

Making Waves: Successful Formation of Female IT Communities

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Abstract

Female networks in professional contexts are making waves for their members. In this presentation, we describe three existing networks: their origin, how they were set up, their reception, their life, and the impact they made. We invite the participants to join into a discussion about positive networking examples as well as an analysis of failed attempts.

1. Introduction

The need for female networking in a professional context, as well as in education, has long been identified – and has recently started to be addressed: be it as a series of discrete events like summer universities [1], as a global organization [2], or as rather small but highly effective projects [3]. A specific need can be detected where members of a minority have difficulties to find birds of a feather in their everyday environment. For the target group of women in the IT domain, we exemplify the creation and evolution of self-organized communities which have arisen from single or infrequent face-to-face events.

We present and discuss various forms of both initial events and continuing networking activities. We report on existing networks, their history and effectiveness. Drawing from our experience and in discussion with the participants, we identify basic essentials of successful networks.

The presentation's goal is twofold: we hope to identify and promote existing networks as well as to inspire and support new female networks.

2. Community Examples

MUFFIN21 – mentoring including research and companies of the "Initiative D21". [MENTORING] The women mentoring program MUFFIN21 [4] was funded by the German National Research Center for Information Technology (GMD); it aimed at supporting relationships between mentors (women from both industry and research) and their mentees (female students of computer sciences). MUFFIN21 started as a yearlong pilot project with only a few members and continued for two more years with a larger number of members. Beyond the mentorship

couples, MUFFIN21 supported the members with workshops in soft skills and gave financial help for travelling. After the official end of MUFFIN21, a group of women kept in close contact. With the help of the established network, they still exchange information and advice regarding political decisions concerning their individual careers. The web platform used during the project was closed at the end, but the group kept in touch through a simple mailing list. This rather low-level technology is now all the mentees and mentors need to keep this professionals' network alive.

Proven – network of women in the faculty of engineering. [CAREER COMPETENCIES] One day can make a difference. Indeed, in this case, the Girls' Day has connected a couple of women who once had worked separately in IT-related departments at the University of Duisburg, Germany. A women's network was founded during the post-event meeting of Girls' Day 2004. The network takes advantage of all women working at the same campus. Hence, a regular lunch meeting was set - fostering a growing community which is by now also virtually connected via a forum, a Wiki, and a mailing list. Eventually, meetings outside the limited professional context started. The advantages are closer relationships amongst the women and therefore an intensification of the community. The network is cited as a "best-practice-example" – the group became famous beyond the borders of university's campus. After the first year, the University of Duisburg-Essen awarded a grant for organizing and holding workshops (presentation techniques in engineering, leadership and time management) in appreciation of the network's members' efforts [5].

ZEITUNG – editorial board within Computer Science. [TECHNICAL AND PERSONAL SUPPORT] Originally set up for two weeks during a summer university [6] in 2000 the conference newspaper developed to a now mainly virtual editorial board for an IT-related online newspaper. Despite the members' fluctuation regarding the actual writing the network has been successful for a long time. Some staff members continued working for more than six years. One important precondition is the group's openness for new (and former)

members. The group maintained and extended its supportive character into the professional lives of the members. E.g., one member emigrated and took on a professorship overseas. A second one followed and wrote her diploma thesis there and is now returning again to write her PhD thesis. Working abroad has been arranged for a study project in Sweden, also cooperative visits to Austria and New Zealand. At another level, the group's members provide each other with technical support regarding questions like "how to install a Wiki", "how to write in LaTeX", "which Linux distribution can you recommend".

3. Making Waves

Friendship and professional support make the presented communities valuable for their members. The networks often originate in short face-to-face events where women work together in an intensive and demanding, but also highly motivating and encouraging way.

Despite their heterogeneous origins, the secret to sustain an active community is always the same: the members communicate in a highly open manner, trusting the group to keep shared information in confidence. Furthermore, the self-organizing nature of the communities requires socially constructive and creative behaviour as well as technical skills. Across all different formats, the frequency of communication or need for common face-to-face meetings is not as significant as the will of the members to come together as one strong body, facing the often male-dominated IT-business together.

The first personal meeting often is crucial for lively communities. That holds for the social as well as the technical support. Organizers should not only provide support for the whole group, but also allow subgroups to form within the social structure of kick-offs and network events, minority meetings and other kinds of "meeting points". Future research might answer the question which role independence and autonomy play for forming and evolving loosely-coupled but closely-connected (sub)groups.

4. Attendance and Format

The presentation is open to women with experience in network building as well as newcomers; no specific background knowledge is required. The presentation will consist of details of example networks, and the benefits and difficulties in keeping networks alive over time. It is planned in an interactive manner with written material handed-out and will close with a discussion about working and stranded communities and means to foster success. The session length should be 90 minutes. The number of participants should not exceed 40.

5. Speakers

Maria Oelinger is a researcher in the COLLIDE group at University Duisburg-Essen, Germany. She supports learner groups in EU projects that deal with computer supported learning in technology, mathematics and science. Maria has taught at several universities in Germany and Austria. Her current research interests are community support and CSCL. Dorina Gumm is a researcher at the Department of Informatics, University of Hamburg, Germany. In her research she deals with requirements engineering in distributed software development projects. Dorina is involved in the CommSy project that is developing and supporting a new platform for computer supported learning. Birgit Koch is a researcher at the same department. Her research focuses on robotics and artificial intelligence. She has been a lecturer at universities in Germany, Austria and the United States. Her current research interests are cooperation techniques in RoboCup. Annika Hinze is a professor at the University of Waikato. Her research interests are databases and information systems. She established and chaired the Computing Women Congress in New Zealand, a summer university for women in IT. Friederike Jolk is a Computer Science and Digital Media student at the University of Bremen. Her current research interest covers multimedia learning environments.

The speakers will present this workshop in cooperation with members of the networks discussed above.

6. References

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