

Community Supporting Design

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ABSTRACT

Based on a qualitative research with supporting literature a study is done on how design can support a community. A start-up community is used as case for this study. The goal for the design of this community is to encourage informal knowledge sharing within the community which is one of the conditions that is needed in a start-up community. The physical environment and the social activities of the start-up community are designed to support the community. Although the designs have not yet been tested, it has been shown that there are possibilities to create and support a community using design.

Author Keywords

Community supporting design; start-up hub, incubator, start-up community.

INTRODUCTION

Communities can be found everywhere, you are probably at least member of one. The people you living with in your neighbourhood, the people with whom you share your interest online or all your connections on LinkedIn, they are all communities. You probably also experienced that communities can become inactive such as some early social media communities. According to Merriam-Webster a community can be defined as: "a unified body of individuals: such as an interacting population of various kinds of individuals (as species) in a common location." (Merriam-Webster, 2017)

In this paper I will show how you can create and support a community through design.

According to literature there are a number of components that are important to a community. One of these is having committed members. The level of commitment of a member is his/her willingness to remain in the community and contribute to it (Kraut et al., 2012). Committed members tend to be more satisfied and better performing in the community. (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990) Another component is content (Kraut et al., 2012). The community needs content that matches the shared interests and or goals of its members. Without this content there is no reason to stay together as a community and the members will leave. The members of a community are connected because they share the location of the content. This could for instance be

an online forum or a clubhouse. Activity of the content is also important. To be successful, communities need their members to provide and update content on a regular basis (Kraut et al., 2012). Without regularly updated content the members will lose interest and the community will slowly die.

In this study I would like to use design to stimulate and support the aforementioned components in order to create a successful community. This will be applied to a specific community: The start-up hub of the University of Twente.

Start-up communities can be described as a group of entrepreneurs in a local informal network that supports and encourages each other by sharing their knowledge, passion and experience (van Weele et al., 2014).

Every community attaches its own meaning to members, content, activity and location. The following is known in literature about start-up communities.

According to van Weele et al. (2014) the following conditions are required for a start-up community; a shared unique identity with an attitude of willingness to help each other, a small and well connected group of entrepreneurs, a shared identity and common work field.

Things that a start-up community can benefit from according to van Weele et al. (2014) are:

- Physical capital such as office space, equipment and basic facilities.
- Financial capital such as economies of scale, access to investors and shared services.
- Credibility through community relations, selection, achievements. An affiliation with a University will increase the credibility of a start-up hub (Mian, 1996).
- Social capital; a willingness to help atmosphere where members share their network, knowledge and experience resulting in a feeling of belonging and encouragement.
- Knowledge; which includes informal knowledge sharing. Allen et al. (1983) found that emergent technology spreads the best through informal networks based on personal relations and is constructed through regularly social interaction.

Before presenting the outcomes the method and the specific case will be described. The designs can be found in results and are followed by the discussion and conclusion.

METHOD

A qualitative research through design with supporting literature is done.

CASE DESCRIPTION

In the case of the start-up hub there are a number of interested stakeholders. The first one is Hardstart, this is a new student association for entrepreneurs at the University of Twente. The Student Union, the provider of this assignment, is a party of the University of Twente who takes care of the interests of the students. Kennispark is an organisation which provides services for companies and start-ups in the region.

The Student Union has noticed a certain demand among students for support in starting their company. To meet this demand they proposed creating a start-up hub. I was asked to create a design concept for this start-up hub for approximately 60 members. The Student Union required that the start-up hub develops a real community that makes it unique compared to other office space.

In this case the members of the community are the start-ups and entrepreneurs. Some of them do already have experience in entrepreneurship. The University of Twente and Kennispark are not members but important stakeholders in the start-up community, they are not physically present at the hub.

The content of the community are the drive for entrepreneurship, knowledge, experience and connections. The members provide each other with a large resource of information and with encouragement to achieve their goals.

Activity of content is realised when members of the start-up community continuously share their new experiences and knowledge. The sharing of content belongs to the social capital and knowledge of this start-up hub.

The location that is connecting the members is the start-up hub, the office space. This is the physical capital of the start-up hub.

As designer I cannot directly influence the financial capital and credibility of this start-up hub. The community needs to attract investors who cover the financial capital. The credibility of the start-ups will grow if they work in a successful community and when the connection with the University becomes stronger. The knowledge will come with the members and will be shared if the social capital is strong enough.

As a designer I am able to provide physical capital (the start-up-hub) and to design it in such a way as to support the social capital.

RESULTS

As mentioned before the design will include the physical and social capital. I will first present the designs of the physical capital that supports the community and then present the social capital designs.

The focus of the designs is to encourage members to get to know each other in an informal way and to give them the possibility to show what their company is doing and share their ideas, knowledge, achievements and struggles. The community will be stronger and people are more likely to contribute and provide content for the community.

Physical Capital Design

The most important facility for a start-up is the office space where the entrepreneurs work. The design of the office space is very open as can be seen in figure 1. Every start-up has its own place but there are no walls separating them. This is done to make it easier to contact others.

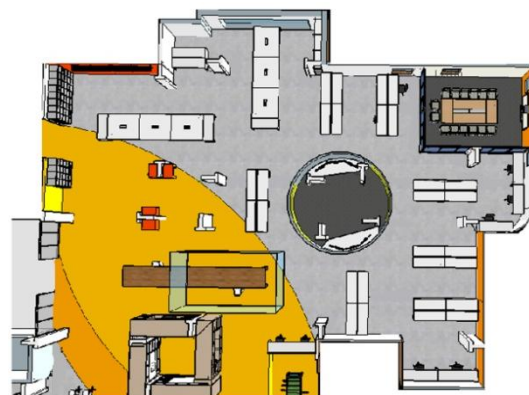


Figure 1. Open office space

Besides the office space the hub has more facilities to support and encourage the community. The lounge for instance can be used during the break to socialise with other entrepreneurs and just relax.

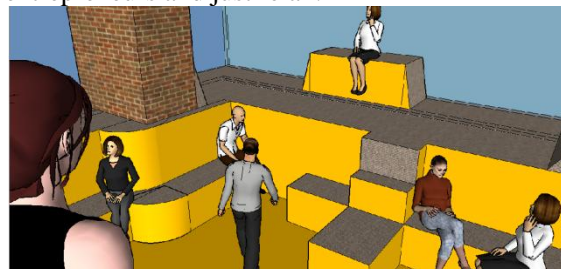


Figure 2. Lounge

The lounge looks out over a presenting spot as shown in figure 3. When standing on this presenting spot someone can pitch his/her idea while others listen and give feedback. This

enables the sharing of ideas and struggles which is important for a strong social capital.

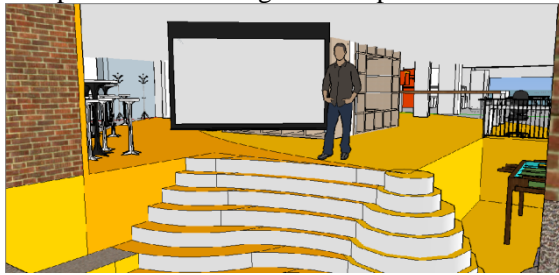


Figure 3. Presenting spot

The members of the start-up hub can also show what they do in the "community cube" as can be seen in figure 4. This cube has small components on all sides where start-ups can place something related to their company. The community cube is located close to the entrance. Visitors and members will pass it and can have a look on what is going on in this hub. When it is known what others do it is much easier for the entrepreneurs to find the right person to ask your question. The University, Kennispark, and their relations are also able to show their offers and requests in this cube. A screen makes it possible to show what is happening in the hub from company requests to events and achieved goals. Showing achievements can encourage other members and create a positive flow within the hub.



Figure 4. Community cube and informal furniture setting.

Next to the community cube there are high tables with bar stools. A conversation at this table is more informal than a conversation from behind a desk. This setting results in a more informal setting than an environment with desks because desks can form a barrier between people. These spots are made to have a quick meeting or discussion. It is easy to add more people, they can just stand at the table. These tables can also be used on events like a Friday afternoon drink which supports the social capital. More about events can be found in the section on social capital design.

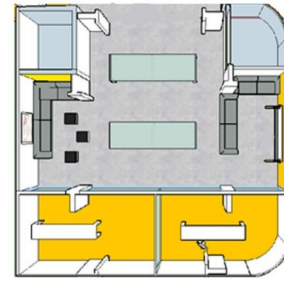


Figure 5. Creative wing with shared facilities.

Figure 5 shows the plan of the creative wing of the incubator. This wing is made for all the members of the hub. The two small rooms at the bottom are made for brainstorming sessions (you can use the walls to write on). The couches and large tables are also made to facilitate having discussions. The idea is that you could invite entrepreneurs from other start-ups or visitors to think with you about your ideas. It is often not possible to invite people at your desk because of the lack of space. This wing facilitates collaboration between start-ups in a informal setting and gives them a place where they can invite external experts.



Figure 6. Coffee table for informal conversations

The last example I want to show is the coffee table next to the community cube which can be seen in figure 6. In many offices the coffee machine is the place to be for an informal talk. This is the place where you get to know each other. The content displayed on community cube can be used as a subject for conversation. The coffee table area is also the place where visitors will wait for their appointment and perhaps participate in the informal conversation.

Social Capital Design

The sense of belonging, the encouragement of a group, inspirational success stories, knowledge, experience in entrepreneurship and interesting connections, this is what the social capital of the community needs to be. The physical environment is already designed to encourage collaboration. Not only physical objects but also social activities can be designed. A community manager is someone who encourages social

capital within the start-up hub and his/her task is to promote social activities. A few examples of the tasks of the community manager are presented below.

Organising informal events is one of his/her tasks. Informal events such as a Friday afternoon drink or a sports clinic can bring the members of the hub together. The focus of these events is to get to know each other without the intention of doing business.

The community manager also organises events with a focus on the start-ups themselves. For example the lounge /presenting place can be used to host an event where start-ups pitch their ideas, achievements and struggles once a month. (Hardstart is already organising an event like this and it turned out to be really successful.)

The community manager also plays a role in the amount of diversity and the size of the community. The manager helps to select new members when there is a spot free in the hub. The new start-up needs to have some overlapping interest with the other members to be able to fit in the community and to be able to contribute content. If there is too much overlap the start-up will form a competitor. This will damage the sharing knowledge culture of the community.

The community manager must be a person who owns already an extensive network. The start-ups can contact this manager for connections (also for connections within the hub). The community manager needs to know the struggles of the start-ups so that an expert can be hired to help the start-up. It could be that many start-ups have juristic questions or questions about a specific topic. The community manager can then arrange a meeting with an expert in this field. I suggest that someone from Kennispark becomes a community manager since Kennispark is already a party that provides services for companies and start-ups in the area and they also have connections to the University of Twente. In this the community manager can also function as a bridge between the University and the start-up hub which increases credibility.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to provide guidelines on how design can be used to create and support a community. This study was done on a specific community, a start-up community, and its results are consequently not directly applicable to other communities. However, the basic strategy of the design can be used when designing for other communities.

The results have not yet been tested and evaluated in the real world but can give an indication about how it could work.

The advantage of this case of the start-up hub is that there is already a group of people who already have a start-up and experience in entrepreneurship. Which means that from the very start of the community there is some content to attract new people.

At this moment only the physical location is designed. It would be interesting to do further studies on a possible online platform for this community to extend the location of the content. Further research can also be done on the events within the start-up hub. With these events even the companies in the whole area and the University can be involved to enlarge the network and credibility of the start-up community.

CONCLUSION

Although the results have not yet been tested, it has been shown that there are possibilities to create and support a community using design. Not only the design of physical objects but also the design of social activities can influence the success of a community. It depends on the community how the members, content, activity and location should be filled in and influenced.

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