

LEADER NETWORKS

DRIVING COMPANY STRATEGY THROUGH SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This research report, sponsored by Verint, is based on interviews with the leaders of Verint Community customers – Sage, Analog Devices, Sophos, Visma/Raet, and others – and a recent Leader Networks' survey of nearly 300 community and marketing leaders. We also interviewed Verint executives responsible for intelligent self-service and customer experience to round out our research.

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Executive Summary

More and more companies understand that support communities can play a key role in their self-service and customer success strategies.

Customers are more interested than ever in self-service.² Our report explores how leading companies are leveraging this trend, making their support communities the centerpiece of a self-service strategy that is critical for scaling affordable, effective support.

We also reveal that a well-run support community, which gives customers and partners timely advice and answers to product-related questions, not only offers cost savings, but also enables customer success and lowers churn rates. Given that about two-thirds of all communities are synched to their company's CRM system¹, customer success teams now have a real-time window to the customer journey.

Creating a successful support community, however, is no simple task. Many of the leading companies we interviewed had to undergo a culture change for their community strategies to succeed. In particular, they had to learn how to *really listen* to their customers. Our research also reveals three support community models, each with distinct implications for community management and value creation.

When it comes to value creation, most companies intelligently estimate the cost savings their communities provide by tracking KPIs such as deflected tickets. However, the profit lift from greater loyalty and lower churn resulting from community-driven customer success is rarely measured. In this report, we aggregate the input from our research and present a new, comprehensive approach for measuring community value.

Based on our business model, the potential payoff is big – about \$1M per year in support savings and over \$10M in profit lift from reduced churn. Given an approximate \$350K/year investment¹, the support community is an underrated online community that provides companies with great strategic and economic value.

\$1M / Yr.
SUPPORT SAVINGS
from community
self-service

\$10M / Yr.
PROFIT LIFT
from customer success
and lower churn



CHAPTER 1

Support Communities are Integral to Company Strategy

Many customers view the online support community as the most powerful, convenient and responsive place to turn to when they have a question, concern or need about a company's product or service. Many companies, however, don't fully recognize how valuable the community can be.

We found that communities are particularly beneficial when a high level of know-how is required, such as:

- When the pace of product launches and diversity is so high that static knowledge management can't keep up with new customer inquiries
- When community members know more than the support staff and can truly help one another

The companies we interviewed stand out because they do understand how critical support communities are to their business; they see that traffic across their communities far outweighs traffic across other support channels. Therefore, it's logical to assume that these companies are among the global leaders in aligning their communities with self-service and customer success strategies.

Customer Self-Service Strategy

Self-service is one area where the Q&A forum-driven support community plays a strategic role. Customers across all demographics are increasingly interested in self-service, since it saves time and is convenient. In fact, according to a [Verint study](#)², people of all ages – including those over 65 who didn't grow up in the digital age – prefer online self-service rather than live human support. In addition, 78% of all customers welcome technology that provides the right information at the right time.

According to our interviews, companies are more than happy to accommodate. Self-service suites, which include support communities as well as automated online chat and intelligent virtual assistants, increase customer satisfaction, carry little-to-no variable expenses, and deflect tickets. As a result, they are more cost-efficient support channels than call centers, emails and live chat.

“Our community is critical to our customer support, but that's just the beginning. Now that we recognize its strategic value, we've added our partners to the mix and are building our education program in the community.”

- Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

“Self-service is a key priority for the company. It's an invaluable one-to-many support approach that can be used to deflect support cases. For this reason, we invest in our community support forums, and work to produce high-quality product documents and videos.”

- Florentino Sanchez, Online Community and Social Media Manager, Sophos

Customer Success Strategy

Companies today are focused on making customer success a priority. As such, they're creating dedicated customer success positions and shifting some efforts from new sales to retention. Support communities can play a major role in that shift. We found that well-run communities create a framework for positive engagement between customers and the company to create a win-win situation: members succeed with the product and trust the organization's brand, while the company retains satisfied customers and generates greater loyalty.

An online community is a good fit for customer success programs, since it gives the customer success team a real-time window into what's happening with customers. When the data of community members is synchronized with a company's CRM system, the organization can see what customers are doing both inside and outside the community. The community leaders we interviewed are leveraging this data by synching customer interactions across multiple contact channels in order to follow and understand the customer journey, act at the right time, and ensure success.

Synching with CRM is beneficial not only at the individual customer level, but also at the collective level. Many of the companies we spoke to said they can pinpoint customer problems by aggregating metadata from both the community and the organization as a whole. For example, when a company identifies customers' most pressing issues by reviewing threads on the Q&A forum, it can offer fixes to current products or add new products to meet their needs.

Our broader survey of community leaders, however, shows that many companies have a long way to go to make the most of this integration. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed said that the challenges relating to community reporting and analysis are an obstacle for achieving competitive advantage.¹

“We are continuously trying to optimize our members' experiences so they can succeed. We monitor what they are searching for, viewing, downloading, and rating. We scrutinize the type of inquiry to better understand the customer's needs.”

*Lisa Allison, Enterprise
Community Manager,
Analog Devices*

“There's a time for self-service and a time to talk directly with our customers. We want to identify the right time to hold high-value conversations, for example, when they can add value both to our customers and our company through upselling.”

*Wilfried Rijsemus, Program
Manager Ecosystem &
Customer Conversations,
Visma/Raet*

CHAPTER 2

Three Support Community Models

In order to contribute to a company's self-service and customer success strategies, the support community must carry out its core Q&A function well – namely, members must receive timely answers to their questions from trusted, knowledgeable experts. All of the community managers we interviewed emphasized that a key metric for evaluating the support community's effectiveness is the percentage of discussions with verified or accepted answers.

The level of trust that community members have in those responding to their questions drives the verified/accepted discussion metric. As a result, when the leading companies we interviewed planned their support communities, they considered this key question: Do customers trust only employees to answer their questions, or do they also trust fellow customers? The companies then worked with one of these three self-service models, depending on how they answered that question.

Company-led model

The least common approach is a pure company-led Q&A model, where customers always expect and get a prompt response from an employee. Customer-to-customer support is not the goal.

Customer-led model

Some companies prefer a customer-led Q&A forum. In this case, only customers answer each other's questions, while the company takes a back seat and enjoys cost savings. The customer-led forum aims to deflect tickets, but there's no guarantee that the inquiring customer will get a fast and satisfactory response.

Hybrid model

The most popular approach is a hybrid Q&A model where customers are encouraged to answer each other's questions. If members don't come up with a satisfactory answer to a question within a certain period of time – often a day or two since posting – then an employee steps in.

Once the company decides on its preferred model, the community can set clear expectations for customers, incentivize employee participation, and measure success.

	Company-led Q&A	Customer-led Q&A	Hybrid Q&A
Customer expectations	always get an answer	no guaranteed answer	usually get an answer
Employee incentive to participate	mandatory	build your reputation	mandatory or enhanced reputation
Staffing model	community manager and part-time commitment from experts	community manager	community manager and part-time commitment from experts
Success measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # active employees & members • time-to-respond • deflected tickets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # active members • deflected tickets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # active employees & members • time to respond • deflected tickets

In the hybrid and company-led models, employees have to engage with customers. Otherwise, customers don't get good answers, calls aren't deflected, and the self-service strategy is not executed effectively. The problem is that employees often don't regard answering customer questions in the community forums as part of their job.

Our research suggests that internal alignment issues may be behind this problem. Support departments are responsible for communities in only 15% of all cases, while marketing or communications departments are responsible for some 50%.¹ This can cause friction between departments, which community leaders suspect is also due to a lack of understanding or belief in the value of the community.

Leading companies, however, are breaking down these barriers between community and support, and creating an integrated support experience that delivers timely answers and better serves customers. For example, with the customer-led Q&A model, customers can often find a link to a chat with a company support rep alongside Q&A forums.

“The workflow now goes in the opposite direction. The community is becoming an internal resource for support engineers, a real-time “research library” that is used when orienting new engineers, or when talking on the phone with a customer.”

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

CHAPTER 3

Community Success Often Requires a Culture Change

The support community helps companies engage in a basic dialogue with their customers through transactional Q&A support. However, not all companies take advantage of the opportunities for deeper company-customer relationships that can lead to greater customer loyalty.

The community leaders we interviewed typically found that they needed to undergo a culture change within their organization – that is, shifting their customer interaction mindset – to create an honest dialogue with their customers. In many cases, the company had a compelling product and solid brand message, but hadn't given any thought to caring for and building relationships with the people who matter most – their best, most engaged customers.

These leaders described how the community helped identify and overcome cultural barriers – not only between the company and its customers, but also among company employees. Some interviewees described situations where very few employees believed it was their job to talk to customers, or didn't feel empowered to do so. But other interviewees described a more entrenched barrier—a lack of concern, and even respect, for customer opinion.

The community provides an opportunity to start building partnerships with customers and to listen to them. We found that companies that learn how to *really listen* to their customer communities enjoy the greatest success with their customer success strategies.

Companies that underwent a culture change are more likely to share roadmap or product direction details with community members, as well as request and respond to feedback. We found that the existence of this kind of dialogue lowers churn and improves the bottom line. For B2B tech companies, in particular, it's important for customers to feel that their demands for new product enhancements are considered. When that's the case, they're more likely to stay on as customers with the company.

“To improve collaboration with our customers, we had to make a change in culture, so we intentionally set up a hybrid community featuring internal and external conversations. After three years, we knocked down communication barriers not only between employees and customers, but also among our own people. Now we're ready to successfully execute strategies that require greater personal engagement with our customers.”

*Wilfried Rijsemus,
Program Manager Ecosystem
& Customer Conversations,
Visma/Raet*

“I'm most excited by how our staff is actively engaging with our community to help build and strengthen our customer relationships. They are answering questions and responding to customer feedback. This is very valuable for our product teams, who are getting near-instant feedback on beta releases.”

*Florentino Sanchez,
Online Community and Social
Media Manager, Sophos*

CHAPTER 4

Business Value is Clear, but Challenging to Measure

Many organizations find that communities create significant value. While setting up and maintaining a large community costs on average about \$350K/year¹, including software and headcount costs, companies often recoup that amount annually through service/support savings. Typically, companies make this assessment by tracking KPIs related to member activities. Here are 10 of the leading KPIs that organizations examine to track support communities.

Top 10 KPIs for Tracking Support Communities

TACTICAL

CONNECT

1. Registered Members
2. Unique Site Visitors

ENGAGE

3. Page Views
4. # of Questions Asked

RESPOND

5. Time to First Good Response
6. % Questions with Response

SUPPORT

7. % Questions with Accepted Response
8. Employee Participation Rate

VALUE

9. Solution Views
10. Deflected Tickets

STRATEGIC

These KPIs enable community leaders to understand key correlations – for example, between active customer Q&A discussions and solution views, or between solution views and deflected tickets – and then translate that data into support/service savings.

One community manager whom we interviewed, for example, said that the number of solution views helps him determine the value of having a dedicated engineer answer questions on a Q&A customer forum. Based on his experience and metrics, an expert post thread of 20-30 solution views leads to a deflected ticket, underscoring the importance of professional advice to the community.

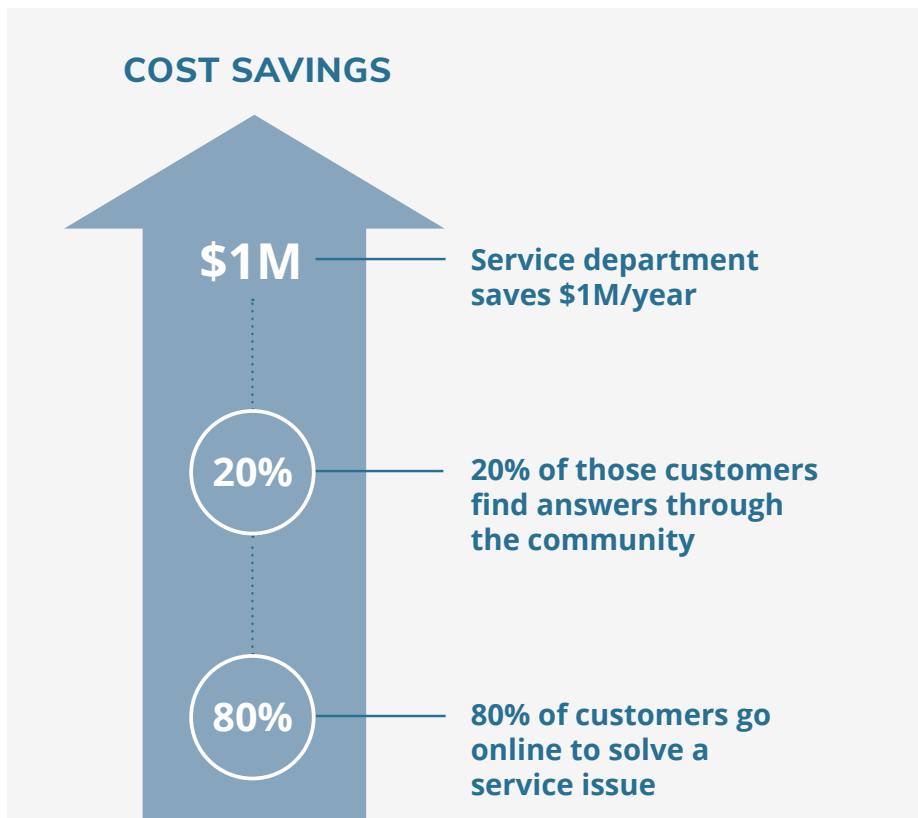
We found, however, that community managers have limited means to measure the impact of their communities on satisfaction, loyalty, churn and revenue generation. This is the case even while the majority of marketing and community leaders (57%) maintain that competitive advantage means retaining current customers¹. Recognizing this limitation, we have created a model for determining the value of both service-driven factors and hard-to-measure loyalty-driven factors for the organization.

Leader Networks Support Community Value Model

For the purposes of our model, we have assumed that a typical organization with a large support community has the following parameters:

- **Revenues/profit margin:** \$2B/10%
- **Churn rate:** 25% of annual revenue
- **Online community members/page views:** 250,000/3M per year
- **Community costs:** \$350K per year
- **Customer support team:** 300 employees

Based on these parameters and the rules of thumb we present below, it's clear that support communities offer a compelling opportunity for creating value in an organization



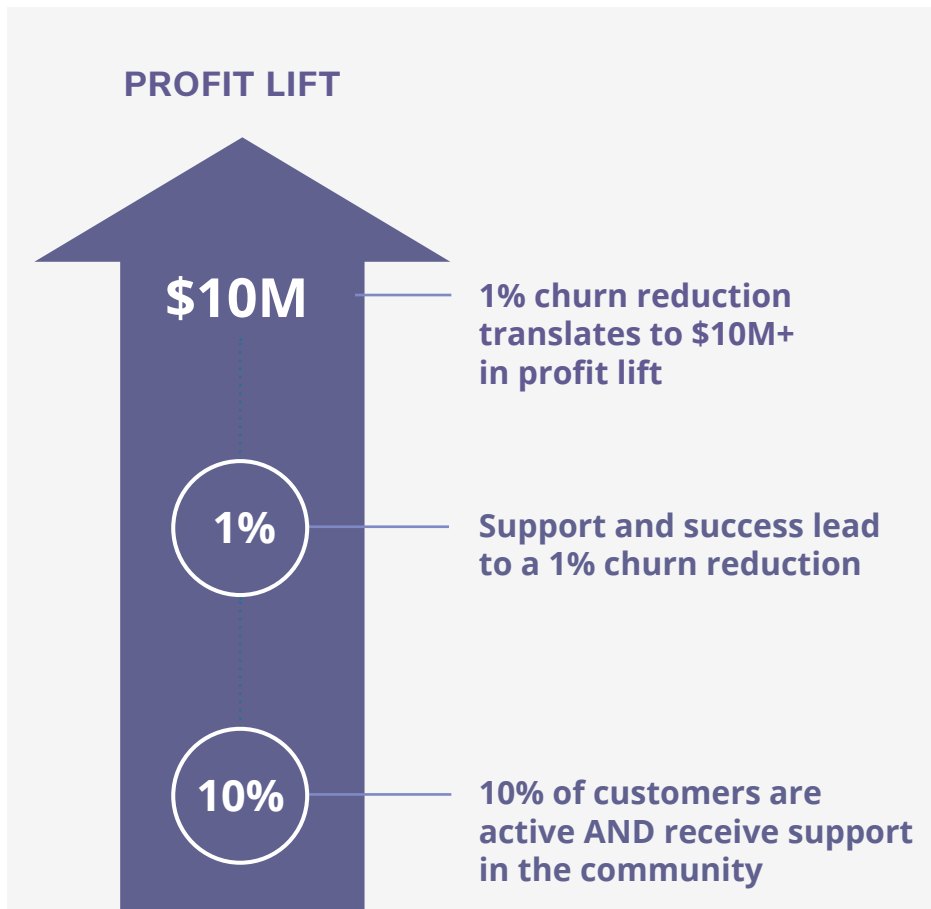
Some 80% of an organization's customers go online in search of a self-help solution whenever they have a service issue, based on customer behavior and preference surveys.² The vast majority of those people find the answer in product or "how to" pages, FAQs, and other channels. However, about 20% of them get the response they're looking for through the support community according to our model, which compares community website and support center volumes. When customers find their answers in the community, they don't call in to the call center, leading to service department savings.

"We have 1,500 active users each month – valued members who engage by providing feedback, posting questions, and supplying answers. But that is only part of the story. Each month in 2019, community.sophos.com had 750,000 unique sessions and 370,000 unique users. The majority of visitors are simply customers finding and referencing previously-solved questions."

Florentino Sanchez, Online Community and Social Media Manager, Sophos

"Thanks to the community discussions – especially those with hundreds to thousands of views – and our structured FAQs, we are seeing a significant number of support inquiries being handled in the community. When we add support for a new product in the community, we see a decline in email inquiries and calls over time."

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices



“Overall satisfaction has increased noticeably. Software can often cause frustration, since something can always go wrong with a computer or its settings. But Sage City enables an authentic connection with the brand and provides customers with a way to receive trusted answers to their questions. A community builds loyalty in a way that social media can’t.”

Derek Vink, Senior Manager (Sage City “Mayor”), Global Online Communities

Each company looks at its community traffic – particularly the number of verified answer views – to understand how many customers are participating in the community. In our model, we normalize this data and estimate that 10% of a typical company’s customers found their answers and were satisfied with their experiences in the community (for example, getting a satisfactory response and returning to work quickly). From our interviews, we learned that this is especially true for tech-oriented and introverted customers, who prefer avoiding live calls.

Given that over two-thirds of all customers “feel more loyal to organizations that make it easier and convenient to engage,” according to a [Verint paper](#)², the 10% rule of thumb appears to be a very reasonable assumption.

After taking into consideration the above factors, satisfaction derived from the support community experience leads to a churn reduction of 1% (a conservative figure compared to the 5%-10% cited by many community leaders). Since a 1% reduction churn can increase profits by over 5% (see [HBR article](#)³), a typically large organization with a more engaged, passionate and loyal community will enjoy a profit lift of at least \$10M.

CASE STUDIES

SAGE

“A community builds loyalty in a way that social media can’t.”

Derek Vink, Senior Manager (Sage City “Mayor”), Global Online Communities

About Sage

Sage is a UK-based technology company, with 13,000 employees across 24 countries. Sage is a market leader for integrated accounting, payroll and payment systems, with millions of customers, mostly small and medium-sized businesses.

About Sage City

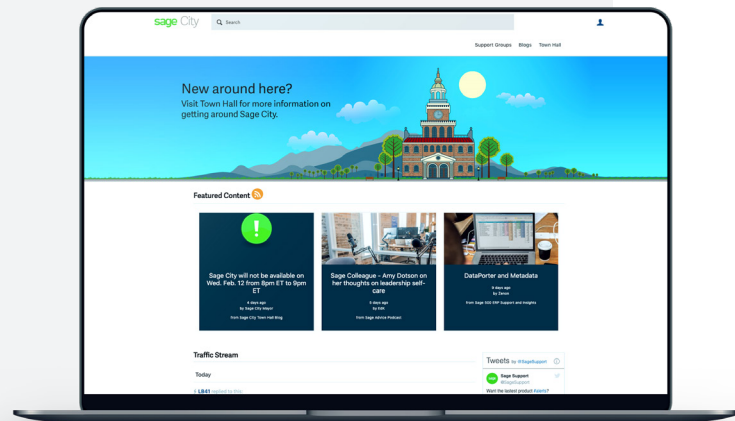
[Sage City](#) is the online community where Sage customers and partners can ask questions, collaborate with others, and share experiences. Built on Verint Community, Sage City has over 80,000 active members. The community began serving customers in Canada and the US in 2013 and went global in 2018.

Value of Community for Members

The Sage City community is clearly focused on providing customer support. Given its wide range of global and local products, Sage is continuously looking for ways to provide top support to millions of customers. Fortunately, Sage City lets the company do just that.

“In North America, we offer assisted support during regular business hours, while the community operates 24/7 and in multiple languages. Since many of our customers are long-time expert users, the community often offers suggestions within a few minutes, regardless of the time of day. Many users also find it quite helpful to exchange ideas with those facing similar business challenges.”

Derek Vink, Senior Manager (Sage City “Mayor”), Global Online Communities



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Value of Community for Sage

The Sage City community has helped Sage control support costs.

“Even though our customer base has grown significantly over the last few years, we’ve maintained the same number of support staff, and have even seen our call and chat volumes drop slightly. Much of that is thanks to our self-service resources, including Sage City, Sage University, and Sage Knowledgebase. Many groups within Sage City are well-established, requiring minimal moderation from Sage.”

Derek Vink, Senior Manager (Sage City “Mayor”), Global Online Communities

The positive support experience also translates into greater customer satisfaction, loyalty and advocacy.

“Overall satisfaction has increased noticeably. Software can often cause frustration, since something can always go wrong with a computer or its settings. But Sage City enables an authentic connection with the brand and provides customers with a way to receive trusted answers to their questions. A community builds loyalty in a way that social media can’t.”

Derek Vink, Senior Manager (Sage City “Mayor”), Global Online Communities

What’s Next?

Given the success of the North American communities, Sage made a strategic decision to take Sage City global in 2018, adding thousands of new members and building strong engagement. With both Sage City and Sage University already global, Sage is now planning to take Sage Knowledgebase global, too.

The next goal is to create one central location that will bring content from all three self-service elements together so that a customer gets the best results regardless of where the content resides. In addition, if a case or chat is initiated, the Sage support team will know which content has already been viewed and will start troubleshooting from there, enabling a faster resolution. In the future, this end-to-end interaction will be able to take place within the product itself, providing a seamless customer experience.

ANALOG DEVICES

“We are seeing a significant number of support inquiries being handled in the community. When we add support for a new product in the community, we see a decline in email inquiries and calls over time.”

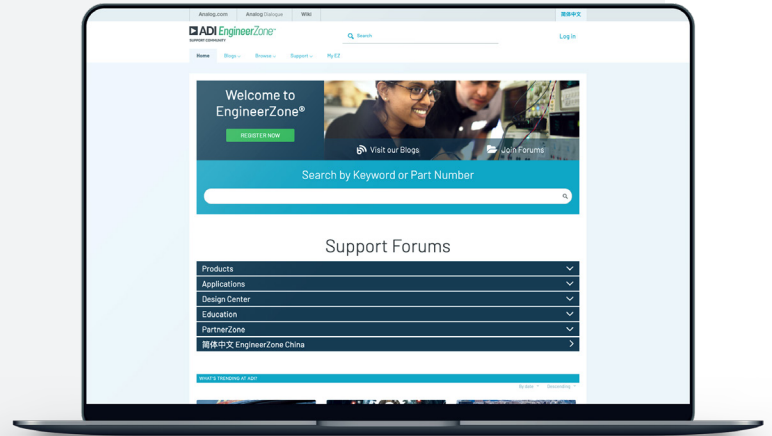
Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

About Analog Devices

Analog Devices (ADI), a \$6B revenues company with over 15,000 employees, is a world leader in the design, manufacture, and marketing of integrated circuits (ICs) used in virtually all types of electronic equipment. ADI products are used by over 100,000 customers worldwide.

About EngineerZone® Support Community

The EngineerZone (EZ) Support Community is an efficient way of connecting customers to ADI engineers, and is available in English and Chinese.



“The primary purpose of the community is for members to ask tough design questions and get answers, browse our rich knowledge base, and read about our new technologies and the engineers behind them in one of our blogs. Our goal is to provide the best experience for members and make our employees more efficient.”

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

The EngineerZone’s home page highlights the community’s emphasis on enabling self-service. Typically, ADI customers have a question about a specific product. The home page is designed with a powerful search tool enabling them to type in a question or product number that triggers the display of a menu of answers, related content and forums.

Value of Community for Members

The community’s main goal, from a support perspective, is to answer members’ questions accurately and rapidly so they can return to their work as quickly as possible. EngineerZone isn’t just for support; the community offers insightful blogs and an extensive library of webcasts presentations, and hosts the ADI Design Partner Network.

“We are continuously trying to optimize our members’ experiences so they can succeed. We monitor what they are searching for, viewing, downloading, and rating. We scrutinize the type of inquiry to better understand the customer’s needs. Do they prefer webcasts? Do they need more content on a particular topic?”

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

The community's support is a critical part of ADI's multi-faceted support program. Customers who feel the need to contact the company via conventional channels can still call or send an email. But it's important to keep in mind that in ADI's business, the person most qualified to answer a technical question is an engineer who specializes in that area. While the support department is primarily comprised of engineering generalists, it often needs to bring in a specialist to resolve a complex issue. Savvy customers have learned that the community is the most efficient pathway to reaching such specialists.

Value of Community for ADI

The more community members self-serve, the more time ADI engineers can spend developing the next ground-breaking technology to enable the success of our customers.

"Thanks to the community discussions – especially those with hundreds to thousands of views – and our structured FAQs, we are seeing a significant number of support inquiries being handled in the community. When we add support for a new product in the community, we see a decline in email inquiries and calls over time."

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

And a more successful community translates to a more efficient support team.

"The workflow now goes in the opposite direction. The community is becoming an internal resource for support engineers, a real-time "research library" that is used when orienting new engineers or when talking on the phone with a customer."

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

This new workflow makes the community an integral part of ADI's support efforts.

"We recognize that specialized or confidential conversations need to happen offline, not every customer may be supported by the community. If they can be supported via community, their inquiries help to expand the comprehensive library of combined expertise. We want to offer our customers a range of support models, community being an important one."

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

What's Next?

Given that the community has proven itself, ADI believes it will only grow in strategic importance.

"Our community is critical to our customer support, but that's just the beginning. Now that we recognize its strategic value, we've added our partners to the mix and are building our education program in the community."

Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager, Analog Devices

CHAPTER 5

Key Success Factors

All companies can benefit from a support community. However, since no two companies are identical, we have compiled a list of support community key success factors that cater to various organization types.

FOR ALL COMPANIES

Don't be afraid of criticism

If you are reluctant to start a community due to the risk of negative, brand-damaging discussions on your forums, consider adding processes and moderation tools that mitigate such risks. For example, refer members to your Terms and Conditions or Rules of Conduct section to create a culture of self-moderation.

With that said, if your company, like most others, features products and services with strengths and weaknesses that you are continually looking to improve, don't avoid creating a community for fear of negative comments. Clarify matters in a non-defensive manner when you are unfairly criticized. Listen to your members, collect feedback, and look for recurring themes, then improve and act. And always let the community know you are listening and responding.

CEOs and strategy leaders must offer active support

Don't let your community's potential go by the wayside due to internal alignment or silo-driven problems. For example, if your community is run by support, make sure that your marketing and customer success teams have access to the member data and opportunities to engage. Some leading communities even maintain a strategic advisory board that includes managers from multiple departments. These boards can access funding and identify new ways for the community to support company strategy.

FOR B2B TECH COMPANIES WITH Q&A FORUMS

Improve your fight against continuous churn threats

All support communities have customer Q&A forums, but not all Q&A forums are communities. Many B2B tech companies use their customer forums simply as a means of exchanging information impersonally. But the customer forum is where you can also create a sense of belonging for customers and work together on common goals. Even though the community-building business sounds soft, the results speak for themselves: community bonds lead to increased loyalty, lower churn and higher profits.

FOR B2C COMPANIES WITH HIGH CALL-CENTER VOLUMES

Add forums to your self-service suite

Companies in industries renowned for high call-center volume should consider launching or expanding a community as part of an integrated self-service suite portfolio. In this case, the community can be included in your upcoming large workforce automation purchase, either alongside or in place of upgrading your call center with IVR and chatbots. You can see the value when you calculate cost per interaction through your community compared to your other support channels.

FOR GROWING COMPANIES

Learn from the lessons of others

Early-stage companies often recognize the value of communities for driving advocacy and building a passionate customer base. As your company grows and as churn and support costs become key issues, your support community can also grow into a customer success community, delivering great value over time.

Growth-stage companies should also learn from the experiences of those who have already experienced the community-building process. One large company we interviewed, for example, admitted that during an intense growth phase, it was flush with support inquires and could not manage timely replies. If your company today depends on calls and chats and feels a strain, imagine the scenario in the event of a 10-fold increase in your customer base.

Conclusion

The potential up-side for customer support communities in large companies is about \$1M per year in support savings and over \$10M in profits from reduced churn – a great return on a \$350K/year investment.

But perhaps the best strategic reason for building support communities is the foundation they provide for the future. One [investment blog](#)⁴ called communities a defensive “moat” strategy for their ability to maintain high margins and competitive advantage.

So, keep in mind that when building a support community, you may be creating that “moat” strategy by ensuring that your customers remain close and passionate about your brand.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

In addition to sponsoring this [Leader Networks](#) report, Verint was a valuable partner in our research. We interviewed executives responsible for Verint's community offering, and spoke to officials overseeing the company's solution suite. These conversations also gave us insight into next-generation self-service strategies that will incorporate online communities.

Verint Interviewees

- **Nancy Treaster, GM Strategic Operations**
» Verint Customer Engagement Solutions
- **Michael Southworth, General Manager**
» Intelligent Self-Service
- **Brian Koma, Vice President**
» Customer Experience Business Strategy
- **Jon Allen, VP & GM**
» Communities & Web Self-Service

We also interviewed seven leaders from companies that built their communities on the Verint Community platform. Four agreed to be quoted publicly.

Community Leader Interviewees

- **Florentino Sanchez, Online Community and Social Media Manager**
» Sophos
- **Derek Vink, Senior Manager (Sage City "Mayor")**
» Global Online Communities, Sage
- **Lisa Allison, Enterprise Community Manager**
» Analog Devices
- **Wilfried Rijsemus, Program Manager Ecosystem & Customer Conversations**
» Visma/Raet

About Verint Community

Verint acquired in 2015 the Telligent Community platform, now called Verint Community, and integrated it into its Intelligent Self-Service Suite. Verint's [Intelligent Self-Service](#) offering leverages "artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), enterprise chatbots, conversational systems, community, web self-service, and knowledge management to create a better customer experience (CX) and automate more interactions."

VERINT®

For a full list of case studies and additional resources from Verint, [click here](#).