

Global Communications and Communities of Choice

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New technologies, new organizational forms, and the rise of the global village will have a profound effect on our sense of community in the years ahead. Two trends stand out: the explosion of our potential to communicate instantaneously and massively across the globe and, closely aligned with that, our ability to create communities of choice. Both these trends will create new challenges and opportunities. I will first discuss the impact of the imminent communications revolution and whether the new communications technologies will present us with a dream come true or a nightmare.

I will then turn to the challenges that leaders face in communities that are created not by the accidents of history and geography, but by the conscious choice of their members.

The Global Community of the Future: Nightmare or Dream Come True?

Three common characteristics of communities in the past have been that community members could communicate with each other, trade with each other, and share a common culture. In the future, communication, trade, and culture will almost certainly become much more global. The rise of the global community brings both unparalleled opportunities and challenges that have major implications for the future of humanity.

Global Communication

The advent of massively available communication means that the opportunities for learning will be greater than ever. A child in a remote, rural village in India can receive instruction from a great thinker who is thousands of miles away. A doctor who is preparing for a rare operation can watch a narrated video of the same operation that was conducted by the world's authority in that specialization. A researcher in bioengineering will have efficient access to all the information that has ever been recorded in the field. The potential for "global

connectedness” means that we will have the opportunity to interact in a way that leads to the rapid and positive evolution of our species.

More information, however, does not necessarily lead to better decisions. As one sage noted, “Leaders in the past could not make decisions because they had *too little* information. Leaders in the future will be unable to make decisions because they will have *too much* information.” Editing and efficiently accessing truly relevant information will be a key challenge for the future.

There is also little historical evidence to support the assumption that the instant availability of information will lead to long-term quality of communication. Early in its history, television was considered a breakthrough innovation that had the potential to provide positive long-term benefits to humanity. Unfortunately as it turned out, far more television programs deliver short-term stimulation (for example, “sitcoms” or “action” shows) than deliver long-term benefit. Today *television addiction* is one of the most underrated problems in the United States (with the average child spending thousands of hours watching “junk” TV). In the future, *Internet addiction* may well pass drug addiction and alcohol addiction, combined, as a social problem.

Global Trade

The advantages of global trade are well known and well documented. Increased global competition leads to higher-quality products and services at lower prices. Consumers can have access to an incredible diversity of goods that may have been produced anywhere in the world. Poor countries, which have lower labor costs, are given the opportunity to “catch up” by being given labor-intensive work that would cost much more in wealthy countries. As the poor countries become more efficient, they will gain the purchasing power to buy more goods and services from the rest of the world.

The removal of trade barriers leads to an increasingly efficient market. Proponents of the European Community note the billions that will be saved by simply having a common currency that eliminates the need for costly foreign exchange transfers.

While, in *theory*, global trade will create greater product diversity, in *practice* it sometimes creates greater homogeneity. Notice how the “shopping streets” in major cities around the world have all started to look the same. They tend to have the same clothing, the same music, and even the same food. While the stores may have products from more countries, they are becoming the *same* products. People around the world are buying the same global brands that are globally advertised, marketed, and distributed.

Another cost of global trade may be an increased lack of loyalty and identification with a larger whole. As Tom Peters recently noted in *Fast Company* magazine, everyone may end up working for a company called “Me Inc.” Such an attitude may well benefit successful individuals while costing the larger society.

Global Culture

Increased access to information means that more and more cultural opportunities will be available to the “masses” of humanity. Historically, many cultural opportunities were limited to the reasonably affluent, who could afford to attend the theater, go to concerts, and attend colleges. In the future, many cultural opportunities from around the world will be instantly accessible at the push of a button.

Cultural access will go well beyond the ability to better understand art or music. It will include the ability to better understand people. It is no accident that repressive regimes, which

encouraged hatred for other groups, typically tried to restrict the flow of open communication, for example, by burning books. By being able to study and communicate with people of diverse backgrounds, we quickly learn that negative ethnic stereotypes are invalid. Massively available, open communication can lead to a world where diversity is better understood and the ethnic hatred and violence that has been a plague on humanity is greatly reduced.

While the global culture has great potential benefits, it can also have great costs. Many scholars in Europe and Asia have decried the “Americanization” of the world. People around the world are much more likely to look alike, act alike, and sound alike. Even in rural Third World villages where people have never seen television, many of the inhabitants are wearing used Nike shoes and Michael Jordan T-shirts. Future conservationists may become as concerned with “culture extinction” as we are today with the extinction of plant and animal species.

What Won't Work: Trying to Stop the Flow

Attempts at stopping the flow of communication, trade, or culture may produce short-term successes but are doomed to failure in the long term. Senior legislators in China and in the United States are currently attempting to pass legislation that will restrict the flow of information across the Internet. Such attempts at censorship may produce short-term results but their long-term impact will be negligible for two reasons:

1. The Internet is *global*. Information that is censored in one country will be quickly and effortlessly duplicated in another country.
2. Almost all of the brilliant (and mostly young) people who are developing new technology believe in the free flow of information, do not like censorship, and are not intimidated by government edict.

The world's most recent large-scale experiment in stopping the flow of trade, the Iron Curtain, was a massive failure. Having captive customers and not having to keep up with global competitors led to the manufacture of products that fell further and further behind the international standard every year. Cars produced in East Germany became more of a national joke than a national source of pride. Building “walls” to protect noncompetitive industries or non-competitive workers produces a short-term benefit but does not stop the development of better and cheaper products around the world. Recent American attempts to force trade restrictions on unwilling partners and keep them from doing business with Cuba led to international anger and a retraction by the U.S. government.

Some legislators in France are currently making efforts to restrict the flow of global culture and to protect the historic French culture. Strategies such as limiting the amount of American television that can be shown and trying to control the amount of English-language input that is provided by the Internet may be well intended but will have little long-term impact. Many French people find the concept that they are incapable of making their own decisions insulting. The attempt to restrict access to any product often leads to the perceived desirability of what is being forbidden.

Creating a Positive Global Community: Meeting Three Key Challenges

Reaching Out to Humanity and Avoiding Isolationism

The global community will be a place where it will be simultaneously easier to reach out to humanity *and* easier to become isolated. Superficial communication with everyone can lead to meaningful impact on no one. Residents of the global community will need to be inspired and educated in the value of trying to benefit the world, not just themselves. As the opportunities for huge individual achievement and wealth grow, the community will need to do a better job of recognizing individuals who, in Peter Drucker's words, make the transition from success to significance. Support for global social sector organizations, such as the International Red Cross/Red Crescent, will need to be greatly increased and community heroes will need to be celebrated based upon their skills in *giving*—not their skills in *taking*.

Celebrating Diversity and Avoiding Conformity

One of the widely accepted reasons for the success of the human race is our ability to adapt. The global community's ability to adapt to changing situations will largely be a function of our diversity. Linguists believe that the structure of language leads people who speak different languages to view the world in different ways and to have different approaches to making decisions and solving problems. The global community will need to encourage diversity in language, culture, and lifestyle in order to help ensure its own survival. Globally powerful countries like the United States will need to fight the tendency to try to make other countries that are dissimilar (but not threatening) become like us. Historically, members of communities have often been told that "different" was synonymous with "inferior" or "bad." Residents of the global community will need to celebrate the fact that "different" may be synonymous with "fascinating," "enhancing," and even "necessary."

Building Long-Term Value and Avoiding Short-Term Stimulation

Residents of the global community will have almost unlimited access to sources of pleasurable, short-term stimulation. Television, movies, interactive games, virtual-reality experiences, chat rooms, and many other options (some not yet invented) will be massively available at a low cost. Yet few of these activities will produce any long-term value for the community. A major challenge will be to inspire and educate citizens about the value of "investing" for the future. One hard reality that will not change is that long-term value will still be the result of vision, creativity, innovation, and hard work. Residents of the global community of the future will have access to tools that have the potential to dramatically increase human productivity. They also will have access to countless pleasurable distractions that can lead nowhere.

Challenges and Opportunities

The global community has the potential to become a nightmare:

- *A world of conformity:* with billions of people wearing the same baseball caps turned backward, the same baggy shirts, the same blue jeans, and the same tennis shoes, speaking the same language, and laughing at the same jokes
- *A world of short-term stimulation:* with countless hours spent on mindless television, video games, and a virtual reality that begins to eliminate the real human experience of life on earth
- *A world of isolation:* with lives spent in front of a screen, striving for personal excitement and gain with little thought for the other residents of the community and even less effort devoted to helping future generations

The global community has the potential to be a dream come true:

- *A world of diversity:* with billions of people being able to communicate, trade, share cultural experiences, and appreciate each other, with access to an infinitely diverse range of products, services, religions, cultures, philosophies, and languages that can all help to stretch and develop the human mind
- *A world building long-term value:* with countless individuals connected as the “global mind,” working together to advance the evolution of our species, building upon what has been learned around the world in a manner that is incredible, efficient, and productive
- *A world reaching out to humanity:* with people being able to touch and help each other in ways that could never have been imagined, celebrating each other’s success, and helping the less fortunate members of the community become productive and successful

Will the global community of the future become a nightmare or a dream come true? No doubt it will be some of both. The present increase in global communication, global trade, and global culture will continue. The evolution of new technologies will not slow down. Attempts to stop the flow of communication, trade, or culture will fail. By inspiring today’s citizens and educating them in the values of celebrating diversity, building long-term value, and reaching out to humanity, we can begin to build a global community that is less like a nightmare and more like a dream come true.

Leadership Communities of Choice

For most human beings throughout history, membership in a community has not been the result of a deliberate choice, It has been a matter of history and tradition. Historically most communities could have been described as communities of requirement.

Religious communities were usually composed of members whose family and culture supported a certain tradition. Cultural communities were something that people were “born into” based upon their nationality or ethnic background. Geographic communities tended to be reasonably stable, with the large bulk of residents having parents who were also

community members. Even organizational or professional communities were often influenced by the class, caste, or occupation of a person's ancestors.

Membership in communities has always played a large role in defining who a person was as a human being (for example, an Irish, Catholic, rugby-playing carpenter from Dublin). Rejection from a community often had severe, negative consequences. For much of Western history, people who were excommunicated from their religious community were convinced that they would burn in hell for eternity. People who were rejected from their organizational or professional community faced unemployment, reduced social status, or even starvation. People who were rejected from their cultural community felt a lack of identity and a lack of connectedness.

In a world of communities of requirement, the community clearly had the balance of power. Fitting in was a "must" and rules, regulations, and guidelines were both formally and informally dictated. The community could reject the member much more easily than the member could reject the community.

Many communities of the future will have a totally different character—they will be communities of choice. In a community of choice the members will be able to leave on short notice with very little personal cost. They will be community members because they want to be, not because they have to be. In a community of choice the balance of power is quite different. The community must prove its worth to the members as much as, or more than, the members must prove their worth to the community.

The shift from communities of requirement to communities of choice can be seen in several different types of communities:

1. *Geographic communities:* As the ease of mobility and the increased ability to communicate across boundaries keep increasing, the perceived need to stay in a geographic community will keep decreasing. Many people will have very little traditional loyalty or "connection" to a geographic community. They may not even consider a transfer from one community within a region to another as a "move." People will be increasingly willing to leave states or provinces and move across the country. As Richard E Schubert and Rick R. Little point out in their chapter in this book, residents will also be more willing to leave a country to move to another country that provides greater opportunity. The rise of multicountry regions such as the European Community will only accelerate this movement. The projected increase in telecommuting will mean that many "wired" professionals can choose to live wherever they want.

2. *Religious communities:* The religious communities of the future will be largely composed of members who are there because of true personal choice (with the possible exception of a few fundamentalist Islamic countries). In the primarily Catholic or Lutheran countries of Europe, few people in business will care if their coworker is a Catholic or Lutheran. In America it will not be a "social requirement" to claim to be a Christian or a Jew (in fact, it is now illegal to even ask). Even Communist and formerly Communist countries will allow almost total freedom of religious and philosophical orientation. The opportunity for the religious community of the future is that almost anyone can become a member of any denomination. The challenge will be that almost any member can freely choose to become a member of any other denomination.

3. *Cultural communities:* Historically, membership in a cultural community could transcend place and time. It was largely a function of ethnic and geographic heritage. In the future, culture will be largely a matter of personal choice. Massive, open, globally accessible voice and data communication will be available to millions or even billions of people. The virtual community will become a common reality (see the chapter in this book by Howard Rheingold). Today some senior legislators in the United States, France, and China are trying

to “control” the Internet to “protect” various aspects of their historic cultures from “attack.” In the long term, they have little chance of success. The “control team” is composed of mostly old legislators (many of whom cannot turn on a computer) who are trying to censor the flow of information. The “open communication team” is composed of thousands of young computer wizards who believe in the free flow of information. The future outcome of this game has already been determined. The Internet will not go away; old cultures cannot be “protected” and people will only become part of a cultural community because they choose to, not because they have no other realistic option.

4. *Organizational communities*: Membership in organizational communities will continue the trend of becoming more fluid and less stable. Attracting and retaining high-impact performers will be one of the greatest challenges for the organizations of the future. The extreme example of future organizational communities can be seen in the Silicon Valley area of California. When hundreds of managers from four major companies in the Valley were asked, “What percentage of your key performers can currently leave the company and get a pay raise within one month?” the nearly unanimous answer was “All of them!” In many ways, the key contributors to major high-tech companies are taking a pay cut when they show up to work. They choose to be in their present organizational community for the opportunities, growth, fellowship, and stimulation of the job. Their paycheck could easily be duplicated elsewhere.

5. *Volunteer service communities*: In the past, the choice of volunteer service opportunities was much more limited than it is today. The rapid growth of the “third sector” has created many opportunities to serve that never existed before. Social entrepreneurs, many of whom have already succeeded in business, are forming foundations to help solve local, national, and global problems. Leading community business executives can no longer be expected to serve on the same boards. The typical executive today is suffering from extreme “overchoice” in opportunities to provide volunteer service and is highly selective in terms of where time, money, and effort should be expended.

6. *Communities of interest*: The Internet and other new communications technologies are creating an environment where joining a highly specialized, personally challenging community of interest will become easier and easier. In the past, if a person’s passion was, for example, pre-Columbian sculpture in Peru, communication with fellow pre-Columbian fans might occur only a few times a year. In the future, communication can occur almost continuously, at the pleasure of the communicator. While the number of people interested in discussing a highly specialized topic in a local community may be very small, the number of people interested in the same discussion in the global community will probably be large enough to promote a rich, ongoing dialogue. Joining a club or special-interest group will become a choice from a huge menu of global choices as opposed to a narrow selection of local choices.

Being a Leader in a Community of Choice

Leadership in a community of choice may have very different characteristics from leadership in a community of requirement. Some key qualities may include:

1. *Communicating a shared vision*: In a community of requirement, the vision can be communicated from the top down, from leaders to followers. In a community of choice, there are no followers in the traditional sense. Members can come and go as they please. If members feel involved in creating the vision of the organization, they will be more likely to actively participate in the community (see Stephen R. Covey’s chapter in this book). If they do not feel involved, they will be more likely to go elsewhere.

2. *Achieving clear results*: As Peter Drucker has often pointed out, future participation in the social sector will be much more a function of results than activities. James L. Heskett, in his chapter in this book, has made the same point in discussing New York City. All kinds of communities of choice, from geographic to religious, will be chosen based upon their ability to achieve clear results that meet the high expectations of members who have other desirable alternatives,

3. *Changing leadership style*: Leaders in communities of choice will be much more likely to choose the “circular” style (a term used by Frances Hesselbein) or the “servant leader” style (used by Pollard) than the command-and-control style. Telling people what to do, how to do it, and when to do it can work in an environment where people have little choice but to obey. The same style can be a disaster when community members can say good-bye anytime they feel annoyed.

4. *Ensuring that members feel valued*: In communities of choice, it is especially important for members to feel valued and accepted. In many ways, the community will need to feel like home. As the traditional nuclear family becomes statistically less important for determining a person’s identity, membership in various types of communities may become even more important. Members who feel devalued or unappreciated will leave. Members who feel highly valued, accepted, and recognized will become the recruiters for the community.

5. *Creating a personally enriching experience*: Members in communities of choice are often looking for personal growth and development, along with the opportunity to serve others. If the experience of being a member of the community is not personally rewarding or is painful, members will simply leave. Scott McNealy, at Sun Microsystems, has noted that “having fun is a key competitive issue” in an environment where people have true freedom of choice.

Conclusion

Many communities of the past, whether they were based upon geography, religion, culture, profession, volunteer service, or area of interest, were like monopolies or, at best, oligopolies. They often had little or no real competition. They were communities of requirement. Almost all significant communities of the future will be in intense competition for members. They will be communities of choice. The traditional standards of leadership that may have been acceptable in the past will not lead to success in the future. The leader of the community of the future will face much greater challenges in retaining members. The leader’s success in adapting to the new world of the community of choice will be a huge factor in determining the community’s success and long-term prosperity.

This chapter is taken from the book:

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