

# Problem Solving Communities

By Alan Mitchell, Liz Brandt and Alex Cheatle



Most large organisations in both the private and the public sectors regard the questions customers and employees ask as a costly hassle - a distraction from the really important business of providing their product or service.

But there's another way of looking at peoples' questions. An individual's question is probably the best possible signal of real demand that anybody can come up with. It tells us what that individual would find valuable, *when* the provision of this value would be of greatest value. If people's questions can be gathered and answered in an efficient way, they could - indeed *should* - become a hugely valuable economic resource.

Until now, however, it has not been possible to answer individuals' questions fully in an economically viable manner.

We believe this is changing. 'Problem Solving Communities' could transform the way value is created and delivered across a wide range of industries.

This White Paper introduces the concept of the problem solving community and explores some of the opportunities it creates.

## A pioneering experiment

The UK's Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) <sup>1</sup> discovered the value of answering peoples' questions when it was wrestling with the need to help school leaders do their job better. Being a school leader can be a lonely, stressful job. Many groups of people (e.g. government and public bodies, unions, local authorities) want to pursue their agendas through you, but don't have anyone to turn to for help. In fact, whichever way you turn you face demands: from governments, local authorities, teachers, students themselves, across a huge array of issues to do with budgets, curricula, changes to school status, staff motivation and performance management, bullying and truancy, and so on, and so on.

The Department for Education and Skills already publishes advice on a central website, but the amount of advice needed is massive and the DfES is not the only information or advice provider <sup>2</sup>. A central publishing model only creates another burden for school leaders. They have to wade through a vast library of material looking for answers to their problems, and the chances are that any one publication won't fully answer their particular question or fit their particular circumstances anyway.

The TDA came up with a different approach: why not provide school leaders with a human being they can talk to; a sort of personal assistant who can go away and research the answers for them?

As anticipated, providing such a personal assistant-based service proved to be horrendously expensive. It might take a day for a researcher to research and draft an answer to a question. And that's just one question from one of 80,000 school leaders in England alone.

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<sup>1</sup> The TDA is a non departmental public body attached to the Department of Education and Skills

<sup>2</sup> There are many other potentially useful sources of information and advice such as the National College of School Leadership, the Association of School and College Leaders, the National Association of Head Teachers, the General Teaching Council, and the Local Government Association, who all have something to add in this area

But then, as expected, something intriguing began to happen. Different school leaders started phoning in with basically the same questions. The more this happened, the less new research was needed, so the cost of answering each question began to fall.

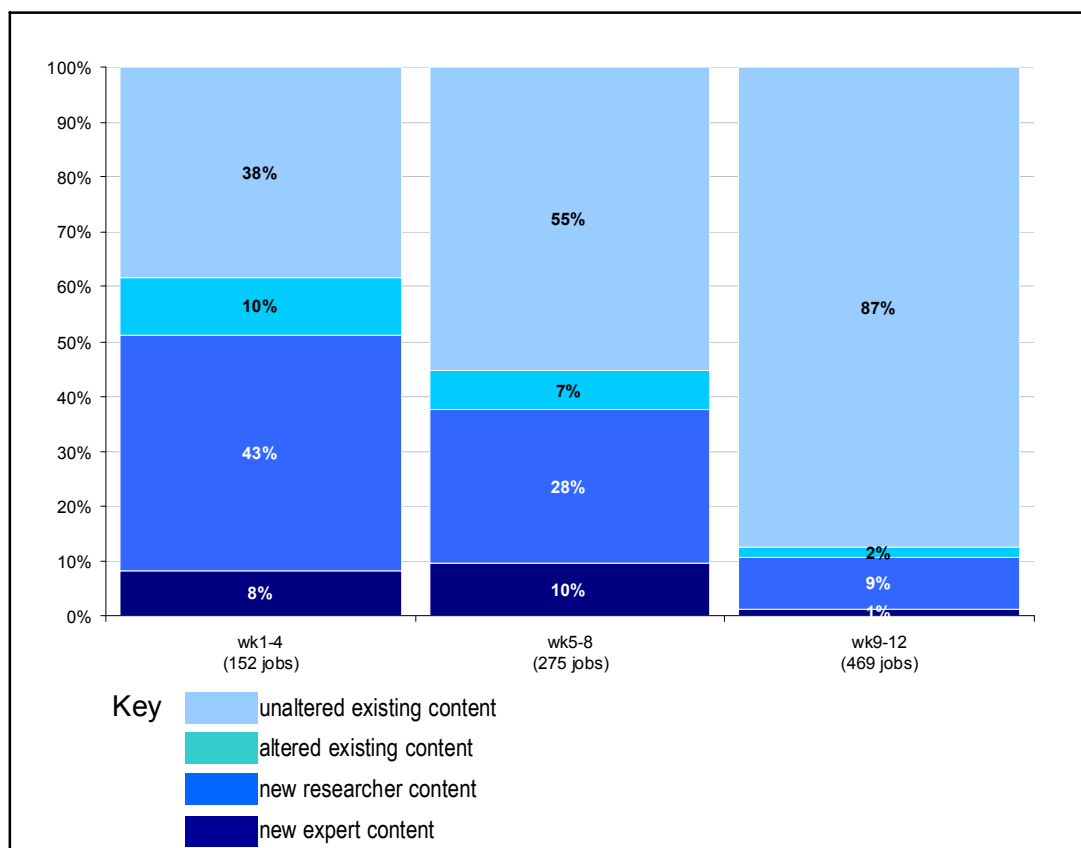


Figure 1: Trends in cost per question in the initial TDA pilot

Figure 1 illustrates this process. During the first four weeks, 51 per cent of questions answered required either new research or new expert input, with an additional 10% requiring extra work on pre-existing content. By the third month, the proportion of questions requiring extra work had fallen to just 13 per cent.

At the same time the quality of these answers actually improved as further incremental bits of research filled out and deepened a growing knowledge base. The result was:

- A tremendous saving of time for school leaders who could now get good quality, bespoke - in other words, *useful* - answers to their questions quickly. They could now use the time saved to do more productive things.
- A significant emotional/job satisfaction boost: for the first time, school leaders had somebody they could turn to for help, rather than yet another person placing yet another burden on their shoulders.
- The emergence of school leader mutual support groups. School leaders who had asked the same question and were wrestling with the same issues, were put in touch with each other by the service to compare notes.
- A significant productivity boost across the school system. Instead of 100 school leaders each spending three or four hours researching an answer to the same basic question, now the same answer could be used a 100 times over.
- A much better understanding of school leaders' real working lives, leading to potentially better ways of allocating resources. By monitoring which questions school leaders were asking the most, the TDA realised it could identify problem 'hot spots' and devote resources to addressing these hot spots. As the hot spots changed, so could the resource allocation. In this way, the department could continually align its spending to where it could deliver the greatest value.

After a highly successful pilot - every school taking part said they found the service "needed or extremely needed" - the TDA is now stress-testing this concept (called The Key) in partnership with the National College of School Leadership (NCSL). The experience has demonstrated the huge potential of the 'problem solving community'.

### **Problem solving communities: the core principles**

Problem solving communities operate according to the following core principles.

- 1) Problems - the questions people want answers to - are an invaluable resource because:
  - a. For the individual, answering the question is a sure-fire way of helping to deliver the right value to the right person at the right time
  - b. For the organisation, the questions people ask effectively tell them 'these are the issues you should be focusing your efforts on'.

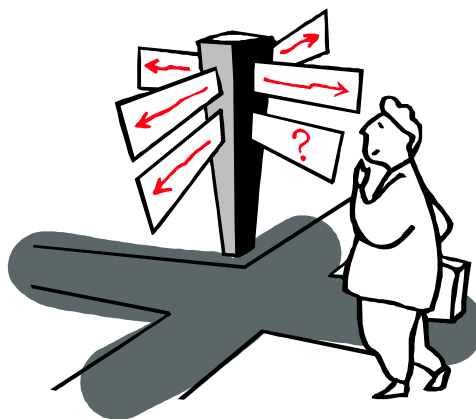
These benefits may sound obvious, but as we've seen, most organisations' reaction to the questions people ask is exactly the opposite. Questions get in the way of the 'smooth running' of the operation and are expensive to answer. They are a nuisance to be avoided or 'managed down'.

- 2) In most areas of life, most people come across problems/questions which are new to them but which have already been answered by someone else. Most of the time, however, they end up having to reinvent the wheel because the answer is inaccessible. Either it remains stuck in someone else's head or they don't know how or where to find it. For example, when buying a digital camera for the first time, Mrs Smith from Scunthorpe has to climb a steep learning curve: what is a pixel? how much memory do I need?; how do I get prints? But whatever she learns is of no help to Mr Jones in Skegness who is in a similar situation, because there is no way that Mrs Smith can transfer her learnings to Mr Jones.
- 3) For most problems - the challenge of being a school leader, or of buying a digital camera for the first time, or of facing up to the implications of a long term illness - there are a finite number of questions that will be asked and that need to be answered.

This is critical to the economics of Problem Solving Communities (PSCs). If the 'problem area' is tightly defined with clear limits, the same basic questions will be asked many times over by many different people, so the cost of answering these questions will fall quickly. If the 'problem area' is not tightly defined however, very few people will ask the same question and the cost of providing answers will quickly balloon out of control.

In the context of PSCs then, the 'community' is a group of people looking for answers to the same basic set of questions. 'Community' is not defined by, say, the degree of peer-to-peer interaction or from the feelings they have for one another. It is defined solely by the fact that they are asking a common set of questions: problem solving communities work by identifying groups of people with similar problems, and helping them solve these problems. The definition of this community constitutes a tipping point either to economic success or economic failure.

- 4) If and when conditions 1, 2 and 3 hold true, the Problem Solving Community has the fundamental ingredients of a 'perfect' business model or module. It is *a service that improves with use* - the more it is used the lower its costs and the better its quality (in this case, its answers).



## **PSCs: Scope and Potential**

PSCs are an innovation that is set to sweep through every customer-facing service in most services industries (health, education, retail, financial services etc) and most workplaces. They will change how individuals interact with organisations and what they expect organisations to deliver, in turn changing what value organisations provide and how they provide it.

PSCs will also transform how organisations do their work and relate to their employees (in one sense, the job of every organisation is to answer their employees ever-changing work-related questions).

Some PSCs will become stand-alone businesses in their own right. Others will operate as modules within a larger service.

The basic approach is applicable to most personal life departments such as personal health, financial management, home management, entertainment and leisure, holidays and hobbies, personal mobility, communications etc. The concept is also equally applicable to major life events such as buying or moving home, having a baby, getting married, getting divorced, contracting an illness, the death of a partner etc.

For users, PSCs add value in three ways.

- They reduce the costs of researching good, actionable answers
- They reduce the costs of *not* researching such answers, i.e. the money, time and energy that people waste doing the wrong things, or doing them badly, because they haven't got the answers they need.
- They help people make better decisions leading to better outcomes.

In other words, they improve personal productivity and reduce the costs of ignorance.

The details of the services provided by PSCs will vary depending on the sorts of content people need. Their questions may include:

- ‘what to buy?’
- ‘where to go?’
- ‘what to do?’
- ‘how to do it?’
- ‘what else do I need to think about/be aware of?’

They will also range around different types of problem:

- sometimes, the most important question is ‘what questions do I need to ask?’
- sometimes, we know exactly what we want to find out and the value lies simply in providing the answer: good content
- sometimes, we get an answer but we don’t really understand what it means, so we need to ask further questions to clarify the situation
- sometimes one question leads to another, so the real value lies in the answer to supplementary questions, thereby creating decision trees
- sometimes, all we really need is help in finding answers that have already been provided, so our questions are *navigational*: ‘where should I go to find ...?’
- sometimes there is no right answer e.g. design, fashion, perhaps even morality. Nevertheless, discussion, debate and the expression of opinions helps people make their own minds up

The questions PSCs address may also range widely from the relatively trivial to the profound. It could be ‘which is the best digital camera in this price band for doing holiday snaps?’ or ‘how should I go about getting broadband internet services; what do I need to think about and what do I need to do?’. Or it could be big decisions and life-changing events such as ‘what do I have to organise in order to move house’ or ‘I have been diagnosed as having a kidney condition. What will the treatment entail and how can I best cope with all the changes that will follow as a result?’.

The nature of the answers will also range widely in response.

- in some cases there is ‘a best possible answer’ - the equivalent of recognised best practice in industry
- sometimes ‘a better answer than the one I had before’ is still valuable
- sometimes simply being provided with suggestions - ‘these are things you should consider and investigate further’ - is useful
- sometimes simple reassurance and the reduction of perceived risk is the main benefit: ‘I am planning to do X but is there anything that I haven’t thought about but should?’



Answers can come from a range of different sources including recognised experts, peer-experts inputting their own advice and experiences, and published sources of information.

PSCs are not the best way forward in every situation. In some cases, individuals need to rely on the professional advice of experts who really do know best (say, in areas such as medicine and law). At the other end of the spectrum, PSC services aren’t needed whenever individuals are already sufficiently knowledgeable or confident they can find the answers they need.

But there is a huge gap in the middle: where individuals find themselves on a learning curve and need or want help. PSCs fill this gap.

## The Status Quo

Nobody has done the calculation yet (the question has never been posed before) but the fact is, a huge proportion of our economy is *already* devoted to answering peoples' questions. There are number of different ways in which this happens.

**Professional and expert services**      These services provide personal - often face-to-face - advice customised to each individual's personal situation. The resulting advice can be hugely valuable, but it is also very expensive. As a result, most professional advice is not popularly sought after. It is a 'distress purchase' (such as legal, tax or medical advice) only undertaken when people feel they have no other option. The economics of professional advice create a financial incentive for advisors to keep their service opaque and hard to access. Complexity and opaqueness means competition from cheaper advice remains impossible, so the professional is guaranteed large amounts of repeat business at high prices.

**The media**      The media has gone a long way to 'democratise' information by producing and distributing it on a mass scale. However, at a certain point, low unit costs of production and distribution (the printing press, the broadcast show) actually *increase* the cost of finding 'the answers that are right for me': the more information the media produces, the more there is to sift through, and the greater the proportion of irrelevant to relevant information. What's more, most of the information provided by the media only partially answers my question. It is not comprehensive (it is not designed to be - it is usually just part of a news story or feature). And it may raise more questions than it answers.

**Call centres**      Now a vast industry, call centres are driven by peoples' questions. But most call centres are *operationally* focused, designed to answer questions about customer service ('where's my order?', 'my widget isn't working'), resolve bill queries, or execute sales transactions. Call

centre operations (and staff training and recruitment) are not designed to answer the questions that help people make better decisions. To the contrary, in their desperate attempt to reduce costs, most call centres operate according to standardised scripts that positively discourage such questions.

On the user side, very few individuals trust call centres to provide them with the information they really need to make a better decision. If I want to know what I should look out for as a 'must have' or 'must avoid' in a home insurance contract, for example, the last place I can expect objective advice is from a particular home insurance provider with a vested interest in selling a particular product.

**Frequently Asked Questions**                      The concept of the online FAQ lies at the very heart of the Problem Solving Community: PSCs organise themselves around groups of frequently asked questions. However, there are three problems with most FAQ services as they exist today.

- 1) they are not necessarily the most frequently asked questions; they are just the questions the organisation thinks may be asked frequently.
- 2) often they are not the questions people are actually asking - they are questions the organisation particularly wants to answer; they fit the organisation's agenda not the questioner's agenda.
- 3) most FAQs represent just the start of an answer, not a complete one.

As a result FAQs often simply generate more questions rather than actually provide answers.

**Search**                      It's an inherent quality of information that we only know its relevance and value to us after we have invested time and attention processing it. To get value from published information then, we first have to invest time sifting it. The more information we have to sift to find the nuggets of value that matter to us, the more time and effort we

waste. Search short-circuits this wasteful process by allowing us to pre-specify what sort of information we want to pay attention to.

Search therefore represents a fundamental breakthrough in the costs of information use. But it is only part of the answer. If we conduct a search, we may not fully understand the information it throws up. It may throw up contradictory pieces of advice. We do not know if the answers are complete and comprehensive. We do not know if they are trustworthy. Also, we may not know enough to ask the right questions in the first place. So, to provide the breakthrough in value that is now needed, search needs to be complemented by other services.

**Searchable databases** Searchable databases go some way to reducing the downsides of search by narrowing and focusing answers and expertise to particular fields. The quality of their answers is therefore usually much higher. Computer software and hardware companies have invested heavily in such databases, as has the NHS with NHS Direct. Searchable databases are however, often very difficult to navigate and often they raise as many questions as they answer. The searchable databases provided by computer hardware and software companies are mostly incomprehensible to all but the most expert users for example. Again: such databases are part of the answer, but not the complete answer.

**Instant messaging/online chat/wikis** Many people use online communities to ask questions and they often receive valuable answers. Online communities are an extremely efficient, effective way of tapping the expertise and experience of peers, and are another module of the Problem Solving Community. However, they also have drawbacks. There is usually no 'quality guarantee' to the answers provided - users have no way of assessing the honesty or expertise of the person providing the answer (though user ratings can help). And the data itself tends to be highly unstructured, making it difficult or expensive for users to find the nuggets of information they want.

## **The PSC breakthrough**

When it comes to answering peoples' questions, then, the status quo is either too expensive, too difficult to use, too biased or too incomplete - or all of these things at the same time.

Problem Solving Communities bypass these problems by using all the above tools in the right mix, capitalising on their strengths while avoiding their weaknesses, to create a single, seamlessly integrated service. The main processes of a Problem Solving Community are:

- 1) Take questions - by phone or online depending on issues such as complexity, volume, confidentiality, need for 'personal touch', etc.
- 2) Research answers to these specific questions - from already published sources, professional experts, peer experts and experiences (depending on the nature of the question and the desired form of answer).
- 3) Create a codifiable, searchable 'best possible answer' given the information that is available. The management of this step is vital because it provides the springboard for all future PSC value creation (see below)
- 4) Publish the answer, almost certainly online.
- 5) Enable easy navigation to this answer, so that other people asking similar questions can access it with minimum fuss or hassle, and so that the service avoids the need to answer the same question twice.
- 6) Continually improve by:
  - a. Answering new questions
  - b. Finding better answers to existing questions (clarifying and eliminating areas of confusion, deepening details, updating, refreshing, fine-tuning)
  - c. Ensuring easier navigation to these better answers.

This process delivers several benefits.

**‘Best possible answers’** Creating the best possible answer is a crucial step for two reasons. First, it creates a knowledge asset which is then open for re-use by other people, improving their economics by saving them from the need to reinvent the wheel. Second, once the knowledge base is there, it can be continually updated and fine-tuned. It therefore becomes a foundation *for continuously improving* quality. The apparent high cost of using human beings to research, think about and construct a ‘best possible answer’ is not, therefore, the prohibitive expense it seems to be, but the foundation of the service’s value and economic viability.

**Continuous alignment** The ability to track the changing profile of user concerns and issues can be hugely important for product and service providers’ economics, helping them avoid waste on two fronts: investing resources doing things users do not find valuable; redirecting these saved resources to do things users *do* find valuable. Result: much greater value at the same or even lower cost.

PSCs can also use the changing profile of questions and answers to shape their own service. For example, to ensure quick, easy navigation they will make the most common questions most prominent in their answer bases: they actually *know* what the most frequently asked questions are. The other side of the coin is that questions that were once very popular but are not popular any more (say, ‘what is email and how do I use it?’) can be relegated to the footnotes of the knowledge base, or perhaps even removed. Thus the service and its knowledge base are *continually adapting* in real time to the real, expressed needs of its users.<sup>3</sup>

**Staying in touch** By continually analysing what questions are coming in, organisations can also identify emerging issues in close to real time - rather than being surprised by them at a much later date.

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<sup>3</sup> One sophistication is that if a question is particularly hard to answer, or lies in a particularly arcane field, it may be put up for ‘auction’. Only if a certain number of people bid for it will the service dedicate resources to answering it.

## The PSC balancing act

For PSCs there are two critical ingredients to success:

- 1) their ability to define a tight enough problem area/community to ensure that most of the questions are repeated
- 2) their ability to find the right mix of personal service and self-service.

PSC's use human beings for what they are good at: understanding meaning, intuiting what other people are 'getting at', distinguishing between the significant and the insignificant etc. And they use technology for what it is good at: data storage, transmission, interrogation etc.

The PSC 'trick' is to use human beings as just the cutting edge tip of a knowledge iceberg - identifying the questions that really matter, getting the best possible answers, and so on - and using this human input to keep the content up to date and to make sure the iceberg takes the right shape. Part of the human input is to make sure the technology bits - access, searchable databases, etc - do in fact provide the best answers, are as easy to navigate as possible, and so on.

In this way, PSCs grow a bit like a trees. Only a small part of the whole tree is actually 'alive': the outer skin of bark and the leaves. This outer skin is continually transformed into fixed, core infrastructure - the wood that displays trees' hallmark concentric growth rings when cut.

A young sapling has a high proportion of growing tissue to wood. A mature tree has a high proportion of 'infrastructure' / wood to growing tissue. Likewise, PSCs start out as labour intensive services, but the more answers are codified into infrastructure - searchable knowledge bases - the lower the proportion of human cost to value delivered.

## Why now?

Once presented with the PSC idea, most people immediately grasp it as obvious. It's one of those things where we say, 'why on earth wasn't this done ten years ago?'

One reason is that ten years ago we didn't have the technology infrastructure to make such a service economically viable.

For a Problem Solving Community to work, it has to be efficient at eliciting questions from individuals, at configuring answers, and at delivering these answers. Ten years ago, the process of taking in questions (probably by phone), manually researching an answer, and then sending this answer out (either via another phone conversation or on paper by surface mail) was slow, laborious, time-consuming and expensive.

Today, thanks to the digital/Internet revolution these costs are plummeting. Many PSC services will still use in-coming phone calls to elicit questions because they are still the best way of discovering meaning - exactly what the individual's problem is and what sort of answer they are looking for. But now we also have many other cheaper ways of eliciting simpler, more straightforward questions via email, instant messaging, and online forms (including decision-tree questionnaires where the fields presented to the user depend on how previous fields were filled in).

Likewise, we now have the ability to build and search knowledge bases, copy, paste, slice and dice digitalised information, so that we can provide customised answers in an economically efficient manner. And we can deliver these answers efficiently too via mechanisms such as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), searchable knowledge bases and online decision trees.

Without the ability to be efficient in all these areas PSCs could not be economically viable.

## The twist in the tail

There is a twist in the tail of the PSC concept, however. It is person-centric and not organisation-centric. There are two aspects to this.

First, for the last hundred years our commercial system has organised itself around the mechanics of *choice*, with product and service providers competing with each other to *influence* individuals' choices (Buy me, not my rival!). Helping individuals make *better decisions* simply wasn't on their agenda.

For this reason, while many PSCs will be provided by existing organisations as part of better customer service, many other PSC services will be provided by independent, impartial *buyer-centric* services that have no vested interest in pushing any particular product or answer. This issue of trust and impartiality is critical to the PSC's success.

This is paralleled inside workplaces where command and control methods are still the norm, and where, still, it is managers' job to issue orders and staff's job to obey. In such an environment, staff questions are a nuisance, perhaps even an impertinence. However, there is growing evidence that organisations that see themselves as 'inverted pyramids' - where it is the job of management to help staff do their jobs better and easier - tend to be more successful. Inside organisations, PSCs may well be one of the tools organisations need to manage to achieve the cultural and operational evolution from the old approach to the new.

Second, many of our most important questions do not relate to the products, services or operations of just one organisation. If my question is

‘what is the best way of going about moving house’ for example, the answer or solution will involve many different product and service providers.

So, while many PSCs will be set up by individual organisations to help customers’ and employees’ questions *as they relate to the activities of that organisation*, many of the most value-adding PSC’s will be stand-alone services helping individuals deal with many different organisations.

In the commercial arena, this is the concept Supplier or Vendor Relationship Management <sup>4</sup>. It is also particularly important for the public sector, which is bedevilled by ‘silo-itis’ - many different and isolated government departments or agencies dealing with different aspects of the same problem for the same individual in a completely uncoordinated way. In the public sector PSCs may be one of the ways the much-discussed need for ‘joined up’ public services can be provided.



Problem Solving Communities then, are not a trivial matter. They represent:

- a *mindset* change (a shift from an organisation-centric to person-centric view of value)
- an *economic* change (realising that peoples’ questions are a potential source of economic value, not cost)
- an *operational* change (the infrastructure, processes and skills needed to efficiently elicit questions, provide answers and act on these answers).

All these shifts are still in their infancy.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Supplier, or Vendor, Relationship Management see [www.projectvrm.org](http://www.projectvrm.org). This is a project under the auspices of Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, exploring the practicalities of VRM services

## **PSC business models**

PSCs will emerge in a variety of very different commercial and service contexts. The main ‘business models’ are:

- 1) **Cost reduction** where a service provider sees the opportunity to reduce the costs of existing question answering services, either for customers or employees (as was the case with the Training and Development Agency for Schools). This is a particular opportunity in public services which are obliged to answer the public’s questions as part of their service. Local authority, tax authority, and health services could add much more value, at lower cost, by developing a PSC approach.
  
- 2) **A learning opportunity.** By definition, the questions people ask tell you what they are worried about and are interested in. They also tell you what areas of value have not been addressed, yet. Organisations will use PSCs to find out what they are doing wrong (and to fix it), and to discover new opportunities for product and service development. In this way, PSCs will help drive ‘co-creative’ innovation.

PSCs also facilitate a more subtle type of learning: when the service discovers a pattern of many apparently different questions, all of which revolve around the same underlying ‘root cause’. For example, in the school leader pilot, the service received many different questions from school leaders struggling to cope with a new requirement to allow teachers 10% of their time for planning and preparation. The questions - in forms such as ‘how can I raise extra money to help fund this?’, ‘am I allowed to use supply teachers to fill the gaps’, ‘can I use classroom assistants as teacher cover?’ - highlighted the existence of a deeper problem: initial assumptions

about resource allocation were either wrong or not being implemented properly.

- 3) **A growth opportunity.** There are some situations where the risks of making bad decisions are high, but where the costs of researching good decisions are also high. Stuck between the rock of high risk and the hard place of high costs, many people choose a third option: do nothing - and the market is effectively stifled. This is what is currently happening in the UK's financial services industry. Most people manage their personal finances (long term savings, pensions etc) badly because they don't trust the advice they are likely to get from sellers or so-called independent financial advisors and/or because the cost of this advice is high. If the costs of getting good advice fell, and the content of this advice was more trustworthy, more people would be inclined to seek out advice - and then act on it. The market would then grow.
  
- 4) **Paid-for services.** As the costs of answering a particular set of questions falls, and the comprehensiveness and value of the answers rises, the knowledge base relating to these questions becomes more valuable. Imagine, for example, a PSC that has identified and answered all the main questions people ask when considering purchasing say, a plasma TV. It then turns this knowledge into an easy-to-use decision tree which buyers can access for say, a fee of £5. Almost certainly, the information contained in this knowledge module will save the buyer more than £5, while also helping him make a much better decision. Repeat this 100,000 times and you have a revenue stream of £500,000. Repeat cross 50 different categories, products and services and you have revenues of £25 million.

In addition, as usage numbers for such services grow, advertisers will become more and more eager to advertise within or around the service, in the hope of influencing buyers - though the service must

work hard to guarantee the independence, impartiality and comprehensiveness of its answer base.

- 5) **Transaction engines.** The only point of getting a better answer is to make a better decision ... leading to a better action. In many cases, the natural knock-on result of being provided with an answer is to want to act on this information: to make a purchase of a product or service, for example. Many PSCs will develop lucrative revenue streams earning commissions or other referral fees from suppliers linked to the service (though, again the service must work hard to guarantee the independence, impartiality and comprehensiveness of its answer base).
- 6) **Mix and match combinations** of all the above.

Now consider all these business models in the round. The Problem Solving Community is where the worlds of service provision, media and retailing merge and coalesce around better meeting the needs of the individual. It's a transition point to a different, person-centric, commercial set-up<sup>5</sup>.

### **Who is going to do it?**

We see five main areas of (often overlapping) opportunity:

- 1) 'Pure' standalone services that develop a reputation for being the best place to get my questions relating to a particular subject answered.
- 2) Module services which act as a part of a larger buyer-centric service, such as:

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see the discussion of Personal Information Management Services at [www.rightsideup.net/PIMS.htm](http://www.rightsideup.net/PIMS.htm)

- a. An added value buying service helping people navigate their way to the best value products and services for their particular circumstances and priorities
  - b. A supplier relationship management service helping people manage life departments and events such as 'my personal finances' or 'moving home' or 'coping with illness'
- 3) Module services within existing public and private sector organisations, hoping to add value and, perhaps, cut costs when dealing with customers/citizens.
  - 4) Integrative services within the public sector helping to deliver 'joined up' services - the public sector equivalent of supplier relationship management.
  - 5) Services for employees within large organisations, such as the education system, wrestling with complex problems in specialised areas.

## **Next steps**

While the basic ideas behind the PSC are 'obvious' many technical details are far from resolved.

A huge number of questions remain unanswered, such as:

- in what situations/markets does the PSC concept offer the most value, and what are the criteria for identifying these opportunities?
- what tools and techniques to best encourage people to ask questions;
- how to most efficiently capture these questions;
- how to most effectively answer them;
- how to most efficiently pass the answers back to questioners;
- how to navigate users to already-provided answers;
- how to distinguish between 'focused' areas where questions will repeat themselves often enough to provide a viable service, as distinct from diffuse areas where questions fail to repeat themselves thereby failing to create a foundation for a viable service

- how to continually improve the service in terms of content richness and usefulness, ease of use and navigation, costs, revenue streams
- how to brand such services. Problem Solving Communities need to manage the expectations of their users. While help individuals to find a better answer, they cannot guarantee to deliver the best possible answer. At the same time, users need to be able to trust that the service is doing its best to find the best possible answer.
- in what contexts to implement the idea. Problem Solving Communities probably work best in the context of certain management/business styles. They may not fit organisations committed to traditional, top down 'command and control' methods and attitudes.

Over the coming months the BCCF ([www.rightsideup.net](http://www.rightsideup.net)) intends to pursue answers to these questions. We value your input. If you have any questions or comments, get in touch with BCCF chairman Alan Mitchell at [alan.mitchell@rightsideup.net](mailto:alan.mitchell@rightsideup.net).

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### About the authors

Alan Mitchell is chairman of the Buyer Centric Commerce Forum.

Liz Brandt is a partner at Digital Public. Digital Public helps the public sector deliver innovative new services and approaches to reach and engage people. It was a member of the TDA team, leading the service vision and design through to procurement for The Key.

Alex Cheatele is founder and CEO of TEN UK, which was responsible for operationally managing The Key service at its pilot stage. TEN is now implementing a 1000-school pilot of the service.