The Value of Virtual Reputation

RANDY EMELO

The popular gaming mentality can translate into virtual knowledge sharing, but only if learners trust the experts they find online. Reputation is key when there is no handshake.

Reputation systems aren't popular yet in Web-based mentoring, but they will be soon. Within virtual knowledge sharing and Web-based mentoring networks, people's professional reputation can influence whether others want to enter into collaborative learning engagements with them. The growing use of virtual knowledge sharing technology requires that learning leaders give people a way to build a virtual reputation, and to ensure it is the same authentic representation of a person's capabilities that would be seen in a face-to-face environment.

Virtual reputation takes the place of the meet-and-greet phase of a new engagement, becoming essentially a virtual handshake between participants. Employees can quickly see and understand who they are engaged in a virtual learning relationship with, what strengths they bring and what others have said about their collaboration and work styles. This allows them to skip over the sometimes-awkward getting-to-know-you phase and jump right into the payoff of sharing knowledge and implementing new skills on the job.

How to Build Reputation Online

Online games such as "World of Warcraft" and "Angry Birds" can provide learning leaders with many innovative ideas organizations can use to build reputations in a virtual environment for the average worker. Here are four gaming principles that can be altered to fit

into the corporate world of Web-based mentoring and knowledge sharing.

Keep it positive. While multi-person games such as "World of Warcraft" thrive on competitiveness, running raids and winning battles, the virtual world of Web-based mentoring, social learning and knowledge sharing flourish best when the focus is on building community and collaborating with one another. The goal of Web-based mentoring and social learning is to spread knowledge, skills and know-how among colleagues. This requires people to willingly and openly share what they know, which is why a good reputation within the virtual knowledge-sharing realm is so important. Others will come to those they trust for insights and will believe the information and concepts they pass along. A competitive environment will not always make this type of sharing possible because people would be more apt to hoard rather than share their knowledge.

Since many colleagues never meet face-to-face, using a reputation system built into a Web-based mentoring program becomes critical to understand how people work, share and collaborate (Figure 1). A January white paper by senior learning analyst Scot Lake of Brandon Hall, called "Critical Strategies of Modern Mentoring Programs," cites three factors that should make up a virtual reputation system: a person's expertise, collaboration style and interests. He said these should be focused on positive aspects to keep the environment collaborative.

For example, people could give positive feedback about others' collaboration style and leverage a common set of positive adjectives such as inquisitive, pragmatic, innovative or responsive. People could tag a colleague to show which aspect they experienced.

Others could see this information when they look at a person's profile, providing an indication of what people could expect from that contributor.

Companies don't want and can't afford to have competitive or combative knowledge-sharing environments at play in their organizations. That type of mindset might work in "World of Warcraft," but not in business. Negative comments can create a permanent barrier and hinder knowledge flow, since people may avoid sharing or collaborating with someone who was flagged with a negative remark. Instead, if a colleague does not think someone was responsive during their previous interactions, they would simply not choose that description. They would focus on what strengths that person did bring to the group and emphasize the positive qualities that person can offer.

Offer collectible achievements. Online gamers of "Angry Birds" or "Call of Duty" often collect achievements for performing certain activities within their game. From mining a particular amount of gold to catching a set number of fish, these seemingly small tasks create an impetus that keep people involved.

This same technique can be applied to Web-based mentoring as a way for learners and advisers to stay active in the program and build reputation. Rewards for personal achievements such as

FIGURE 1: A VIRTUAL REPUTATION SYSTEM IN WEB-BASED MENTORING

Source: Triple Creek, 2011
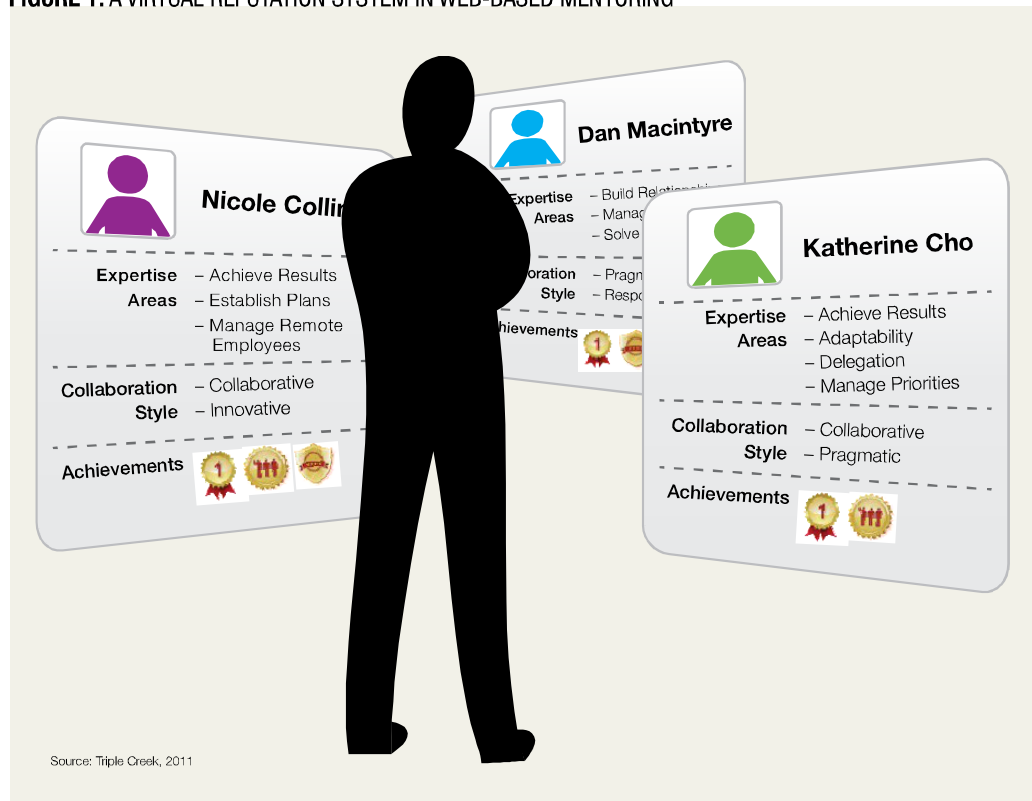
sharing information, completing a profile or tagging other users on their collaboration style can be awarded to individuals and shown off in a personal trophy case of sorts. This helps build and project a person's reputation, such as showing that a person has been active in starting and completing learning engagements.

Information gleaned publicly from this virtual brag box allows others to evaluate what activities a potential adviser or learner has accomplished and how that might translate into value in the learning environment. For instance, people could infer that someone with an achievement for tagging others' collaboration style will willingly give meaningful feedback.

One important aspect is to let individuals decide what is public and private so they retain control over their reputations. For example, the following comment from a mentoring collaborator may be something a person wants to keep private: "I am impressed with how well you handled that awkward moment with your boss in today's meeting. I could see some of those new techniques for handling difficult people at work!" While a positive comment, this may not be something a person wants to broadcast to the world. Letting people choose what to keep private is

essential for a system like this to work.

In Web-based mentoring, collectible achievements can become a source of personal pride because they acknowledge advisers' and learners' endeavors. Giving people a way to positively take part in virtual knowledge sharing, and recognizing the efforts they make, helps them stay engaged, build their reputations and become generous members of the learning community. These activities promote learning momentum and provide incentive for people to continuously log in, link up and actively share communal insights.

Avoid public rankings and numbered levels. Gamers often talk of leveling up their characters through battles and achievements, meaning they attain higher rankings based on actions they take in the game. These higher levels come with better equipment, more user features and improved skill sets. Assigning ranks or levels to players works well in a competitive game because it lets people easily see the level of players they are fighting against or teaming up with. However, using this same type of public valuation system in corporate Web-based mentoring can cause a competitive atmosphere to emerge and inhibit learning.

Private rankings can be useful, however. They let people score themselves and track progress as they improve their skills and knowledge. For example, a Web-based mentoring system could let people evaluate their own skill levels around various corporate competencies, and have them assign a level for each one such as beginner, intermediate or expert that only they can view. As they improve, they would see their level move upward.

The problem with numbered levels and rankings comes when they are made public, because they accentuate the differences between people and put the focus on labels instead of learning. If competency levels are public, beginners could look for advisers who are experts, and only experts, in a particular competency area. This is problematic because an expert-level adviser is not always ideal for a beginner. In many cases an intermediate adviser is the right match, or possibly even another beginner who has more experience. These people can speak the beginner's language and can relate to his or her issues; an expert is typically too far removed from the situation to provide meaningful assistance.

One of the greatest values of virtual knowledge sharing is it removes barriers that may occur within the organizational hierarchy such as job title, location, functional area or business unit. None of that matters in a virtual environment that is open to the entire company. People simply will look for colleagues who have the skills, know-how and reputation they want in a learning collaborator.

Focus on expertise. Teamwork is a common element in multiplayer online games. All players bring unique skill sets that make them valuable team members, and the role they play helps the team fight its battles. The key is to have a balance of skills among the players so all areas and needs are covered.

The same holds true in Web-based mentoring. Learners and advisers who come together through a knowledge-sharing system need to understand what experience, expertise and learning needs each person brings. This will allow people to see who needs their knowledge and who has knowledge they need. Learning leaders can promote healthy and balanced knowledge sharing by encouraging individuals to be both learners and advisers, and by recommending they have diverse learning networks of five to 15 collaborators from across job levels, functions and locations who can cycle in and out as their needs and strengths evolve.

Today's workforce requires access to a wide range of knowledge sources, in part because jobs tend to flow over boundaries and filter into numerous functions. The varied experiences of others who work for the same organization but are from outside a knowledge seeker's specific job function can help that person gain a deeper understanding of the situation or issue he or she is facing. This, in turn, opens up the knowledge vault within an organization and spreads tacit know-how throughout the workforce.

By using a communal set of functional and leadership/management competencies as the basis for expertise profiling, a common foundation forms across functions, departments, regions and the organization. This creates a universal foundation for learning within the company and helps people connect with one another to share critical knowledge.

Make Reputation Matter

The realm of Web-based mentoring and social learning can be a tricky beast to tame, especially when technology keeps changing and new ways to connect and share keep emerging. And while most people are willing to share and learn from the crowd, it is vital

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they see how their personal knowledge, insights and understanding are valued by colleagues.

A reputation system allows people to take the reputation they have locally and project it into a virtual space. This validates the unique strengths each contributor brings to the company, helps incentivize participation and engenders trust among collaborators.

Organizations that can take advantage of this process can build a deep, diverse pool of contributors and expand knowledge sharing across all realms of the enterprise. `CLO`

Randy Emelo is president and CEO of Triple Creek. He can be reached at editor@CLOmedia.com.