality and interest. It is therefore important to identify these members and maintain a strong relationship with them by motivating them and involving them into a deeper cooperation.

In addition, an online community isn’t that different from a traditional one. Although it starts as a virtual entity, it gains recognition once it gets offline. Connecting people, their knowledge and professionalism, by organising local networking offline events, for instance, is a great way to strengthen the communities.

Members’ ownership

Another tip for successful communities consists in strengthening the members’ sense of belonging. It is the facilitator’s task to make members feel at home and encourage them to take ownership of their own community by sharing their thoughts on the various themes. Naturally, the ability of the facilitators lies in their capacity of keeping the leadership and channeling the different forces and voices without losing track of the main goals of Joinup.

Leadership

Besides providing discussion triggers and creating content, facilitators may also inspire others to take leadership. Increasing the number of facilitators can overcome the time shortage. Having two, or more, facilitators sharing responsibilities over one community would allow a better

coverage of the community as well as a more fresh and diverse approach to community management

Recruitment

Another method to grow the community is recruiting new members. This is usually an underestimated part of the job of the facilitator that may have an impact on the health of the Joinup communities. In the absence of new members communities miss the opportunity to get reinvigorated with new minds and ideas. Recruiting new members, however, is a heavy task that can be time-consuming.

Immediate network

The most direct way is to contact and invite colleagues and work relations that are interested in learning more about the topic, or would benefit from participating in a group.

Regular Joinup visitors

By producing regular content in the community, the community building team will stimulate the content to be visible in other sections of Joinup through highlighting and promoting. The team regularly receives notifications of newly created content and will select some news, cases, documents or events to be featured in the dedicated editor's choice sections or on the front page of Joinup. This way the community will become visible to recurrent Joinup visitors who, depending on their interests, may opt to become members of the community.

Social media

Social media such as, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn Groups, are great tools to attract potential members to a community. Twitter and LinkedIn give access to many already established communities. Engaging into a conversation in external communities is a great way of recruiting new members as well as for promoting the Joinup communities and projects. More concretely, facilitators are encouraged to interact with the Joinup social media account by retweeting or sharing their content. In addition, it is advisable to create #Hashtags by identifying keywords and adding a '#' in front of the key word. Another Twitter tip is to address a particular influencer in the field or the Joinup Twitter managers by adding a '@' in front of their Twitter name, for Joinup this is @Joinup_eu

The above recommendations aim to raise the awareness of the community outside the platform. Finally this would also give the facilitators the opportunity to become more visible and promote their own community and related works and events.

Tools and features

Although communities are mainly about people and relationships, online communities are also about tools. In fact, choosing the wrong tools or features can prevent the community from growing and being successful. For this reason, facilitators have to be fully aware of the platform

technologies and its overall structure and must be prepared to answer the members' questions. Therefore, it is recommended that they are familiar with the following pages: "A to Z", "Help" and "FAQ". Facilitators are advised to stay in close contact with Joinup support in case of questions and difficulties.

Choosing the channels

The Joinup platform offers a range of features that are designed to effectively communicate with members. Naturally, each facilitator has his/her own favourite ones. However, it is important to test and experiment all the features and ask its members to choose which channels they prefer. Sometimes, what we believe is the most effective and efficient choice is not the one preferred by the community. Thus, facilitators should never miss the opportunity to introduce members to the use of the different platform features; from the private messaging feature to the newsletter and mailing list. After a trial phase, it should be easy to identify the most efficient ones. One should not hesitate to ask members directly about their feedback. Sharing is part of the community spirit and Joinup.

Support from the Joinup team and the community of facilitators

There is a dedicated community on Joinup which is managed by the Joinup community building team; [the community of facilitators](#). This is a community in which facilitators can exchange tips and best practices regarding the management and administration of their community. They are always welcome to ask questions they might have and share suggestions regarding the improvement of their communities.

As already indicated, if a facilitator would like to raise the awareness of important updates, news items, case studies or events, they can reach out to the community building team who will further accompany them in this process.