

Clear rules facilitate continued Web interaction among general practitioners

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Research at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, explores how an online learning community works for a group of general practitioners and shows that clear rules facilitate continued web interaction.

Urban Carlén, Department of Applied Information Technology, has studied how a large group of [general practitioners](#) interact via an e-mail list. The list started in 1999 and serves as an online community for exchange of knowledge and experience. The submitted e-mails are distributed to all members of the community.

The participants discuss various topics in different threads, which are then stored in a web archive. In addition to lengthy discussions, participants exchange short information e-mails. In his thesis, Carlén attempted to identify the characteristics of the participants and also investigated the rules all members are obliged to follow. How do participants communicate, and what do they communicate about? And exactly what has made the community last this long?

Carlén concludes that the impressive longevity of the list is mainly a result of the clear rules that all participants have to abide to. The e-mail list is linked to a professional association and has a moderator - the same person as when the list was launched years ago. The association and the moderator manage the online activities and formulate and enforce the rules, which is crucial for the survival of the community. New members are carefully initiated into the community culture and rules, and if a member breaks a rule, he or she is immediately notified of his or her

violation. All members are treated the same in this respect, regardless of rank or status.

'The rules are always emphasised and enforced, and I'm sure this explains why the list has been around for such a long time', says Carlén, 'It obviously helps keep the overall quality and level of professionalism high. The list has become a reliable means of exchanging professional information among the practitioners. They really appreciate the forum.'

Carlén notes that although the list can be seen as a type of social medium, its content has been strictly professional - at least in the studied years. Thus, the list is an example of a long-lasting community with a large number of members that serves as a social hub - without compromising its level of professionalism.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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