

## **Learning on a Jet Plane: Distributed Problem Solving and Knowledge Sharing in a Virtual Community of Frequent Fliers (Haigh)**

Presented at ASIS&T Annual Meeting, Austin, November 2006

**Topic:** This research examines knowledge sharing practices within the online discussion forum site FlyerTalk.com, which describes itself as "The World's most popular frequent flier community." By January 2006 it ranked 4,093 in the Alexa.com ranking of web traffic and had accumulated more than five million posts in half a million distinct discussion threads.

**Research Gap:** Despite a surge of interest in both communities of practice and knowledge management, relatively little research has examined knowledge interactions among communities of the consumers (rather than designers) of products and services. Likewise, most ethnographic work on knowledge sharing in communities of practice has focused on physical, rather than virtual communities. Nothing of a sociological or anthropological nature has been published on frequent flier programs, still less on the knowledge sharing practices of their most devoted members.

**Methodology:** This is primarily an online ethnographic study (Schapp, 2002; Lyman & Wakeford 1999) of knowledge sharing in a virtual community of practice (Gray 2004) involving two years of fieldwork as a frequent lurker and occasional participant in selected FlyerTalk forums. The researcher has also created a software tool to download and parse hundreds of thousands of posts into a relational database, permitting statistical analysis of posting patterns.

**Research Question:** Can an informal, loosely structured virtual community of amateur enthusiasts supported by generic software achieve the eternal managerial dream of an organization more intelligent and more flexible than its constituent members? This presentation focuses on the ability of FlyerTalk community members to work together to solve complex problems, leveraging scraps of information and experimental results. One example is the "mileage run," a ritual defined by FlyerTalk as a trip "designed solely for gaining maximum miles and/or points for no other reason than to gain the miles and/or points." The actual travel destination is immaterial and travelers never leave the destination airport. FlyerTalkers exploit the enormous complexity of frequent flyer program regulations, airline alliance, routing restrictions, special promotions, and fare codes to construct lengthy, circuitous yet inexpensive itineraries designed to maximize the number of miles per dollar. FlyerTalkers have created a network of on- and off-line training seminars, specialized software tools and knowledge resources (more than one hundred and fifteen thousand posts in the dedicated mileage run discussion forum alone) to support this activity.

**Implications:** This analysis suggests that online communities of practice can pool their knowledge to facilitate distributed problem solving. In some cases, airlines are effectively paying them to fly. These communities are adept at exploiting the unintended interactions of travel reward programs and airline reservation systems, turning to complexity of these products back on their corporate creators.