



VIRTUAL INNOVERSITY

Column by Susanne Justesen, INNOVERSITY RESEARCH, January 2004

More and more organisations are starting to realize the benefits of bringing people together virtually – both within the organisation itself – and across business units, across countries and even across continents. Organisations are seeking to connect the knowledge diversity of their employees worldwide.

And it really makes sense to do so as corporate online communities hold enormous potential for learning and knowledge sharing across disciplines, hierarchical boundaries and geographical distances. But most importantly such connectivity makes available a whole new array of diversity, which – when exploited right – becomes a highly important source of innovation. I would like to think of this as virtual innoversity! Let me explain:

Innoversity is about being able to tap into the existing diversity to make the organisation more innovative in what it does. Virtual Innoversity is about using virtual ICT tools to achieve the very same thing. That is, to be able to benefit from different skills, different professional and cultural backgrounds, and different approaches and points of views existing within an organisation, without necessarily bringing people together physically.

The key ingredients in working with Virtual Innoversity can be described as diversity (of course), connectivity, training, and last but certainly not least, the innovation impetus.

Diversity: Most likely your organisation already has a certain degree of diversity in terms of different ways of thinking, acting, reacting, doing, like, knowing etc. If your organisation is not entirely co-located in and around the same premises, chances are that your degree of diversity is fairly high. Virtual innoversity is a way of tapping into all of these resources.

Connectivity: But first let me ask you this question: Has your organisation found a way to connect employees worldwide to share experiences and learn from each other? If not maybe now could be the right moment for them to start doing so! The overall infrastructure is improving the available bandwidth, and with the availability of relatively low cost computing, virtual learning environments are technologically and economically accessible to most organisations.

Training: This therefore requires both hard skills (technological competences) and soft skills (facilitation and organisation-specific knowledge). One of the key aspects in working with Virtual Innoversity is that the facilitators are able to cater for linguistic diversity, and the potential conflicts and misunderstandings bound to result in a group characterised by a high degree of diversity.

Innovation impetus

If your employees do not have access to relevant tools for learning and the sharing of experiences, you should not expect them to be able to deliver neither radical new thinking, new products, or new services. The primary reason for even wanting to set up a virtual community within your organisation, should be a need for innovation in terms of processes, products and/ or services. If the impetus is not strong enough, management backing is not likely to be strong enough for people to actually spend their time and energy on something like this!

Virtual Innoversity – how?

The four ingredients described could seem to be a major knowledge management project, but it need not be. A very simple approach to start off with would be to:

- Identify key forms of diversified knowledge relevant to growing your business
- Ask the key players what they need from the organisation to be able to connect better with each other, learn from each other and build new knowledge
- Train a group of facilitators who can assist them in building their innovation community
- Bring this group together physically to connect with each other and have them test and use the selected infrastructure right then and there, thereby kicking off their virtual community!
- Facilitate, facilitate, facilitate