New Era of Business Cooperation

The Descartes Community

By ChainLink Research

Note from the author: Content for this paper was created by assessing several emerging social networking initiatives from seven supply chain and four ERP companies, as well as the Descartes Community. The intent of this paper is to highlight the unique attributes of Descartes' approach.

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Why A Community?

Our generation lives in a more informed and open world, one that is supported by both business and social networks. Globalization is enabled, to a great degree, by these networks which support creative commercial relationships and social understanding. However, many of these networks, though they provide connectivity, do not, per se, foster truly meaningful collaboration. Surely, to some degree that may have been their intent, but the broader social networks such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter have become 'marketing vehicles,' at least as far as business is concerned. This is the case, as well, with the biggest search engines. Gone are the days when you could easily search for the highly relevant companies or content you were looking for. The Google search engine is littered with advertising and abandoned web projects, keeping the serious professional from compiling useful and relevant information and finding like-minded professionals and organizations to share and work with.

And then we have the business application networks. The concept of a network is not new—the transportation industry was an early adopter of internet-based solutions. The web is a natural platform for the kind of inter-enterprise process and data sharing inherent in the industry. The last decade has seen an explosion of many-to-many cloud-based networks to support a variety of industries. These multi-party applications use the term networks, but they are not. There have been networks, but they only existed to move data across organizations.

Recently, there has been some effort to tack on social tools to bring more personal dialogue to the network. These tools have important advantages for the users in that they can facilitate introductions and the establishment of some relationships. However, some of the approaches used disrupt rather than unify. And the bottom line is *these social networks are not communities.*

A community is a cohesive unit with many shared values and intents, and is a highly interactive and dynamic environment—whether geographical or web-based. During the early days of the web there were discussions about community, conceptual at that point, but the co-opting of the web by advertising has sidelined that goal.

The evolving architecture from search engines and business and social networks, however, has provided us with the platforms from which to envision and create a community that leverages these technologies within the *purpose-driven confines of a community.* Thus, Descartes has launched a new solution—to facilitate a 'community' for the supply chain community.

In this white paper we will explore these technologies and how key attributes have evolved to enable a community to be built. We will then explore the Descartes Community, and how it can support a community for the transportation and logistics industry.

How Web Technology Evolved

Our world is a mesh of '*multis*'—multi-site, multi-enterprise, multi-mode, multiple data streams, supporting multiple processes and multiple dialogues with multiple people. Yet the technologies we use have been served up to us in stovepipes, so, as users, we have to consult various portals, sites, and systems to conduct our business activities. Transaction systems work very hard to isolate users and their work from others, often creating a rigid workflow that does not support discovery, learning, and collaboration and ad hoc interaction. The emergence of networks, in part, was to take down some of these barriers.

We have seen two distinct universes of networks—business and social. A business network is a pay-for-use expert environment used for the acquisition of customers and suppliers, and subsequently, transaction management. In this environment, attributes such as security, data quality validation, and data recovery are prized.

The other universe is that of consumer social and search. We all are familiar with the discovery process of search and its ability to take us to new content and help us share. This does not require expertise and supports the casual user. This world is totally open. The benefits have been obvious—revolutionizing the world of thought, for example. But along with that, the loss of privacy has had profound and unpredictable implications on both societal and governmental levels. This is why business has been hesitant to embrace social paradigms. However, the business community is beginning to understand the benefits of a network, and a new generation of business professionals is embracing a more collaborative work model.
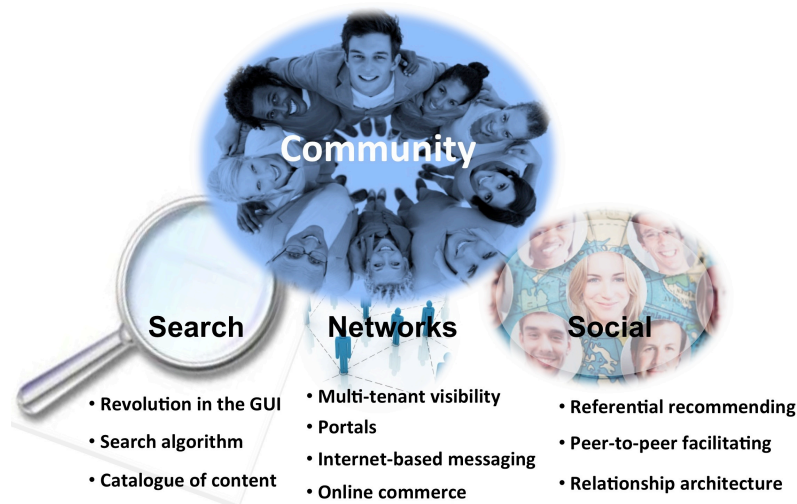

Figure 1 - Evolution of Architectures

So the question then is how to bring together the best of the underlying architectures. Part of the challenge is ensuring exclusive and secure access when desired, while being totally open when desired (all in one environment), taking into account cultural and generational diversity.

Descartes, therefore, announced an innovative new approach—the Descartes Community. This is an interesting development, since its aim is to converge the best of business networks and social networks to support the way we work today. Descartes aims to 'foster a new generation of business cooperation.' A lofty goal!

What Is the Descartes Community?

Before we drill into the attributes of the community, let's take a step back and look at the goals for *this* community.[1] Descartes' goal is to create an environment for the logistics community that is bigger than just Descartes and its customers. The idea is to foster collaboration, knowledge sharing and, yes, commerce. But rather than creating just a set of tools, they want to create real *cooperation* in the industry for both customers and the customers' relationships. Part of Descartes' vision is to enable all this through a philosophy or guarantee of what they call "entrusts." *An Entrust is a federator, bringing together other member enterprises and networks to streamline a process.*[2] Much of the work they are doing architecturally in their solutions and with the launch of the community is toward that end.

A thriving community fosters cooperation; it must come from the community members, themselves, who unify through shared goals. The host (Descartes) provides the enabling technology and its unified architectural approach. Descartes should be thought of as the municipal services and utilities behind the scenes, not the dominating presence you see in enterprise software. Descartes stated that their goal was to not be the driver of content. Rather, they wanted to let the community drive where things go.[3]

Community and Sub-community

Thriving web communities have both mega-community and sub-communities to support both general and special interest forums. Supporting special interests is absolutely vital to a thriving community. Think about it this way: everyone in your town shares some common goals and organizes to support them.

But there are also special interests: people in a certain neighborhood may share some common challenges—our street is near the interstate and we want to find ways to deal with noise, or our kids are attending the local school, or your group is raising funds for the library. These sub-communities get to the heart of people's needs and can solve real problems and/or enrich people's lives.

Here in the logistics community, new trade agreements, customs, commodity/fuel prices, environmental regulations, new shipper or customer logistics strategies, or just getting a better handle on the industry, for example, are all important topics around which groups might be formed.

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[1] https://www.descartes.com/blog/201212/introducing-descartes-community

[2] https://www.descartes.com/blog/author/837

[3] Descartes will moderate some subgroups, not to restrict content, but to ensure that the code of conduct is followed. That is, this is not a site in which to market and sell (the fate that has befallen LinkedIn, for example).
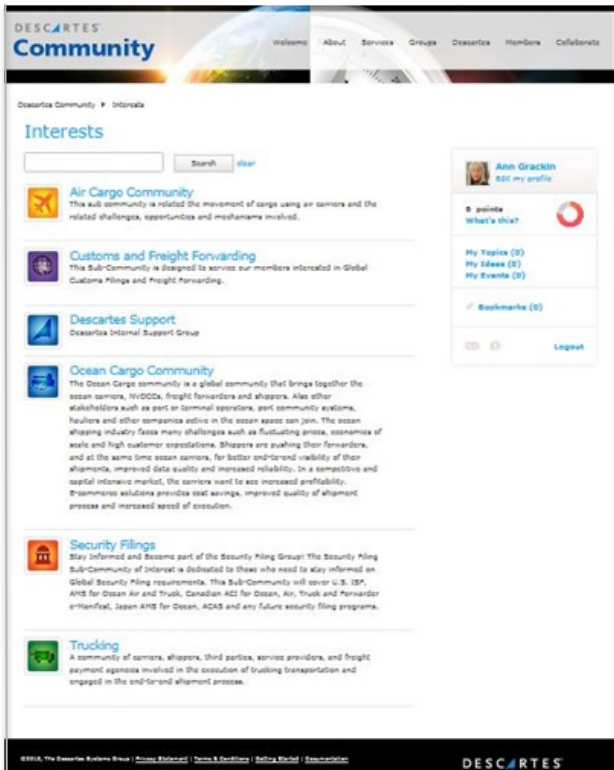
Figure 2 - Major Initial Subgroups within the Descartes Community
- Source Descartes Systems

This aspect is the key to the Descartes Community. So let's explore this a bit. Descartes has kicked off the community by creating some obvious groups that many people would clearly want to participate in, as seen here (Figure 2). The Customs and Freight Forwarding group, for example, would address changes in customs regulations; the Ocean Cargo group might address changing ocean routes, risk, port congestion, fuel costs and so on. At this level, the categories can be broad enough to allow Descartes, its users, and other knowledgeable members of the logistics community to *share* and build a body of knowledge. This *community data* could be shared by members to help them better manage their freight, reduce costs, and improve professional skills, for example.

Other subgroups with special interests (stand-up groups) can also be created. Different types of dynamics govern these groups, for example, open vs. private groups. Community-driven, open groups can support a group or site visitor, supporting those who want to share and learn, whether casual users or frequent, committed contributors.

Another group option is 'by invitation only,' for example, formed to address an issue for shippers or carriers. Other groups require more privacy and security, for instance, specific trading groups such as suppliers and buyers, one retailer and all their suppliers, one shipper and all their carriers, and so forth.

Knowledge Sharing and Management

Unlike the open web, where dialogue may become 'rants and raves,' the business community seeks to stay focused on the issues. They seek input on important ideas and establish business relationships in a secure way. Descartes is a *trusted service,* processing millions of transactions a day. In talking to the developers at Descartes, they made it clear that they will not do anything that would jeopardize the security of the infrastructure.

In the collaboration area, members of the community can seek like-minded people and organizations from whom they can learn. Social architecture surely facilitates this. But having it within a logistics-oriented opt-in community (vs. a LinkedIn group) will likely keep the conversation elevated. In a more informal yet respectful environment, members can elevate issues and work together to solve problems.

Community Content

By blending an operational system with a 'social collaboration' system, resources that are usually inaccessible such as trade documents and various how-to documents can be made available to expand the knowledge of the community. Knowledge sharing and management can be formal such as papers, research, how tos; or it can be more informal blogs and requests for opinions. Respect for knowledge or creativity will naturally lead to more formal relationships.

Supplier/Partner Information Management and Discovery

Supplier Information Management (SIM) represents an emerging capability in logistics systems.[4] In the community, the idea is to provide multiple paths for finding and getting to know potential partners. A traditional approach supported here is *search*: seeking expertise by individual[5] or by organization within the community functions.

A more collaborative way in which this new community's value is demonstrated is through group *conversations,* where knowledgeable members may emerge. For example, a freight forwarder would belong to the Freight Forwarding group and a subgroup whose interest is US/Japanese customers and regulations. A shipper looking for an expert can learn about an issue from the community discussions and see who the experts are before reaching out. Or members can ask other members for recommendations. This approach avoids the hard sales pitch that often accompanies a visit to a company's website.

Collaboration

Collaboration represents the highest level of relationship. Joint work amongst trading partners or potential partners needs a common trusted area in which to work—no matter what the topic. Here is the true power of community: engagement, an exchange of ideas, and maybe a real transformation can be achieved in a common, trusted platform.

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[4] The logistics industry has a 'light touch' on supplier information management-type solutions as compared with materials and manufacturing procurement systems. CIM (Carrier Information Management) services are emerging on the web, but these are still not a complete and rich source of data for finding the right partners.

[5] A member's profile includes whether they are Carrier, Buyer, Consignee, Consolidator, Freight Forwarder, etc. As well, their capabilities are included, for example, what kind of electronic messaging capabilities a member offers, or what route/lane a carrier may have.
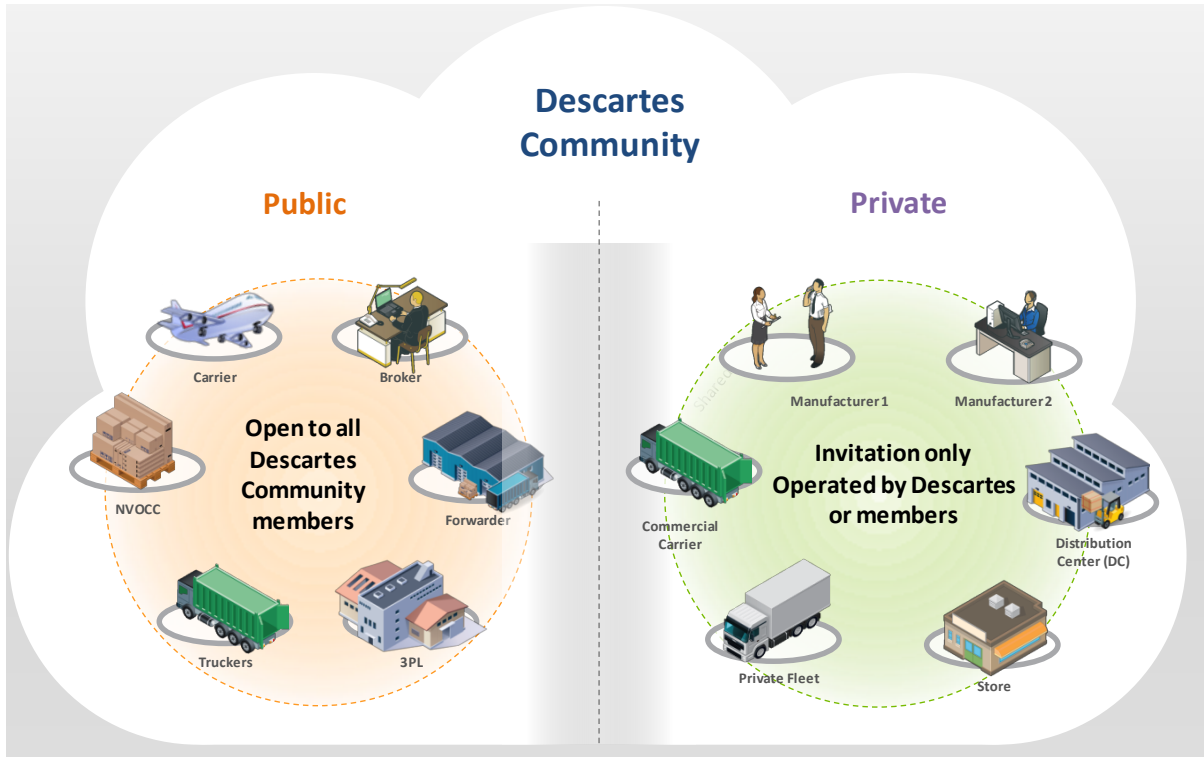
Figure 3 - Source: Descartes Community Membership

Relationship Characteristics—Who Is a Member?

To achieve this type of community requires inclusiveness. Communications have to be open, to a degree, to create participation. Key stakeholders or those who have a role to play in an industry may need to be included in important initiatives. In transportation, multiple parties are often involved in completing the work. Interesting to note is that Descartes has opened the community so members can invite their suppliers and business partners (who may not be Descartes' customers), as well as Descartes' complementary solutions partners. That surely reflects the holistic approach, the inclusiveness, required to support their aim of 'fostering business cooperation.'

Members can be casual or highly engaged participants. However, the goal is peer-to-peer. Peer-to-peer supported by a social architecture is critical to create a community so that great ideas, useful content, and relevant working groups can emerge.

Why Join?

One of the important elements of social and community-based infrastructure is the *democratization* of these environments. That is, the community defines its own purpose. And the community, not the software company, can add, delete, utilize, (or ignore) what it deems relevant. The software company's role is to facilitate the community's vision. This is quite different from the domineering enterprise applications that have rigid structures and in which users must petition the provider to include new content, new linkages, and so forth. *This community is about you—not them.*

Followers	Points
4	108

Our work styles in this 21st century are more open than they were even two decades ago. And we won't be going backward. Looking to meet others, seeking to increase collaborative and commercial opportunities, to interact, and to integrate with important relationships are key reasons people should join the community.

Community benefits, then, can be:

Collaboration

Sharing knowledge: Professionals seek others who can help expand their knowledge. Community membership is basically open to everyone in the logistics community.[6]

Industry or ecosystem initiative: In a purpose-driven community, those who share similar challenges such as standards and compliance, industry and trade issues, and regulatory issues may find like-minded people. This can lead to the formation of stand-up groups that organize meet-ups or even more ambitious proposals for working groups. But think of this: the Descartes Community offers a powerful environment for facilitating discussion and response. Here, the community can evolve from *talking* about change, to *working* in groups, to actually *implementing* that change.

Many individuals would like a broader say in how their supply chains or industry work. However, long-term industry groups are not only taxing and time consuming, but expensive. A community presents a huge opportunity for a better way. The beauty of web communities is that energy, creativity, and active participation can drive the direction.

Commerce

Forging new relationships: One of the reasons for joining communities is the ability to broaden your network—to let others know what you are doing and to learn about them through a natural evolution of deepened acquaintanceships.

Search and seek new markets, new partnerships: By replacing web-scraping and aggregator sites, ad words, and advertising, members can find real knowledge and companies that might make great trading partners.

Blending commerce and collaboration: Supporting dialogue and execution in a single sign-on environment if users choose to use the entire community platform in this way. Some users may choose the community as their desktop, integrating their applications with their group activities.

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[6] According to Descartes, any professional, as long as they have a valid business email can join and have access to many of the services in the community. Of course, for some usage of GLN and other Descartes products, these higher level capabilities do need a subscription or license.

Conclusion—Not Just Chatter

No doubt, many of the technologies that support search engines and social networks have played a significant role in how we work today, and will continue to in many settings. However, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, et al, are not communities. They are technologies. The social groups that leverage these environments do—or do not—make them communities. So 'digging' or 'liking' and other low-engagement tasks may be interesting to marketers, but they do not form a cohesive bond between people.

A purpose-driven community has many minds working together, sharing knowledge, conducting trade. It is fitting to express some thoughts of **Rene Descartes**, who suggested *that to become wise we should have conversations with others who have brilliant minds.* By collaborating, members gain a wider perspective about their industry.

This is not chatter. It is absolutely vital to the health and progress of the industry. So community, as we have discussed here, has the potential to create *productive* relationships—cooperative relationships. With over 146,000 parties using Descartes today, there is surely huge potential! Ultimately, it will be the logistics community that will create a community here. Descartes is merely the foundation.

Another brilliant mind, Sir Isaac Newton, probably summed up the benefits of collaborating best: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."[7]

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[7] http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/268025.html

About ChainLink Research

ChainLink Research, Inc. is a Supply Chain research organization dedicated to helping executives improve business performance and competitiveness through an understanding of real-world implications, obstacles and results for supply-chain policies, practices, processes, and technologies. The ChainLink 3Pe Model is the basis for our research; a unique, multidimensional framework for managing and improving the links between supply chain partners.

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