Machibata.net—Innovation Hub for Community Development

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Machibata.net, a Website supporting the publicizing and linking of community development activities, was launched by Fujitsu Laboratories in November 2011 with the aim of interconnecting individuals, organizations, and groups involved in community development and creating new value for society. The name "Machibata" combines the Japanese words for town ("machi") and flag ("hata/bata") and signifies a flag that is flown to inform others of community development activities. Machibata.net can be used to describe thoughts and content associated with community development activities and to share that information with other groups or individuals, as well as to find others with shared interests and to announce seminars and other events. The Website also provides training for users who would like to acquire skills in gathering and disseminating news on attractive features of a community and important people and facilities. Machibata.net supports exchanges between communities and the nurturing of community activists from both real world and Internet perspectives. This paper presents the background to the creation of Machibata.net, describes the purpose, service content, and achievements of the Website, and touches upon future developments.

1. Introduction

We have been engaged in the research and development and practical application of a qualitative design methodology for understanding the deeply rooted needs of people and for formulating medium- and long-term directions while also enhancing interpersonal communication. Up to now, this methodology has been mainly targeted at the business community, not the social community.

Machibata.net, a Website launched by Fujitsu Laboratories in November 2011, supports the distribution of information on community development activities and collaboration between those activities across regional boundaries. It provides community development organizations and individuals who wish to create new projects with useful and simple methods for publicizing community development activities and solving associated problems.

The creation of Machibata.net stems from the growing expectations people have for social services. We define "social service" as a service supporting people's lives in such areas as childcare, senior caregiving, crime/disaster prevention, and sports. Social services are provided through the volunteer work of nonprofit organizations (NPOs), civic organizations, etc. There are three basic ways in which people relate to social services, participation in activities, contribution of funds, and use of services, and there has been increasing levels of involvement in each of these ways in recent years.[1]

As the value and importance of social services grow, the information-gathering needs with respect to service providers will likewise grow in the form of "What organization is involved in what activities and where?" "What organization has what ideas and what future vision?" and "What forms of services are provided when and where?" To satisfy these needs, it is desirable that information on the content and activities of provided services be freely distributed. In other words, the information to be distributed should include not only quantitative information such as name of the organization, scale and location of activities, and provided services but also qualitative information such as thoughts on the service provider's activities, value

obtained through the activities, and changes desired in the activities.

This paper presents the state of community development throughout Japan and introduces Machibata. net as a hub for connecting community development activities.

2. Approaches to community development

The words "community development" can take on a variety of meanings, such as city planning and local revitalization, depending on the context in which they are used. In the Machibata.net concept, community development means all nonprofit activities geared to making everyday life better in a particular community. Accordingly, the principals involved in the community development activities targeted by Machibata.net are not limited to any specific region, to only local residents, or to regular people. For example, a private enterprise operating in a certain area that would like to contribute to the local community can also be a principal in community development activities.

At present, it is mainly intermediate support organizations managed by local governments and local NPOs that are providing support for community development activities targeted by Machibata.net. As a result, the range of support provided is limited to specific regions such as those under government jurisdiction.

In addition, Websites such as the "NPO Home Page,"[2] managed by the Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, and "Machigenki–Community Development Information Site,"[3] managed by Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, disseminate information on community development activities in all regions of the country. The groups targeted by these Websites, however, are limited to nonprofit organizations having corporate status, and the activities that they target are mainly concerned with the theme of revitalizing city centers. These Websites, in other words, are limited to business content that falls under the jurisdiction of the entities that manage them.

For the above reasons, we considered that community development activities unbounded by region or attribute were not being sufficiently shared or used. We also considered that this situation arose not because of "no need or demand" but because of "difficulty of implementing" and that this state of affairs had to be changed.

3. Purpose and overview of Machibata. net

Providing support for connecting community development activities unbounded by region requires a mechanism that can share information on community development without physical constraints and facilitate mutual interaction based on that information. To provide such a mechanism, we developed a Website called "Machibata.net."

The purpose of Machibata.net is to provide a hub for interconnecting community development activities regardless of region and for creating new value for society. Community development activities include those by individuals with a desire to involve themselves in community development, groups looking for new members in community development activities, organizations and enterprises that would like to contribute to the community, and researchers and specialists who would like to put their know-how and expertise to good use. Machibata.net enables these individuals, groups, organizations, and others to gather and share information on community development activities and to become involved with each other's activities. The Machibata.net concept is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

The main feature of Machibata.net is that individuals, groups, and organizations involved in community development activities can create a "machibata" (where "machi" and "hata" are respectively the Japanese words for "town" and "flag"), which means a flag that is flown to inform others of community development activities. A machibata corresponds to a project, so a group can raise more than one machibata. It consists of information that should not change over the medium- or long-term, such as the value gained from activities and future vision, and information that changes over the short term, such as event announcements. A key feature of a machibata project is that it describes the non-changing type of information in the form of a "social card," which is a communication framework for summarizing community development activities including "thoughts" on those activities. The structure of a social card is based on the Fujitsu-developed Appreciative & Imaginative (AIm) interview model outlined in **Figure 2**.
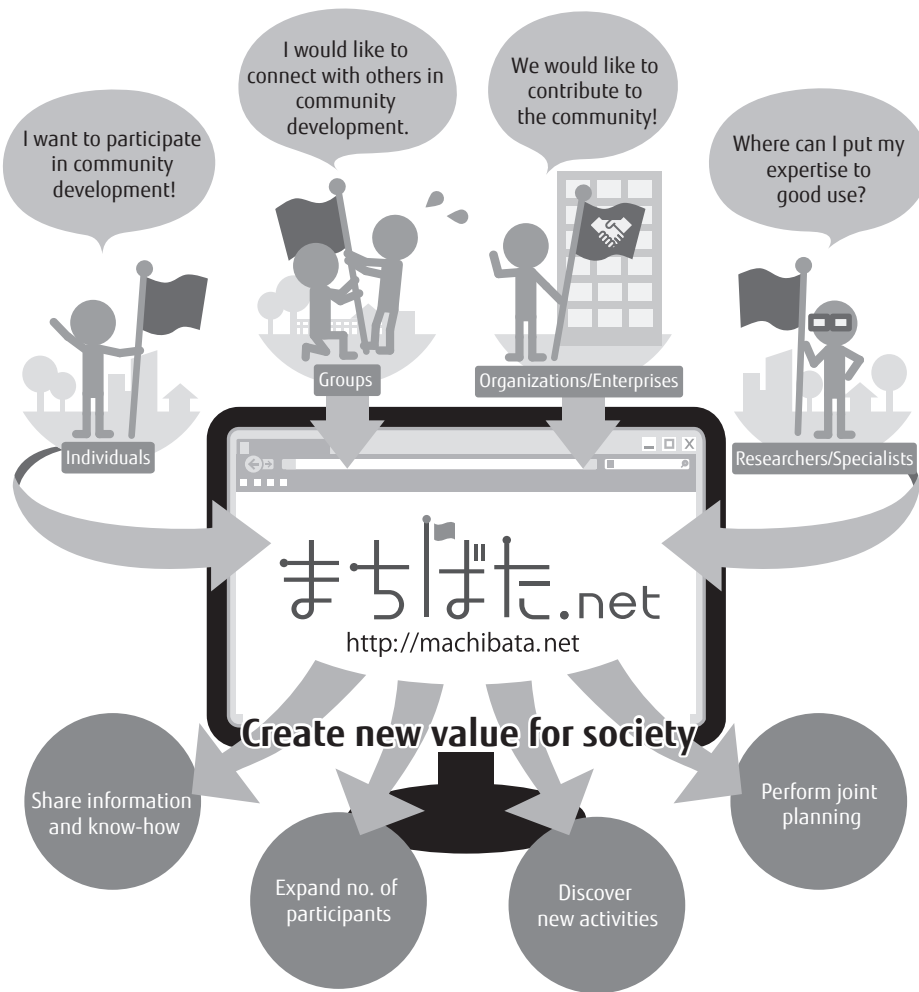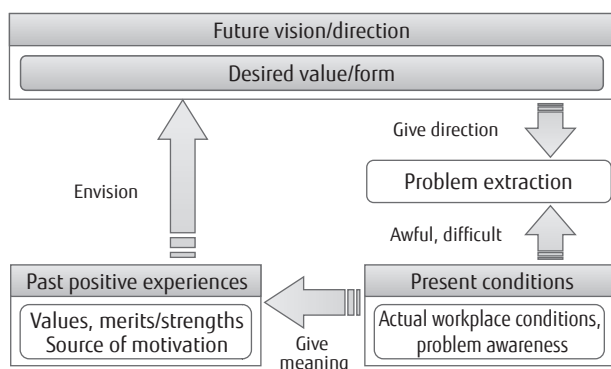
Figure 1
Machibata.net concept.

Figure 2
AIm interview model.

The AIm interview model is used for qualitative surveys and analyses and was developed with the aim of identifying the basic, deep-rooted needs of product and service users so as to design concepts with a medium- to long-term outlook. The strong point of the AIm interview model is its ability to capture, express, and convey "thoughts."[4]

In community development activities, it is important to express and convey individual ideas and images about the community, that is, thoughts that lie at the root of those activities, such as "I would like to solve the problems in the community" or "I would like the community to take this form in the future." With Machibata. net, this is made possible by applying the AIm interview model.

4. Machibata.net service system

There are two main categories of services provided by Machibata.net. One is the "Machibata" service for becoming acquainted with others, providing mutual support, and forming tie-ups with respect to community development activities in regions throughout the country. The other is the "Machibata Report" service for sharing information about people active in the community, thoughts on a group's activities, know-how, and other matters of interest in relation to community development. All Machibata.net services can be used free of charge after creating an account through Facebook, Twitter, mixi, Yahoo!, or Google.
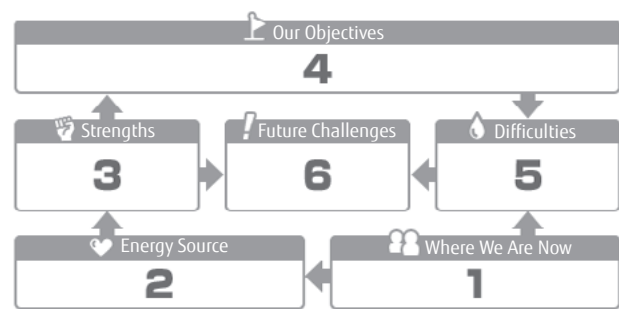
For a community development group, Machibata.net can serve as a Website for publicizing the content of its own activities, searching for and recruiting people to participate in and support its activities, and receiving materials and disseminating activity details. For an individual, Machibata.net can be used to learn about community development activities in communities throughout the country including one's own, to declare one's intent to participate or support certain activities, and to read articles on various types of community development groups.

5. Machibata service

The Machibata service provides five functions in particular.

1) "Machibata creation"

This function enables the creation of a portal page for introducing and sharing community development activities. In addition to allowing the entry of basic information such as name of group, region of activities, and overview of activities, it also provides for the creation of a social card. As shown in **Figure 3**, a social card consist of six items: "Where We Are Now" describing the current state of activities, "Energy Source" describing the motivating force behind the activities, "Strengths" describing the strong points of the activities, "Our Objectives" describing the objectives and targets of the activities and future vision, "Difficulties" describing problems associated with the activities and the gap between an ideal situation and reality, and "Future Challenges" describing upcoming activities. Each of these items is described in a brief and straightforward manner within a limited number of words. These six items are configured to have a present-past-future

Figure 3
Structure of a social card.

relationship with each other that enables community development activities to be outlined in a concise manner including thoughts on those activities.

2) "Machibata support"

With this function, one can declare "support" for another community development activity that one may be interested in or empathize with. This support is specifically expressed by clicking on a "Support this Machibata" button appearing on each machibata project portal. The function provides value in the form of mutual connections between user and machibata, user and user, and machibata and machibata. Each machibata, moreover, includes an area that displays the users who are currently providing support so that a user can learn about other users who are supporting that machibata. In this way, a user can learn about the presence of other users having similar interests and concerns. Additionally, for users also supporting other machibatas, there is an area that displays those other machibatas. Thus, a user perusing or supporting a certain machibata project can learn about the existence of other machibatas that he or she may have an interest in or empathize with.

3) "Event creation and management"

With this function, users can publicize seminars, study groups, and other events held in relation to community development activities and manage applications for participating in them. There are two types of events: public events to be "viewed" in newspapers and magazines or on the Web or TV and participatory events to be "attended" such as seminars, workshops, and roundtable discussions. A Machibata.net user who has created a machibata can create events for that machibata, and any Machibata.net user can submit an

application to attend an event.

4) "Needs-matching"

This function enables users to register declarations like "I can provide support" and "I need support." Multiple instances of each may be registered. A user can also register medium- and long-term information expressing, for example, the ability to support the "strengths," that is, the specific activities of a certain machibata, or the need for support in dealing with "difficulties" faced by one's own machibata. There is also a way for registering short-term information such as the need for support in recruiting staff for an upcoming event.

5) "Social media linking"

Content created on Machibata.net via the Machibata and Machibata Report services can be connected to a variety of social networking services (SNSs) such as Facebook and to other existing Web content. There are two linking methods for this purpose. In one method, Machibata.net automatically installs social plugins for connecting purposes whenever content is created by the user, and, in the other method, the user specifies the URLs of other Websites or blogs when creating a machibata project. A "social plugin" is a function provided by an SNS like Facebook enabling content on a Website to be connected to the SNS. The former method automatically installs social plugins for Google+, Tumblr, Delicious, mixi check, Hatena Bookmark, and Facebook, while the latter method allows any URL pointing to a Website, blog, Twitter account, or Facebook page to be specified. A machibata also includes an "activity log" area that automatically collects and consolidates up-to-date information from various forms of media as specified by the user and displays it in time-series form.

6. Machibata Report service

Machibata Report carries thoughts on community development activities and related know-how from key individuals and groups in the community in the form of news articles. These articles are written in two basic ways. In one, Machibata.net personnel perform all tasks from news gathering to article preparation and publishing, and, in the second, a graduate of the citizen-reporter training course collects news and writes the article while the Machibata.net secretariat publishes the article. The latter method is expected

to become increasingly important as Machibata.net usage expands.

7. Citizen-reporter training course

The "citizen-reporter training course" combines classroom education with on-the-job training and was developed to provide Machibata.net users an opportunity and venue to acquire the skills needed to collect and disseminate information about their communities. The seven sessions cover newsgathering, effective interviewing, taking photos and video, preparing news articles, disseminating information via social media, practicing newsgathering and article preparation, and course review (**Table 1**).

In the "newsgathering" session, a professional media editor or reporter from the local community talks to the students about the role and value of local media and relates anecdotes about actual news gathering. In the "practicing" session, articles prepared by the students on local facilities, people, or groups of personal interest or concern are carried in "Machibata Report" on Machibata.net.

The graduates are provided with a business card giving them the title of "Reporter" as a form of course-completion certificate. The aim of this business card is twofold. Having the title of "Reporter" makes subsequent newsgathering activities easier, and having a business card facilitates the creation of contact points for conducting exchanges with community residents and community development activities. For these

Table 1
Typical curriculum of citizen-reporter training course.

Session	Theme	Lecturer
1	Newsgathering	Professional media editor or reporter
2	Effective interviewing	Fujitsu Laboratories staff member
3	Photo and video taking using a digital camera and post-processing	Content producer in target community
4	Preparing news articles	Fujitsu Laboratories staff member
5	Disseminating information via social media	Fujitsu Laboratories staff member
6	Practicing newsgathering and article preparation	Fujitsu Laboratories staff member
7	Course review	Fujitsu Laboratories staff member

reasons, the front of the business card (**Figure 4**) includes the title "Reporter," the person's full name and contact information, and the Machibata.net URL pointing to the news articles written by that reporter. The back of the card (**Figure 5**) presents the reporter's personal social card, which conveys the reporter's interests and/or concerns and reporting activities. This business card is presented to the students towards the end of the course, before the "practicing" session. Using the card even during on-the-job training facilities newsgathering activities.

The citizen-reporter training course has two notable features. It is planned and held in coordination with local public bodies and media outlets, and the graduates get to use Machibata.net as a media outlet for the news articles they prepare. Furthermore, it has two key effects. First, in addition to providing the students with newsgathering skills, it promotes exchanges with the community as the reporter engages in newsgathering activities. Second, for people with no job title such as housewives and retired individuals, it can provide a sense of fulfillment and a place in society as a citizen reporter.

8. Achievements and future developments

Since its launch in November 2011, Machibata.net has been successively adding functions such as event creation and management. The citizen-reporter training course was first held in Kanagawa Prefecture in May 2012, and it has since been held in other regions in Japan such as Nakano City in Tokyo, Nagoya City in Aichi Prefecture, and Fukuoka Prefecture (**Table 2**).

People have been commenting on Machibata.net, saying, for example: "It is difficult for a local government to create citizen-exchange media having no regional bias. Enabling private entities to do this is meaningful." "I would like to use the service that collects information on community development activities in other communities." and "Couldn't I use Machibata.net as a source for studying coordination between local-government staff and regional NPOs?" On the whole,

Figure 4
Example of citizen-reporter business card (front).
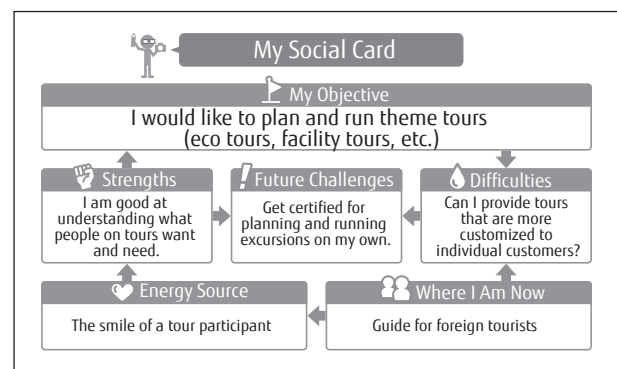
Figure 5
Example of citizen-reporter business card (back).

Table 2
Achievements in holding citizen-reporter training course.

Course	Region	Period	Collaborator
FY2012 Volunteer Reporter Training Course for Prefecture Citizens	Kanagawa Prefecture	May – July 2012	Kanagawa Community College (Kanagawa Prefecture)
Volunteer Reporter Training Course for Nakano City Citizens	Nakano City, Tokyo	October – December 2012	Street Design Research Organization (specified non-profit corporation), Nakano City Social Welfare Conference
Learning Reporter Newsgathering Techniques from Professionals	Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture	November – December 2012	Nagoya City, Fujitsu Tokai Regional Office
herbest Citizen-reporter Training Course	Fukuoka Prefecture	November – December 2012	herbest (NOTCH)

users have good things to say about the Machibata.net concept.

We administered a questionnaire to students of the citizen-reporter training course, asking them what they expected from the course and what they found appealing about it. Some typical replies were: "I need a platform for sending out information on my own and the know-how needed to do it." "I would like to use the course as a basis for creating an informational magazine for my own NPO activities." "I would like to use the course for training people in government-based intermediate support organizations." "I want to learn techniques for listening, communicating, and talking about things that interest me." "I like the fact that the course includes actual on-the-job training and not just classroom studies." These replies reflect latent needs in community residents for means of disseminating information.

We also asked students about the creation and provision of reporter business cards. Typical replies were "I again have my own business card after three years without one, which I'm very glad about." "I used to visit facilities that I found interesting to learn about them, but would arrive alone and empty-handed, making me look somewhat suspicious. Receiving a business card changed all that." "I initially prepared my social card as instructed, thinking that I would later change its content, but I found that it was a good conversation starter, so I left it as it is." These replies indicate that having a reporter business card can be effective in creating new relationships with the community.

Using these achievements as a starting point, we plan to give Machibata.net an extensive lineup of services from both real world and Internet perspectives to enhance its social value as a community development hub unbounded by region.

9. Conclusion

This paper introduced the Machibata.net concept. The purpose of Machibata.net is to connect community development activities across regional boundaries and to create new value for society. To this end, the Website makes it easy to distribute all sorts of information, including qualitative information, through such services as a "social card" for outlining community development activities and related "thoughts" and "Machibata Report" for presenting thoughts on community development

activities and know-how in the form of news articles. It also provides people who wish to acquire the skills needed to collect and disseminate information about their communities an opportunity and venue to do so in the form of a "citizen-reporter training course" and also issues reporter business cards as a catalyst to local revitalization. At Fujitsu Laboratories, we will continue to promote the use of Machibata.net as a major hub of community development and as a social infrastructure for bringing about new value in the community and society.

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FUJITSU Sci. Tech. J., Vol. 49, No. 4 (October 2013)

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