



Online Community Report

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Interview with Soren Kaplan, iCohere

October 2004

Soren Kaplan, co-founder of [iCohere](#), manages online events and communities for many large and small organizations.

Tell me about icohere? What do you do?

iCohere helps organizations create "collaborative communities", which we classify into three types of communities – learning communities, communities of practice, and project communities. We've applied our backgrounds in education and organizational development and built a software platform that includes a suite of group process and collaboration tools that help people foster relationships, collaboratively learn together, create new knowledge, and work together remotely.

Much of our work bridges the online world with face-to-face meetings and events. I just returned from a meeting with the Environmental Protection Agency, for example, in which over 300 senior leaders met for a four-day leadership development summit in Philadelphia. Now we're helping this distributed group continue to collaborate online by establishing a community of practice to sustain their momentum. Some of our other clients include organizations like SBC Communications, the National Institutes of Health, Case Western Reserve University, World Vision, and the American Society of Association Executives.

What lessons can you share about running a really great online event or conference as it relates to community building?

We've conducted events for small groups as well as communities of up to 1000. The same principles generally apply including:

- Make the technology as invisible as possible – design the online environment and the process for participation around the experience you're trying to create.
- Define what it means to be a good attendee and community member ahead of time so that norms for participation are established before the event begins.
- Seed the community prior to the event by inviting presenters and selected participants to create networking profiles and post brief introductions stating their expectations for the conference.

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- When people first login to the community, welcome them personally through an instant message, just like you might greet them at the door of a conference hall.
- Engage people through constant communication. Send out emails that detail the upcoming day's program, summarize the previous day's events, and that provide a direct link to the community to ensure easy access. This creates energy and establishes momentum that inspires participation.
- Stagger live events to accommodate different time zones and archive events for those who cannot attend in real time.
- Provide opportunities for facilitated live and asynchronous conversations focused on giving people an opportunity to contribute resources, stories, and best practices.
- Create a "structure" for supporting unstructured discussions and networking so that topics and ideas from the community can emerge organically.
- Tell success stories about how previous attendees have gotten the most out of participation – for example, stories about how people have most effectively used their time, how they've networked and created new relationships, and how they've learned something new that's resulted in a new opportunity.

There is growing interest in online communities strengthening offline communities, and vice versa. What strategies or formats are most effective?

If you take an historical perspective, the WELL (www.well.com) was one of the first widely recognized examples of the successful bridging of online and offline community. One advantage of the WELL was that many community members lived in the same region, the San Francisco Bay Area. Meetup (www.meetup.com) and Moveon (www.moveon.org) have demonstrated more recent success through facilitating interest-based and action-based networking and collaboration. In addition to these examples of online communities spawning face-to-face connections, more and more individual organizations are looking at this topic as a way to strengthen their culture, enhance work processes and develop their people.

Here's a case in point. In early 2004 World Vision International (www.wvi.org) embarked on a strategic planning process to identify organization-wide priorities and goals to guide the organization into the future. With over 20,000 employees and offices in 100 countries, World Vision is one of the world's largest non-profit organizations and is currently the world's largest distributor of food, feeding over seven million people last year. An important part of this planning process occurred last June, when 150 of World Vision's leaders from offices around the world met in Bangkok for a summit. World Vision not only involved its top leaders in the process, but it engaged 4000 employees in an unprecedented virtual process through our online collaborative community platform.

For a month before the Bangkok summit began, employees and other stakeholders were asked to participate in face-to-face meetings at country and regional levels to discuss World Vision's core competencies and aspirations for the future. Both individuals and groups summarized their success stories and insights and then logged into an online community designed to capture and share best practices from across the globally

dispersed organization. Over 4500 people from 60 countries contributed to this important “pre-work” by participating in a month-long cycle of face-to-face and online dialogue and collaboration.

Virtual participation continued once the summit began in Bangkok, with the online community continuing to serve as a link through which the entire organization could participate in the summit process. Highlights from the Bangkok meeting were summarized and posted to the online community. Overnight, the rest of the organization around the world read, discussed, and voted on issues and ideas that emerged from the face-to-face summit. This input was summarized and integrated into the Bangkok meeting the next day.

World Vision’s project community illustrates how virtual and face-to-face processes can inform one another. The Bangkok summit created an opportunity to weave together an entire global organizational system, merging virtual and face-to-face collaboration in ways that tapped the collective wisdom of the organization. Within an extremely short period of time, in a way seldom seen in traditional planning meetings, an entire organization was able to be represented and work together in a meaningful way. (For a streaming presentation that provides additional detail about World Vision’s approach and process, [click here](#)).

In what ways do you see collaboration connecting to community?

Regardless of how you define community, our view is that online communities must become more collaborative by necessity. To add value to their sponsoring organizations, not to mention their members, communities are becoming more and more goal oriented, and achieving these goals often involves encouraging or directly facilitating collaboration.

Take the New Media Consortium for example. The NMC is a consortium of companies – like Macromedia, Apple and Adobe – and major universities focused on developing next generation learning technology. As part of NMC’s approach to building its community, we’ve helped them establish an approach to delivering four-day online conference events. On the opening day, members log into an online community site, create a networking profile and are met with a streaming media welcome and [overview](#) by Larry Johnson, CEO of NMC. Each day a new set of conference rooms open where participants can view streaming presentations and then interact through discussion boards with the presenters and other attendees. A “Collaboration Café” provides a forum for members to discuss a variety of topics. A daily “Happy Hour” brings together presenters and attendees in a real-time online chat. A searchable directory of participant profiles and instant messaging options create networking opportunities to help members identify new partnerships and collaborative projects. Online discussions throughout the conference and public and private virtual meetings create an easy, friendly environment to compare interests and exchange information. This kind of learning event takes community facilitation to the next level – The NMC has created a truly collaborative experience for its members that is closely aligned to its mission as an organization.

Do you see senior executives getting involved in online collaboration, or is there still a disconnect?

Right now I’d have to say there’s still a gap, but it’s closing fast. As the value of community and community-based collaboration becomes clearer through real examples and noteworthy success stories, executives will see collaboration and community as critical levers by which they can communicate and lead. For World Vision, engaging the broader organization in a shared strategic planning experience resulted in higher

quality goals and plans, the rapid alignment of stakeholders around the world, and enhanced organizational readiness for implementation. These are results that the organization's executives easily understood.

What groups involved with online interaction do you admire?

Interestingly enough, many of the larger companies with a lot of resources have yet to demonstrate the real power of collaborative community. It's the non-profits, educational institutions, and government organizations that have, often by necessity, taken community to the next level. EDUCAUSE (www.educause.edu) has a "Virtual Communities of Practice Initiative" that's blazing new trails in higher education. The World Bank (www.worldbank.org) has also been a leader in community-based collaboration for a long time. A shared purpose is a recognized success factor of strong communities. I definitely have respect for communities that demonstrate purpose in more ways than one.

The Online Community Report is a free twice-monthly newsletter covering news and best ideas in online collaboration. Senior Editor: [Jim Cashel](#).

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