International Journal on

SOCIAL MEDIA

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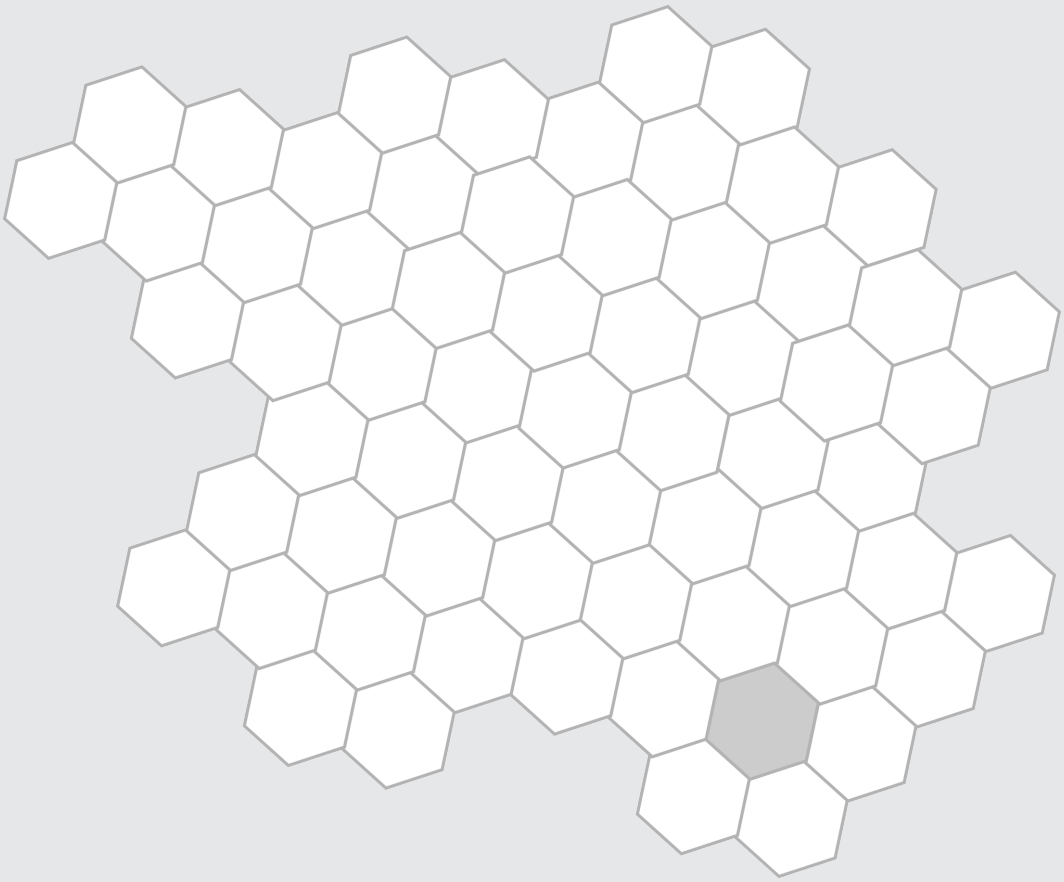

I, 2010, 1
ISSN 1804-5251

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Editor-in-Chief: Jan Žižka

Publisher's website: www.konvoj.cz
E-mail: konvoj@konvoj.cz, SoNet.RC@gmail.com
ISSN 1804-5251

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Social Network as a Part of the Interactive Environment for Starting Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

The paper presents a concept of the interactive environment for starting entrepreneurs from the perspective of three defined areas: education, communication and cooperation. It is based on the outcomes of an ongoing research which surveys the opinions of prospective entrepreneurs on the electronic environment. The result is the processing and incorporation of the needs of those interested in the business interactive environment and the identification of areas that will be developed within this environment. A social network will be created as a part of the environment.

Key words

Interactive environment; social network; research; education; communication; cooperation; starting entrepreneurs

Project on interactive environment for starting entrepreneurs

Interactive environment for starting entrepreneurs is a project that is currently under development and preparation. The basic idea is to develop an interactive environment for those interested in business, which will facilitate their training, interaction and participation in its content at ipodnikatel.cz portal, which will house the environment. The interactive environment will provide starting entrepreneurs with a network which will include:

- Education(participation in an on-line course for starting a business),
- Communication (with those who are preparing themselves for starting a business),
- Cooperation (expressing opinions on the content of the www.ipodnikatel.cz portal).

All three areas have to be interconnected and create a synergy effect. Those interested participate in an on-line course which trains them for starting a business. At the same time they can interact with the community of people with the

same interest. They exchange their views and experiences which contributes to the educational effect. Ipodnikatel.cz portal covers the entire environment. Those interested in business must be a part of it and the content of the portal has to be tailored to their needs. The goal is to convert those interested in business into successful entrepreneurs [4].

Posing basic research questions

The interactive environment for starting entrepreneurs has to be based on real needs and ideas of its potential users. Therefore, it is necessary to engage them into the preparation stage of the project as soon as possible. (Sousedík, 2009) Currently, there is an ongoing research that is presented at http://www.hwsystem.ic.cz/, which is, in cooperation with `ipodnikatel.cz`, collecting views of those interested in business on the intended interactive environment for beginning entrepreneurs. The aim is to select appropriate Web 2.0 services (Zbiejczuk, 2007) which the prospective entrepreneurs would appreciate, and thus respond to the basic research questions raised prior to the research process:

- Will the prospective entrepreneurs be attracted by all three areas (education, communication and cooperation)?
- Will they at least take an interest in the on-line course?
- Will it be necessary to create their own social network for communication, or will they give priority to communication through the already existing social networks (e.g. Facebook)?
- What factor would motivate the prospective entrepreneurs to participate in the creation of the environment and regularly visit the portal which hosts this environment?

Ongoing research results

The questionnaire survey was commenced in December 2009 and is still ongoing. After the first three months the main trends resulting from the research can be already presented. The complete questionnaire is available at `www.hwsystem.ic.cz`.

Identifying questions and questions focused on entrepreneurship

In the part of identifying questions and questions focused on business the most numerous responses are presented only. This paper does not aspire to present a detailed analysis of the survey that is currently still ongoing. A total of 52 questionnaires were completed; 35 were answered by women and 17 by men. The largest groups of respondents were 26–30 and 36–40 years old. The highest education achieved by most respondents (38) was secondary vocational school (with the school leaving examination). Forty respondents are currently employed full time, 28 prospective entrepreneurs plan to start a business within one year. Most respondents (34) have no experience of entrepreneurship from the past.

Interactive environment

The third part of the questionnaire was focused on the intended interactive environment for starting entrepreneurs. The objective was to find out if the respondents were interested in the interactive environment services as a whole, or if they preferred just one of the areas. The results so far show that the most attractive area is education, namely the chance to participate in on-line courses for starting entrepreneurs, which will provide them with the knowledge and skills useful for starting a business. This was the choice of 23 respondents. 17 respondents answered that they would appreciate all offered areas of services as a whole (education, communication, cooperation). The area of communication was placed third (10 respondents) and only two prospective entrepreneurs found the separated area of cooperation the most attractive; in other words to have a chance to participate in the content of the `ipodnikatel.cz` portal, which houses the environment.

The results show that the interactive environment has to be built mainly on the area of education; at the same time it has to offer other services as well and function as an integral whole of the proposed areas. Although the cooperation area seems uninteresting, and probably would not work on its own, it remains – in connection with education and communication areas – an integral part of the whole. Preliminary results already answer one of the research questions. Within the environment, the areas of education, communication and cooperation can be developed together. Those interested in entrepreneurship have accepted all three areas, which should work as a whole, while the main emphasis has to be put on the education area.

Another part of the questionnaire deals with the development of the area of education. This offers the opportunity to engage starting entrepreneurs in an on-line course. The main success or failure of the whole environment will depend on the quality and practical implementation of this area. A total of 30 respondents said they would like to sign up for the on-line course; however, they would consider the course fee. The question elaborates on the structure of the on-line course for starting entrepreneurs. The areas, the respondents could take a stand on, were as follows:

- Through a series of questions (entrance test) to determine the areas where I need to improve.
- Participation in an e-learning course tailored to individual needs (development of the areas which I need to improve).
- Participation in an e-learning course aimed at gaining a general overview.
- On-line consultation with a personal adviser on a business prospectus.
- Business plan development with the assistance of a personal adviser (on-line communication).
- Creating a personal profile to be able to communicate with the others (e.g. other course participants).
- Involvement in group discussions moderated by an experienced consultant.
- Participation in the final test and obtaining a certificate of course completion.
- Subscription to a journal which will be sent by e-mail.

The most attractive areas of interest are:

1. On-line consultation with a personal adviser on the issue of the business prospectus. (28)
2. Through a series of questions to determine the areas in which I need to improve. (27)
3. Participation in an e-learning course tailored to individual needs. (27)
4. Participation in the final test and obtaining a certificate of course completion. (21)
5. Business plan development with the assistance of a personal adviser. (20)

The answers to this question confirm that the structure of the education area has been designed rightfully. Those interested in business understand this area as a whole consisting of an entrance test, subsequent training through an e-learning course, preparation of a business plan; they also require feedback in the form of a final test.

The attractiveness of working on the business plan on-line with the chance to consult it was confirmed by the question in which the respondents were allowed to select one answer only. The options 'On-line consultation on a business plan with a personal adviser' and 'Development of a business plan with a personal adviser (on-line communication)' selected by most respondents (13 and 11).

Thus the evaluation of the research questions is obvious. The opportunity to participate in an on-line course for starting entrepreneurs caught the respondent's interest, whereas the most attractive option was the on-line business plan development with a personal adviser.

Communication

Concerning the first question, most respondents (43) chose the option 'Communication within the interactive environment'. In this way they answered another research question. When creating an interactive environment, it is necessary to develop one's own social network. The respondents did not show any interest in any other social networks (e.g. Facebook). This is a fairly surprising result which has shifted the area of communication to a new level. The chance to communicate does not play a complementary role only, but it is a pivotal pillar of the interactive environment for starting entrepreneurs.

Those interested in business would create their personal profile (29 responses) and most often they would like to communicate with other people interested in business (9) and experts in a particular area of business (law, marketing, accounting, etc.) (6). The area of communication should also include additional services that add value to it. Apart from the ability to communicate those interested in business would also appreciate the following services:

- Creating a presentation about their business activities and its confrontation within the social network (26).
- Participation in on-line discussions with experts (business, accounting, etc.) (26)3.
- Engagement in real time discussions (chat) (25).

Several respondents, who were not interested in creating their personal profile, expressed their interest in communication through chat. It opens up another issue which will be necessary to be dealt with when creating the interactive environment.

Cooperation

Another part of the survey identifies the interest in the opportunity to be involved in the creation of the `www.ipodnikatel.cz` portal which hosts the entire interactive environment. A total of 21 respondents expressed their interest in cooperation. Among the most common forms of cooperation were scoring or grading individual papers presented at the portal (12) and selecting the best contributions of the month / week / day (9). However, the greatest number of responses in this section was the answer 'I do not know' (24) by which the interest in co-operation was neither confirmed nor invalidated.

Within the area of cooperation there was also a question on the form of motivation which would attract the prospective entrepreneurs to visit the `www.ipodnikatel.cz` site regularly. The results show that the major motivation would be the chance to contact the experts and ask questions on the issues related to starting a business. This option has been chosen by 33 respondents (out of 52). It answers the last research question seeking to find the most motivating factor that would attract the prospective entrepreneurs into the participation in the environment development.

Main results and identification of further research areas

The interactive environment for starting entrepreneurs is a combination of three basic areas, namely education, communication and cooperation. This environment is accessible on-line which significantly reduces the cost of preparing the starting entrepreneurs. Otherwise it is very expensive and requires public support. The aim of the interactive environment concept is to support people interested in becoming successful starting entrepreneurs while maintaining the profitability of this project. The outcomes of the ongoing research have showed the following findings:

- The respondents expressed their interest in all three areas that should function as an integral whole. The main emphasis has to be put on the area of education.
- The opportunity of participating in an on-line course for starting entrepreneurs caught the respondent's interest; the most attractive option was the on-line business plan development with a personal adviser.
- When creating the interactive environment it is necessary to build a social network. The respondents were not interested in any other social network (e.g. Facebook).
- The opportunity to contact and consult experts about issues related to the start of business is the main motivating factor that would attract the participants to use the portal housing the interactive environment, and thus make them interested in its development.

Within future research it is necessary to elaborate on further individual areas of the interactive environment:

- Methodology, content and form of implementation of the on-line course for starting entrepreneurs.
- Designing and creating a social network for interactive environment using technologies by Buřita and Janoušek (2007).
- Forms of cooperation within the portal housing the environment.

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The contribution is a part of the ongoing thesis 'Knowledge Support for Starting Entrepreneurs through Information and Communication Technologies' at Tomas Bata University in Zlin by David Sousedík. It also draws from research topics on the Knowledge Systems dealt within the MENTAL project at the University of Defence in Brno, which is being solved by the co-author of this article, Ladislav Buřita.

Call for Papers

Papers to be included in the next issue should be preferably focused on topics related to social-networks in one or more of the following subjects (the list is indicative rather than exhaustive):

Sentiment/Opinion Analysis in Natural-Language Text Documents

Algorithms, Methods, and Technologies for Building and Analysing Social Networks

Applications in the Area of Social Activities

Knowledge Mining and Discovery in Natural Languages Used in Social Networks

Medical, Economic, and Environmental Applications in Social Networks

Submitted papers should not have been previously published nor be currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. Each of the submitted research papers should not exceed 26 pages. All papers are refereed through a peer review process.

Submissions should be send in the PDF form via email to the following address: `SoNet.RC@gmail.com`

Accepted papers are to be prepared according to the instructions available at `http://www.konvoj.cz/journals/mmm/`.