

Assessing Value Creation in Professional Communities: Perspectives on Collaboration in Demographic Change

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Abstract: This research explores how value is constructed in professional networks and how participation, collaboration and inclusion shape members' experiences at different career stages. As demographics and technology change, professional networks are increasingly expected not only to share knowledge but also to facilitate renewal and engagement. Using qualitative interview data, the study identifies the key mechanisms through which communities generate knowledge, social, emotional and symbolic value. The findings highlight that participation requires accessible structures, low-threshold opportunities and an open culture. For participation to be meaningful, especially for young members, it requires not only content but also visibility, recognition and the opportunity to influence. The study deepens our understanding of value as a relational and community-constructed phenomenon and offers practical recommendations for strengthening community-based collaboration in a changing expert environment.

1 INTRODUCTION

Professional networks are an essential part of the expertise ecosystem. They bring together professionals, students and organisations at different stages of their careers, enabling interaction, knowledge sharing and joint development. They build bridges between education and working life and facilitate the transfer of knowledge, experience and practices across generations and institutions (Newell et al., 1998).

The role and structures of networks are challenged by the changing environment. Demographic change, technological developments and the constant renewal of skills needs emphasise the importance of communities in maintaining, transferring and re-shaping skills (Dirani et al., 2021). In particular, the involvement of students and early career professionals becomes a key issue for the continuity and renewal capacity of communities (Belcher, 2015; McGregor & Halls, 2020). At the same time, understanding what motivates different member segments to participate is key to sustaining engagement and delivering perceived value (Markova et al., 2013).

Previous research has shown that value in professional networks is created at multiple levels -

through individual learning, community support and broader professional identity building. However, the experience of value is not the same for everyone, nor is it automatic. It requires not only effective structures but also a culture that supports openness, participation and reciprocity (McCormack et al., 2016).

This study examines how value is constructed in professional networks from the perspective of different groups of members, especially young people and newcomers. It also highlights the structural and communicative factors that either support or hinder participation and the experience of value. The aim is to increase understanding of the ways in which networks can support participation and create long-term relevance for their members - in a context where continuity and renewal go hand in hand.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Professional communities are a key part of the professional work ecosystem, bringing together organisation, students and professionals at different

stages of their careers. Through these communities, bridges are built between education and the world of work, and their interactions generate a range of value for individuals and for the communities themselves (Dyer & Singh, 1998). In the following section, we look in more detail at how this value is created, what factors are involved and how the participation of members is linked to the processes of value creation.

2.1 Value Creation in Professional Communities

Professional communities provide a platform for interaction, skills development and networking. The value created is not only individual benefits but also the renewal of skills and the broader social impact of the community (Hallberg, 2017).

Value creation is based on interaction between students, teachers and professionals. Communities offer informal learning opportunities that complement education (Soleymani et al., 2024), while gaining fresh perspectives from younger members (Schultz, 2016).

Value in a community is created in multiple layers and can take different forms depending on how the individual participates in it. For example, the value provided by a community can be informational (access to expertise and silent knowledge), social (network building and a sense of belonging), practical (participation in projects and activities) or identity-affirming (the opportunity to define oneself as part of a professional community).

(Rintamäki et al., 2007) describe value through four dimensions: functional, economic, emotional and symbolic. In the context of professional communities, these dimensions can be interpreted as informational, social, practical and meaningful value, which together form a holistic participatory experience for the member. The experience of value is therefore not based on individual benefits alone, but on how the community resonates with the member's goals, feelings and identity.

Members both create and use value (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000). Participation also supports career development through roles such as project management or event organisation, experiences linked to professional success (Seibert et al., 2001).

For participation to feel meaningful, members must gain tangible benefits such as skills, visibility or guidance (van Amersfoort et al., 2019). Communities, in turn, need active involvement to remain relevant. Trust and recognition act as mediators of value creation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Value is not static but negotiated (Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014). In multigenerational communities,

differing expectations highlight the need for a shared value base and clear opportunities for participation.

2.2 Value of Professional Communities in Changing Environment

The changing world of work, technological developments, demographic shifts and rapidly evolving skills needs put pressure on professional networks. Communities are not static, but operate in an environment where their role is highlighted when individuals or organisations cannot respond to change alone. Networks enable sharing of resources, skills development and collective capacity building (Hallberg, 2017; Alasoini, 2014).

Professional networks can act as an adaptation mechanism to change, allowing knowledge, experiences and good practices to be transferred between actors (Haksever et al., 2004). Networks support their members by providing both knowledge and social resources that can help, for example, with career transitions or the acquisition of new skills (Rintamäki et al., 2007). This is particularly important when traditional institutional structures, such as formal education or individual organisations, alone are not sufficient to address complex change needs.

Networks are especially important in transitions, such as moving from study to work or career changes, where individuals seek information and social support (Mata et al., 2010). Communities can also strengthen professional identity and self-confidence (Soleymani et al., 2024).

Demographic change, particularly ageing of the baby-boom generation, challenges community renewal. Attracting younger generations requires lowering thresholds for participation and recognising differences in expectations, communication and motivation (Badoer et al., 2021; Schultz, 2016).

Technological developments, especially digitalisation, are reshaping community practices. Digital platforms enable new forms of interaction and accessibility, while also requiring new structures and skills from communities (Miller, 2016).

2.3 Student Engagement and Academic Collaboration

Students' involvement in professional communities is central to skills development, career transitions and professional identity. They can act not only as learners but also as developers and influencers, if communities' open activities to them and collaborate with educational institutions (Soleymani et al., 2024).

Active participation gives students practical experiences unavailable in studies alone, for example

in event organisation, working groups or mentoring. These roles also strengthen communication, organisational and leadership skills essential for working life (Seibert et al., 2001).

Cooperation between educational institutions and professional communities bridges formal education and practical needs through guest lectures, thesis supervision, projects or student memberships. This two-way learning benefits both sides (van Amersfoort et al., 2019).

Barriers arise if students are unaware of opportunities or if participation feels disconnected from their studies. Successful collaboration therefore requires clear structures and student-centred communication (Schultz, 2016). Students must be treated as full members, not only future professionals.

Student participation also brings fresh perspectives, technological skills and up-to-date insights that support community renewal and alignment with future workforce needs (Hallberg, 2017).

2.4 Knowledge Exchange in Professional Communities

Information exchange is a key value-creating mechanism in professional networks, enabling sharing of knowledge, best practices and silent information unavailable through formal systems. It requires trust, social capital and structures that support interaction (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Professional communities provide both formal and informal forums: seminars, workshops and publications on the one hand; personal relationships and discussions on the other (Hallberg, 2017). Formal exchange supports scalability and documentation, while informal interactions enable rapid, contextual learning.

Knowledge sharing is also cultural and social. Openness and trust determine how actively and honestly information flows (Seibert, 2001). This is particularly important with silent knowledge such as experience-based insights or lessons from failure.

In times of constant change, networks spread timely, context-specific knowledge that single organisations cannot generate alone (Soleymani, 2024). Communities can act as knowledge brokers, linking actors from different backgrounds (Schultz, 2016).

The ability of professional communities to facilitate knowledge exchange has a direct impact on their value and attractiveness to their members. Communities that can provide their members with relevant, timely and useful information are often perceived as useful and thus valuable (Rintamäki et al., 2007). Knowledge exchange is therefore not only a tool for learning, but also a key factor for the vitality and continuity of the community.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study consists of two parts: a literature review and thematic interviews. The first part is the literature review, which identified existing knowledge and aims to provide the reader with a clear overview of the topic under study, thus laying the groundwork for the subsequent research process (Knopf, 2006).

The literature review made use of scientific articles and other relevant literature. The search was limited to sources in English and Finnish.

The second part of the study utilizes a qualitative approach where interviews were the main data collection method. The empirical data of the study was collected from the case association through interviews and from materials and documentation already existing in the association. Case studies are a useful approach when the aim is to delve into the specifics of a particular organization or case in detail (Saunders et al., 2009). The interviews were conducted in spring 2025 and targeted individuals involved in professional communities from a variety of roles and backgrounds. Informants were selected on a discretionary basis to include both students and more experienced community practitioners.

The aim of the study was to understand the value creation between students, young professionals, educational institutions and the association. For this purpose, people from within the association were selected to be interviewed who were involved in one way or another in these matters. The interviewees had different profiles, which allowed for a broader understanding of the topic under study. The interviewees were either students, teachers or representatives of the association (see Table 1).

The interviews were transcribed, and the analysis was conducted using theory-driven content analysis. In qualitative research, the theoretical framework is not an isolated step, but it supports the analysis and helps to interpret the meanings emerging from the data (Puusa & Juuti, 2020).

4 EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS ON VALUE CREATION AND PARTICIPATION

Professional networks generate value at different levels, and this value is built primarily through interaction between members. The value creation is not limited to individual services or events, but comes from the opportunity for members to participate in collective activities, share their knowledge and feel part of a community of experts. It is not only what the community offers, but what it enables: shared

discussions, learning, empowerment and professional growth.

The key is that value is not a constant, but varies according to how members participate, where they are in their careers and what their expectations are. The value provided by a community can be expressed in terms of knowledge, social, emotional or symbolic experience. Often these forms of value combine and reinforce each other. Value can come from new contacts, but also from making one's own skills meaningful to others or from contributing to the development of the community.

The results also show that students and young professionals in particular perceive community meaning when they are treated as equal actors. They crave clear, accessible opportunities for participation, but also space to contribute and grow as part of the community. At the same time, however, barriers to participation emerge, such as unclear communication, a high threshold for participation, or the experience of not having to contribute.

The ability of a community to deliver value is particularly important in situations where the environment is changing. Professional networks face the challenges of generational change and technological change at the same time. Engaging new members, transferring silent knowledge and embracing digital practices require communities to be able to renew themselves without losing their fundamental nature. Value is created at the interface where experience and new perspectives meet, and where technology acts as an enabler, not a barrier, to interaction.

The creation of value in a community is not a foregone conclusion. It requires openness, effective practices and a culture in which different members can genuinely engage with each other. A community's ability to create value is linked to its capacity to enable participation and to accommodate different perspectives. Above all, value is created when a member is not only the object of an activity, but also its creator.

4.1 Value Creation of Professional Community

The main value of a network of professionals is not in the individual services or events, but in the fact that it functions as an organised community that enables its members to develop together with others. Above all, this value comes from community structures, interaction and a continuous exchange of information that no single organisation or training programme can fully provide. The interviews suggest that professional networks create a space in which shared understanding, trust and professional identity - elements that are at the core of value - emerge.

The theme of community was present in almost all responses, although it was expressed in different ways. For many, the network provides a safe environment in which to share experiences, seek peer support and discuss openly without the pressure of competition or organisational structures. This space of trust allows for deeper learning and brings emotional value - a sense of belonging to a team where one's knowledge and experiences are valued. Trust was also seen as a prerequisite for the continuity of community action: without trust, knowledge sharing, cooperation and commitment remain superficial.

One of the key value-generating mechanisms is the exchange of information. In particular, the sharing of expertise was seen as central to the professional network. Through the community, it is possible to gain both the latest knowledge in the field and practical experience from other actors. This combination of formal and silent knowledge builds a unique knowledge capital that would not be attainable simply by reading studies or attending individual training courses. Practical examples of value creation emerged in the form of webinars, events and mentoring programmes. These allow for skills development, learning about current issues and networking with peers and more experienced people. The interviews highlighted that the value of silent knowledge is best realised when community structures support informal encounters - for example in small groups, discussion forums or shared project experiences.

The interviews also underlined that interaction within the community is not random but has structures that allow for participation in different roles and at different levels. Many mentioned, for example, working groups, expert forums and regional management teams as places where value is made concrete. Working together in these groups not only creates operational benefits for the network, but also an experience of influence, participation and the use of one's own skills in a wider context. Some respondents described a gradual evolution of their role: involvement in small tasks allowed them to grow towards more demanding and visible responsibilities, deepening their experience of value and strengthening their commitment.

Another recurring theme was the role of the community in providing direction. The community not only shares information but also builds a common vision of where the sector is heading, what skills needs are on the horizon and how to address the challenges facing the sector. This makes the community not only a knowledge-sharing tool, but also a collective reflective space where members can relate their own knowledge and orient their development towards future needs.

Professional networks also create value that is difficult to measure but easy to recognise when it is missing. This relates to professional identity and pride in one's field. For many interviewees, belonging to a network was also a way of saying: "this sector is important to me, and I want to be involved in its development."

However, the value generated by the Community is not automatic. It requires not only functioning structures and opportunities for interaction, but also a shared culture that values sharing, participation and cooperation. Several interviewees stressed that networks do not create value if they are only used passively - value is only created when there is active and genuine participation in the community.

An important finding in terms of value creation is that active participation is directly related to perceived value. Those who were active themselves felt that they got more out of the network. This suggests that membership alone does not automatically provide value - it requires participation and opportunities to contribute. As informant 4 summarised:

"The more you give to the community, the more it gives back to you."

4.2 Value Perceived by Students and Young Professionals

Students and early career professionals represent the future of professional networks, but their participation also brings immediate value. They contribute fresh perspectives, current knowledge of training and working life, and willingness to engage when accessible channels exist. The meaningfulness of participation builds on accessibility, visibility and inclusion. Value also comes when their views are taken seriously, creating the basis for long-term commitment.

Students' first contact with networks is often random, due to a lack of systematic cooperation with institutions. This creates inequalities in participation unrelated to motivation. Where cooperation is strong, students are more engaged and see the network as relevant; elsewhere, the community may remain unknown.

Those students who had been able to participate described the experience as eye-opening and tangibly useful. Several mentioned that they had gained a new understanding of working life and career options in the sector through discussions with more experienced members. As informant 11 stated:

"When you think about your future career, professional communities offer a way to build valuable connections."

The need for concrete opportunities to get involved emerged particularly in the student interviews. Events for young people were considered important, but passive participation alone was not enough. The value was seen in particular in the opportunity to participate in practical tasks such as organising events, communication or working groups.

Young professionals, on the other hand, look to the community above all for peer support, professional debate and opportunities to develop themselves as experts. Several interviews revealed that these members are not only looking for content, but also for places where they can test their skills, be seen and contribute to shaping the future of the community. The value of participation then also comes from having one's contribution recognised and valued. This two-way value creation - giving and receiving - emerged as a central theme in their experiences.

Flexibility in the forms of participation was a recurring need. Young adults often have limited time due to studies, work and other life commitments. As a result, traditional forms of participation, such as long meetings or committees, do not always fit into their schedules. In contrast, low-threshold forms of participation such as project-based work, digital channels or short-term assignments were seen as more viable. Developing the digital dimension of networks was seen as an important means of promoting equal opportunities for participation. The interviews also highlighted that personal invitations are a much more effective way of activating participants than general messages or newsletters.

Although many successful examples of youth participation were highlighted, the overall picture remained fragmented according to most interviewees. Activities were often based on the initiatives of individual activists or teachers, and there were no clear structures in place in the communities to involve new young people. This was seen as a risk: without structural support, only a few and select few would reap the benefits of the activities. Suggestions to improve the situation included re-launching mentoring programmes, appointing regional student ambassadors and consolidating youth events into annual events. It was also suggested that communities should create a clear 'first-timer's path' - for example, an information pack, a personal contact or an orientation session - through which new members can understand what is done in the community and what roles are available.

4.3 Barriers and Opportunities in Engagement

It is not enough for a professional network to be open in theory – it must also be accessible and relevant in different life situations. Interviews showed that barriers and opportunities are multidimensional and overlapping. Participation depends not only on individual choice but also on structures, communication, culture and roles.

Despite good examples of youth engagement, participation was fragmented and dependent on individuals. More permanent structures such as mentoring, annual events and clear entry roles are needed to ensure continuity.

Young professionals are often in the workplace and look to the community for peer support, professional discussions and opportunities to develop and expand their networks. Several interviews highlighted that they seek more than expert content – especially opportunities to build identity, test skills and gain visibility.

A key barrier was lack of information and clarity, especially for new or young members about how to get involved and what opportunities existed. As informant 5 described:

"Students do not always see what benefit networking has in working life. They ask first: what do I get out of this?"

Participation remained unclear and distant, even when there was interest. Such uncertainty breeds passivity: if a particular level of activity and navigation in an unclear environment is required to get involved, the threshold becomes too high for many, especially for newcomers or those outside the network.

Another major barrier was related to the reach and tone of the communication. Many interviewees felt that communication within the network often remained too formal, distant or insider-like. New members felt that communication was not inviting or targeted at them but rather aimed at those who were already familiar with the activities.

The culture within the community also had an impact on the barriers to participation. In particular, "silent structures" and established practices around people who had been involved for a longer period could make the community difficult to approach from the outside.

The interviews also revealed regional differences in student activities and youth participation. The interviews suggested that the network should develop a scalable but locally applicable model of engagement that would provide consistent opportunities for collaboration between institutions in all regions.

Despite these challenges, the interviews also revealed a wealth of enabling and facilitating factors. One key enabler was low-threshold forms of participation. The ease with which people could get involved, for example in event organisation, communication tasks or short-term projects, made the experience of taking part inspiring and stimulating. Students and young professionals in particular appreciated clear and limited tasks where they could contribute and learn, but where the commitments were not too heavy. Such forms of involvement also often acted as a gateway to deeper engagement: when the initial experience was positive and enabled success, the participant was more likely to stay involved.

Another key opportunity was related to personal invitation and encounter. It was strongly emphasised in the interviews that a significant proportion of participation was initiated only after someone directly invited or showed interest in the person's expertise or perspective. This shows that the barrier to participation is often not a lack of motivation, but rather a lack of invitation. A human encounter - where the member is seen as an individual, not just a target group - lowers the threshold and builds trust.

The third enabler was the sense of community relevance and value base. Several interviewees stressed that they felt that activities were meaningful when they were aligned with their own values and professional identity. In this case, participation was not only beneficial but also personally rewarding.

Barriers and opportunities are therefore two sides of the same coin. The same structures can support or exclude depending on how they are organised and communicated. Networks should reflect on how new members are welcomed, how experienced members support others, and how openness is fostered in culture and communication.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Professional networks can support the development of individuals and strengthen the resilience of communities in a changing environment. Participation, trust and shared practices are key factors in building value in such communities. This is particularly important in situations of generational change and technological transformation. Students and young professionals benefit from early involvement, while experienced members maintain their relevance through knowledge exchange. This study identified the mechanisms through which value in professional networks is created and maintained through participation, interaction and inclusion.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

A key theoretical contribution relates to the understanding of value as a multifaceted phenomenon. Empirical findings show that value manifests itself simultaneously as knowledge, social, emotional and symbolic - forming a whole that goes beyond the traditional economic or performance-based value model. This broad interpretation complements previous perspectives such as (Rintamäki et al. 2007) and (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) by showing how these forms of value are intertwined in members' experiences.

The study also clarifies the bidirectional nature of value. Members are not only recipients but also producers of value. Participation, knowledge sharing and initiative develop both individuals and the community, supporting renewal and relevance in a changing context (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000).

Perceived value is strongly linked to accessibility and inclusion. For students and young professionals, being able to contribute and be heard is central, showing that participation is also a cultural and symbolic process built on the experience of being seen.

Value creation in professional networks depends on adapting to demographic and technological change. Intergenerational learning, digital tools and silent knowledge help preserve and renew value, making networks ecosystems where meanings, identities and innovations are built.

5.2 Practical Implications

For professional networks to deliver value, they must be accessible, inclusive and relevant across life stages. Participation is often limited not by lack of motivation but by structural, communicative and cultural barriers. Identifying and addressing these is essential for member experience and community vitality.

Clear entry pathways are important to lower barriers. New members should be offered concrete ways to get involved, understand the network structure and find their role. Contact persons, orientation events and clear communication help build an inclusive environment.

The flexibility of the forms of action supports participation, especially when members have limited time or experience of community practices. Project-based tasks, low-commitment participation pathways and digital channels allow everyone to participate according to their own resources. This increases the diversity of participants and allows even light engagement to be transformed into longer-term activity.

Mentoring and peer support should be part of daily community life. For newcomers, mentoring provides a safe entry and helps structure professional growth while transferring silent knowledge. Reverse mentoring, where younger members share expertise such as digital skills, can also strengthen resilience and learning culture.

An open and receptive atmosphere is a key enabler. Communities should value diverse perspectives and ensure equality and listening. Belonging arises not from formal membership, but from the sense that one's voice matters.

At their best, professional networks can guide entire sectors. By combining generational skills, technological capabilities and shared values, they foster innovation and support adaptation. This requires strategy but above all everyday practices that enable participation and shared responsibility.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Research actor informants.

No	Title	Role	Experience
1	University Lecturer	Regional Management Team Member	~15 years of experience in regional management teamwork
2	Student	Member of the Regional and Young Professionals Management Teams	Half a year
3	Student	Regional Management Team Member	One and a half years in the community
4	Lecturer	Regional Management Team Member	~25 years of experience in the community
5	Retired, former lecturer	Regional Management Team Member	~40 years of experience in the community
6	Student	Regional Management Team Member	Half a year
7	Lecturer	Regional Management Team Member	One and a half years
8	Logistics Teacher	Regional Management Team Member	~30 years in community, active regional contributor
9	Engineering Student	Chair of the Regional Management Team	3 years in community, active role as chair of regional team
10	Business Student	Representative of Student Organization in community's Regional Management Team	Half a year
11	BBA Student	Regional Management Team Member	Half a year
12	Procurement Manager	Member of Young Professionals and Deputy Chair of the Procurement Forum Management Team	Half a year
13	Service Manager	Service Manager of the community	5 years of active employment
14	Executive Director	In charge of the Transport Forum, member of multiple committees	Half a year