Government Information Quarterly 29 (2012) 21–29

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Government Information Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/govinf

# Communities of Public Service Support
# Citizens engage in social learning in peer-to-peer networks

Albert Meijer *, Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen, Gijs Jan Brandsma

*Utrecht University, Department of Public Administration and Organizational Sciences, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC Utrecht, Netherlands*

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 16 November 2011

*Keywords:*
Public service support
Communities of practice
Expats
Virtual communities

ABSTRACT

New Public Management and bureaucratic models fail to acknowledge the value of peer-to-peer cooperation between citizens as a resource for public service support. Social media enable citizens to create environments for sharing information about public services in Communities of Public Service Support. The success of this model for public service support depends on the availability of communities, the level of active participation, and the information content. This paper presents an empirical study of virtual communities of expats in The Netherlands. Our analysis shows that there is a wide variety of virtual expat communities with a high level of participation and valuable content. We conclude that virtual communities play an important role in public service support since they facilitate social learning between citizens.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. The promise of peer-to-peer cooperation

Providing public service support in communities of citizens provides a radically different perspective from the New Public Management doctrine and the traditional bureaucratic approach to public services. NPM typically sees citizens as consumers of public services (Barzelay, 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000) while a traditional bureaucratic approach focuses on the legalistic and formal logic of the service provider (Bovaird, 2007). Both approaches have a common focus on the relation between government and citizens and do not consider the relations between citizens. A similar focus on the relation between government and individual citizens dominates the literature on e-government (West, 2005). In contrast, the basic idea behind peer-to-peer support is that citizens contact other citizens with questions regarding public services. This line of thinking is based on ideas about civil society as a sphere of support for citizens (Edwards, 2009). Citizens may be able to obtain useful answers that combine expert information with insightful experiences from others. This approach shifts our attention from interactions between citizens and government to peer-to-peer interactions between citizens in (virtual) communities.

Peer-to-peer cooperation is said to be the new paradigm for organizing in the information age (Lee & Cole, 2003; Raymond, 1999). Cooperation between dispersed individuals in projects such as Linux and Wikipedia has proven to be widely successful and communities of practice have become a dominant model for organizing collective processes of learning (Wenger, 1998). Various gurus have highlighted the potential of the internet for stimulating communities in the public sector (Eggers, 2005). They argue that the success of platforms such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and Facebook could form a stimulus for new forms of peer-to-peer cooperation in the public sector. Public service support is mentioned as one of the government tasks that could be carried out in peer-to-peer networks (Leadbeater & Cottam, 2007).

Peer-to-peer networks are not new. Citizens have always contacted neighbors and friends for information about taxes, benefits, and entitlements. The interesting aspect of peer-to-peer support in an information age is that new technologies enable citizens to develop flexible, open, and targeted communities (Barnes & Shardlow, 1997; Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004; Rheingold, 1993; Winzelberg, 1998). Virtual communities of citizens, therefore, may be an important supplement to formal forms of public service support. Typical for these new forms of public service support is that citizens can easily find people in the same situation for help or support. Many citizens do not have a friend or neighbor in need of the same public service but they will more easily find companions on the internet. In the realm of the World Wide Web people will certainly find other people with similar issues with, for example, their tax applications.

Providing public service support in communities has become popular in patient communities, hobby groups, and professional platforms (Ferguson, 1996; Ferguson & Frydman, 2004; Madara, 1997). People interact in these communities to exchange information and experiences and to engage in collective learning about music, illnesses, woodwork, traveling, computer programming, etc. In general, communities are groups of people who feel connected, interact, and share norms and rules for these interactions (cf. Van den Boomen, 2000, p. 43). Typical for virtual communities is that the individuals do not share a geographical space but, instead, share mental orientations. Shared identity plays a key role in communities (Castells, 1997; Van den Boomen, 2000). The internet extends the range of contacts, increases the flexibility and

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail address:* a.j.meijer@uu.nl (A. Meijer).

0740-624X/$ – see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.giq.2011.06.004

openness of communities, and facilitates the creation of a community knowledge base.

The idea of having virtual communities of citizens in which they answer each other's questions sounds promising but many barriers may prevent these communities from being successful. Do citizens really create these virtual communities to discuss public services or are they only interested in chatting? Do citizens have the knowledge to answer each other's questions or are many questions asked and few answered? Are questions specific for individuals and is the answer of another individual in another situation irrelevant? Whether a citizen-to-citizen approach in public service support actually works, depends on the availability of venues for citizens to ask for support from other citizens and on the quality of these venues. We have therefore formulated the following question: can citizens organize public service support in virtual communities?

We will explore actual citizen practices—in our case expats in The Netherlands—to evaluate whether virtual community service support can work in terms of providing information about public services to citizens. The case study should be regarded as a most likely case since expats are highly connected to the internet and much in need of information about public services. Our study tests whether public service support through virtual communities can work in a most likely situation and it aims to enhance our theoretical and empirical understanding of peer-to-peer public service support. Theories about communities of practice form an important contribution to work on citizen engagement and coproduction since most of that work focuses on the interactions between citizens and government, and not on interactions between citizens (Alford, 2009; Bovaird, 2007). We will present a perspective that conceptualizes peer-to-peer interactions between citizens as Communities of Public Service Support.

## 2. Communities of Public Service Support

The idea of Communities of Public Service Support builds upon broader notions of social learning in communities. Key to our present-day thinking about information exchange in communities is the work by Etienne Wenger (1998) on communities of practice. Wenger (1998, p. 3) criticizes an individual approach to learning and highlights the social aspects of learning. He places learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world and he puts an emphasis on learning as an informal process. The basic idea is that people interact in communities to reflect on experiences and enhance their understanding of the world and Wenger (1998, p. 4, 5) emphasizes that we all participate in various communities at work, at home, in our neighborhoods, in sports clubs, etc. This paper focuses our attention on a specific Community of Practice: a Community of Public Service Support. A Community of Public Service Support is defined as an informal community of citizens who engage in social learning about public services. These processes of social learning result in a better understanding of a specific part of the world: public services.

Wenger (1998, p. 5) highlights the social and constructive character of communities of practice. These communities concern much more than practices of information exchange in groups of people. Communities of practice help their participants to attribute meaning to their lives and the world and to develop shared identities. Patient groups, for example, do not only exchange information about the virtues of new treatments in virtual discussion groups but also develop a shared understanding of what it means to suffer from a certain disease. Kwon, Pardo, and Burke (2009) show how records managers use communities of practice to engage in collective learning on digital preservation. The exchange of information in Communities of Public Service Support therefore needs to be understood within a broader conception of social learning.

How can we conceptualize a Community of Public Service Support? Using the general conceptualization of Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) three components of Communities of Public Service Support can be defined:

1. *Domain*. Citizens share an interest in a specific domain of public services. They may be interested in information about specific services such as unemployment benefits of student grants, or alternatively, they may share an interest in the whole of public services for a certain target group such as elderly citizens.
2. *Practice*. Citizens develop shared resources, frameworks, and perspectives to facilitate exchange of information about public services. Citizen groups develop rules of interaction and they may also develop a common knowledge base with information about public services.
3. *Community*. Citizens develop social configurations in which their enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and their participation is recognizable as competence. Communities of Public Service Support develop a shared account of the engagement between citizens in this community and what the engagement is to achieve.

These three components are highly intertwined: practices are related to domains and shared in communities to facilitate social learning. From an evaluative point of view, the issues are whether these communities actually exist and whether they produce relevant information for their participants. The production of information depends on the composition of the community and the quality of the interactions within the community.

Do Communities of Public Service Support exist in a given domain of public services? Wenger (1998, p. 49) highlights that a community exists when participants engage in a mutual enterprise and develop a shared repertoire of doing things. The existence of the communities of practice depends on (distributed) leadership for building and maintaining a community (cf. Wenger et al., 2009, p. 10). A community can be created specifically for social learning on a certain domain of public services or social learning can take place in more general communities. Communities of unemployed are an example of the first type of community whereas an example of the latter is social learning about taxes within the context of an existing community of members of a trade union.

The composition of the community needs to be supportive to social learning about public services. Wenger (1998, p. 55) refers to participation in terms of membership of social communities and active involvement in social enterprises. Why do citizens participate in Communities of Public Service Support? Useful insights in citizen motives can be obtained from theories on coproduction in the public sector. Alford (1998, 2009) presents an overview of reasons why citizens want to be involved in the public sector. He indicates that voluntarism is the "animating spirit" of citizen involvement and its distinguishing characteristic. He stresses that citizens may be moved by either extrinsic rewards, such as pleasure or pay, or intrinsic rewards such as finding an activity worthwhile or self-fulfilling. Alford (2009, p. 27) stresses the importance of sociality or solidarity incentives, which he describes as "the enjoyment we derive from associating with others, from receiving their approval and concomitantly from not being subject to their disapproval." This confirms that a sense of "shared faith" is at the heart of peer-to-peer public service support.

Following the idea that social learning needs to be based on diversity (Wenger, 1998, p. 75), the success of Communities of Public Service Support depends on the number of participants and the composition of the community. The number of participants seems to be important for producing a variety in experiences and perspectives. A small community will be based on a limited set of experiences and, therefore, may suffer from a lack of information. A large community does not by definition mean that the community is diverse: it also has to have a diverse composition of participants. Participants may assume different roles in communities of practice and these communities will exhibit a

دریافت فوری ← متن کامل مقاله

ISIArticles
مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات