Rewarding Participation in Social Media Enabled Communities of Practice

Warren Allen

The iSchool at Drexel University
warren.s.allen@drexel.edu

Abstract

Tacit knowledge is difficult to objectify, whether the goal of doing so is to test, share, or technologically reproduce it. Therefore, extending the traditionally skills-based I.T. certification practice to the assessment of social learning that occurs in Communities of Practice will be a challenge. My research approaches this challenge by examining the role of social media and related technologies, information systems, and artifacts in the mediation of knowledge and expertise across the boundary between workplace-based Communities of Practice and external professional communities. Findings from this empirical case study of the Microsoft MVP Award implicate certain design considerations into the design of social media within the workplace.

Introduction

Professional certification of industry- and product-specific skills is a major trend in information technology sector (Shackelford et al. 2006) and has become a lucrative commercial industry (Adelman 2000; Hitchcock 2007). However, the value of I.T. certifications varies, and has been called into question: while job candidates benefit from achieving credentials from completing certification exams, not all I.T. managers view them as legitimate indicators of relevant knowledge and skill (Cegielski 2004). A review of I.T. industry certification programs further reveals the following limitations:

- I.T. certifications typically require multiple examinations, and the cost of examination sitting fees, books, and self-guided training materials cost hundreds of dollars per exam; instructor-led courses often cost upwards of a thousand dollars per exam.

- Commercially-operated certification and training organizations drive the cost of examination and introduce for-profit motives which may not align with op-

timal learning strategies for individuals or the organizations that often fund the certification of employees.

- A workplace barrier to certifications and learning exists: many I.T. certifications are oriented around business technology that is inaccessible outside of the context of the high-tech workplace. The financial barrier and workplace barrier result in a "catch 22" for individuals who lack independent financial means; i.e., a job that requires certification may pay well, but attaining the certification requires a well-paying job.

Finally, assessment is exclusively skills-based, resulting in credentials that at best reflect achievement of explicit, skills-based knowledge, and at worst demonstrate merely the ability to "cram for an exam." This (over-)reliance on skills-based assessment overlooks the importance of tacit knowledge and its role in creativity and innovation (Leonard and Sensiper 1998). Expertise is constituted by more than skills and explicit knowledge; it includes an intellectual disposition which motivates practitioners to achieve excellence in their work. Thus, the "knowledge of experts is an accumulation of experience, a kind of 'residue' of their actions, thinking, and conversations" (Wenger et al. 2002).

From these limitations we can conclude the following: *I.T. training and certification programs, for those who have the means to complete them or are afforded the means by their employer, are ill-equipped to assess – much less develop – professional expertise, particularly tacit, intellectual forms of knowledge.* These forms of learning typically occur in face-to-face and technology-mediated social environments in which expertise is developed through the exchange of narratives between experts with diverse experience and knowledge (Brown and Duguid 2000). The proliferation of Internet-supported virtual communities and increasingly-ubiquitous social media technologies accelerate the coordination of these informal associations in which "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al. 2002).

Tacit knowledge is difficult to objectify, whether the goal of doing so is to test, share, or technologically reproduce it (Reber 1989). Therefore, extending the traditionally

skills-based I.T. certification practice to the assessment of social learning that occurs in ostensive Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998) will be a challenge. My research approaches this challenge by examining the role of social media and related technologies, information systems, and artifacts in the mediation of knowledge and expertise across the boundary between workplace-based Communities of Practice and external professional communities.

Research Method

This research examines participation in the professional community oriented around the use, design, and engineering of Microsoft SharePoint, a popular enterprise-level, software system for information management and collaboration. The research method follows an ethnographic approach, as the goal of the study is to develop an understanding from the perspective of community members how and why contribution occurs, and what they think of systems designed to recognize and reward contributions. Data was collected through participant observation in Share-Point community events and interactions in face-to-face and online settings between July 2011 and February 2012.

Field notes, communications, and other artifacts collected during participant observation are being analyzed as part a larger study using the Thematic Analysis framework for qualitative data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The following section describes preliminary findings from the ongoing study, focusing of Microsoft's MVP Award. Analysis of these findings will implicate certain design considerations in the design and use of social media systems in knowledge work contexts.

Ethnographic data

This section contains one of the research vignettes derived from ethnographic data collected thus far. Following the vignette is an analysis of the role of the Microsoft MVP award in the performance and mediation of identity, as well as the dynamics that are observed between the market, the commons, and the award itself.

The Microsoft SharePoint MVP Award

Microsoft operates a "Most Valuable Professional" ("MVP") program designed, according to the company's promotional Website, to recognize exceptional community leaders from around the world who voluntarily share their deep, real-world knowledge about Microsoft technologies with others. Beyond Microsoft's statement that "to receive the MVP Award, you must be passionate about Microsoft technology," comments made by individuals in the community suggest, "it's not clear what criteria Microsoft uses to choose who gets the award."

Recently, a software developer ("Bob") had his MVP award renewal denied, launching a discussion on Twitter and in multiple blogs about experiences with the MVP program. As the sole developer of a popular and free open-source add-on to Microsoft's closed-source programming language, Bob's values about transparency – and the potential for conflict with the MVP program are evident in his critique:

> One of the problems with the MVP program is that the whole thing is basically a mystery. Here's where I first knock heads with the program. I value transparency and openness, even if it's difficult or sometimes painful. The MVP program does not value openness. That's why it's basically a mystery how you get nominated for a MVP or what you have to do to get one.

Others have suggested that there are certain ways to become a MVP even though there are no official criteria. Across the multiple blogs and many blog comments regarding the matter, a range of views reflect diverging thoughts and opinions about the program:

> MVP and the Certifications are about promoting Microsoft products. That's it, nothing else really. The reward I get for doing the Certifications isn't the cert, it's the fact that my company will pay me a bonus. Why do they care? Because they want employees with certs to maintain their Microsoft status. Why do they want that? Because of sales. Makes sense, and a nice cooperative relationship. I win, they win, Microsoft wins.

> I was awarded as a MVP 8 times for the period between 1999 and 2007. Many years ago the MVP award was for answering questions on Compuserve and then NNTP newsgroups. Nothing else. If you happened to like answering questions and knew what you were talking about you might get a MVP award. If you had a website/blog or http forum, good for you, but you wouldn't get an award. It was about answering the direct posts of people who needed and answer. So things change, but we don't have to like it. Today any douchebag with a blog could get one. Marketing is king.

Not all bloggers and commenters view the program negatively or with such skepticism:

> Don't forget that being MVP is a PRIVILEGE, NOT A RIGHT. Sure, you built a cool framework, but in all fairness it was probably your bitter attitude that you've expressed here as well that made your MVP not be extended.

> Achieving a MVP award means you did *something* to deserve it. You were involved with user groups, code camps, speaking engagements, posting on forums, writing blogs, writing books, etc. The fact that Microsoft is recognizing your accomplishments isn't something to take for granted, regardless of how secretive and closed the selection process is (a favourite complaint of many).

At a point in the MVP nomination process, each nominee completes a spreadsheet or submits information by way of an online form that has been the target of criticism:

> When I came up for renewal, I had to *defend* why I should have my award renewed using a bad Excel spreadsheet and a really bad online form which don't even allow me to capture my real contributions. Shouldn't it be a MVP Lead's job to know his MVPs and what it is they are doing?

Though not all comments observed during the study were negative towards the spreadsheet or its role in recognizing contributions to the community:

> IMHO, it's reasonable for MSFT to ask what you did to be a MVP once a year - it's hardly a monumental task (although the site/spreadsheet is ridiculously painful to work with).

I discussed the nomination process with Blake, a recently awarded SharePoint MVP. In addition to sharing information about the selection process, he included the document he sent to the MVP Program representatives instead of the spreadsheet. His 10-page document outlined his many activities in the SharePoint community throughout the year. The document bears comparison to the following criticism from Bob E.'s blog post mentioned above:

> The spreadsheet you have to fill in already shows what kind of people Microsoft really wants to be a MVP: people who volunteer to do their PR, their evangelisation, the marketing of their products, in short: sales people who don't cost a dime! So for MSFT, a person who did a lot to spread the Microsoft gospel among fellow community members, that kind of person becomes a MVP. Not a person who actually did something for the community, like contribute a lot."

Bob brings into contrast "a person who actually did something for the community, like contribute a lot" with "a person who did a lot to spread the Microsoft gospel among fellow community members." (To wit, Blake's professional title is *Evangelist*, not an uncommon term and job title in the SharePoint community.) This reflects Bob's scheme of perceived value that is emblematic of his role as an open source software developer; i.e., he values *code contributions* above all other forms. Blake considers this "the biggest complaint about the MVP program" – that there are "non-technical folk" earning the award.

The content of Blake's self-designed nomination form reflects drastically different values: He also produced a series of short videos highlighting community experts sharing their answers to the question, "what is the one thing everyone needs to know about SharePoint 2013?" and community-spoofing videos such as "Behind the Music: The biggest fake SharePoint band, ever." Blake has been the most prolific speaker at user groups and worldwide community events in recent months (he lists 44 speaking engagements in his MVP dossier) and he is often seen at these events handing out t-shirts capturing a range of community memes and inside jokes. Finally, he authored a "free" e-book (it "costs" the reader an email address, paid to Blake's employer) the title of which – *Inside the SharePoint Community: 4 Strategies for Building Your Personal Brand* – reflects his perspective on the value of doing proactive forms identity work he (among others) refers to as *personal branding*.

Ultimately, both Bob and Blake received a 2012 MVP Award; the former reluctantly, the latter with conspicuous fanfare from his employer, a software and services firm that released a press release with the following headline:

> *Excelsior Inc. Evangelist Blake Doe Receives Microsoft's MVP Award: Doe Recognized as Top-Tier Technology Influencer and Community Leader in the SharePoint Category.*

The firm's press release continues, claiming that the award is "also an acknowledgement from Microsoft of Excelsior's broad contributions to the SharePoint community." Having attended multiple of Blake's sessions and speaking with him about the award, there can be as little doubt about his personal loyalty to the community as there is about his company's desire to capitalize on it.

Discussion: Rewarding participation in social media-enabled communities

The empirical study of the SharePoint community and the MVP Award informs future research and design of systems for measuring such constructs as "influence" and "reputation" based on participation and contributions to online community platforms and in workplace and educational settings. Social media technologies open a new path for I.T. training and certification programs to assess more than what can be examined though paper- and computer-based examination methods. However, questions remain about how such systems address the limitations identified in the literature review; namely, that training and certification programs are ill-equipped to assess professional expertise and tacit, intellectual forms of knowledge. Below, I discuss this issue in the context of the MVP Award.

Blake and Bob are examples of individuals who contribute differently to the same community but have different values. The *interpretive flexibility* (Latour 2005) of what constitutes valuable contributions to the community allows for one community to recognize multiple viewpoints on one thing, i.e., "valuable contributions" or "the MVP Award." The MVP Award survives as a legitimate token of recognition of valuable contributions only to the degree that it, too, affords *interpretive flexibility* that allows for the award to mean different things to different people. Any recognition of contribution – especially when encoded in an information or physical artifact – must be "allowed to be grasped through different viewpoints, before possibly

being unified in some later stage depending on the abilities of the collective to unify them" (Latour 2005 p. 116).

The SharePoint community itself has at least these two viewpoints towards valuable contributions: (1) That code contributions are paramount over other forms of contribution, and (2) that "evangelizing" and other "non-technical" behaviors are legitimate forms of contribution. The MVP Award has enough flexibility that it does, by-and-large, survive the diverse viewpoints in the community, although the debates about its legitimacy suggest both a limit to its flexibility, and a degree of intolerance in the viewpoints of some who would not have the award recognize certain forms of contribution. By contrast, the spreadsheet and online form that "[show] what kind of people Microsoft really wants to be a MVP" lack the flexibility to "grasp" what Bob considers to be his "real contributions." These digital artifacts are designed inflexibly, and at least in the eyes of certain community members, they reflect only Microsoft's viewpoint on what constitutes valuable community contribution.

Contributions by community members are encoded into rigid information systems in order mediate that information into parts of the Microsoft organization where individuals convert these representations of community contributions into a determination of who receives the award. Thus, the system for converting community contribution to recognition depends on human intervention. There is no "algorithm" for earning an MVP Award; rather, it is an interpretation and judgment by an unknown individual or group of individuals within the Microsoft corporation. This introduces two challenges to any computational system for recognizing and rewarding community contributions: First, while certain contributions are more readily encoded (e.g., Bob's code contributions and bug fixes are readily quantified by certain affordances of code repository systems) it is difficult to see how a computational system for awarding an MVP would accommodate Blake's contributions.

Whether a recognition system relies on human intervention or computational methods for converting contributions into rewards, the suggestion of viewpoints about valuable contributions "being unified in some later stage" (Latour 2005) may never be realized in a single, heterogeneous context such as the SharePoint community. Therefore, designers of such systems should expect *interpretive flexibility* to be a design goal for computational systems for reward and recognition. Deciding on the algorithms for recognizing contributions in a given community depends on local values and knowledge; therefore, a universal design principle for such systems ought to be the ability for any member of the community to understand how an award came to be granted to a given individual.

Complete transparency may be neither possible nor desired, so recognition and reward systems should be designed for *algorithmic translucence*. Certain activities and attributes are explicit and tangible, thus easily encoded into information; other less tangible activities (e.g., "evangelizing") and attributes (e.g., "reputation") are not easily encoded into information. Where it is not feasible to encode explicit information representing actual activity, visually representing intangible contributions and attributes requires greater visibility into the internal logic of the award so as to answer questions about how an individual has earned an award.

Conclusion

Information systems designed to convert knowledge and contributions into recognition and rewards face limitations when they try to accommodate tacit forms of knowledge and behaviors that are difficult to encode. Additionally, constituents in a single community such as the SharePoint community may have diverse and sometimes conflicting values about what constitutes contributions worth rewarding. These challenges limit the feasibility of any system that would extend in this direction the capabilities of traditional I.T. certification programs. Social media technologies introduce new potential for recognizing and rewarding diverse forms of knowledge, but more work is needed to understand how such systems are to be effectively designed. The ongoing study of existing systems such as the MVP Award will contribute in this area by providing comparable use cases for social media designers.

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