ARIA Sardinia:
the Italian on line Community joining tradition and innovation

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ABSTRACT

The "ARIA Sardinia" project (Network Actions for Italians Abroad) has been especially designed to integrate and give value to the network of relationships between public administrations, local socio-economic stakeholders and Italian communities abroad, this goal to be pursued with the support of new technologies and learning approaches emerging within the context of on line interest communities.

The general objective of the project is the development of competencies and knowledge, intended to combine specific technical skills with local "territorial knowledge", in a process where the strengthening and the dissemination of these forms of culture come from the prompt use of innovative tools.

The main activities of the project are the actions intended to guide and assist entrepreneurs, associations, development projects' partners or promoters in the path of acquisition and dissemination of the competencies which are necessary to the involvement of Italians abroad into the internationalization process of Sardinian economy.

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ARIA Sardinia on line community is available at: http://oss.formez.it/aria

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1. PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND OF INTERESTS: A SHORT DESCRIPTION.

"Virtual community" refers to a number of people using Internet for communication purposes (Rheingold, 1994; Micelli, 2000)[1]. The above definition is a wide one, which includes an heterogenous set of phenomena, ranging from Digiland and IRC chatlines to Usenet newsgroups, weblogs, etc. According to this view, virtual communities are considered aggregations of people that virtually meet and share their interests (e.g: politics, music, and so on). On line communities are always run by a common set of rules.

Training activities, lately, are ever more supported by on line communities created to facilitate knowledge sharing among trainees. During the last two years, Formez has developed a methodology to project on line communities and an open source platform combining information databases with customized tools of communication, in order to promote distance learning and the share of experiences.

It is interesting to stress two aspects that seem significant to understand this phenomenon's potentialities. The success of on line communities allowed outlining the role of new technologies as a carrier of rich and complex forms of communication. People find with this approach an answer to their needs of communication, that otherwise cannot be satisfied within the socio – cultural context they live in.

The huge success of the World Wide Web has made more complex the environment where these communities take place. Internet has disclosed its gates to more and more

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[1] S. Salis, L. De Pietro, V. Finotto, F. Lao, S. Marras, *Comunità di pratiche, di apprendimento e professionali – una metodologia per la progettazione*, Quaderni Formez, Vol. 10, Roma december 2002

people, because of shared hypertexts standards and the easiness in its use. New actors, such as firms and businessmen, have seen in Internet interesting economic opportunities.

On line communities are not anymore only a phenomenon reserved to some kind of users. They have started being a wider experience, involving an heterogeneous group of actors, such as consumers, firms, professionals, each of them giving on line communities different meanings and functions. The two spheres of information and participation in the on line communities are not opposite and incompatible dimensions. On the contrary, they represent two features which may co-exist, although with different proportions.

The today challenge is to be able to reassemble, in an original way, these two elements in order to give rise to a so called *learning community*.

The latter results from a virtuous circle, where contents of contributions are guaranteed by relations and by a tailored selection process and qualification of information.

Continuous comparison and dialogue among members of a community renew the validity of the two above mentioned features. As a result, the on line communities become the significant partner for firms and public bodies, as they are more and more consistent with the knowledge shared practice of the present competitive scenario.

The ways of communication vary, depending on the different kind of activities held. Therefore, there will be different types of communities:
- information–oriented communities;
- discussion–oriented communities;
- cooperation–oriented communities;
- learning–oriented communities.

In addition, there are several ways to support communities' activities:
- project areas;
- databanks.

Besides there are also several ways to transfer knowledge: e-books, hypertexts, exchange of experiences and documents, best practices. All the above described instruments are always linked together with self-assessment systems and methods for the animation of groups, which can be synchronous (virtual classroom, chats, and so on) and asynchronous (forum, mailing list, etc.).

Finally, according to their own features, there might be four types of on line community:
1) practice communities;
2) learning communities;
3) professional communities;
4) interest communities.

Now we are going to enter each of them in detail.

1) *Practice communities* aim to find a solution to problems by the exchange of experiences, the diffusion of new instruments for new work processes. From a technological point of view, databanks and applications are designed and used in order to make co-operation and identification of best solutions easier. An important point in this kind of community is that learning is not an individual process or a simple knowledge transferring. It is strictly linked to the texture of relations where the "practice" of the community itself is based upon, generating new opportunities for innovation.

2) *Learning communities* are those where members share the objective to obtain some knowledge and skills. The predominant tools are tutorials and virtual classrooms. Its aim is to transfer contents, individual and collective exercises

to verify the level of learning, tests for the assessment and e-learning instruments.

3) *Professional communities* aim to develop collective identities, attached to the practice of a particular profession. In this case, objectives are the sharing and the use of similar skills required in the practice of that kind of job, such as language, common knowledge, professional perspectives, deontological rules, and so on. Tools needed are those for the working out of complex forms of sharing, participation and learning, such as autonomous working groups or on line experts.

4) *Interest communities* consist of not homogeneous groups carrying out common interests and looking at Internet as a source of information and news on a particular topic, giving each other an added value in order to reach the knowledge common objective.

These four described types of community are not fixed, but they always mix together or evolve from one kind to another. For instance, practice communities may develop in the learning, professional and interest ones, or else professional communities may pursue objectives of learning, of thematic investigation and of problem–solution.

2. BUILDING AN ON LINE COMMUNITY: A FOUR PHASES PROCESS

a. Context analysis

Context analysis implies several different phases aimed, in general, to define the context which the community becomes a part of and -in particular- to identify the requirements of the relevant target. Context analysis entails the following activities:
- exchange of opinions with domain experts and potential users;
- analysis of the public web site (if available);
- benchmarking;
- data interpretation and operational proposals.

b. Strategic planning

The strategic planning phase consists in defining the strategies to be used in the different phases of the community life cycle and in creating an organizational support structure which will be developed, in the short or in the long run, taking into account the results of the previous phase of analysis. The community evolves according to an ongoing growing process that covers several different aspects: the role of the community, its objectives, the number and the features of participants, the roles inside the organizational structure.

The main actors of the strategic planning process are the promoter of the community and the community manager (part of organizational structure), who should evaluate the opportunity to start innovative support actions.

The entire process of strategic planning will be described in the strategic plan, a document which outlines the strategy and the organizational features chosen for the implementation of the community objectives in the long run. The strategic plan is articulated in three sections, which define:
- the strategic objectives of the community, both from a quality and from a quantity point of view, in the medium-long run, and its evolving mission;

- the community policies, describing the requirements and the access procedure;
- the organizational structure and the system to support the community.

The strategic plan will contribute to verify the efficiency of the management activities carried out, thanks to a feedback system and through the analysis of the possible deviations from the plan.

c. Technical implementation
The technical implementation of an on line community is the third phase, that represents the conclusion of the previous two phases (analysis and strategic planning) turning the community objectives and the users needs into services and tools made available inside the community. The implementation of the planning document involves the promoter, the community manager and the technology expert, who define in detail tools and services to be made available. The document defines the necessities identified during the context analysis, expressing them in terms of services, and contains the necessary requirements and the detailed lists for the implementation of the technological platform and for the definition of the standard management procedures of the on line environment.

Technical implementation implies the following activities:
- realization of a technical-functional analysis which shows the macro-areas and the single services of the community and identifies roles and key processes;
- definition of a graphical community identity which takes into account existing institutional communication requirements;
- creation of a prototype of an on line platform.

Implementation document:
- describes the technological tools to the community users and explains the operational processes governing the on line platform in its complex;
- describes the different roles (editor, expert, community manager, manager), the modalities of access, the services provided and the various processes the community is based on.

d. Operational planning
The operational planning comprises a plan of activities outlining a detailed program of activities, aimed to achieve the strategic plan objectives.
The operational plan defines the "chart of responsibilities", describing roles and specific tasks of the members of the organizational structure.
It contains a list of activities that people is in charge of, stating precisely start and end dates. The plan is articulated in preliminary activities, which are peculiar to every phase of the life cycle of a community and preliminary to other activities, and in the quarterly planning of activities, subdivided in back office activities, periodic activities and scheduled activities. It shows:
- the main qualitative and quantitative objectives of the community which should be achieved in the next 2/3 months;
- the detailed activities to be carried out and the group of people who must cooperate in each of them;
- the members of organizational structure that must been involved in every specific activity.

3. THE INTEREST COMMUNITY CALLED ARIA SARDINIA: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The project "Network Actions for Italians Abroad" was born to integrate and increase in value the existing networks between public bodies, local socio – economic actors and the Italian communities abroad. It is supported by technologies and learning methods used within interest communities.
It concerns the whole Sardinian territory, and provides for actions aimed to develop the skills needed for the internationalization process of the Sardinian economy, involving Italian citizens abroad. It consists of accompanying and orienting actions addressed to entrepreneurs, promoters and partners of projects for an integrated approach to development. The ARIA Sardinia's purposes are the following:
- innovation–spreading through tools and methods for the management of knowledge based upon ICTs;
- development of both co-operation networks among the different levels of government, and relation networks with the national and international economy, through the exchange of experience, the comparison and the learning from on line interest communities;
- improvement of the communication process within the public institutions and among these and citizens and firms, both in Italy and abroad. This is achieved by spreading the on line information culture and the interactive communication. Skills and relations accrued by Sardinians and Italians abroad are its strength.
The general objective of the project is to develop skills and knowledge to be fostered and spread by fully exploiting innovative tools that are able to combine specific technical know-how and the common knowledge in the territory. There are also some horizontal objectives, such as networks building in order to enhance and spread trade.
Entrepreneurs' and local development actors' know-how and skills are made available on line, as they are seen as the best connectors and spreaders of experiences and findings, as well as precursor of needs expressed at local levels by public bodies and firms. The strategy of intervention starts from the identification of the entrepreneurs' demand, in Italy and abroad, by local development actors and by the territory itself, in order to address it properly. It attempts to reach a large number of recipients, by intervening on the system of relationships among them in order to strengthen it. It is substantially a series of accompanying measures to promote the development and involve the Italians abroad, through reinforcing socio-economic, institutional, and cultural skills in general.

a. Users
ARIA project involves different classes of users:
1) Sardinian firms with some export experience or willing to expand internationally;
2) Public institutions: executives and officials, who are recipient of training activities for the starting of a continuous dialogue with the Italian communities abroad;
3) Sardinian and Italian citizens abroad in general, including members of whatever associations, and, especially, those interested in the diffusion of the so-called "product Sardinia";
4) Chambers of Commerce in Sardinia and Italian Chambers of Commerce abroad;
5) Trade associations: executives and officials have been contacted and involved in the realization of several activities:

information, training, research, network building, orientation. All these activities are addressed to development operators in Sardinia and aimed to turn the existing connections with the Italians abroad into steady development factors;
6) Experts in internationalisation: lecturers, professors, researchers, consultants, etc.
These six classes include specific recipients, chosen among the local development actors as potential on line community users. They were interviewed to assess their interest in the on line community and their technological endowment. Among them people carrying out a major interest in this specific project have been selected.

b. Mutual interest
With the development of the on line community each user is able to take advantages from participation. The exchange of information and knowledge is the added value that makes the communication system attractive, as structured in the form of an on line interest community.
The following are the main advantages that users can take from the community:
- Firms can find in short information on international activities, such as laws, opportunities, ways of transport, and so on, and at the same time they are able to exchange useful informations with others entrepreneurs with similar experiences or potentially synergic with them;
- Public bodies, participating in an on line community, may deepen the topic of internationalization by providing useful tips and practical information, even with the promotion of co-operation and exchanging deals;
- The Trade associations may use the on line community as an instrument of support to members firms in the internationalization process;
- Sardinian and Italian citizens abroad may act as "aerial" for the diffusion of the "product Sardinia" as a whole. They might exploit the relationships established during their past residence abroad. At the same time, the on line community offers users a continuous link with the culture and the economy of their place of origin. This also promotes their role as developers.

4. THE IMPACT OF INTERNET ON ARIA SARDINIA COMMUNITY USERS

a. From direct to mediated communication
The introduction of new technological instruments has brought about several changes in lifestyles, by altering many habits and producing new needs. The spread of Internet has been able to demolish many territorial constraints, by making interpersonal communication and the knowledge acquisition prompter and at a lower cost. The opportunity to obtain documents (either on economic or legal subjects) in real time, the opening of new virtual commercial (e.g.: e-commerce) or legal (e.g.: e-government) channels has made the communication faster and increasingly substitutes the usual communication ways (the so called "direct" communication) with a so called "mediated" communication. The former was face–to-face or took the form of phone calls, the latter is made through computer tools and allows maintaining every kind of relationship. The adaptation to changes was not only slow, but also conceptually difficult to absorb. Especially those who use traditional methods are not so willing to accept Internet as the main tool of their activity. The lack of information and training in the technological field is still a constraint in the use of Internet. The ARIA on line community is attempting to modify this approach by spreading new methods of communication.

b. New communication standards
On the basis of the interviews held to analyze the referring context of the ARIA project, it results that the level of use of new technologies by those interviewed is high on average. Most of them said that they possess a good computer equipment and they use often Internet for several purposes, ranging from the research of information, the supply of services, the activation of a e-commerce window, the e-mail, messenger and newsletters use, and so on. However, it is necessary to make some distinctions depending on the interviewed people.
- Within Sardinian clubs and associations abroad there is a day-to-day use of Internet : this is an essential tool to keep in touch with Sardinia and thus e-mails, chats and messengers are the useful tools used, as they are the best way to stay in touch with relatives and friends and, more indirectly, with the Sardinian culture. Especially young people show a strong interest in the home region. In fact, as they are born and grown up abroad, they wish to feel closer with their land. On the other hand, young people are more familiar with new technologies and use them to maintain personal contacts.
- In the Chambers of Commerce new technologies are mainly used to give information. Here also there is a day-to-day use of Internet, but the most used tools are newsletters and mailing lists, in order to collect information and data therefore available to all users.
- The computer equipment is satisfactory even within the public institutions and the trade associations interviewed: almost all the offices have an ADSL connection and each operator has his own computer. The use of Internet in this case is related to the supply of services. Therefore, the most used tools are newsletters and on line research to find information, afterwards made available to all users. The public bodies interviewed have their own website, that is mainly a informative portal in which information, data and news are collected.
- Entrepreneurs also are strong Internet and e-mail users. They consider the Web as an important basin for collection of data and information, especially because of the reference to some websites, useful for their activity. The research of information is the main push to the use of the Web, even if there are some firms having their own website, through which they try to develop e-commerce activities. Sales made in this way are a few, but the existence of a on line window is considered a good channel to activate commercial relations and bargaining, especially with other countries.
It is important to stress that the fact that many of the interviewed were familiar with Internet was essential for their involvement in the project. In fact, a basic assumption to consider the virtual community a useful instrument is that users find it a good source for information and for know-how sharing. So, the first community users were expert web users, able to fully exploit all the potentialities that an on line community offers. In regard to the adoption of new technologies in the field of training, a positive assessment has been expressed by the interviewed. Public institutions, trade associations referents and Sardinian and Italian citizens abroad all agree that new technologies are an effective instrument in the field of distance learning. Some of them believe that the distance learning cannot be used alone but it must be supported by some face-to-face lessons, as the

human contact is considered inalienable. Some others argue that they have already tested them and recognized that there might be a further improvement of the already tested learning techniques and methods. However, there are general trust and interest in the opportunities this new solutions open. This a further successful element in the perspective of carrying on with the community. Finally, several functions are recognized to new technologies: informative, co-operative and exchange and learning functions.

5. CASE STUDY: ARIA SARDINIA COMMUNITY

a. The evolution of the community: from a purely relational community to an economic one

The first research on practice communities highlighted a phenomenon called "legitimated peripheral participation". That is to say, the participation in an on line community started as a kind of periphery of an organization and carries on gradually until its partakers become members of the community.

A comparison has been made between the on line interest community and other types of flexible organization, not fixed over time, such as project team or network. It revealed that the former is spontaneous, generates organizational learning and has a common identification of its members, whereas project team is formally built up: a manager gathers some people to create a group, the group carries out its mission and after the end of the project the team dissolves.

The community, instead, is steady over time, even if it is actually a moving entity.

For this reason the interest community is more similar to the other kind of organization mentioned above: the network. It is well known that networks are more and more widespread, due to Internet, which multiplies opportunities to spread specialized information and to create connections.

Both the interest community and the networks tend to be steady, a characteristic that plays a key role in the development of the community.

The ARIA Sardinia project has mainly an economic objective, despite the fact it starts from relational activities aimed to build stable links among partakers. In other words, the on line community initially gave the participants (i.e.: firms, public bodies, trade associations, Sardinian entrepreneurs abroad) the opportunity to interact continuously, and accordingly made easier the set of commercial relationships between Sardinia and the rest of the world. It is a free exchange of information that allows local firms to get information from the public bodies about the country they intend to export in, avoiding any expensive waste of time.

At the same time, firms are able to enter in touch with foreign buyers, previously contacted and selected by the community.

Therefore, there is a development in the role of the community. From a simple sociological instrument it becomes an economic one, capable to catalyze and to converge the information necessary to the development of stable commercial relations and to spread best practices and exchange of experiences.

b. Best practices

At the planning stage of ARIA community, some representatives of local firms, well known for their successful transactions abroad, have been contacted. Their participation in the community might be very supportive for all the members, as they have already gone over most of the obstacles and the difficulties occurred during the transactions and therefore they may bring suggestions and advices for the internationalization process.

Their contribution is very interesting, for two reasons: first, they may represent a case to imitate; secondly, their expertise may simplify the operation of those firms interested in export.

The small size of the Sardinian firms often affects the lack of dynamism of the entrepreneurial texture. The predominant model is that of the micro-firm, with all the related limits.

The interviewed trade associations often pointed out that the small size of firms is seen as an obstacle to the development of the Sardinian economy. In other contexts, small firms became the bearing axes of the economy: industrial districts in North Eastern Italy are an example.

On the contrary, in Sardinia firms were not able to form a system, to become part of a network where the value of each knot is multiplied through the interaction with the others.

The lack of co-operation and integration among firms is always indicated as a weakness of the Sardinian economy.

For this reason the contribution coming from those firms that successfully went over the embryonic stage of the abroad development of their productive network might be helpful to get over the limited perspective of Sardinian firms, which are too deep-seated on the territory and not so willing to open to new markets, with the related risks for them.

Furthermore, firms with international trade experience have highlighted some problems they had with the registration of their brand, the patent protection, the ways for payment and the lack of knowledge of the law in force in the different countries.

These difficulties can be faced with the help of consulting bodies intentionally created.

On the other hand, entrepreneurs recognize a lack in the knowledge of foreign markets and their needs. This knowledge is fundamental, in order both to adapt the product to the specific consumer requirements, and to decide what language must to be used to communicate (formal, informal, specialist and so on).

To sum up, some successful stories may represent an added value for Sardinian firms stating to be internationally opened, while the contribution of some firms is balanced by the acquisition of new commercial opportunities abroad.

The information provided takes two directions: the first is technical assistance and training on the export law and practices in use, on national and international law to finance the export activities, on the identification of most important people and referents.

The second is to inform foreign firms on the product of the Sardinian ones (such as territorial marketing), to contact local entrepreneurs, to promote local events, to inform about the characteristics of local markets abroad.

c. The operation of ARIA Community and the introduced innovation

It is interesting to point out how ARIA Community works. It is an on line platform, with a website in Italian language, http://oss.formez.it/aria. ARIA Community set a space on the Internet where identified group of people, having the same or similar field of activity, may access the same information, interact and exchange experience and knowledge on line. In this way, they develop best practices and solutions through a cooperative and dynamic approach.

ARIA community is effective particularly towards new and under construction activities, which have not had a previous training path, as in the case of the activities for internationalization and technical assistance.

This instrument is especially suitable to guarantee the development of those activities that distinguish themselves for continuing on job innovation and learning.

On one hand, the community offers a fostered platform that makes the exchange of information easier and so is the actual participation of all the operators. In fact, every member can supply his own contribution, opinion, advice and feedback.

On the other hand, in the community can be found contents and information services edited by an intentionally created team.

Nowadays, one of the main problems of firms is not only the availability of information, but an adequate selection of them, in order to get the most useful data.

For this reason, the on line platform provides information and services meaningful and specific for each interest community (for instance: internationalization, encouraging the use of Internet in the SMEs, territorial benchmarking; commercial and export law and practices; project management methods; international marketing; presentation of European projects; etc.).

An on line community transforms itself continuously through the contribution of every member. Each of them may put forward a new forum or promote a collaborative space for document management (the so called file sharing).

In the first three months of platform testing, 167 people became part of ARIA community, and over 25.000 on line pages have been visited (420 pages seen per day on average); 63 documents have been published and 5 forums opened. Moreover, new economic relationships have been outlined.

Depending on future funding, there might be an implementation of spaces within ARIA Community devoted to e-learning and distance learning, in order to encourage the relationship with the Italian Chambers of Commerce abroad, with the support of synchronous and asynchronous methodologies.

The community will keep on supplying technological support to the actors involved in the project, through computer tools (say databanks, forum, mailing lists, etc.).

There will be also a methodological support at the planning, organization, start up, management and monitoring stages of the on line community, through meetings, seminars, face-to-face and remote advice.

To sum up, all the above mentioned activities consist of:
- operational assistance to the development and the management of the community through workshops, and face-to-face and remote advice;
- technological development through the definition of a common and shared methodology on the start up and the management of the interest community;
- diffusion of the results through the promotion and sharing of materials, and the organization of meetings and conferences on internationalization.

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