



The Value of Online Communities: A Survey of Technology Professionals

■ INTRODUCTION

Technology professionals have consistently been leaders in using online communities for professional benefit. Forums such as Google or Yahoo Groups, Tech Target, AppDeploy, and others have delivered important forums where technical problems are discussed and solved, helping systems administrators and other IT professionals do their jobs.

The following report is based on a survey of IT professionals conducted in June 2007. The goal of the survey was to gather data about the value and impact of online communities including the level and patterns of use, perceived benefits, accuracy of content, and time saved by using community-based information to address and resolve issues. Additionally, information was gathered about areas where improvements could be made to online communities for IT professionals.

■ SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- 93% claim that they do their jobs more efficiently and save time by using IT communities to solve system administration problems.
- 100% of IT professionals who participate in online communities report benefiting professionally and 85% report benefiting personally from this use.
- 98% of participants believe that the information in online communities is typically accurate, although many clarified the importance of validating online sources.
- 70% of respondents participate in online communities focused on systems or security management.
- 94% of participants cite the need to visit more than one source of information for each problem that they solve. 75% of participants who work in IT say that a comprehensive community that would answer questions without the need to visit multiple sites would be beneficial.
- 50% of respondents who work in IT would find value in having relevant community information available to them directly from their systems management console.
- Better search is the most frequently cited improvement that would add benefit to online communities for technical information. Other suggestions included resident subject matter experts and moderators, live forums and policing of community content for accuracy and currency.

■ Communities help IT professionals do their jobs more efficiently

The vast majority, 93%, of participants believe they do their jobs more efficiently and save time by using online IT communities. The actual time saved by using online IT communities as compared to the time it would take to complete the same tasks without accessing these communities was estimated by respondents and varied with the largest group of participants, 43%, saying they saved between 1-3 hours per week. 13% of participants claimed they saved some time, but less than an hour, while 37% of participants estimated that they saved three hours or more each week by using online communities (**Figure A**).

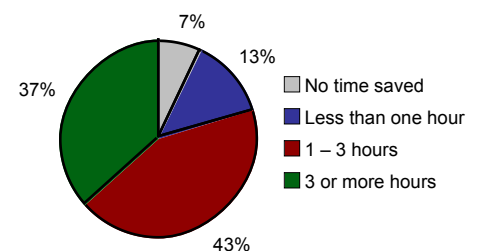


Figure A: Time saved weekly using communities



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Both personal and professional benefits are derived by participating in online IT communities

100% of IT professionals who use online communities report that they benefit professionally from communities and 85% also benefit personally. The greatest professional benefit cited (75%) was doing a better job. The greatest personal benefit cited (68%) was professional development. See **Figures B and C** for more information on personal and professional benefits of online IT communities.

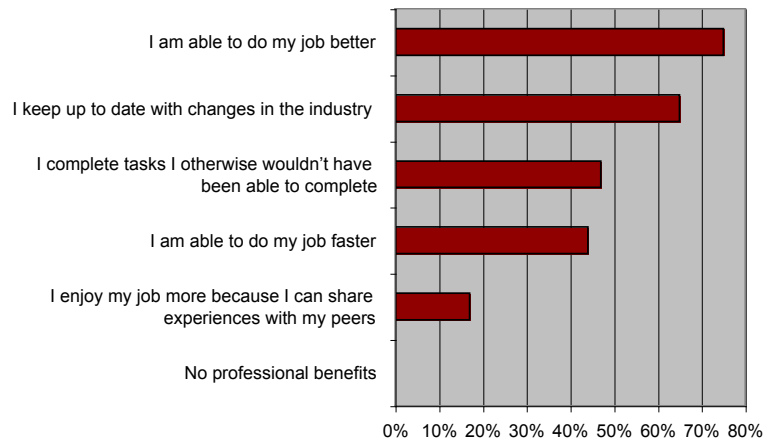


Figure B: Professional benefits of IT communities

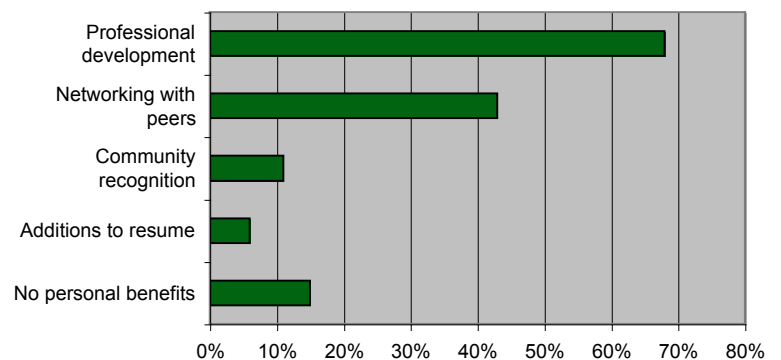


Figure C: Personal benefits of IT communities

Community information overwhelmingly viewed as accurate

Almost all participants, 98%, reported that they believe the information from online communities is typically accurate and trustworthy (**Figure D**). However, when given an opportunity to comment, participants were quick to clarify the importance of checking the source of information as well as look for validation of important information.

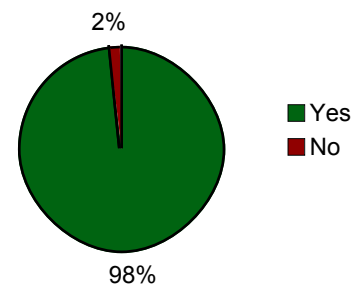


Figure D: Is information from online communities accurate and trustworthy?



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■ Majority of participants participate in work-related online communities

The majority of survey participants, 70%, participate in online communities focused on systems or security management as part of their job (**Figure E**). Google Groups was cited most frequently (61%) followed by Tech Target (50%). Other online forums including AppDeploy, Experts Exchange, myITforum, Tek-Tips, Yahoo Groups, and various vendor-specific communities were also mentioned by a significant number of participants.

Front-line IT professionals use communities only slightly more than senior management (75% vs. 69%). More than half of participants (66%) are “lurkers” who read what is going on, but do not actively participate by posting questions or participating in discussions. Managers are more likely to be lurkers (78%) than frontline professionals (65%).

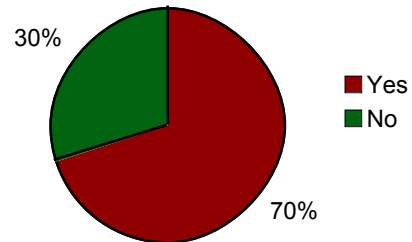


Figure E: Online community participation

■ Communities used primarily to find answers to technical problems

Participants were asked what their purpose was in using online communities. The most frequently cited use was finding answers to technical problems (87%). Entertainment was cited least frequently (12%). See **Figure F** for a detailed breakdown.

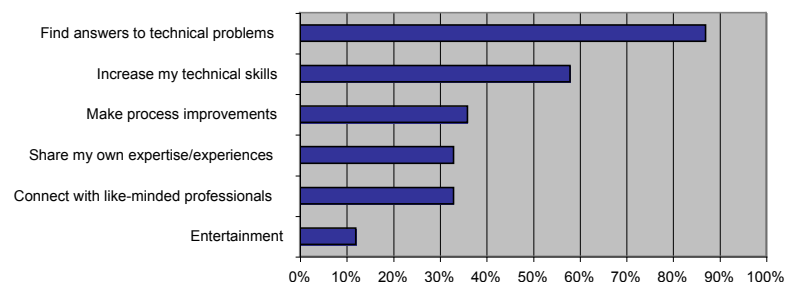


Figure F: Reasons for participating in IT communities



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■ Necessity of using multiple sources of technical information makes problem solving more difficult

Participants were asked in general how many sources of online information they would typically visit in order to solve a single technical problem. The vast majority, 94%, cited needing more than one source of information for one typical problem. Most participants, 64%, estimated visiting 2-3 online sources to solve a problem, while 30% of participants reported needing to visit 4 or more online sources to solve a typical problem. See **Figure G** for a detailed breakdown.

This is clearly a pain point for participants with 75% of participants who work in IT saying that a comprehensive community that would answer questions without the need to visit multiple sites would be beneficial (**Figure H**) and 50% saying they would find value in having relevant community information available directly from their systems management consoles (**Figure J**).

■ Better search capabilities, review and validation of content, and resident expert roles would improve online communities

In an open-ended question, participants were asked what would make online communities more beneficial. The most frequent response was better search capabilities. In a related finding that demonstrates the difficulty of finding information, 74% of participants said that their use of search engines like Google for finding answers to technical problems has increased in the past year. Other areas for improvement included full time moderators, proactive policing of content to ensure that it is accurate and up to date, the availability of more time saving tips and tricks, and resident subject matter experts.

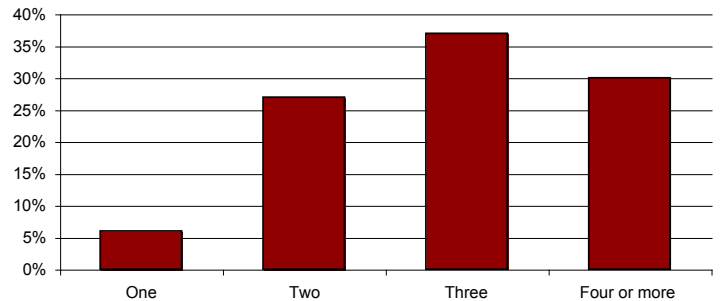


Figure G: Number of online sources used to solve one typical problem

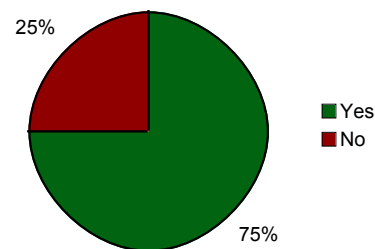


Figure H: Find value in a comprehensive online community

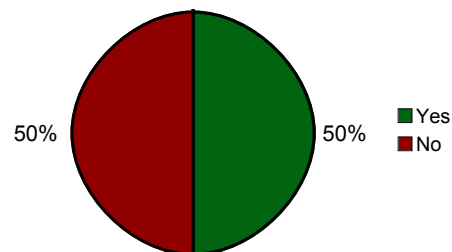


Figure J: Find value in having community information available from existing consoles



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SURVEY METHODOLOGY

An independent database of IT professionals was emailed and invited to participate in a survey on the topic of IT communities. A total of 203 respondents completed the survey representing a broad range of job functions within IT. See **Figure K** for a detailed breakdown.

The survey was conducted using Zoomerang, an online survey tool. This survey was sponsored by KACE, the leading provider of systems management appliances. Respondents were not compensated for participating in this survey but were offered a copy of the final report.

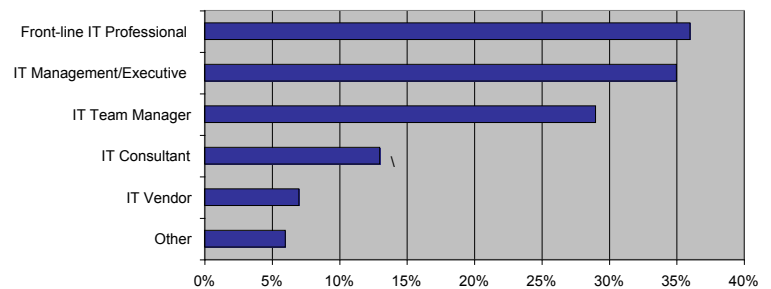


Figure K: Participant job functions

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