

# IT Managers Connection

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Barnaby Jeans IT Pro Advisor  
Microsoft Canada



## Sean O'Driscoll: IT Communities--Attributes, Participant Characteristics, and Value to business

This is the next interview in the [continuing series](#) which is featured here "first" in the Canadian IT Managers (CIM) forum.



In this blog series, we talk with Sean O'Driscoll: Global Senior Director for CSS Community and MVP Worldwide, Microsoft Corporation.

We started our chat with Sean on [Friday](#) where I profiled Sean's background. We continue our discussion with Sean...

Stephen: You have valuable expertise about the power of communities. What are the kinds of communities that exist and their purpose? What are the trends? Why should businesses care?

Sean: I think today there is a community for nearly everything. No matter what you're an enthusiast for (photography, cooking, travel, music, etc), you will find corresponding communities. I think a good starting point on this question is to examine the motivation for utilizing communities. One myth I often deal with is that it is just about support...technical support. Sure, people often go to communities for help/support assistance, but it is hardly the only motivation. I like to summarize with the following motivational "map":

Learning – My favorite example of this is about home networking. For anyone interested in setting up a media center to "digitize" their home, communities are a must-use resource. Read what experts have to say. Hear what other users encountered and discover scenarios you may not have thought of.

1. Social &/or business networking – Let's face it, the biggest and fastest growing communities on the net are social networks. Beyond that, communities are a great equalizer. People love finding like minded peers anywhere in the world on any topic with whom they can share and explore ideas (social or business). I've seen this countless times.
2. Helping others – At its core, this is what an MVP is: those who quite simply enjoy sharing and helping others altruistically. The ROI for them? Satisfaction in a reply back that says: "thanks, you really helped me."
3. Support – A great source. Now, personally, if something isn't functioning, I will tend to pick up the phone and call for support, but there are countless scenarios for "how to" or "why does it" or "has anyone ever seen" type questions. Communities are 24x7, 365 days a year and are in countless languages around the world – incredible.
4. Validation – Input from others who have gone there first. I call this the case study example. Virtually no one is ever doing something for the first time – the challenge is finding others who have walked that same ground. I find online communities are great for this.
5. Information – Like learning above, but for me, more general purpose. Unlimited "consumer reports" if you will.

The next layer of this is to think about the actual characteristics of the participants in the communities. In any community you have a diverse set of participants who can be characterized in a lot of different ways. I like to think of the following populations:

1. Lurkers – Only read what others contribute
2. Questioners – Primarily ask questions and read others' contributions
3. Question/answerers – Ask questions and occasionally answer questions
4. Answer/questioners – Answer questions and occasionally ask questions
5. Answerers – Almost exclusively answer questions

Some will read this and think this is too simplistic and they are right, but for those just learning and thinking about communities, I think it's a good place to start. Much has been written on this topic and by more creative people than me. For example, another population/segment written about are called "flame warriors" – you'll know them we you see them. The sole purpose of the "flame warrior" seems to be to create chaos in the community, change course on conversations, add controversy and generally speaking, create havoc. What to do about them? My advice, ignore them. Don't engage, (no matter how tempted you may be); that is their objective. Ignored, they tend to go away.

Each of the 5 segments above could then be examined against the characteristics of the participant. For example, some participants are just plain economical – they are "takers." They possess the skills, experience, and knowledge to answer, but lack the interest, time, or energy to do so. So, take "questioners" as a starting point on this. Some questioners are inexperienced and are in the community to learn while others just come when they need something.



John Osley Director Community Evangelism  
Microsoft Canada



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This is not a criticism, it's just reality. Often times, a person (I fall into this camp) is a questioner in one community, an answerer in another, and a lurker in another. It's in this area that there are some clear differences between what I would call pure social networks and technical communities. What I think you would see is the population distribution (% lurkers/questioners/answerers) changes as communities become more social. This isn't inherently good or bad, just a by-product of what is motivating participation.

There are also different community "venues" - Newsgroups, online forums, Blogs, Wikis, etc. and an endless list of emerging "features" like RSS, pod casting, reputation systems and tagging. I won't go into those here (at least not this time around), but most people do develop venue preferences and over time want to subscribe to certain experts and/or content sources that they find repeated value in or trust. This can be a very important issue to help you become more efficient in how you utilize the community according to your unique interest is.

The last part of this question was "why should business care?" In the end, communities are a virtually limitless source of knowledge, expertise, experience and content in addition to providing a very powerful method for peer interaction - I think businesses have to care. Businesses, and more importantly the people that run them, succeed based on the quality of the decisions they make. To me, communities are a breakthrough in terms of broadening and deepening that source of inputs for decision making. Beyond that, communities are more than a fad; they are changing how people make decisions and who influences those decisions. No matter what business you are in, there is or will be a community of users - you have three options and only one real choice: Resist it, ignore it or embrace it.

In the next blog, Sean will talk about how you can get involved in ICT communities and make significant contributions. Sean will also detail the rewards when you get involved.

I also encourage you to share your thoughts here on these interviews or send me an e-mail at [sibaraki@cips.ca](mailto:sibaraki@cips.ca).

Thank you,  
Stephen Ibaraki, [FCIPS, I.S.P.](http://FCIPS.I.S.P.)

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