

Ann Arbor IT Zone

Establishing User Profiles And Increasing Membership

Team: Eating Beyond Our Bandwidth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Background

The Ann Arbor IT Zone is a non-profit organization that strives to build a community of IT professionals in the Ann Arbor area while providing technical resources and education for entrepreneurs and area small business owners. Presently, the IT Zone does not have a good understanding of its users and their needs. This lack of understanding is reflected in a low membership conversion from event attendees, and is a detriment to the IT Zone, which relies on the revenue from its membership to function. Additionally, the IT Zone website has not been significantly updated since its inception in 1999, and therefore is not currently meeting the needs of the organization.

User Demographics

The members of Eating Beyond our Bandwidth (EBOB) used a demographic questionnaire in order to obtain specific information on a wide variety of users. This information included: age ranges, education levels, professions, website usage, and how they hear about events. The users of the IT Zone have an equally distributed age range between the ages of 25 and 65. Two-Thirds of IT Zone users have a bachelors degree; almost all remaining users have a masters or doctorate degree as well. Most members tend to use the website on a weekly basis to view information about events, whereas only 12% of non-members used the website.

Membership Issues

Two focus groups with a total of seven members and five interviews were held with a variety of members and non-members. Additionally all three staff members were interviewed. Upon analysis, EBOB found that current members of the IT Zone are not aware of all of the benefits of membership, including use of the IT Zone building for meeting space. Additionally, both members and non-members felt that for membership to be worthwhile there should be more value in the membership. After analyzing and concatenating the interviews and focus groups, EBOB recommends that the IT Zone:

- Create a document or publication clearly stating all benefits of membership
- Create a members-only section of the website with
 - An up-to-date and easy to use member directory
 - Audio and video content from select presentations

Website Issues

Both the questionnaires and interviews indicate that most IT Zone participants that use the website only do so to read information about events, and usually access the website by clicking specific links from the weekly update email. Users feel that the website does not reflect the missions and goals of the IT Zone, and that features should be added to cultivate a sense of community. Because most individuals that are familiar with the IT Zone bypass the front page, it should be geared more towards people that are not familiar with the IT Zone. EBOB has created a proposed layout for the index page of the website in order to better convey the values and activities of the IT Zone to newcomers.

OVERVIEW OF ORGANIZATION

Eight years ago, a group of professors at the University of Michigan looked at the way private industry, local government, and educational institutions were co-operating in Palo Alto, CA to capitalize on the information technology opportunities there. These professors saw a similar mix of attributes in Ann Arbor and in November 1997, the Ann Arbor IT Zone was created to bring these interests together to benefit the community as a whole. The result was an organization focused on wiring downtown Ann Arbor as well as providing a “clubhouse” atmosphere where members could develop relationships and exchange ideas to promote IT growth.

The IT Zone grew quickly, but following the “dot com” bust, a shortfall of resources and sponsorship forced a re-evaluation of their mission. In 2001, the Ann Arbor IT Zone was awarded a SmartZone grant. The SmartZone program enlists organizations around the state of Michigan to develop technology-based business and jobs in their designated areas. The Ann Arbor IT Zone shifted away from a networking/trade organization model and now serves its members by offering courses and workshops intended to assist the development of local businesses.

This change in mission has also forced the IT Zone to define itself among the myriad of organizations meant to promote business growth in Washtenaw County. The IT Zone now falls under an umbrella organization, Ann Arbor SPARK. SPARK’s mission is to promote economic development from the technology research breakthroughs made at the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University. To that end, the IT Zone is responsible for the educational part of this mission by hosting events and providing a forum for people involved in small business to exchange ideas and experiences.

Following this transition, the IT Zone knows that its demographics have changed and it desires to know more about the people attending its events. Its current goals are to grow membership and invigorate the current member base. To accomplish these goals, the IT Zone wants to understand its users and streamline its website to suit the new mission.

Key staff members that will be working with our group include Suzanne Thomashefski (membership and programs coordinator) and Dianne Durance (President).

The Ann Arbor IT Zone website can be found at <http://www.annarboritzone.com>.

SITUATION DESCRIPTION & STATEMENT OF NEED

Situation Description

Ann Arbor IT Zone is a non-profit organization that strives to build a community of IT professionals in the Ann Arbor area. Initially, the goals of IT Zone were mainly focused on creating a hub of tech-related activity through professional interaction and networking opportunities for local businesses and individuals. Recently, their emphasis has shifted to providing resources and education for entrepreneurs and people interested in technology through technology-oriented classes, speakers, and presentations.

Statement of Need

The staff is currently occupied with running the events, classes, and speaker series and has not been able to get a good profile of their current and potential members. The client would like to analyze and evaluate its relationship to its users with particular attention paid to the following points:

- The organization's website has not been significantly updated since inception, and it is feared that the website is not meeting the needs of current members and non-members
- IT Zone relies on contributions from people attending events and from membership sign-ups, but have not had much success in increasing membership
- Would like to improve their website to clearly reflect the mission, identity, and goals of the organization, present enticing events that are easy to sign up for and attract attendees, facilitate organizational members sign ups, and include meaningful content for the members-only section of the site.
- IT Zone does not currently have a clear or current picture of its members and their needs, wants, or working practices
- Has frequent events where a significant portion of attendees are "people off the street"
 - Administrators do not know/understand who these people are or why they come, what they do, what they want out of this, etc
 - Would like to convert these people to members, but need better understanding of who they are first

METHODS

Overview

This study was conducted in order for the staff of the Ann Arbor IT Zone to better understand who the users are that participate in the IT Zone. Additionally, this study was conducted to understand what membership means to users and how the IT Zone can use that information to increase membership.

In order to conduct this study, two research methods were used. First, demographic questionnaires were handed out at events over the course of several weeks in order to get a broad view of who the participants are. Second, interviews and focus groups were conducted with a range of IT Zone users including members, non-members, and all three staff members. All interviewees completed the IRB form, shown in Appendix F.

The members of Eating Beyond our Bandwidth also attended many IT Zone events and interacted with the staff and participants. These observations helped team members understand how users interacted with each other and with the organization. After each event, the IT Zone staff send out an email survey to participants in order to get feedback about the event. EBOB had access to these surveys, however they were not used in our analysis.

Research Objectives

The goals of the research performed were as follows:

- Determine the age ranges, education levels, and professions of participants at IT Zone events.
- Gauge usage of the IT Zone website along with what aspects of the site are most important to users.
- Evaluate whether or not the IT Zone website meets the information needs of the users.
- Determine additional website features that would enhance participating in the IT Zone.
- Assess how much members and non-members know about becoming a member and what they feel is valuable in membership.
- Offer suggestions on how to increase membership

Research Subjects

52 users of the IT Zone filled out a demographic questionnaire. All but one were between the ages of 25 and 65 and all but one had at least a college degree.

Two focus groups were conducted with a group of five and a group of two. The group of five consisted of a range of user types including an extremely active member, a moderately active member, a new member, and two non-members. The focus group of two consisted of one member and one representative from a member company. Both focus groups took place in a conference room at the IT Zone immediately following a High Tech Tuesday event.

Interviews were conducted with three members and two non-members in a variety of locations. Two interviewees were provided by the IT Zone staff, two were recruited after events, and one was recruited from the School of Information.

The two full time staff members and one part-time staff member were interviewed at the IT Zone as well.

Data Collection

The demographic questionnaire was one-sided half sheet handed out by the IT Zone staff and EBOB members on the following dates:

Table 1. Number of Questionnaire Forms Filled out by Date

Date	# of Forms Filled Out
10/25	12
11/08	19
11/10	8
11/11	8
11/15	5

Participants at the IT Zone that chose to complete the questionnaire filled it out during the speaker's presentation and placed it on a table as they left. The number of questionnaires returned for each date is indicated on the table above.

The IT Zone staff provided EBOB with a list of 5 members and 3 non-members that would be willing to participate in interviews. EBOB also recruited several interviewees while at events.

EBOB initially contacted provided interviewees by email and set up interviews through email or over the phone. Table 2 provides information on interviews including dates, interviewers, recruitment methods, locations, and recording method. F# denotes members of a focus group, U# denotes individual interviews, and S# denotes staff interviews.

Table 2. Interview Logistics

Date	Key	Interviewer(s)	Member Type	Profession	Recruitment Method	Interview Location	Recording Instrument
10/25/05	F1, F2, F3, F4, F5	Rob, Alok, Jason N.	3 Members, 2 Non-members	PR Firm Owner, Startup Tech Business, Professor's Assistant, Startup business employee, Company President	Recruited after Event	IT Zone Conference Room	Sony TCM 200 DV with clear voice technology
11/1/05	U1	Amy, Rob	Non-Member	Consultant	Recruited after Event	IT Zone Conference Room	Sony TCM 200 DV with clear voice technology
11/15/05	U2	Alok	Member	Small Business Owner	Recruited after Event	Room at IT Zone	Sony TCM 200 DV with clear voice technology
11/15/05	F6, F7	Rob, Jason N.	Company Member, Individual Member	Small Business owners	Recruited after Event	Room at IT Zone	Sony TCM 200 DV with clear voice technology
11/16/05	U3	Rob	Non-Member	Student	Recruited at SI by EBOB	Student Lounge at SI	Apple Powerbook Internal Microphone
11/16/05	S1	Jason N.	Staff	IT Zone Staff	N/A	IT Zone Conference Room	Sony TCM 200 DV with clear voice technology
11/17/05	U4	Jason Y.	Company Member, Former member of Web Evaluation Committee	Principle consultant	Provided by IT Zone Staff	Roundevu on South University, Ann Arbor MI	Digital Recorder
11/22/05	U5	Amy	Member, Program Committee Member	Software Developer	Provided by IT Zone Staff	AOL Instant Messenger	N/A
11/22/05	S2	Amy	Staff	IT Zone Staff	N/A	IT Zone Conference Room	Apple 3G iPod with Griffin iTalk
11/22/05	S3	Rob	Staff	IT Zone Staff	N/A	IT Zone Conference Room	Apple Video iPod with Griffin iTalk

The interview questions for focus groups, interviews, staff members are located in Appendices C, D, and E respectively. EBOB members interviewed a wide variety of participants in the IT Zone, and therefore tailored each interview slightly to gather insight based on each person's experience. These differences can be seen in the transcripts in Appendix G.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaires was tabulated using a relational database using PHP and MySQL. The data was broken down by event and also combined together as well. Fields that were not filled out were not included in the tabulation. Therefore, some questions had more answers than others. All answers were evaluated on a percentage basis. The data was queried using MySQL to discover relationships between categories. The raw data was exported to Excel and can be seen in Appendix B.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed. EBOB Members gathered to discuss the most important aspects of the interviews, which included “users”, “membership”, “website”, and “communication.” Each transcript was analyzed for information relating to those categories, and pertinent quotes from all interviewees were combined.

EBOB members used their own observations of members interacting at events to understand the overall culture networking component of the IT Zone.

FINDINGS

IT Zone USERS FINDINGS

Profile of users based on the information collected:

Many interesting insights into the IT Zone’s event attendees can be gleaned from the “IT Zone Questionnaires” that were filled out by attendees at various IT Zone events. All together, 52 attendees filled out the questionnaire over a span of five different IT Zone events. Of those that filled out the questionnaire a good majority (about 66%) were members of IT Zone. This also means that there are a sizable number of people who attend IT Zone events who are not members; this would lend credence to the original issue of people attending events at the IT Zone who are not members. Out of the non-member attendees there was a clear majority of those (about 53%) who attended between 3 to 5 IT Zone events per year. This made apparent the fact that non-members do not only come for an event or two but also attend multiple events. This is one of the problems that IT Zone is facing, converting repeat non-member event attendees into full-fledged members of the IT Zone.



Figure 1. Attendance of Members vs. Non-Members

In terms of the average number of events attended by members of each group, the members seem to take full advantage of their membership by attending over five events per year. The non-members do not attend as many events per year, they attend a little over two events per year; this is explainable by the fact that non-members need to pay to attend an event. The attendance patterns also come to light when looking at per event attendance. Certain events having to do with small business, such as the one titled “Building Small Businesses That Learn, Lead and Last” attracted many more members (16) than non-members (3). Other events such as the one titled “R&D with the Department of Defense” attracted more non-members (7) compared to the attendees who were members (4) of the IT Zone. Such discrepancies can be further studied over multiple events where non-members out-number existing members to try to seek ways of attracting non-members to the IT Zone.

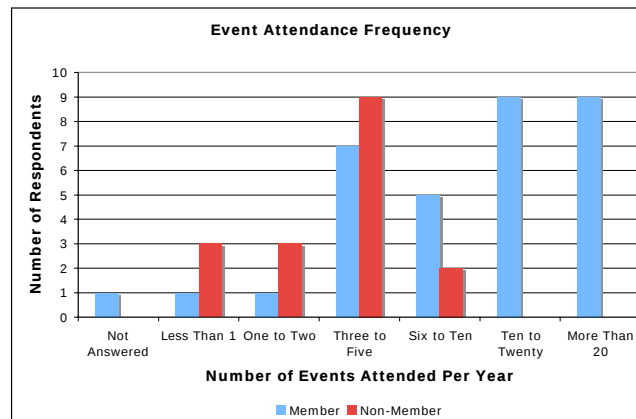


Figure 2: Number of Events Attended by Members and Non-Members per Year

One might have expected the attendees of IT Zone events to come overwhelmingly from technology or IT related industries. During the interviews, S3 estimated about 70% of the overall users were from technology related industries. About 40% of the attendees were from non-technology related industries. There was still a majority, 60%, who were from technology related fields but the ratio was not as high as initially expected. With regards to the members of IT Zone, this picture is a little bit different. About 80% of the respondents who are members

worked in technology related fields. On the non-member side, only about 30% of the respondents worked in technology related industries. This diversity is a good sign for the IT Zone and could be utilized as a tool for better informing potential members, especially those who are not employed in the technology industry. The difference between members working in technology related industries versus those who are not members of IT Zone could also be an indicator of the changing nature of the events organized by the IT Zone.

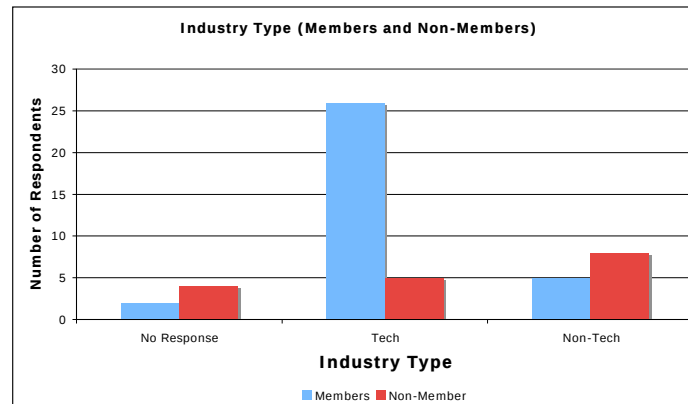


Figure 3: Overview of industry type in members and non-members

Channels of communication:

Besides providing basic demographic data about the uses of IT Zone the “IT Zone Questionnaires” also provided insight into the communication channels used by both members and non-members of the IT Zone. During the course of the interviews and focus groups a majority of the users interviewed stated that their primary mode of communication with the IT Zone was through email. These statements are supported by the data collected through the IT Zone Questionnaire. About 62% of the participants stated that email was their primary and sometimes the only means of finding out information about a given event. There were a number of people (21%) who received event information from the IT Zone website, as well.

The website appeared to be used more by members (27%) to find information about events compared to only 12% of non-members. The usage of other channels of communication such as flyers and word of mouth also seemed to be under-utilized. None of the non-members who filled out the questionnaire had received information about the event via flyers and only 17% received information about the event from friends or colleagues. This low usage of the tools such as the website, the flyer, and word of mouth shows an area of concern for IT Zone in terms of attracting non-members to attend their events and potentially become members of the IT Zone. The indication that about 65% of the non-members get information about events at the IT Zone via email sent out by the IT Zone shows that one has to already be on the IT Zone email list to get information about upcoming IT Zone events. This indicated an under usage of the other forms of communication with users and potential users as found previously.

Members of the IT Zone who attended more than ten events per year also tended to be heavier users of the IT Zone website. About 44% of the members who attended more than ten events per year used the website to obtain event information, in comparison to only 7% of the members who attended less than ten events per year. This discrepancy points to more awareness among

heavy users regarding the IT Zone website. It also allows for an opportunity for IT Zone to increase user awareness regarding the IT Zone website.

ORGANIZATION & MEMBERSHIP FINDINGS

What are people's perceptions of membership?

There were many distinct interpretations of what membership means to the users of IT Zone. When asked about "membership", most respondents attempted some sort of definition of the "community" and what that means in terms of profession, geographical region, and peer group. Perceptions differed among members, nonmembers, and staff members, but were also quite dependent on the size and level of maturity of the business or organization each individual was affiliated with. When asked about what their idea of membership meant, many users simply responded with descriptions of what one can do at IT Zone events, regardless of membership status. There is a qualitative value of the organizational/brand image within the regular user community. If someone is attending multiple events and getting involved in the community, it is seen as "natural" that they would become a member.

Types of Community

F6: "It wasn't a specific event that pulled me in, it was more about a conscious decision to get more involved."

U3- "I was really just focused on the event, I didn't know what its business was outside of sponsoring lectures and things like that. Community gathering point and information dispersal."

U5: "[The primary role of IT Zone is to] bring together technology companies for networking and educational benefits as well as helping to build a local community of technology entrepreneurs."

S3: "[For smaller companies] I think it's a chance to meet their peer group and to possibly meet people who could be helpful to them...service providers, or people that could introduce them to financial resources, that kind of thing."

F6: "I think that there's a lot of people that come to IT Zone events once in a while that are very much A Players in the within the Washtenaw county, southeast Michigan IT and kind of extended business community. So there's definitely that attraction."

F6: "[The primary goal of IT Zone is] to create an environment where you can network with the broad community that serve the IT environment in this community. Whether it's the banks and venture capitals, the entrepreneurs, the developers, that sort of thing..."

F7: "I'm an entrepreneur, so I enjoy this kind of environment. It's a natural thing for me to support and want to be part of that environment."

Business/Networking Focus

U5: "[I use IT Zone for] both networking and educational sessions as well as Creativity

Forum (which I wouldn't classify as educational or networking but still useful)."

U4: "It does help connect you with some of the other business community around Ann Arbor. In some ways its like joining a local chamber, where sort of part of the cost of doing business... With an organization like that it's almost easier to ask why *Shouldn't* you be a member, rather than asking what do you get from it? You should be part of that and help make it unique."

F6: "From a practical, starting a new company point of view, we're trying to get more involved in what's happening locally so we can hopefully make contacts to reach out to broader to broader markets."

F3: "I am trying to learn some new technology and I knew I needed to make some contacts locally, I wanted to find my capital and I wanted to raise my family here. I'd answer the question, how do I meet these people? Where are they?"

Education/Socializing Focus

F1: "I'm intrigued by every program that's put on around here. There's lot of subjects, its very educational for a non-IT person. For a marketing guy, which I am, I do have pretty broad interests. I like to find a way to get good overview, kind of shallow from my perspective, but given me a broad base in understating information technology."

F2: "I think it allows an opportunity to be mentored or be a mentor. I think that's really important in this community."

U2: "I'm not looking for how to start a business... I went to dozens of those talks back in the '80's. I'm not short on talks. I'm looking for the most part, for things that are academically interesting."

Worth/\$

U2: "So financially it was a wash, and we figured we could be in the database and since I show up it makes sense that I be a member instead of a moocher. It looks more substantial and responsible if you're a member instead of just showing up all the time and a non-member."

Membership as the Physical Space

S2: "[The primary role of IT Zone is to] provide a place, a physical location for people to network on an ongoing basis..."

Membership as Civic Responsibility

S3: "[Large companies] just join because they want to support a local organization that encourages technology....a lot of [medium-sized companies] kind of lean in that direction too, where they don't really participate a lot, but they feel like they're leaders in the community and so they join."

Member Benefits

S2: “[...] there isn’t a lot of other member benefit than events.”

U2: “I’d rather work with someone who’s here, listening to things about IT than somebody in the yellow pages, who may not have any interest or knowledge of IT.”

What does the IT Zone do?

Two central themes which run through almost every response to this question involve education and networking. IT Zone has many elements to it and fulfills many roles, but these two areas came up again and again. Some key points seem to be the explicitness with which individuals can articulate these features, the extent to which they see each feature as being fulfilled, and level of integration between them both. IT Zone provides a common forum for entrepreneurs, larger business owners, and IT people in general.

General Networking

U4: “Right now it is primarily a networking organization, there isn’t much else in terms of services provided there.”

F2: “I’m getting to know the IT Zone. So this is part of my process in getting to know them and acquiring the skills that they have to offer, not as a class, but as a learning environment. How do you walk up to someone you don’t know, introduce your self, give your elevator talk, extract information, figure out when someone doesn’t like you and when to leave. All that kind of stuff.”

Small Business Acceleration

U4: “There’s absolutely nothing to get from, “it’s starting to get painful to do business out of my house to I’ve got some number, N employees where I actually need my own space.” And whether it be the chamber or Ann Arbor IT Zone or some other organization, there’s really nothing around to help bridge that step, so right now we’ve got a lot of companies that just stay as lifestyle businesses.”

U5: “I have met lots of people who have been helpful to me and my company (too many people to name). [...] I’ve also met some people that I knew years ago but lost contact information. [...] I’ve met several people who read my business plan and gave me feedback on it.”

U2: “It’s always the question with business incubators and is there enough venture capital and are bankers knowledgeable enough to work with small companies and startups. They’re trained to be bankers not venture capitalists, and is there a quorum, critical mass to accelerate things?”

Events as the Focus Point

F1: “The thing that’s good about it is that there’s so much activity. How many associations have at least one meeting every week and sometimes three or four meetings in a week.”

Bootcamp as Flagship Educational Event

F1: “Well, you mention mentoring before, twice a year there’s a boot camp, and its another great place where you have an opportunity. [...] It’s a very rewarding experience, being a mentor and I hope for the mentees, it’s the same way. It’s a great learning experience. You get a couple days and you get to see a parade of brilliant concepts and ideas...”

Use of the Space

S2: “[The most part of IT Zone is] the central location. The space. Because I think the value that our members are getting is really from each other, so having a place to be and having a home [...]”

What could IT Zone do better?

One major theme that kept coming up in this area was getting more people involved. This could take the form of involvement as members, event attendees, or as partner organizations. There were many suggestions involving the size, scope, and content of events and activities. Many of the suggestions revolved around communication techniques and tools, often referencing the website. There are suggestions to improve communication between the organization and its members, between the general public and the organization, between the general public and members, and to encourage cross member communication.

Users who are active in IT Zone seem to have a good sense overall of the community spirit and shared goals of the organization in addition to some ideas about the specific benefits of membership. Expanding this holistic/community view of membership could serve to increase membership and activity.

More People Involved

F6: “There’s some marketing aspect or some need that’s not quite being met exactly. I don’t know what it is but I’d be happier if there were more people there to network with and I think we could get more speakers, more people interested in talking as well.”

Better Advertising

U4: “You can find companies that are growing, but they’re certainly not pointing to the IT Zone as one of the contributing factors to their success. So if you’re looking to invest and help the Ann Arbor business community grow, is that really a good use of the money? [...]. If that has happened, whether it’s the website or something else, they’re not communicating it.”

Communication

U4: “It’s ridiculous when you compare it to places like Stanford which has a top-ranked graduate business school and a top-ranked computer science school, and gee, they grew a company called Google, go figure. In Boston, there’s another one, a better community of between people coming out of MIT and Harvard...a lot more working together across disciplines than I see anywhere around here.”

Use of Website

F6: “The main focus seems to be putting on events, an in-person event like tonight, which is very valuable and useful. But I think there’s also an opportunity to have more virtual events, a community online, members only, or members and friends community, where people could find people to hire.”

F7: “I would agree that they don’t foster enough online community.”

U5: “As a member, I’d like to be able to access a video or audio recording of recent sessions. More online resources. I’d like to have a linkedin group ([linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com)). A forum (possibly a wiki?) for bringing together the community (in the online forum members would be able to ask questions, get recommendations, etc.).”

F1: “[I would like to have an option] where you can sit in the entire talk on the Quicktime presentation or whatever it is and it would be nice to be able to link to that for the member because it people here for the most part think they are quite entrepreneurial and can’t get the benefit from the meetings because they can’t get to the meetings.”

F1: “You can find a member with it, if you know the name of the company, the contact information, so you know, it’s basically functional without bells and whistles.”

Organization/Membership Findings Synopsis

The user perception of what membership to the IT Zone means is integrated more into the overall nature of the organizational community rather than tied to specific membership benefits. Almost all of what IT Zone does is encompassed by the two categories of education and networking. Different users utilize each in varying degrees depending on their individual situation, but all we spoke with recognize their presence and significance. The core of what users feel could be improved at IT Zone concerns getting more people involved in all aspects of the organization and increasing and improving communication methods and tools, especially in the IT Zone website.

WEBSITE FINDINGS

How Is The IT Zone’s Website Being Used?

When asked how they use the website, several IT Zone members initially mention capabilities they know or think the website has. They also mention ways they’ve been frustrated in attempts to use the site. Although the IT Zone website has several features, we found an overwhelming trend of using the website nearly exclusively for the calendar.

That members use the website primarily to get information about future events suggests that the website contributes only to promoting the IT Zone’s on-site activities. The limited range and infrequency of use of the website by IT Zone users indicates that the website plays a minimal role in how people extract benefit from the IT Zone. If the directory, and other functions of the website are not being used, networking and promoting member businesses are not being advanced by the website.

F1: "I keep the IT Zone website bookmarked and I go there to check what's going on today."

F5: "[uses the website] approximately once a week to read a session description and possibly register for it."

F2: "I do always look at the email, a quick look to see if anything's new. Then most times I delete it; if I really want to know, I'll go to the website and get a complete listing."

F4: "What a good website for the organization should be is a clearinghouse for information and a way to keep members and prospective members informed about the organization and to publicize the events."

Does the website meet user needs and support the organization's mission?

We observed that features such as news, information about the IT Zone as an organization, and membership information went largely unused. Our inquiry into the website then became largely about potential uses of the website and whether the limitations of the website substantially hinders use of the IT Zone. We did not find a uniform level of dissatisfaction with the website. The people most unhappy with the website were those with the most knowledge of and experience with it.

IT Zone staff and members who have been involved with evaluating or maintaining the website made explicit and extensive references to specific shortcomings. The responses of this group, staff and members involved in committees made it clear that they had given thought to the relationship between the successful pursuit of the IT Zone's mission and the website. However, most people we spoke with expressed their dissatisfaction with the website by not using it. They adjust their use of the IT Zone to exclude possibilities offered by the website.

S2: "There's too much just block text and I find it hard to navigate, and I find information hard to catch, even in the event portion, you often have to fine tooth comb it to find out what it is."

F1: "I don't think the website really reflects the personality of the membership for some reason. It's very uh kind of impersonal in its style and you know somebody here could probably get creative and make it really exciting, but I think serves its purpose quite adequately."

F4: "A site with web content that hasn't changed in three months looks like the company has abandoned it, like it's not relevant, it's not part of their ongoing communications strategy. And the IT Zone website communicates that to prospective members. It's not updated; it's not relevant; it's just not being used. Now, is a website enough to make people leave? No. It's not the reason you join or leave an organization."

F3: "I wouldn't say the website defines how we think about this place. It's more of a mental reference point...so the bulk of my concept of the place is being here and is not communicated over the website."

F2: "I know they have a list of the existing members and what they do. I got myself in there at one point so I tried to find it. It was a little bit hard to find... So my use (of the website) is very limited to, what is the schedule. I was never motivated to do a whole lot more than that"

What is missing from the website?

We asked interviewees to discuss what they would add to the website. The things members wanted from the website often overlapped with ideas about how the website could be advancing the IT Zone's organizational goals. These suggestions include aesthetic and technical considerations, promotional and operational objectives, and the networking and educational functions of the IT Zone.

Posting information about what went on at events could help people who haven't attended them stay aware of what the IT Zone is doing. This could encourage people to attend events more frequently.

A forum that allowed user feedback, like a blog, would support discussion beyond the actual IT Zone building. This remote communication would allow users to remain engaged, encouraging different types of participation in the IT Zone.

F5: "I am disappointed / surprised that some people (board members and committee members) attend so rarely. How can you plan if you never attend? Perhaps if there was an online forum they would participate?"

S1: "Right now you pretty much have to come here to an event to really connect with the IT Zone."

- Several members have proposed improvements to the directory that would promote increased connection among local business.
- U1: "I think as they look to bring more industry into Ann Arbor, it would be beneficial to have a pool of people available for work.
- F2: "I'd rather work with someone who's here, listening to things about IT than somebody in the yellow pages, who may not have any interest or knowledge of IT."
- F2: "One website I do like is the Washtenaw country website and I don't know if you've looked at that but they really have all the links to anything you want to go to in regards to accounting."

Summary of Website Findings

The IT Zone's website is currently peripheral to their primary goals. There's no disagreement that the website's content and technology website are out of date. There is some difference of opinion as to how the website affects the IT Zone. Potential members of an organization focused on business and technology are likely to check its website. The outdated technology and information, and limited functionality fail to convey the identity and values of the IT Zone. However, the website is one of several communication tools used by the IT Zone, and many

users feel that the current website does what they need it to. The website is problematic mostly in that it is a missed opportunity to expand the ways in which people and businesses can participate in and benefit from the IT Zone.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANIZATION

Our findings are based on interviews, focus groups and personal observations. We found that awareness and identification with the user community at IT Zone is a major factor in the decision to become a member. A clear, concise, and reinforced expression of the community culture and mission will strengthen the organizational identity within the membership and among potential members. Our opinion is that IT Zone can increase membership value by cultivating this sense of community and extending this ideal to new users.

Assemble All Membership Benefits For Publication

None of our interviewees were able to name all the membership benefits. A lack of a comprehensive list, and confusing and complicated the website information both contribute to this problem. We recommend that a clear set of membership benefits be assembled and displayed in a concise manner on appropriate IT Zone literature and the website. This will help potential members to understand the full value of an IT Zone membership.

Website content needs to be rewritten to simplify membership information. A membership FAQ (frequently asked questions) document might be helpful to get people started on learning about IT Zone. Testimonials from members about how IT Zone has helped them professionally might be helpful as well.

Use Event Introductions as an Opportunity to Talk About IT Zone

At the beginning of each event, a speaker (usually Diane) starts the event and mentions IT Zone, but does not usually speak in depth about the organization. For people who are new to a particular event, a very short stump speech that expresses what IT Zone is about would be very helpful to introducing new users to the community.

Possible speech components:

- IT Zone's mission and organizational goals.
- Benefits of belonging to the IT Zone community
- Where to get more information

Increase Organizational Visibility by Using Signs

We observed that many people had difficulty finding the IT Zone offices and the entrance. The windows on the building display only the SPARK logo and the door to the building is not clearly marked. New members (and first time speakers!) will greatly benefit from better visibility afforded by adding the IT Zone logo to the windows and a sign marking the entrance.

Enhance Member Directory System to Augment Networking

Many members expressed interest in having a member directory that was easier to use and provided a better way to find other members. The main complaint was that it required too much

specific knowledge to find another member's information. The process for navigating the directory was often described as cumbersome and members wanted the option of making their information open to the public.

Interviewees wanted to use the directory in two ways. The first was to follow up on a networking experience. For instance, you might meet a new person at an event and use the directory to get contact or company information about that person. Second, some members wanted to use the directory to develop new contacts. One member gave the example that his company needed some graphic design work and wanted to find all the graphic designers in the database.

Users expressed interest in the following improvements:

- A more detailed profile that expands beyond contact information and job title.
 - Deeper description of what they do
 - Deeper description of the services their organization provides
- Ability to find members by a particular profession or trade
- Ability to find members by organization
- Ability to control whether the profile is open to the public

It might be helpful to have pictures of members added to each profile to help people identify a fellow member they may have met at a networking event.

Change Website Style to Promote IT Zone's Mission

Our interviewees held a nearly unanimous opinion that the web site does not communicate the ethos of IT Zone. Based on interviews and analysis, this can be improved in a number of ways.

- Redesign the site style to include images and depictions of community and education. The current logo and design do not give that impression.
- Consider developing a new tag line. "Where people and technology meet" may not be descriptive enough to convey what IT Zone really does.

Update Old Content and Add New Content to Create an Active Website

Outdated or stale information on the website harms the organization by sending the message that IT Zone is not an active community. This can be addressed in a number of ways

- Update static content and institute a procedure to periodically review this content and make revisions.
- Post event recaps along with news and announcements on the front page of the website.
 - Event recaps are a great way to update those who missed an event, and to give new users an idea of what IT Zone meetings are like.
 - Short description of what took place
 - When available, post power point slides used by presenters
 - Upload any pictures from the event
 - As technology becomes available, audio or video recordings of the event may be a great way to add value to memberships.

- Write a monthly article to introduce new members and/or highlight featured members. These types of articles can develop a sense of community and awareness about the activities of the membership.

Redesign Website Structure to Account for Access Methods

We found that regular IT Zone users tend to access the web site primarily through links provided in emails. As a result of this, we feel that the front page of the site should focus on promoting the IT Zone's image and mission.

Content should include:

- A global navigation system to help people get to major web site sections
- IT Zone News and recaps of events
- A short paragraph explaining the mission of IT Zone.
- A small section listing upcoming events
- A link or form to sign up for the mailing list

The Ann Arbor Ad Club (<http://www.a2ac.org>) has a good information architecture and website layout. We recommend looking at their site for reference on how a similar organization developed their website.

Website Notes

Since many users access the website through links from email communications, it is important to announce new website features. Mentioning the website at events and linking to new features in emails can help to ensure that members are aware of the website and use its features to their advantage.

Any website design initiative must be mindful of the ease of updating content. Keeping the website updated is extremely important to the image an organization, especially one actively involved in the IT community. There should be room to improve as technology improves. Whatever site is designed today will look outdated in several years. Creating a flexible design that allows for incremental improvement to keep the content and design in line with IT Zone's principles should be the long-term goal. Figure 4 shows a wireframe of a proposed redesign.

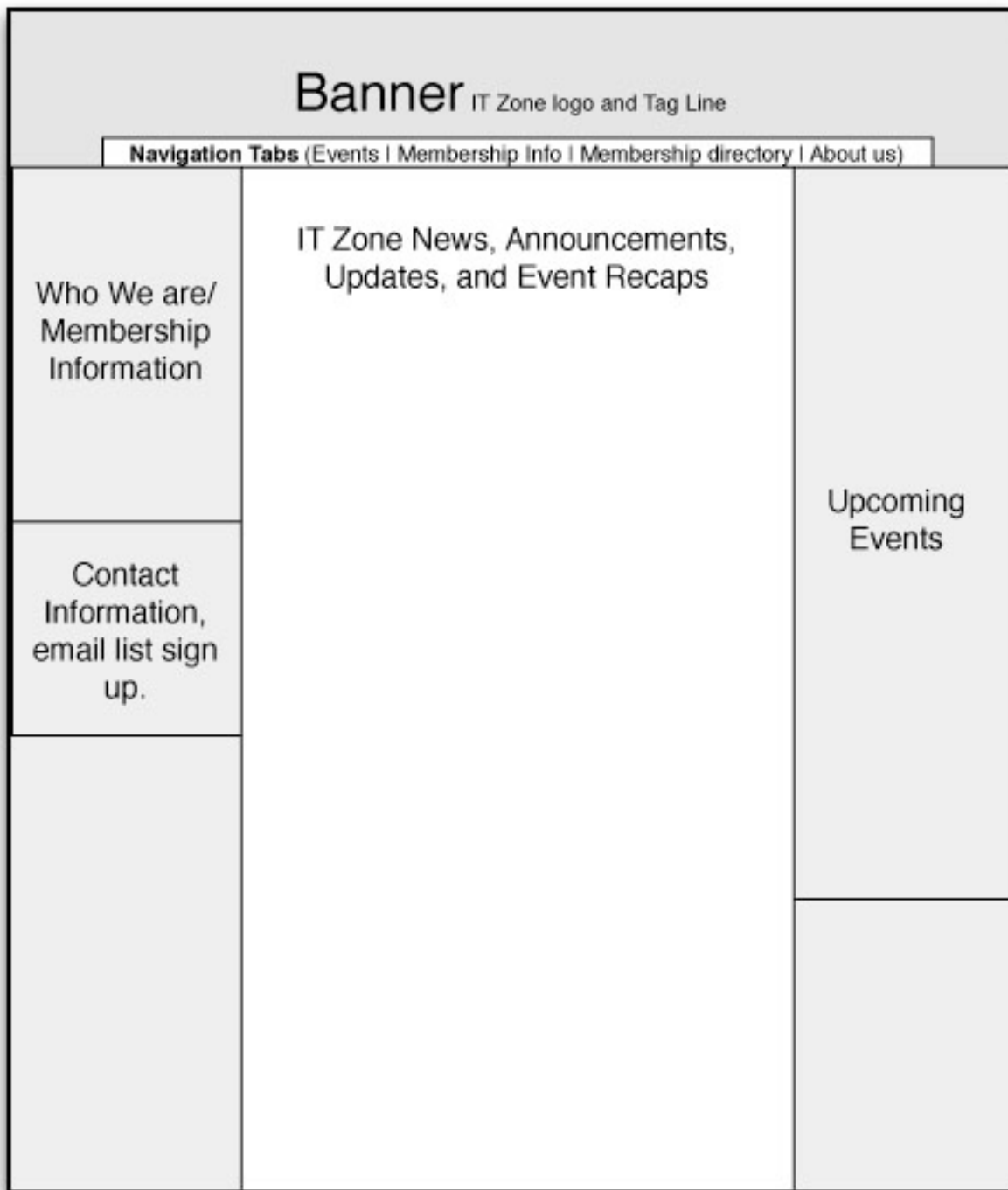


Figure 4. Wireframe of proposed index page

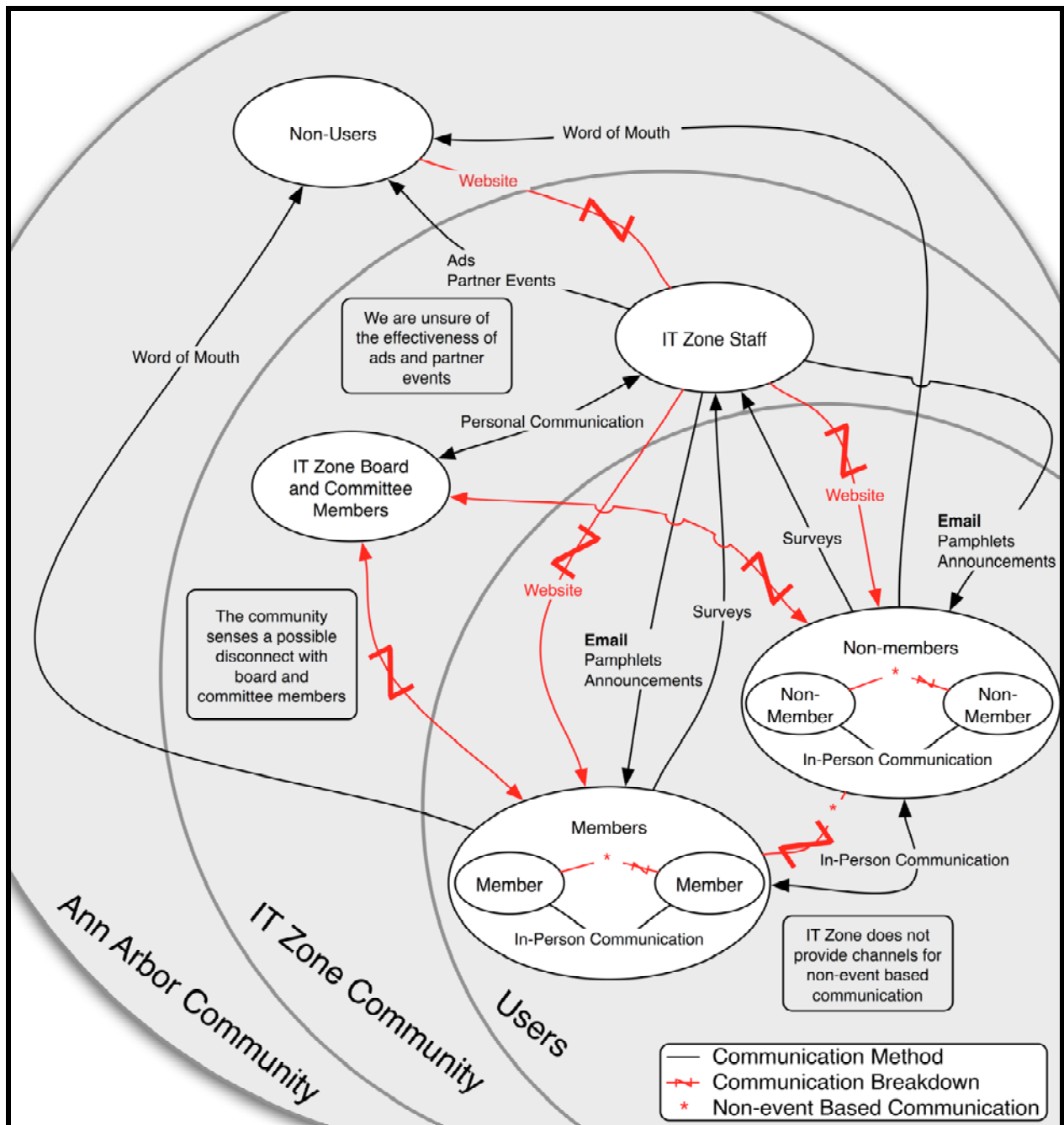


Figure 5: Communication Flow Diagram

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Ann Arbor IT Zone User Questionnaire

Thank you for your time!

Today's Date: _____

Name of Event: _____

Age Range: ☐ Under 25 ☐ 25 to 35 ☐ 35 to 45 ☐ 45 to 55 ☐ 55 to 65 ☐ 65+

Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male

Education: ☐ High School ☐ College/Professional Certification ☐ Graduate Degree
 ☐ Doctorate

Job Title: _____

Job Industry: _____

Are you a member of the Ann Arbor IT Zone? ☐ Yes ☐ No

How often do you attend IT Zone events? (per year, approximately)
 ☐ *Less than 1* ☐ *1-2* ☐ *3-5* ☐ *6-10* ☐ *10-20* ☐ *20+*

How did you hear about this particular event?

☐ IT Zone Web Site ☐ IT Zone Email ☐ Work ☐ Friend/Colleague ☐ Flyer
☐ Other (please explain): _____

How often do you use the IT Zone Website?

☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Monthly ☐ Several Times per Year ☐ Never

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire Raw Data

date	age	gender	education	JobTitle	Publication	member	events	website	email	work	friend	flyer	other	webhosting	eventspace
10/25/05	4	Male	3	President	Defense	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	DOO Research 4 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	0	0	2	Founder		2	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	DOO Research 2 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	2	Male	4	Scientist	University	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	DOO Research 6 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	2	Female	4	Assistant Professor	University	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	DOO Research 6 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	2	Female	2	Acct		2	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	DOO Research 4 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	3	Male	3	Sr. Manager R&D	Automotive	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	DOO Research 4 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	2	Male	2	Student body		2	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	DOO Research 6 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	0	0	2	Business Development Manager	IT Consulting	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	DOO Research 2 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	5	0	2	System Engineer	IT	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	DOO Research 2 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	4	Male	3	System Engineer	IT	1	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	DOO Research 2 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	2	Male	2	Business Sales Rep	Telecom	1	5	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	DOO Research 2 Tech Tuesday
10/25/05	2	Male	3	Director of Business Development	Automotive Energy	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	DOO Research 3 Tech Tuesday
11/05/05	5	Female	3	Consultant		2	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2 0 Discipinas
11/05/05	5	Female	2	Priv Mgr	UdM	2	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	4 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	2	Male	2	Superior	Construction	2	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2 0 Discipinas
11/05/05	3	0	2	President IT design bookkeeping	Software	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	4	Female	1	software	Manufacturing	1	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	4	Male	2	Business Owner Services		1	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	4	Male	4	President Smart		1	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	3	Female	2	Software	Software	1	5	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	3 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	3	Male	2	Software Architect	Computer IT Telecom	1	9	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	2	Male	2	Business Sales	Wireless	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	4	Male	3	President System	Software	1	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Discipinas
11/05/05	5	Male	2	Engineer	IT	1	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Discipinas

11/8/05	4 Male	5 System 2 Engineer	IT	1	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2 6 Dismisses
11/8/05	5 Male	3 CEO	Software	1	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Dismisses
11/8/05	3 Male	4 Senior Project Manager	Computer Software	1	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Dismisses
11/8/05	5 Male	4 President	Software	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4 6 Dismisses
11/8/05	4 Male	2 Owner	Software Safety and Security	1	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 6 Dismisses
11/8/05	3 Male	3 President	Consulting	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4 6 Dismisses
11/8/05	0 Female	3		1	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 6 Dismisses
11/11/05	2 Male	VP Sales and 2 Customer Ops	Tech	2	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	New 3 Marketing
11/11/05	5 Male	4 Senior Director Corp Comm	Business Development	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	New 3 Marketing
11/11/05	2 Female	2 Manager	Software	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 Marketing
11/11/05	2 Female	2 Specialist	Software	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 Marketing
11/11/05	2 Female	2 Manager	Software	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	New 0 Marketing
11/11/05	2 Male	2 Engineer	Software	1	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	New 2 Marketing
11/11/05	5 Male	2 Engineer	IT	1	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	New 2 Marketing
11/11/05	2 Female	3 Webmaster	Software	2	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4 Marketing
11/20/05	3 Female	3 Global Channel Manager	Software	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 4 Relationships
11/20/05	5 Male	3 President	Consulting	2	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 2 Relationships
11/20/05	4 Male	2 Sales	Software	2	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 2 Relationships
11/20/05	4 Male	2 Consultant	Software	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 3 Relationships
11/20/05	5 Male	2 President & CEO	Consulting	1	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 4 Relationships
11/20/05	5	0	2 System Engineer	IT	1	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 1 Relationships
11/20/05	2 Female	2 COO	Search Engine Marketing	1	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 3 Relationships
11/20/05	4 Female	3 CFO	IT	2	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Realer & Distributor 4 Relationships
11/15/05	1 Female	2 Executive	Public Relations	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 Changes
11/15/05	5 Male	3 Consultant	IT	1	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 Changes
11/15/05	3 Male	2 Architect	IT	1	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 Changes
11/15/05	2 Male	2 President	Software	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 Changes
11/15/05	2 Female	2 Corporate Communication Manager	Software Development	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 Changes

Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Questions

Hello we're from SI at the university of Michigan. We're conducting a study on IT zone's relationship to its users and we thank for taking time to speak with us. We're independent from IT zone and not here to solicit membership to the organization. In this focus group and we'd like to foster a discussion instead of a question and answer session, so please feel free to speak out with responses.

We need to record this session, the recordings will not be shared with anyone outside our group and you will remain anonymous in our results. Please sign our form if you have not yet already done so.

So to start, we're interested in four main questions:

Who are IT Zone's users?
Why do people join (or not join) the IT Zone?
How do you participate with IT Zone and/or their events?
How do you utilize with the website?

Really short questionnaire

What brought you to this event tonight (this morning)?

How did you first hear about tonight's event?

How many of you are IT Zone Members?

Those of you who are not members, what is your understanding of a membership to the IT Zone. What does it mean to you?

Those of you who are members, what motivated you to join? How did you join? what is your conception of membership to the IT Zone? What does it mean to you?

What do you see is as the primary role of IT Zone? What needs in the community does it fulfill?

How can IT zone better serve the community? What would like to see offered from IT Zone?

To you, what is the most valuable part of IT Zone? What about it?

Can you describe ways in which participation with IT Zone leads to social or professional opportunities?

Who has been the website?

What have you used the website for?

Did the website meet your needs? Has anyone had problems (optional)?

If you don't use the website, can tell us why?

How is the website successful or unsuccessful in reflecting IT Zone's mission, services, and opportunities etc?

What do you feel is a valuable part of the web site?

What do you feel is missing from the website?

Is there anything you feel is important to note about what we've discussed tonight? (Or other ideas/comments?)

Appendix D: Individual Interview Questions

Are you a member of the IT Zone? (Why, Why not?)

What is your understanding of a membership to the IT Zone. What does it mean to you?

If you are a member, what motivated you to join? If not, what would motivate you to join?

How did you join?

What do you see is as the primary role of IT Zone? What needs in the community does it fulfill?

How can IT zone better serve the community? What would like to see offered from IT Zone?

To you, what is the most valuable part of IT Zone? What about it?

Can you describe ways in which participation with IT Zone leads to social or professional opportunities?

How often do you use the website?

What have you used the website for?

Did the website meet your needs? Has anyone had problems (optional)?

If you don't use the website, why?

How is the website successful or unsuccessful in reflecting IT Zone's mission, services, and opportunities etc?

What do you feel is a valuable part of the web site?

What do you feel is missing from the website?

Is there anything you feel is important to note about what we've discussed tonight? (Or other ideas/comments?)

Appendix E: Interview Questions for Staff Members

What is your role in the AAIT Zone?

What do you think brings people to these events?

How do you think participants learn about events?

What percentage of participants do you think are IT Zone Members?

What is your understanding of a membership to the IT Zone. What does it mean to you?

What do you think motivates members to join? What makes them stay?

What do you see as the primary role of IT Zone? What needs in the community does it fulfill?

How can IT zone better serve the community? What would like to see offered from IT Zone?

To you, what is the most valuable part of IT Zone? What about it?

What is an area of IT Zone that you think could be improved?

Can you describe ways in which participation with IT Zone leads to social or professional opportunities?

How do you think people use the website? Does it meet their needs?

How is the website successful or unsuccessful in reflecting IT Zone's mission, services, and opportunities etc?

What do you feel is a valuable part of the web site?

What do you feel is missing from the website?

What is your communication strategy for reaching members and non-members?

How do the committees function and how do they relate to the day-to-day workings of the organization?

What is the role of the board?

What has the changing role of IT Zone been over the time you've been associated with it? How do the twin goals of providing networking and educational opportunities interrelate? Do they support one another or are they sometimes at odds?

Is there anything you feel is important to note about what we've discussed tonight? (Or other ideas/comments?)

Appendix F: IRB Form

Informed Consent Form

School of Information Course 501: "The Use of Information"
Group Projects on User Information Needs Analysis

We would like you to participate in an interview as part of a University of Michigan School of Information graduate course on "The Use of Information." The purpose of this project is to analyze some aspect of information use in a real world setting. The interview questions will relate to some aspect of information needs or use by people associated with Ann Arbor IT Zone.

Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any point.

To assure confidentiality as required by standard University of Michigan research guidelines, we will separate participant names from the data; in addition, study findings will not identify individual participants.

In addition, this interview may be recorded to help the graduate student researcher remember what has been said for later analysis. If it is recorded, the interviewer will ask for permission to do this and have you sign an additional consent below. All tape recordings and notes from this study will be stored in a secure place until they are destroyed at the end of the semester.

For further information about this study, please contact:
Professors Joan C. Durrance durrance@umich.edu or Soo Young Rieh rieh@umich.edu at the University of Michigan School of Information.
Telephone 734-647-3576.

The SI 501 graduate student team members include:

Amy Grude
Jason Nargis
Robert Thompson
Alok Vimawala
Jason Young

The SI 501 graduate student team can be contacted via email at: 501green@umich.edu

Thank you!

(Please sign one copy of this form and keep one for your reference.)

1) I have read the information above and I consent to be interviewed as part of this study.

Your signature

Date

2) It is ok with me to tape this interview and I understand that you will destroy the tape at the end of the semester.

Your signature

Date

Appendix G: Interview Transcripts

5 (F1-F5) users interviewed on 10/25/05
by Alok Vimwala, Robert Thompson, and Jason Nargis

Websites mentioned:

<http://www.a2ac.org>
<http://www.ewashtenaw.org/>

What brought you to the event this evening?

F#1: I was very intrigued with the government R&D, but besides that, I'm intrigued by every program that's put on around here. There's lot of subjects, its very educational for a non-IT person. For a marketing guy, which I am, I do have pretty brorad interests. I like to find a way to get good overview, kind of shallow from my perspective, but given me a broad base in understating information technology

F#2 I'm in a startup phase, and I've secured government money before, but there's always a different story, a different experience that sheds new light on that and uh, tas one of the people said, its an ever changing field. Something stay constant, some things are changing. Plus the food is pretty good.

F#3 I work for a [professor at UM]. And so I received a call that the IT zone would like to have them speak tonight. So I facilitated that with the doctor. We've had some other events where one time we were honored by the IT Zone, um, I think it's a valuable community to work with. I think it's essential in his presentation that was brought up how important networking is. I think that is one of the most fundamental things that we do as humans and as assisting our communities and enhancing our businesses. I think IT Zone along with the MEBC (?) Washentaw Development council, I think they all facilitate in that.

F#2 You bring up a really important point, in that as its not just disembodied funds. There are people connected with it. I'm getting to know the IT Zone. So this is part of my process in getting to know them and acquiring the skills that they have to offer not as a class, but as a learning environment. How do you walk up to someone you don't know, introduce your self, give your elevator talk, extract information, figure out when someone doesn't like you and when to leave. All that kind of stuff. Or if they like you and they want to talk to you more.

F#1 Yeah that working can certainly pay off very nicely. I've managed to find clients here, just through osmosis or whatever it is. The magic of being around people and also teammates for my projects so that's very useful in that respect.

How did you find out about the event tonight? A flier? Or....

F#3 If you're an IT Zone member, you've paid money to be here, it behooves you to follow up and see what you're paying for and get what you're paying for.

F#2 We were invited, but also the symposium we're at down at the fourth street or something, they had fliers out and they announced it that it was put on by the Michigan economic council. I think the university was involved in some capacity as well.

F#1 There're very good about publicizing programs here. You know that Tuesday is tech-Tuesday, sometimes it isn't, but most of the time it is and you know, I wasn't sure there was a meeting tonight or not. Although I did get the yellow or green sheet whatever it is as a recent meeting and often you get an email that reminds you there's something going on today or tomorrow.

F#3 Yeah Multiple sources

F#1 I keep the IT Zone bookmarked on their website and I go there and check to see what's going on today.

Are all of you members?

F#1 I'm a member

F#2 I'm pretty sure my organization is a member

F#3 I just joined two weeks ago

F#1 We're all card carrying members!

Maybe this was answered already, but I want to know what your understanding of a membership to the IT Zone, what does it mean to you?

F#3 Getting to know the Ann Arbor business community with kind of a tech spin. It's not really services so much as objects, programming, you know, its more new economy type interests. I'm not sure that we get a talk from a holiday inn manager or something like that about how to make the beds more efficiently, everything that I have seen has been really interesting.

F#1 I just want to say that the IT Zone, I've had acquaintance with a number of associations and I have to say this is the best deal in town by far. I mean, for the dues, first of all you get your money back in food (laughter) within three months, easily. The thing that's good about it is that there's so much activity. How many associations have at least one meeting everyweek and sometimes three or four meetings in a week. There's moning meetings, there's Friday noon meetings, usually every Tuesday, if not Tuesday it might be Thursday, because you're collaborating with another club and it does allow members to get exposed to other organizations because there join meetings with the new enterprise forum periodically. The adverting club for Ann Arbor now meets here one Wednesday every month. Some of those meetings are scheduled

as joint meeting with IT Zone. So you get a lot of cross fertilization in terms of business disciplines that can happen here. Not to mention the University activities that go on. There's that lollapalooza thing.

F#2 I would like mirror exactly what he said so eloquently. In addition, I think it allows an opportunity to be mentored or be a mentor. I think that's really important in this community. I think with technology, it changes so rapidly. Unlike when you talk about the hotel industry, there are changes, but with technology you go to sleep and there's something new. It seems like this is a vital group to have.

(Pause as more people enter the group)

F#3 I was going to propose that some sort of premise for these churning technology isn't really so much about objects, it's about people. Every program is written by someone, the iPod, you think of Steve Jobs and so really its about meeting people and the question I face is that I am try to learn some new technology and I knew I needed to make some contacts locally, I wanted to find my capital and I wanted to raise my family here. I'd answer the question, how do I meet these people? Where are they? I'm not a rotary club member so this is obvious choice.

What do you find is the most valuable of IT Zone?

F#1 Well, you mention mentoring before, twice a year there's a boot camp, and its another great place where you have an opportunity. The call goes out if you want to be a mentor and they can get you to become one. It's a very rewarding experience, being a mentor and I hope for the mentees, it's the same way. It's a great learning experience. You get a couple days and you get to see a parade of brilliant concepts and ideas that someone one day may become out there in the market place and doing great things and be able to and maybe kind of nudge them in the right direction and at the same time you have an opportunity to learn about things you'd never dreamed that people could think of.

Do you feel there are ways that IT Zone could better serve the community? Is there something that'd you like to see offered?

F#2 I think they should morph into being SPARC (I'm joking!) I think they're doing a great job.

F#4 Maybe a little more marketing effort to bring things together. I know I'd probably come to more if I got more than the occational email or something, they'd probably want to step that up is my suggestion. Tonight's event talkin' to Bill, he had a flier out and workin' with them and you see they didn't get quite the exposure they wanted

F#2 They made a verybal announcement yesterday, I don't know if they did today

F#4 That's good, but I'd like to see a little more than the worksheet they leave out there. That probably would have been more effective than a worksheet on a table.

Are you a member?

F#4 I think so, I've been here a couple times, I used to be in grad school here.

F#1 We were talking about how information is distributed before you came in, as a member I'm assuming everyone who is a member gets the same exposure, Diane is really good about sending emails out quite frequently about what's coming up. We used to get almost every week a complete list of what was coming up, whatever was on that yellow sheet would come in an email and I found that to be very useful because I can just take it off the email and mark it on my calendar and that was that. That was a real easy way to do it. Usually in the previous meetings there Dianne will normally will mention the next meeting and gets the word out that way.

F#2 It might have been nicer and I don't know the lead time they have, it might have been nicer to have a little more collaboration so that there could have been more information there regarding what happening here in the IT Zone in conjunction would have benefited a lot of people and the symposium. I think the three speakers who spoke tonight, a lot of people were at the symposium were professors and small businesses who are trying to get the very kinds of information that the three people spoke about, it's unfortunate that they weren't able to capitalize a little more on that.

F#1 I was really surprised, given the subject, that we didn't get the audience tonight that we typically get for sort of more gee-wiz stuff maybe. I guess government R&D did sound kind of dry.

F#3 I was like most people who were there, have experienced it in some sense. So that one woman who was asking about the accounting issues.

What do you find is your primary communication with IT Zone? Email? Personal Contact? Fliers?

F#5 Email... my problem is that I find myself too busy to be here. I used to be a member but I would only get here once a year and this year I've only been here to speak. I haven't had the issues of starting a business so they aren't that relevant to me. There are other projects and programs that are relevant to our staff but at some point I found that the price was too high for what I was getting in effect.

Are you currently a member?

F#5 No. I used to a member of the [undistinguishable] council, which then kind of folded into the IT Zone I think, and it sort of disappeared which was in a way a competitor. We pretty typically um, 50 to 150 people would come to that every couple of months.

F#2 I think its impressive of the IT Zone will invite someone who is not a member to someone who is not a member. I really do, I wonder how many groups would do that.

F#1 They've got members who have great experience and the preference is to bring someone in from San Francisco or New York.

F#3 In terms of time division, a very small amount of time is spent reading the email, and correspondence from the IT Zone or making phone calls. I've spent what, three hours here tonight. That's many times more than I spend doing the emails. So in terms of the actual word exchange, the information content. The majority of contact is face to face at the events.

Has anyone used the website?

(Universal yes)

F#1 I used it to find out about the meeting tonight

F#3 Exactly.

So what would you say is your primary use of the website?

F#1 I use it to check meetings, I also promote any member plan that I'm doing business with for whatever PR I'm doing for them nationally, I make sure it's on the website as well. I know the fault of the website may be that I doubt if many people know there's a button for member news which takes you to that information. Everytime I've passed something, there's usually the same two or three companies that are posting and they could be many more instances of use going up. I've wanted to talk to them about promoting that within the organization

Do you find that generally the website meets your needs?

F#1 You can find a member with it, if you know the name of the company, the contact information, so you know, it's basically functional without bells and whistles.

Would you say the website is successful or unsuccessful of reflecting IT Zone's mission, opportunities, things like that.

F#3 I wouldn't say the website defines how we think about this place. It's more of a mental reference point as our colleague was saying, it's just a check when is the meeting, who is speaking. Oh I thought it was at 5, but it's at 7. Dianne suggested that I go look at something, etc. So the bulk of my concept of the place is being here and is not communicated over the website.

F#1 I don't think the website really reflects the personality of the membership for some reason. It's very uh kind of impersonal in its style and you know somebody here could probably get creative and make it really exciting, but I think serves its purpose quite adequately.

F#3 They're not going to make their money for click-throughs if that's what you're asking (laughter)

Is there anything you feel is missing from the web site? Is there something you would like to see on the website?

F#1 Well I'm involved in the advertising club in Ann Arbor, as well as the IT Zone. If you a the advertising club's site, you find a very colorful site that lists the membership by name, and the membership by professional category whatever, web business, marketing people, PR it is by clicking on graphic design, every graphic designer will show up in a complete list which is really nice. I often have students who call me and say they would like an intern job at my company; I don't run my company in that fashion where I don't have any interns. There's plenty of opportunities in advertising in town that can be accessed just by going to that site and looking at all the companies your print out a list and you've got a prospect list. So, for that reason I think that would be very nice and would be something here where you have a good place to go. The problem finding out about a company or person with the current website, you have to know the name of the person or the company and then you can go in and get the contact information. You won't find any biographical information, you won't find a profile of the company. That's what I would like to see changed.

Are there any other comments?

F#2 I'm not that familiar with the website

Actually I have a question for you then, is there a reason why you may not be familiar with the website? You haven't come across it? You don't have the address?

F#2 I haven't felt the need, I have kept up with the emails and I'm informed on a regular basis about what's going on. For me that [the website] hasn't been a necessity.

F#3 It isn't like the early days where I'm surfing and trying to get a sense of "of this is cool" oh "what else have they got?" or "I wonder what that button does" I don't really care. I go there and I have something specific that I want, I go get it, it's formatted right, I don't have to mess around a lot. So I'm not

F#2 It really depends on what you want the site to focus on. If you're trying to get new membership I think the focus should be one thing, if you've got an established group, that knows the IT Zone as an organization, they wouldn't utilize it unless you had links to other activities and organization. A great link would have been the symposium [related to that night's event].

F#1 I think that right now that's a good point because I don't know how many people went to the entrepreneurial event that's once a year for small business. IT Zone is kind of helped to promote that. They do the keynote speeches, there's a couple of talks are then played out where you can sit in the entire talk on the quicktime presentation or whatever it is and it would be nice to be able to link to that for the member because it people here for the most part think they are quite entrepenurial and can't get the benefit from the meetings because they can't get to the meetings.

Is there anything you feel is important to note about what we've dicussed tonight, is there anything you'd like to add?

F#3 You seem very interested in the website, why is that?

That's actually part of what they [IT Zone] were interested in. We talked to Dianne, they wanted to know basically who was using the website, how were they using it, that sort of thing. They want to know what ways they may be able to use it to more effectively promote the organization.

F#2 I'm going to claim that people my age don't use the website unless they are trying to glean information. I was with an organization and we had this great website but again unless you are looking for a group and you start looking at the links, you might

F#1 As opposed to what? What would you do?

F#2 I would go to the phone book, other emails. My son would do everything web related.

Part of what we're doing is getting an idea of the members and non-members, who are the people attending the events so we can understand how they can better relate to those people so the website is part of that project.

F#3 There is a traditional dichotomy between the webpage as an advertising tool. A webpage has a reflection of the organization, in which case the webpage in many respects, performing the function of the organization. In the former respect, the page is good for finding information, but it isn't really a networking tool. The organization here is a networking organization, so one possible improvement is to make the webpage a networking tool. Who were these people that spoke or "I met this guy, I really like him, he was at a talk I was at, what his name? Sam... something or other" Now I need some advertising but I he hasn't come to a meeting in six months, how do I find him? That would help me help you [sam] so I can get your services

F#1 I use the web with various organizations to put a team together. I'll do what you do, maybe in miniature. I will pick teammates from people I've gotten to know through actual business experience or through contacts like that. I think it becomes very valuable tool and maybe you almost have to educate people to think about the website that way. When you do that then you do that, you bring more people to the web site more frequently because they see this to be an asset or an extension of the business. A very useful thing to have

F#2 Then it would be more interactive, where you do have the membership listed. You do have links that are appropriate.

F#1 there's a tendency to bury the membership so you don't know who they are. It's hard to find the information.

F#3 There's an advantage of that, that we may want to preserve. People may use these tools to take your time away from you in a valueless fashion. They want to sell you things. You know how that goes. Here you're sorting, you can space time, you can say "well I don't want to talk to this guy" and you can move to the next one. Whereas if everything is available on the website and you put your email down, people are going to come and bother you, people who don't necessarily help you with your business goals.

F#2 One website I do like is the Washtenaw country website and I don't know if you've looked at that but they really have all the links to anything you want to go to in regards to accounting. It's extremely useful. I'm not a website user, but that's one that you can click and just takes you

It works well for you

F#2 It's very user friendly.

Thank you very much for your input!

Focus Group with F6 and F7 on 11/15/05

By Robert Thompson and Jason Nargis

SI: Just to kind of start things off, what brought you to the event this evening?

F6: I guess I've been following the "tales from the trenches" series. My company is an IT Zone member, so if there's an interesting event, try to take advantage of it...scheduling, personal, all that stuff... But the "TFTT" series in particular, there've been some good speakers that are really telling us about things that they've learned in the course of creating and growing businesses. Pretty valuable information...getting access to those kind of people can be pretty difficult.

F7: Yeah, see the first one Arbortext, then I couldn't do the second one, although I wanted to...

F6: Yeah, that one was good too...

F7: I was watching for this one

SI: Are you an IT Zone member.

F7: I'm a member personally...

SI: So what motivated you to join...

F7: Well, we're a small company, so

SI: So what were the motivating factors for joining...

F7: Well, I have a good (bad/bag?) run in the IT community in town, I'm an entrepreneur, so I enjoy this kind of environment. It's a natural thing for me to support and want to be part of that environment.

F6: I'd echo that. From a practical, starting a new company point of view, we're trying to get more involved in what's happening locally so we can hopefully make contacts to reach out to broader to broader markets. I think that there's a lot of people that come to IT Zone events once in a while that are very much A Players in the within the Washtenaw county, southeast Michigan IT and kind of extended business community. So there's definitely that attraction. And also since we plan to attend in learning mode, whether about being a technologist, or learning about running a company that attends these events, it makes sense to be a member as well, and to support the IT Zone mission in general.

F7: I participate in "Boot Camps", (unintelligible) I've done that three times, and I enjoy doing that...It's a lot of fun.

SI: What do you feel is the primary goal of the IT Zone...if you were to write out their mission statement based on your experience...

F7: They call themselves a business accelerator, is that what their tagline is?

No, I think its to create an environment where you can network with the broad community that serve the IT environment in this community. Whether it's the banks and venture capitals, the entrepreneurs, the developers, that sort of thing...

F6: Yeah, there's different roles that the IT Zone can and does serve, but I think to me the biggest path is connecting people that otherwise might not have met or kind of fostering the IT community within the broader geographic community to get more things happening in this area and help businesses get their stuff going as well. For the community at large as well as the individual participants to accelerate their own ventures.

F7: And I can't judge whether they're successful or not, because I'm not involved enough, but I get value from IT Zone being around.

SI: Is there something you feel that they could do better, or some need...something they could offer you that you would like to see?

F6: I think one of the things that has been talked about, but as far as I know, not much has been done with... The main focus seems to be putting on events, an in-person event like tonight, which is very valuable and useful. But I think there's also an opportunity to have more virtual events, a community online, members only, or members and friends community, where people could find people to hire. I know they do that with email, like a list of job openings, but I think there's a bunch more things that could be done exploiting these electronic social networks. And that would probably be done using one of these services out there, because the IT Zone community. It would be an experiment because I'm not sure how it would work out, but it's potentially valuable... Not everyone can attend all the meetings and things that come up during the week. Maybe I need a graphic artist to do something for my website. Well I probably know people, but there's also sometimes going out and finding...or just getting recommendations.

F7: You know, I would agree that they don't foster enough online community. It's more right here. I've noticed, I used to get notification of events and it was done by (inaudible) it was a push for information. Now, I get reminders of events, but if I don't go to the website I don't really know what's going to happen, therefore I don't put it on my calendar.

Q (not sure who asked this, I think F6): So they could do a better job informing you not what's just this week, but what's coming up?

F6: Yeah, this was done to my satisfaction before, and all of a sudden it disappeared. I sent an email saying you're not doing it now? But I never got an answer back to my email?

SI: What do you feel is the most valuable part of IT Zone to you?

F6: If I had to pick one thing it would be the networking aspects, both talking to the presenters and the other people that come to the events. Getting knowledge and contacts from people.

F7: Yeah, I tend, because of my personal...I come for the networking aspects... A lot of the things I've experienced in my career, but it's great to hear it back and get confirmation. Those things are very important although I probably don't use the network as much as I should.

SI: How long have you been coming to IT Zone events?

F7: I've been a member for like, two years. I've been out of town a lot.

F6: The person I started my company with got a company membership, and she was going to events before I was. In the last year, year and a half...more like two, two and a half years for her... we had been to other IT Zone events before that, but not very much. But we made a conscious decision to get more involved. Because we went from being employees of a larger company to starting our own company. It's a much different kind of responsibility, need to draw on whatever resources you can...

(background, approval, laughing)

SI: Have you used the website before?

F7: Yeah, I'm trying to use it more, because it's not being offered to me on the reminder basis. But now I'm using it because I think there's more stuff there than I was aware of.

F6: Right, and the things I use it for on a weekly basis are things like registering for events and double-teching. Sort of what the event is and what time it is and sometimes looking further out, saying what's coming up. There's a member directory...there's different things that get looked up very occasionally. There's probably more value there. No one's reminding people about these other features of the website and I'm sure there's lots of room for improvement as well. A bit of marketing...

F7: I was used to last year, a monthly newsletter and a weekly email of the events. (inaudible) These two things I think have gone away. I receive communication from Dianne saying, "hope we're gonna see you tonight"

F6: Yeah I still get a weekly email, that talks about the events at the it zone

F7: See, I don't get that.

F6: and then I also occasionally get things, where Dianne is kind of plugging or reminding...
(laughter)

F6 Yeah, it's very strange you're getting one and not the other.

F7: exactly, because I couldn't understand.

F6: So they're still doing some of that, it may not be exactly what they were doing before. I think it has changed a little bit. It sounds like you're getting even less than I am. Somebody's decided that spam, or maybe their email lists are messed up, or technical problems.

SI: Do you find in general that the website meets your needs. Do you have a problems or anything...

F7: I wouldn't be able to answer that very well since I don't spend much time with it.

F6: it feels like its sort of in need of a revamp, but I cant put my finger on exactly what. Not just visually, but it hasn't changed much in a while, sort of underlying systems. There's occasionally glitches when you try to register for an event, things like that. Mostly it works fine. Sort of a cost benefit question of investing more there, but I would like to see more of this fostering of a community online and in person. I mean, there's a lot of members that rarely come to events, is my impression.

F7: Or a lot of members that would respond very well to that...everyone wants to have their own way of doing it...

F6: And there's different personalities and different kind of things. So, giving people more avenues for doing that networking and communication would be at least an interesting experiment?

SI: Would you say that the website is successful in communicating IT zone's mission. Do you think that the website reflects the organization. Is it good at communicating what they're about?

F6: I think its ok at least. I don't think its way off base. I think the emphasis is mainly on the events that they're having. If you go to Ann Arbor it zone .org or .com whichever it is, maybe it's both...anyway the emphasis is definitely on...the front page will show sponsors, different things...but the center parts is if I remember right, is what events are coming up. And I think that makes sense given their focus, but maybe they should be promoting different things at different times just to let us know more about different things on the website. I mean there's certain websites you go to on a regular basis, check the news of the day, rss feeds...to me the IT Zone one is not like that. I go there specifically when I want to find out about an event. I have some purpose, its not like the casual I better go there to see what's going on. Maybe there's other things they could do to make it more so, but im not too sure how important that is. It's a question for the membership at large...

SI: Is there something there's missing from the website, something you'd like to see?

F7: I think we answered that to some extent, and I agree the focus is more on the events, and so I think it's underutilized...

F6: I think another thing that could be valuable, and some of this may be there, I cant remember. There's a lot of different groups like the new enterprise forum, interactive marketing group that started up, (unintelligible) automation alley...all these different groups that are putting out events and networking downtown. And spark central which is not really off the ground as far as I can tell...but doing more coordination among these organizations and maybe providing a place where you can find out about all these different events. All these different things that are kinda related to this overlapping audience for IT Zone members and these other events. So, there should be...and maybe there is and I don't know about it...but there should be a site, IT Zone or sparkcentral or whatever, kinda be a hub for what events are coming up, what's going on, online

or whatever...pull together even more of the community. There's people who look at all of these organizations, have to keep track of this stuff. There's no master calendar.

F7: Or the mission of one versus the other...NEF is a competitor to some extent.

F6: They have joint events...they're both complimentary and competitors probably, so it's a little tricky, one person probably doesn't want to overly promote the other. But I think for people like us who are trying to get something out of it, we just view it as another possible thing to attend, another possible resource. So knowing about all of it makes more sense.

SI: If there's anything else that you think is valuable, or that you'd want to comment or question about...

F7: Well you talked about competitors and I don't think they should view themselves as competitors...

F6: Well from a mission point of view that's a mistake certainly...

F7: and even if they cater to the same audience, and I think that's true, that shouldn't prevent them from promoting each others (assistance and all that)

F6: and I they've been doing that. I think Diane Durrance has been pretty good about letting people come in and plug their stuff and she's put a lot of energy into the IT Zone and I hope there'll be more of that cause I think the overall mission of growing the tech community within the county, southeaster Michigan state of Michigan regionally, that's all shared by most of these organizations. There's a lot of groups, business school, SI, at u of m that play into this resources and people putting on events. There's talks at si, that's' like I forgot about that, I should've gone...Stuff that's open to the public as well.

SI: When you first started going to the IT Zone events, what brought you there? Was it a specific talk on a subject, or was it that you wanted to get involved and meet the community.

F6: For me it was more of the second thing. It wasn't a specific event that pulled me in, it was more about a conscious decision to get more involved. Having known about the IT Zone and gone to a few events before that, but deciding that now's the time to get find about more about what's going on.

F7: I was coming back from Europe, I had been gone for four years pretty much, commuting...

(that's a long commute)

...a very long commute... And what's going on in the community...well, check IT Zone, there's a lot of people getting there you meet some people.

F6: I would say that some of the events, you'd expect there to be bigger attendance than there is. I know it's one of the things they're working on...people are members but they're not necessarily going to events. Tonight's a rainy night, and other stuff, but the TFFT is a pretty interesting event with pretty good attendance, but there's room for more people. There's some marketing aspect or some need that's not quite being met exactly. I don't know what it is but I'd be happier if there were more people there to network with and I think we could get more speakers, more people interested in talking as well.

F7: But Bob Nero left tonight with something open (unintelligible)...sales...they oughta pick that up too...good things to say about that too.

F6: Right, he's a good presenter, who's comfortable up there doing it...like most of the people they have are pretty good. Some of them haven't been...sorta like a sideline to learn about some aspect. But they've all been pretty well done as far as presenting... keeping that quality up is a good thing.

11/2/05

U1

Interviewed by: Rob,Amy

R: We're evaluating an information need for the Ann Arbor IT Zone. Mostly in the form of how they get members, how they put on events, and how they use the web site.

R: **How did you first hear about the event this morning?**

U1: Actually at the previous event.

R: **Do you commonly attend these events?**

U1: I was first introduced to the IT zone through Zingerman's, I was doing an internship with them. The leader's connect in particular, it really feeds and addresses a particular audience's need. um, usually leaders taht are very intuitive, very internally driven, externally focused. I think Bob is doing a good job - and his crew - in creating a real niche for people of like minds to come and hopefully, the advertisement will draw a larger audience. I know he was on the radio not too long ago and that drew people that morning that actually came, they heard about it that morning and hopped in their car or the day before, it was really pretty tight as to when they heard about it and showed up.

A: So Bob was the today's introductory speaker?

U1: That's correct.

A: And he's from Zingermans?

U1: No, he was not, he's the leader of the leaders connect project.

R: **So are you currently a member of the IT Zone?**

U1: No, I am not a member, I do pay for individual seminars as I desire to come over for them.

R: **How often do you attend seminars?**

U1: Probably once every two months?

R: **What's the most valuable thing about IT Zone to you? The speakers or network opportunities?**

U1: Yeah, there's a larger vision for the IT Zone that I think will eventually really feed the larger community, I think personally I get a lot out of being here with the speakers. I do meet people one on one, I can't say that I'm terrifically comfortable with large amounts of networking. So I think it's something that I need to build a skill at, so I have had the pleasure of meeting people here and connecting with them in a different setting later on more than one occasion.

R: **Is there anything that you feel the IT Zone do to offer more to you? A certain type event or something you wish they did?**

U1: I think as they look to bring more industry into Ann Arbor, it would be beneficial to have a pool of people available for work. I just mentioned that to Diane on the way to our meeting that I do see on their emails a listing of employment opportunities. But I don't think right here they have in their back pocket a list of people in the area that might meet needs of others as they come into the area.

A: **So you mentioned the web site, and part of what we're doing is finding out how people use the website. Can you tell us a little about your experience with the website, how you use it (or don't use it), what you use it for?**

U1: Dianne sends out emails, so I think I link from an email to web site, I can't say that I've been on the web site, just on occasion, but certainly it is the emails that have the current information. That's what I'm after.

A: **We're not soliciting membership at all, but we'd like to know what you know about the membership here, have you been exposed to the process to becoming a member or have you considered becoming a member?**

U1: I don't know the process and I have not considered becoming a member, I think for the number of things that I attend here, I should look into that as a individual members, not as a cooperate membership as I am a consultant, self-employed.

R: Are there any other comments you have on IT Zone? Anything you wish they did, or anything you wished the website did?

U1: I think as a means of communication, um, they need a better sign. When I was in the parking lot, the speaker was too, and I showed the speaker where the building was. I was going to one thing we chatted about 50 feet from oblivion to the door is “where is this place?”

R: I think we’ve all had that (laughs)

U1: So I think there’s definitely a little bit of work to be done on that which I don’t think is a bad thing. I think people want to know where it is, certainly people want to resolve that conflict quickly.

11/22/05

U5

Interviewed by: Amy

A: Alright. First, are you currently a member of the IT Zone?

U5: yes

A: How long have you been a member?

U5: 2 years

A: Why did you decide to become a member?

U5: I was starting my own business and someone (I don't recall who) suggested I check out the IT Zone

U5: There were lots of interesting and useful sessions for someone just getting started.

A: What type of business are you in?

U5: Software company

U5: Also, there were many people who seemed knowledgeable in a wide variety of areas

A: Ok, great. Now that you are a member, what is the value of that membership to you?

U5: just a minute (interruption here)

3:16:09 PM A:no problem

3:16:30 PM U5: ok, I'm back

3:16:51 PM U5: The sessions are still useful (though occasionally some are "reruns")

3:17:05 PM U5: There aren't quite as many attendees at some sessions

3:17:17 PM U5: btw, do you know that I'm on the program committee at the IT Zone?

3:17:36 PM A:No, but thank you for letting me know.

3:17:40 PM U5: :-)

3:18:25 PM A:Do you use the IT Zone for networking, or primarily for the educational sessions? (or any other purposes?)

3:19:00 PM U5: both networking and educational sessions as well as Creativity Forum (which I wouldn't classify as educational or networking but still useful)

3:19:24 PM A:What do you see as the primary role of the IT Zone in the community?

3:20:58 PM U5: bring together technology companies for networking and educational benefits as well as helping to build a local community of technology entrepreneurs

3:21:48 PM U5: "bring together workers in technology and related fields"

3:22:14 PM U5: (you can't bring together companies...)

3:22:20 PM A:Do you think that there are things the IT Zone should offer that it doesn't already?

3:22:34 PM U5: More online resources

3:23:02 PM U5: As a member, I'd like to be able to access a video or audio recording of recent sessions.

3:23:20 PM U5: I'd like to have a linkedin group (linkedin.com)

3:23:41 PM U5: a forum (possibly a wiki?) for bringing together the community

3:24:23 PM U5: (in the online forum members would be able to ask questions, get recommendations, etc.)

3:24:45 PM A:What do you think is currently the most valuable part of the IT Zone overall?

3:25:15 PM U5: High Tech Tuesday and joint events

3:26:08 PM A:In your experience (and in the experience of people you know) has

participation in the IT Zone led to social or professional opportunities that would not have happened without the IT Zone?

3:26:51 PM U5: yes, I have met lots of people who have been helpful to me and my company (too many people to name)

3:27:07 PM U5: I've also met some people that I knew years ago but lost contact information

3:27:24 PM A:can you give an example of how a person you've met has been helpful to you and your company?

3:27:50 PM U5: I've met several people who read my business plan and gave me feedback on it

3:28:02 PM A:ok, great

3:28:17 PM A:Why did you join a committee at the IT Zone?

3:28:52 PM U5: because Tina Watson (and then someone else) asked me too; they wanted more 'techies' on the committee

3:29:18 PM A:Has your experience changed since joining a committee?

3:29:44 PM U5: I'm not sure

3:30:06 PM U5: I can't really compare before / after (sorry)

3:30:12 PM A:no problem

3:30:37 PM U5: I guess I've met more people (who are also on the committee)

3:31:01 PM A:Now I'm going to move on to some questions about the website...

3:31:14 PM A:How often do you use the web overall?

3:31:35 PM U5: I live on the Internet during the week

3:31:49 PM A:ok. How often do you use the IT Zone website?

3:32:21 PM U5: approx 1/week to read a session description and possibly register for it

3:32:53 PM A:Have you had any problems with the website?

3:33:11 PM U5: does this include the enewsletter that goes out once / week?

3:33:35 PM A:the newsletter would be considered an email, but the website it links to would fall under "website"

3:33:45 PM U5: I don't think I've had any specific problems with the website other than problems with my membership (expiration; names were messed up)

3:34:03 PM U5: the enewsletter often contains broken or incorrect links

3:34:47 PM A:I know you mentioned some additions you would like to see on the website earlier... aside from that, is there anything you feel is missing from the site?

3:35:03 PM A:Or information that should be there but isn't?

3:35:18 PM U5: helpwanted and some things from the enewsletter

3:35:41 PM U5: the website is pretty plain right now; it needs jazzing up (but NOT with flash)

3:35:50 PM A:Do you feel that the website accurately reflects the goals and missions of the IT Zone?

3:36:38 PM U5: no, I don't think the web site helps the IT Zone achieve its goals / missions

3:36:54 PM A:can you elaborate a little on the disconnect there?

3:38:03 PM U5: I think that the web site only works for information about and registration of events

3:38:35 PM U5: It should help with networking and provide a forum for a community to assemble and help each other (StartupNation is starting to do this)

3:39:34 PM A:What are the methods of communication between yourself and the IT Zone. (For example, how do you hear about events, how would you contact the staff to ask questions, etc)

3:39:37 PM A:?

3:40:41 PM U5: IT Zone enewsletter, program committee, in person, at events, GLITR and MiTechNews

3:40:58 PM U5: That is how I hear about events

3:41:15 PM U5: I contact the staff by email (typically) but I think I've called once or twice (quite a while ago)

3:41:43 PM A:ok, that concludes the questions I have. Do you have anything you'd like to add or any other comments?

3:42:05 PM U5: I really like the Tales from the Trenches series; I also like Creativity Forum

3:42:48 PM U5: I like Diane's energy; she makes me excited/happy to be an entrepreneur

3:43:47 PM U5: I am disappointed / surprised that some people (board members and committee members) attend so rarely (how can you plan if you never attend?)

3:44:43 PM U5: perhaps if there was an online forum they would participate? (I really don't know.)

3:45:38 PM U5: I have to go; sorry

3:45:46 PM U5: good luck with your report, etc.

3:45:47 PM A:That's fine, thank you so much for answering the questions

3:45:55 PM A:and for the additional comments

Interview with U4 on 11/17/05
By Alok Vimwala

SI: Could you tell me about your relationship with IT Zone.

U4: Our company joined when the IT Zone formed in 2000, and high tech Tuesday program committee for about two years and we were asked to submit a series of proposals when they were considering redoing the current website.

A little history there, the current website was implemented by a set of interns at compuware and was done gratis for the IT Zone around 2000, and the technology underneath it has not been updated since.

SI: Is your company still an IT zone member?

U4: Yes, we're still active.

SI: Could you talk about what the IT Zone means to your company, what are its benefits as an organization.

U4: It does help connect you with some of the other business community around Ann Arbor. In some ways its like joining a local chamber, where sort of part of the cost of doing business...

With an organization like that its almost easier to ask why Shouldn't you be a member, rather than asking what do you get from it? You should be part of that and help make it unique.

SI: Do you see IT Zone primarily serving a networking function?

U4: That is primarily what it does. There are a lot of things that I think it could and should do that it isn't doing very well right now. One is as companies grow...you may have heard the term lifestyle business...for a company just starting, working out of your basement or somethings, which is a good way to start because the cost is very low. To go from that to office space in Ann Arbor, the cost is somewhere close to 2K per month, or more. There's absolutely nothing to get from, "it's starting to get painful to do business out of my house to I've got some number, N employees where I actually need my own space." And whether it be the chamber or IT Zone or some other organization, there's really nothing around to help bridge that step, so right now we've got a lot of companies that just stay as lifestyle businesses. You know, I'd rather pocket the 2K myself than give it to one of the local landlords. So a lot of companies just stay there and don't grow.

There's a lot of other services that you use occasionally when you're getting into that mode that aren't there. Right now it is primarily a networking organization, there isn't much else in terms of services provided there.

SI: Could you elaborate about what you think IT Zone might be doing for the community?

U4: OK, some things I think it should be doing is...A company starting to grow needs meeting space, but not constantly. Space should be available, even for a fee...because it's not "free". Or a fee for members to schedule ten hours per week of meetings at the IT Zone. Business models that work are things like virtual offices in Southfield...a fairly successful business there, to create the illusion of a part-time office for a company that's starting to grow.

Possible demonstration profile the companies that are growing and put them in touch...and actually help shepherd them through the process of going from pure startup to angel investment

to first stage investment to second stage to some kind of (can't hear). We do a real good job of getting people to start businesses in their basements and then we do a reasonably good job from second stage to buyout, but nothing in the middle which is where our companies just stop at one end or get lucky more or less.

SI: Then do you see this IT Zone as an organization that stands to benefit small businesses the most?

U4: I think it "could"...well, that's what their charter has been. You look at companies in the area like Arbortext, or Proquest or Phizer, don't need the IT Zone. Companies like (can't hear) Mediastation, somebody else just got bought recently... The Ann Arbor area is the only place I have only worked or been associated with a professional community where people network in silos.

And by that I mean that business people network with business people, scientists network with scientists, computer science people network with computer science people but they never really talk with each other...very rarely. And suddenly its all about the (techie says, or business says I don't want to discuss that). And because of that we have business people that make lousy technical decisions and don't even know who to talk to to make intelligent technical decisions And we have technical people that have disdain for marketing and legal services and things of that nature.

I don't know if some of that stems from how separate the campuses are here, how U of M allocates funding into the professional staff or what... It's ridiculous when you compare it to places like Stanford which has a top-ranked graduate business school and a top-ranked computer science school, and gee, they grew a company called Google, go figure.

In Boston, there's another one, a better community of between people coming out of MIT and Harvard...a lot more working together across disciplines than I see anywhere around here.

SI: And you think the IT Zone could be a force to bring these groups together?

U4: Yeah, if you look in the chartered purposes, to bring that kind of stuff together, it just really hasn't come together very well?

SI: And why do you think that is?

U4: I really don't know. I don't have a good answer for that one.

SI: Next I'd like to talk about the website itself, in terms of how the website is intended to support the function of the IT Zone and where there are disconnects.

U4: Alright, what a good website for the organization should be is a clearinghouse for information and a way to keep members and prospective members informed about the organization and to publicize the events. So what it should be doing is telling people what's going on, and keep the organization in the front of people's minds. Where the IT Zone website fails, miserably, is that it's viewed by the business people, as opposed to the tech people, as a (hygiene maker.) The vernacular there is that no one notices if you do it well, but everybody notice if it stinks. And because of that the IT Zone website just barely doesn't stink. It's built on six, seven year-old technology, it hasn't been updated, even staying on the legacy platform, incorporated new concept in (cant hear)communications...and because of that its got the...which is if you're searching for stuff around Ann Arbor, it shows up far lower than it should. The boat that they completely miss is what a lot of organizations are using now, is a technology called

RSS. You know, I don't browse websites anymore...I have an RSS reader that does that for me and lets me know when there's something that I care about. The IT zone's website doesn't support that. So there's too much information out there. I'm not gonna go to the site...if the calendar doesn't come to me, I'm not gonna go find it.

And that's true for a lot of people who are involved inundated by information. And till they fix those fundamental problems, it's not serving as a tool in terms of...

It's harder to find than other organizations, it doesn't push its information out to interested parties. I have to take time out of my day to actually find stuff. Those two are the big ones.

From the inside, the old technology is done horrendously. The old technology is hard to update, which means it's updated less frequently than it should. There you go.

SI: Do you think the website is serving any function at this point?

U4: It's better than not having one. OK, because, the calendar is up there. So for those people they actually reach can look at the calendar and see what's there. The simple solution is RSS feeds, so if events come out, I'll actually know about it...Subscribe to the feed and I'll know what's coming up. They don't have that. So I'll miss events because I didn't know they existed. Because I didn't go to the site this week, or their email gets filtered into the hundred other emails I got that day. Eventually I'll get to it...sometimes too late. So, it's better than not having a website at all, but not much better than that.

SI: Largely because the way that the website is trying to do things is based on a system that people have since outgrown?

U4: Well outgrown, and left behind. Yeah, easily. Look, all the press has focused on blogs because its something people can understand ...you look at where bloggers brought down Dan Rather, or getting information out...Microsoft is really big on this. All of their developer centers have RSS feeds, so any time there's an article on a new technology I'm interested in, my RSS reader tells me. I don't have to have to know, or put it into my daily task list. That technology has long since passed being just in emerging technology...it's mainstream. Microsoft's using it, Intel's using it. Political parties now have RSS feeds for people that are active in the parties for talking points or precinct captains or local and grassroots leaders. This is pushed to them, because they're interested in it.

SI: So do you see the website's function as a supplement to the events that actually go on there or just keeping people in the loop when they can't be there?

U4: A little bit of both. The website is "A" communication tool. It's not your only one obviously, it can't be, but it is a tool. For instance, a .net user group down in Southfield, we had our meeting last night. All the officers are going to write some kind of, "what you missed last night" to our blogs, so if anyone missed something...they'll know, I wish I had been there, I'll know next time. It zone never posts anything about what DID happen, gee I wish I had been there, I'll have to REMEMBER that. Or first time on the site, here's all this stuff that's been goin on, I want to be part of that.

For the past events, all that's updated is, "we had an event". Ok, great. Maybe you saw it, maybe you didn't. Sometimes, the funniest thing that happens has nothing to do with the actual meeting that was scheduled, but some really cool stuff happened. But IT Zone don't use this to reach out to people who are there or aren't there...

Another example, when I was at PPC in Los Angeles, there were a number of us who worked with Microsoft to put on an event called PPC underground, so we got all this buzz about what it was gonna be, but we never said what it was. We just said its PPC underground, go to this hotel and there's gonna be food and all these people there, playing on some of the star-power of about twenty speakers we had showing up that night. Never said a word about what it was. After it was over, we blitzed everybody about what we did. Next couple days at the conference, everybody's going, "you shoulda been there." Next time you do something like that, even if you don't say what it is, people will show up to find out what it's gonna be. They don't use any of that kind of stuff because the site just sits there. Unless you go look at it, there's nothing there...

SI: Then the current content and structure of the website is a problem in terms of transmitting what the IT Zone is up to. Is it successful in conveying information about the more static features of the IT Zone, like its mission and the potential opportunities it represents?

U4: Yes and no. Just like a paper brochure, it's there. It's been a while since I looked at it, but I'll bet that the mission statement that's posted on the website is the one that was adopted in 2000 and has since been modified and no longer reflects what they're doing. In fact I know that the board members listed on the website doesn't reflect the current board. The list of sponsors represents companies that gave in 2000 and have not donated since. So, just like the pile of brochures an organization prints up and has sitting by the door, and becomes the stack that's just been sitting there forever. It's not relevant anymore. And that's just misusing that medium. You actually do need that information up to date or it looks like the organization doesn't exist anymore.

Think of a magazine, that changes every month. There's no reason to go back to the IT Zone website because it never changes. Even when they change the mission and the things they're doing with Spark now, there's no mention of that on the site at all. Which is important; it's going to have a big effect on how they do things. Depending on the story that gets out in the paper, certain parts that are going to make people think that the IT Zone has replaced by Spark. That's not really accurate. Different people, the IT Zone's mission is going to have a smaller focus, because Spark is taking over some of those activities. And that's a good thing. But if someone's curious and they go look, they're looking at something that's stale. They're not even addressing it. They're not responding to the information and misinformation that people are getting from other sources.

SI: Do you think that the current state of the website, what it does, limits its ability to attract potential members and retain current members? You described membership in the IT Zone as something that makes sense as a member of the business community. Is this a substantial enough problem that it's going to drive people away or cease to attract people?

U4: OK, those are two different points. Will it cease to attract people, yes. Looking at different communications mediums for different purposes. In that, you'll print brochures and they may become a little out of date. You periodically update them so everything's in working order. Use email to communicate something to someone, but then that goes away. Email is where information goes to die. You use advertising, printing, radio whatever to reach people and then that goes away. A website is somewhere in the middle. It's there, like a brochure or a catalog

that people save. But it is also easier to change and update so it should always be relevant. A site with web content that hasn't changed in three months looks like the company has abandoned it, like it's not relevant, it's not part of their ongoing communications strategy. And the IT Zone website communicates that to prospective members. It's not updated, it's not relevant, it's just not being used.

Now, is a website enough to make people leave? No. It's not the reason you join or leave an organization.

SI: A followup to that, does the website influence participation in the organization. I think you've already partially covered this by talking about the potential for RSS feeds to keep interest alive.

U4: Right. Um, yeah it is one of a number of things that can help or hurt participation. Obviously the quality of the events is a big thing. The number of events is a big thing...too many events, too few events and the IT Zone faces a few challenges there. Because they stop during the summer. So every fall they have to get people back in the habit. They have events 3 out of every 4 Tuesdays of every month. Which means it's almost weekly, but it's not weekly. They'll also move or combine events with other organizations, so it's almost every Tuesday, except for the ones that don't have meetings. That makes it hard for people to leave it on their calendar and make it a habit. So those organizational challenges, it's not a habit for people to go, they have to make a conscious decision to go. Then there's which ones do I go to. The ones of most interest. How do I know that? By looking at the calendar. Which is organized very poorly. So in that sense, I do think it does hurt participation. But I don't think it's the reason people don't go. People won't stay home because you have a lousy website. But you won't change their behavior, make them start attending with a lousy site.

SI: Is there anything else I haven't thought of that you'd like to comment on?

U4: There's only one or two other things that have a bit of bearing, only because of the audience that IT Zone has. The IT Zone to some extent wants to attract a techie audience. They want the business leaders as well. Technology people care about technology. Websites, I'll make a note of what technology sites I like and dislike are using. Sometimes that's to see if a company is using their own technology. Is Microsoft using .net? Yes. Is Sun using Java? Yes. What is Oracle using? What is Apple using? There are times where there are interesting, funny things. I know of Java groups that use .net, Microsoft technology...That's Weird.

One or two .net groups use Cold Fusion. That looks weird if you're a techie. Your whole mission is to sponsor a technology, but you build your site using your competitors? It'd be like Rick Wagner driving a Ford. And with IT Zone where that's relevant is techies look at it and go, it's built on ASB technology, which Microsoft said is a bad (?) and released its successor, .net in 2000. Even if you look at legacy curves and say, gee this was five years ago, it should be enough time to replace it, especially on a website as small and with as little traffic as that one. That's relevant because here you have this business development technology organization that isn't staying relevant with technology, which sends a bad message to part of the community they want to attract.

SI: You mentioned their website has a list of contributors over time...

U4: No, it's JUST the original contributors...

SI: What I'm trying to get at is, IT Zone has lost a funding base of people able to give as they did in the late '90's. Does that lack of throw around money mean that an organization like this can't survive, or does it mean that they must exist in a different capacity?

U4: That's a more complicated question, because companies will fund organizations that help them in their investments. That investment takes a lot of forms. Northwest was laying off some of their IT staff. So they're gonna donate money to organizations that will help out those people who lose their jobs. It probably does actually help those people. It eases some conscience and it probably is a good PR move. So companies will help companies when it will benefit them.

Microsoft. A couple good examples there. They've funded an organization called INETA, an international .net speakers association, whose mission is to send speakers anywhere in the world to speak to .net user groups. Which means if you're trying to start a group, you get three speakers a year that are internationally known people that will help you start your group. Why does Microsoft care? Because the more successful their .net user groups are, the more people buy their workstations, their product. Investment.

Similarly Microsoft has an (ISB) venture program, helps fund some venture funds, serves on the boards of startups that they've identified, helps license technology out of Microsoft research, to help people that are putting together new products who are running the Microsoft platform.

They'll sell more Microsoft workstations. Investment

Now look at the IT Zone over the past five years and the number of startups doing something interesting around Ann Arbor. You're looking for a return on your investment on helping this organization, it's hard to find. You can find companies that are growing, but they're certainly not pointing to the IT Zone as one of the contributing factors to their success. So if you're looking to invest and help the Ann Arbor business community grow, is that really a good use of the money?

But if you're Microsoft, or Oracle or Sun, why do you put your money here? How is that likely to help you? And it's unclear so far that it does. If that has happened, whether it's the website or something else, they're not communicating it.

Interview with U3 on 11/16/05
By Robert Thompson

So it was the wireless Washtenaw event that you went to. Do you remember how you first heard about the event?

I was thinking about that today in anticipation of this interview. I believe there was an email that was sent out. And I don't know if it was to all SI or just HCI, I can't recall if it came from SOCHI. It was an email that first brought it to my attention and then talking to some fellow students that had some familiarity with the organization – gauging their interest in it as well.

Did you know about Wireless Washtenaw beforehand or did you learn about that project there?

That was the first I had heard of it, I guess that the whole idea of municipal Wi-Fi has been an interest of mine for awhile so that's why I wanted to see how they were handling it here locally

What made you want to attend?

Two thing, well three things really. It was the specific content for that event. It was curiosity about the IT Zone and how that worked, the third thing was the drawing a blank on the organization [Rich Sheridan, from Menlo]
It was another opportunity to see him and others in action.

You mentioned that you talked to other about the event? Had they been to other events and recommended it?

Yes, Brian Kehr (spelling?) has been in Ann Arbor for awhile was familiar with them and spoke highly of the events. I think he too shared an interest in the topic. So it was like sort of ahead of time confirmation that it was a good organization and a worthwhile event.

This was your first IT Zone event?

Yes.

Have you been to any since?

No I have not.

What did you know about the IT Zone before you went?

I was really just focused on the event, I didn't know what its business was outside of sponsoring lectures and things like that. Community gathering point and information dispersal.

Can you describe your experience at the event? Things you remember from it?

I thought the content lived up to what I expected, it was interesting to hear the different perspectives from someone in the business community, someone in the academic community, and a politician that was working on this everyday. I got the sense that a lot of people in the audience that night were pretty well connect with IT Zone or at least were well connected to the local IT community in those aspects. It seemed like it was fostering a pretty rich dialogue. A good excuse for people to come around common interests. The setting was quite nice, settings for lectures are often windowless enclosures and it was nice to be in a space that was open and large windows along the side...

Good food?

Oh yeah, that didn't hurt (laughter)

You talked to me and Jason that night, did you talk to anyone else?

No, I didn't have an opportunity to do that, but that's one of things about it. If there was another topic in which I had even a marginal interest, I might go just for the opportunity to meet with people in the community.

Can you tell me what you pull from that presentation, what you learned?

I don't remember a ton of the specifics, at least they're not coming to me just this moment. I thought it was interesting to hear the way they were tackling it and how there's collaboration between Washtenaw counties and nearby counties. They're taking own approaches and there seems to be a sense of lighthearted competition but a recognition that they had learned something from one another which I found interesting. Sometimes in my limited exposure to sort of urban planning issues, counties don't always think in terms of what's going on around them and what they can learn. It sort of like hording and building something specifically for their community, that if they thought more about it and better coordinated with communities, they could save money and have a more effective solution. So I was impressed by that. And just the cooperation between the different sectors, academic, government, business I was impressed by that as well.

Is there something that may not have been covered as well as you would like or was there something that could have been improved?

I can't think of anything in particular. I had more interest in, I remember there were ideas brought up about state and federal legislation. There was potential that it could stand in the way that of what we're trying to do at the county level. I've read about those issues before and I was kind of curious about the political person that was there. I don't remember if he was a county supervisor...

I think he was on the board for the Wireless Washtenaw project. I think he was responsible for dealing with the politics.

It probably wasn't an appropriate forum, but I was kind of curious about the details of what they were facing at a state and federal level. I remember he was saying that he was spending time talking to them, and was becoming a de facto lobbyist.

Did you research anything about the event, before or afterwards? Did you look up anything on the web?

I remember reading the information they had there [at the event] and in particular the calendar just to see what sort of events they had coming up. And of course, there were some topics that were of interest to me, but they seemed geared towards people who were already starting their own businesses or were already in business and some of the issues around that. I might have some interest in those topics, but at this moment, in the calculus of how you spend your limited time outside of class and homework, they didn't seem relevant enough for me to go back. That I would want to stay on their calendar I guess.

Did you pick up anything about the fact that it's a membership organization?

Based on when I came in and the pricing scheme, I knew there was a membership related, but I didn't explore that in any detail. I'm having limited time available and my expectation is that I'm in Ann Arbor for the two years that I'm in school and I enjoy it while I'm here and I want have some sense of activities that are happening here, particularly in wireless Washtenaw, but more of like a case study into what's happening elsewhere. So I would say that I'm not super invested in the community and that's probably why

I'm trying to get at, in the literature you saw, and the fliers, did you pick up any details about the membership, not that it was suited towards you, but did you get anything out of that?

Yeah it was in the literature they had, but I think it was just sort of, it didn't seem relevant so it wasn't something I stored away.

Have you been email since the event?

I think I received a survey about the event. I didn't fill it out.

Is there anything else you want to talk about the IT Zone – oh wait, did you have trouble finding the place at all?

No that was fine, I was impressed enough about the event, both their coverage of the topic and just how things seemed to operate. But I would go back again if there was a topic that was specifically towards what I want to do. I think it's a good resource in the community and if I were planning to stay in Washtenaw county, for an extended period of time beyond school, it would be ideal. Because it gives you exposure to people in different areas but if you're working you can rely on your immediate peers, but I think its always good to get exposure to people from other organizations and how they're addressing the same issues.

Having experienced one event, have you made it a point to keep up on current events, what they're offering? Or would you say you're passively listening for new things?

Yeah I guess I would say its been word of mouth, but honestly I looked at their calendar and I didn't see anything two months going out. I made it a note to get onto a newsletter or calendar of events. I would like to be on that, because my approach to IT Zone would be very much ala carte as topics interest me.

How long have you been in Washtenaw County? Have you been here for a while?

No, no, I moved here in august, so that's why its that I'm not interested in what's happening in Washtenaw county, its just that I don't have the commitment to the community or in staying here afterwards.

Interview with U2 on 11/15/05
By Alok Vimwala

SI: The reason we're doing this project is we're trying to help IT Zone figure out who their users are, who are their members, who are the people who come to their events. Who are the people who use it and why do they come to IT Zone? What value do they get from IT Zone? What makes them come back to IT Zone? We also want to know what usage they get of the IT Zone website. A lot of people just use the email that Dianne sends out.

Do you come to IT Zone events often? Once a month...

U2: I come here pretty often; it depends on how many other projects I have going. In a good month I come twice a month, sometimes three times a month. Almost always to the Tuesday events and once in a while I come to the morning events. A lot of times they have professors...

SI: How do you usually find out about events?

U2: I do always look at the email, a quick look to see if anything's new. Then most times I delete it; if I really want to know, I'll go to the website and get a complete listing. I look ahead as far as they have anything 'cause I do my planning with my daytimer. So I do my planning way ahead...IT Zone, New Enterprise Forum, the venture capital club that meets up at the Holiday Inn north Plymouth road. That's been going since 1986 I think. So that's once a month, always on the third...ah, right here, November 17th. They might take off two months a year.

So I try to plan out my semester, what travel do I have, the IT Zone, New Enterprise Forum's only once a month so I try to go every time that I can. At IT Zone I actually pay attention to what the topic is. If I haven't gone for a while, I try to pick something interesting and go to it, but most times I try to plan six, eight weeks ahead and say, that's something I want to go to. Then I don't schedule anything on top of it.

I also use the IT Zone because they have non IT Zone events. Partner organizations, you know. I always want to know what's going on just in case. What I should be looking at is their news, but I mainly just go right to the schedule, try to plan my life.

SI: Do you feel that there's something missing from the website at all? Maybe it's not focused toward new, or existing members? Something that might help you network better on the website?

U2: I know they have a list of the existing members and what they do. I got myself in there at one point so I tried to find it. It was a little bit hard to find. One thing I thought unusual, but IT Zone describes as a benefit is that only existing users get to look at what members' companies are. Do a search for internet providers or board manufacturers or software companies you have to be a member to look that up and they say that's one of the advantages to being a member, but I would've thought they'd want to use that more broadly to say... If you want to look in Ann Arbor and find a company who does ISP, here's the IT Zone and you can just look it up. I don't have an analysis of whether that's good or bad, it's just not what I expected.

So my use (of the website) is very limited to, what is the schedule. I was never motivated to do a whole lot more than that. A couple times I tried to find local companies in different categories; I don't remember why now.

SI: When did you first find out about IT Zone?

U2: To go way back, I was part of the Michigan technology council from about '84-'87 on the computer committee. I was part of the Ann Arbor software council for quite a while; they'd have meetings at the wolverine building on State Street. I think the software council membership kinda merged into the IT Zone. I don't think there was any official organizational merging, but in practice the Ann Arbor Software Council went away and everybody that used to go to that started going to the IT Zone. Especially when the IT Zone first got started and had a lot of money so big, nationally known speakers would come in. They'd have these huge meetings out at the hotel near the Briarwood mall. They would have 300, 400 people come to these meetings and hear Michael Stonebraker (U of M grad, INGRES creator, MIT prof. and database researcher) or Hal Varian (UCLA). That's when they could afford really big name speakers.

SI: Was there a specific time you decided to become a member or was that just part of the transition from the Ann Arbor Software Council?

U2: I had been coming and just paying for at least a year on a pretty regular basis. My company is very small, one of my partners was interested in coming. We said, if two of us are interested we might as well join as a company so anyone who wants to can come. So financially it was a wash, and we figured we could be in the database and since I show up it makes sense that I be a member instead of a moocher.

It looks more substantial and responsible if you're a member instead of just showing up all the time and a non-member.

SI: That's what IT Zone is trying to find out. Why do some people not become members? Is there something lacking? Since you came from the Software Council and Tech Council computer committee, were you attending all sorts of events, or were you looking for a specific type of event when you first started coming? Events specifically geared toward small business, new business, entrepreneurs, or technology in general...

U2: I'm looking for things related to technology, or academic. I'm an academic at heart. If I had all the money I could want, I'd like to work for the university; wouldn't have to build products and stuff. I just like to hear about a lot of different things; it's just whether I'm interested or not. And I'm interested in most things, well outside the computer business. So I could have fun reading through most of that book shelf (in the IT Zone conference room?). So I go to other conferences too, to Hillsdale College conference on economics, to Grand Rapids for their conference on globalization. You just hear all these different ideas and it's fascinating. Part of why I come to things like this is it keeps my brain moving. If I did the same thing day after day, I'd get stuck in a rut. Coming here I get new ideas and hopefully some of them affect my

business, but that's not the primary determinate. CK Prahalad from the business school worked for years in corporate strategy and now BOP studies. Which has nothing to do with my software business, but I like to understand these things. Prof. Kennedy gave an excellent talk about a year ago for one of the morning sessions on globalization and economics. For me it's all the IT Zone, no matter who's sponsoring it. If it's here, it's IT Zone.

I always come when they have the annual presentation from the people doing business plans, whether it's part of Entrepreneurial Quest, or whatever group is sponsoring it. Where they have businesses make presentations and a panel decides who gets prize number one, number two, number three. It's a variety of things people are presenting, trying to hone their business plans. Part of it, you get a good mix of people. Mixing with the audience is always interesting. Find companies you never heard of.

SI: Yeah, types of people you wouldn't think would be interested in IT Zone in the first place.

U2: Oh yeah. Inf fact, that's how I found Sam, who's now my PR guy. I think I may also have seen him at the New Enterprise Forum. Mainly just seeing him here and then inviting him out to make a presentation. I'd rather work with someone who's here, listening to things about IT than somebody in the yellow pages, who may not have any interest or knowledge of IT.

SI: Do you think you get enough value out of IT Zone. Are there events you'd like to see more of? The big speakers are always a big draw. Maybe have fewer, but bigger events.

U2: Well, it'd be nice if we could have a regular pattern of nationally (known) speakers. I don't know how that would balance with the other things. It takes staff time to organize. It's not a big cash expense to run something like this, I mean how much they pay for refreshments and stuff. Sometimes that's donated I think. It'd be nice once a year to have a Michael Stonbraker or someone come in. I think that'd be good marketing for the IT Zone, something big enough that they'd put it in the paper. And hopefully they could charge a modest amount, not lose money on it. If you had say 300 people come to a big event, that would motivate more people to come to their normal weekly activities or become members.

SI: How do you see the IT Zone as being part of the community? How does it help and how could it help more?

U2: Those are hard questions. That's been the question for the last 25 years. It's funny sometimes, people say, "I've been through this before, these are the same questions from 1980." Ann Arbor news did an article on my company back in '83 or '84 and these were the same issues raised back then. They had a cartoon above the article with a fancy Hollywood type set showing a glossy fancy high-tech building and behind the supports for the set was a pasture with cows. Saying Ann Arbor's supposed to be so hi tech, but look behind the curtain and there's cows.

So, what more can they do, I don't know. I've read about Spark in the newspaper but haven't been to any events. It's always the question with business incubators and is there enough venture capital and are bankers knowledgeable enough to work with small companies and

startups. They're trained to be bankers not venture capitalists, and is there a quorum, critical mass to accelerate things? I mean there's hundreds of little tech companies in town, most of them you never hear of unless you run across somebody and find out, oh they've been doing this for ten years...I've been going to events like this for ten years and never even heard of them.

Back with the Michigan Technology council we did a survey on Washtenaw County tech companies in '85 or something. A nice published book on that. So I'm not one for coming up with great ideas on what they (IT Zone) should be doing. I think what they're doing now, people are trying and it's slow and hard.

SI: Some of what IT Zone is doing now is different from what they've done in the past, how has that change affected community involvement in what they're doing, helping small business and such? How do you feel about IT Zone in relation to the changes they've undergone?

U2: My interest is in the technology stuff, and we now have for the most part local, not national speakers. And we've got a lot of good local people and I'm satisfied. I'm not looking for how to start a business... I went to dozens of those talks back in the '80's. I'm not short on talks. I'm looking for the most part, for things that are academically interesting. Very seldom do I come to something saying, oh I need to go to that because I can start using it next week. That almost never happens. I have a limited range of goals and the IT Zone meets the goals that I have.

I'm hoping that with SPARK, that'll pull things together. Part of our problem, we've had so many different groups. There's still another software thing in Ann Arbor, but it's more or less for techno-weenies, for development programming not the business aspect which is what Michigan Technology Council used to focus on. And the software council was somewhat a midpoint but looked more toward the business side. IT Zone is technology oriented with a business purpose; technology as a means to an end, growing and expanding businesses. But sometimes it seems like there've been competing entities. I think that's changing over time where people are cooperating more. IT Zone will do joint meetings with the New Enterprise Forum and with Automation Alley from Oakland County, leaders connect.

Is the IT Zone worth having? I would find it a loss if they weren't here. Then I'd be left with a once a month thing and they cover a much broader set of topics. In the old days I went to Michigan Technology meetings and also the Ann Arbor Chamber of Commerce. But you can't do everything. I gotta limit the number of things I go to.

Interview of S3 on 11/22/05
By Robert Thompson

How would you describe your role at IT Zone?

My role is membership and programs, so it's my job to make sure that members have a comfortable experience here. I help new members join and help run the programs from the registration to get the room ready to making sure the speakers are prepared and ready to go with presentations and that kind of stuff.

What do you think brings people out to events?

I would tend to say that specific speakers, but that's not always the case. A lot of times, people come for networking so even if they're actually there are people that come who don't necessarily know who the speaker is. They just show up and ask, "what's happening tonight?" There are some people that come just to be part of the atmosphere here and part of the community of it.

Do you think there are any breakdowns between members and non-members, new members versus older members?

Non-members tend to come for specific speakers, they here that there's going to be this particular subject or person speakers. Members are the ones that just come to be here. A lot of newer members come more frequently at the beginning, they're getting to know what we're all about and come to a lot of things. The older members come for more specific event, maybe once a month.

How do you think people learn about events?

The people who already know about us and who we are learn about us from our updates that we send out. We send out updates on Mondays and Dianne sends out personal emails. We're also in people's calendars, so I don't know if people who aren't members and don't necessarily know about us, learn about us there, but that's my guess. We're in the business calendar and sometimes the Ann Arbor news. If they find our website somehow, they might sign-up. Most people probably learn about them from the emails we send out.

What percentage of participants on a given night are IT Zone members?

It depends on the event, but a lot of times for a non-high tech Tuesday it might be half, whereas a lot of times for the high-tech Tuesday (free to members) it's probably 75% members and 25% non-members. With so many different events, it varies.

So a small business oriented event might draw more non-members?

Yeah, leaders connect which happens once a month for breakfast, that might have a lot of non-members, because a lot of those people are coming specifically for that one event regardless of their knowledge of the IT Zone. So it really depends on the event.

How would you describe the value of an IT Zone membership? If you were a member, what would it mean to you?

The main thing would be the discount to paid event or getting in free to some of them. Also, the use of the building facilities that acts as a conference room, coming in a being able to stop in between meetings. It's a place to stop in. The opportunity to network and meet other people which I guess is available to non-members too. For some of the larger companies it's for the community of it and the good citizenship. There's some well, not status, but legitimacy, like being associated with a reputable organization?

Like getting involved in the community?

Yeah, like being affiliated with a community group.

Do you find that members tend to use things like the conference room?

There are some that use it quite frequently, and others probably don't know that's even an option for them. There are a couple people who will reserve it on a regular basis and a lot of others that never do and I don't know if that's because they don't need it or don't know about it.

I actually didn't know about it, it's something where you can reserve the conference room?

Yes, some of the members work out of their home or have a tiny office and need a room, even our larger space. Members are welcome to reserve it. Some people will do an hour and a half; some will do the whole day. They just have to call in and see if it's available.

So the cubicles out here are also available for people to stop in?

Right, exactly. Those do get used. Those get used more than the conference rooms. People stop in, they're downtown or they are people who are here for another meeting so they hang out for a while, it's a nice place to work.

So people pull out laptops and check their email and stuff like that?

Yeah.

What motivates people to join? What do you think are the primary factors in their decision.

The people who are planning to come to a lot of events feel like they're getting a better value for the money. They're planning to come to enough events where it's cheaper. Some people want to be a part of the organizations. Some people will join the different committees once they become members. That's the sense I get, the community of the group.

After they've joined, what motivates people to renew their memberships?

I guess kind of the time thing. In the past, they've had a good experience. They've found the events and networking and the things we have to offer valuable, whether its money or they've met new contacts or they've got new business from meeting people here. There's some people that are on committees that want to keep doing that.

What do you see as the primary roll of the IT Zone in the Ann Arbor community? What needs in the community does it serve?

A specific group of people group of people that are coming here for IT specifically and the more technical topics that we do. More people who are coming to things here are coming for the education and networking that we offer. Lots and lots of different topics. We have so many different things that we do that there's a draw for a broad spectrum of people from high-tech Tuesday to the creativity forum. It provides a place for people to come and give their presentations but are also for a lot of different people to get a lot of different topics and meet different people. You can come to a different event and meet different people than you normally would.

Do you think there's anything that IT Zone could do better or something it could do to better serve the community?

It probably could, and this is something that we're working on, we could have better membership benefits. We've asked ourselves. What is the value of being a member? The committee has been meeting quite often to look at that. We think the website could be a little bit better. Even though some people who get on and have no trouble accessing information about events, there are some people that for whatever reason do [have problems]. So there's issues with aspects of that, the registration process. Somehow make it more simple so people feel like they have an easy time doing that. That's all that seems to come to mind right now.

Changing gears to the website, how do you think people use the website?

I honestly don't know how people find it. My guess is that they are doing some kind of search in Ann Arbor or for IT or for different speakers and they happen upon it. Maybe people refer them to it. I think that once they know about it, they use it to find out about what events we have. To register for events and some people use the member news section to post their news. Members can access the membership directory, so if they're looking for a specific person or service. But I think primarily, it is used to find events.

Do think the website is successful in communicating the mission of IT Zone?

Probably not. Well I think that our actual mission is on the website, but I don't know if that's the first thing that people see or get out of it. I think most people are on it to find out what we have going on and people that don't know about us...

Do you think people are coming through specifically for events, do you think they pick up what IZ Zone is about while going through the website?

Possibly, but some of the events here, people are linked to the site from another site. Their focus is to get registered for events. I don't think they take the time to look it over.

What do you feel is your primary communication strategy for reaching members and non-members?

Emails. The updates we send out, the emails from Dianne. Even though our membership is around 200, we have lists of contacts of over 3,000, so even though its not 3000 members, there are lots of people who have signed up to get our information and to hear what's going on here. So we send out the emails to a lot of people. We have the updates every Monday, but when we have an event where we're trying to boost the attendance, Dianne sends out a "personal" email and we always gets a boost in attendance from that.

Do you feel that there's anything missing from the missing from the site?

We've talked about trying to make it a little more personal. Maybe a few pictures from events or just have some part of it more personable, or relatable...

Something that might show a community atmosphere?

Yeah, one time we posted pictures from an event, but that was it. I think it might be kind of interesting to do it more often. So people who haven't been here will get a kind of feel for the community.

What do you feel is the most valuable part of the web site?

Probably the registration system and the calendar. Depending on what people are looking for, people might get value from the membership directory. I don't have a sense for what people are looking for, but what I do get a sense for are the calendar and the registration system.

Can you tell me a little about the membership directory? Does IT Zone maintain that?

Basically, when someone joins and they are a new member, we put their information in their contact information and what they do. Once they're a member they can actually go in themselves and update the company description or add a service. Things like that, they can go into that themselves. So it's not something that's really maintained. It's more of when they join, we put something in, and if they want to update it they can. Otherwise its something that just kind of sits there. There's not a whole lot that I do to maintain it.

How memberships are corporate memberships versus personal memberships?

Off the top of my head, I don't know what that is, I would want to say there are more company memberships than individuals, but there is some person, I don't know if maybe its 25% individuals and 75% companies. The individual memberships are more for people who are unemployed or people who are part of a large company that didn't want to join.

How do the different committees for IT Zone function and impact the organization?

Most of the committees meet once a month, and for example, the program committee meets once a month to plan the events. Not all of them, just the high-tech Tuesdays. They're responsible for figuring out that people are interested in and trying to bring those topics in. Then the marketing committee and the membership committee were not meeting monthly and now they are. They just recently met and we talked about if we were going to do the ads we're doing, and answer if it's really drawing the attendance or do we want to put our money somewhere else. So basically each committee is comprised of a couple of people who are here at the IT Zone and sometimes a board members and then members that are interested in the sense of what's going on and want to participate in what we're doing. Usually they're a monthly meeting.

Do you find that that the committees are effective?

Yes, but we probably don't change up enough the people who are on the committee. I know in the program the people who are on it have been there a long time and we probably need to get some fresh – we have added to it, and lost some kind of naturally, but we do need to get some new faces and new people involved so it isn't always the same people. The same people may not ever get a difference sense of what people are looking for.

Can you go into the role of the board? Do they oversee the committees?

The board as far as I understand meets once a month, usually with Dianne there to go over what we've had going on and the attendance has been like, if the membership has increased or decreased, and I guess their goals for what they want to see happening and there are a few board members that are really present and active a lot. But most of them honestly aren't around a lot on a day-to-day basis and hardly come to events. They have very little communication with us in the day-to-day, for some of them it's really about coming to the monthly meeting and being part of the board?

How would you describe how the role of the IT Zone has changed over the time that you've been associated with it (how long have you been here)?

I've been here about a year, I started last November. One of the things that has changed a little bit is that Dianne has been here a little longer than I have by 4-5 months – she's added a lot of different kinds of events and activities which I think has brought in more people, there's a lot of things beyond the high tech Tuesdays and the creativity forum. She's brought in different speakers and different series.

So she's broadened the scope?

Right, we're getting a wider range of people coming to things. The actual space has changed. When I first joined the cubs were flipped around and Dianne was in charge of revamping the place. Some people that haven't been here in a while they say, "oh wow, everything has

changed” so the physical appearance has changed quite a bit. I would say that new topics, new events and new speakers.

What do you think the dual goals of providing a networking environment and educational programs -- how do those inter-relate?

Every event that we have, there’s some level of education in that sense that whatever the topic is, there’s somebody who is an expert in that area. There’s always time before and after events for the networking. So some people might come only for networking, but they’re there for the speaker too, so they get that. Or somebody comes for a specific speaker and they end up meeting someone that they hadn’t planned on. So both those opportunities are there.

Do you think those goals are in support of each other or are there times where they conflict?

I think they are usually in support of each other. We always leave the opportunity or the time for networking at the events. They are usually just hand in hand.

Is there anything you feel like is important to note in general?

Well I guess we were talking about the committees and the board. Some of the people on the board and the committees I’m sure when they first joined it was because they were members and so they thought they should get more actively involved. I think what happened is that –and this isn’t true for everybody –but there are a few people around the committees that don’t come to events anymore. That probably defeats the purpose, that they aren’t actively involved to participate. Definitely the board members it’s the same thing where I feel like the board is supposed to be comprised of people that are involved and want a larger roll. Most of the board members are never at events.

Do you feel they are disconnected from what’s going on?

Yes, and they make recommendations and come with ideas of what they want to happen here, but they’re not here. So it’s like “well you’re not even coming, so why are you expecting us to have this great attendance, when you as a board member and overall leader aren’t even coming” So it’s been a little frustrating for me that there are board members that I don’t know at all. They show up for their meeting and they do the thing they have and it’s certainly not true for everybody. There are a few people who are very active, but I think it would help because the people who come to events would like to meet board members and see them participating, because it’s a disconnect otherwise. That’s something that could change, I don’t know if the board members that aren’t coming to things sort of see it that way, like it is their responsibility to show up for stuff. They may feel that they are accomplishing their volunteering, but I think that it would absolutely help for the morale here and get more people here.

Thanks!

11/22/05

S2

Interviewed by: Amy

A: First of all, what is your role here?

S2: I formally am the tech and accounting administrator, which basically means, um, I do most of the paperwork to communicate with our accountant to make sure membership is uh... revenue is being tracked and appropriated correctly, that membership is.. you know, just the nuts and bolts stuff.

A: OK

S2: Keeping track of everything, what it ends up meaning is, having worked with Dianne and Suzanne before I really end up filling in a lot of the gaps, so, doing whatever little things need to be done. And there's only three of us, so it by no means sticks to just accounting or um, administrative details I guess.

A: Are you part time?

S2: I am.

A: What do you think brings people in to the events that are held here?

S2: Um, you know I've only been here a year, but there are two styles of event that get people here. One is a big name, a big draw, you know like I wanna go see that person speak. And the other are topics that are very universal and close to their... things that can actually help them with their business. It seems like when we have events that are focused on minute things that apply to a very specific line of business the attendance isn't great. There may be 8 or 10 or 15 people that are very interested in the topic, but the big number turnout events are, um, generic, general marketing ideas. or overreaching business concepts. that end up drawing across different business sects.

A: So of the people that attend these events, how do you think they learn about the events?

S2: I would have to say that most of them already know, are the people that have been coming long since I've been around. Now where did they originally hear? I don't really know.

A: So most of the people who come are people who have already been here before?

S2: My impression is that there is a very small amount of first time new members, new interests, new visitors, a large majority are repeat customers.

A: For people who do come to an event for the first time, how do you think they hear about it?

S2: I would guess probably through word of mouth. Through contacts with other experienced.. uh.. you know, we do pick up from time to time with Diane prospecting sponsors and different things, we do pick up new groups but I would argue for the most part they have to be connected to another individual. We don't do a great deal of marketing to new leads so I don't think any of these people coming in the door would be, you know, sought out on our behalf, you know, by us.

A: Do you advertise outside with flyers or anything?

S2: Not very much. I know that in the past year Diane has done some advertising in the Ann Arbor News and the Observer and things like that, but not a great deal. In my opinion, it doesn't really fit in the budget.

A: When people are here for events, what percentage of people do you think are actual members?

S2: Depends on the event. We run with several different event styles, average event a high tech Tuesday or creativity forum, and event that runs weekly or monthly, I would say 60% - 75%. Some of the more special events here, leaders connect, even though it's a regular event

would be considered a different class of event to me, that would be 40%. I would guess the day to day average event would be very high membership. But off the top of my head I'd say we're averaging 35 to 40 for high tech Tuesday and regular events and 25 to 30 of those are regular members.

A: What do you think motivates people to become members?

S2: Not a lot. Um, those who come often enough, its financially worthwhile. It's easy. There's enough going on here that for a \$200 individual or small company membership, a lot of events become free. I do think there's a little bit of status in that it does become a little bit of a family they belong to. A little bit of a group and a place to get out and talk and meet. I be if, you know, you've probably interviewed 15-20 of the real regulars... I know I've seen some of the real regulars come and go in these sessions and I would imagine they say it's the constant communication with the group. The core seems to get along with each other and enjoy spending time with each other.

A: By the core, you mean the people who are really involved?

S2: Yeah, you know, I did a couple of quick glances for Diane, it's a very small percentage of people who come to more than 5 or 10 events. We went through and looked at everyone who's been to an event in the first six months, how many have been once, how many have been twice, how many have been 3 times, up to, I think one guy had been here 22 times in 6 months. But once you get to about six, I mean, 15 people have been here more than 6 times.

A: What makes people stay members?

S2: Again, going back to that spreadsheet, when you look at the few # of people that come more than 8 high tech Tuesdays to get your \$ value out of a membership, that was 12 people. So there has to be some aspect of um, there has to be status or your know some philanthropy I'm giving to the business community. There has to be some other feel for members because none of them are getting a volume discount out of their membership. because you know there isn't a lot of other member benefit than events.

A: What do you see as the primary role of the IT Zone in the community?

S2: Um, it's a good question. Um, it's seems as though there are 2 goals of the IT Zone, you know it's funny it says spark on the window, you could argue these are the goals of the new organization. To provide a place, a physical location for people to network on an ongoing basis, much like a chamber of commerce, but with the IT Zone in the top half of businesses, more towards the tech field, not towards the party stores and flower shops. For the tech community to come and have a place and whatever these nerds (destroy this tape) want to talk about. To have a forum for the networking side of it. There is a certain amount of education with a forum for these people to come in and present new ideas. I have to say there have been some good speakers, really good speakers who have come in in the last year that if you are a small business owner, there's plenty to learn. So there is an education aspect. In those two veins, providing a networking place and an educational forum from time to time.

A: Do you think there is a way the IT Zone could better serve the community? Or something you would like to see offered that isn't offered currently?

S2: Um, you know we've though about that on several occasions, usually kicked it around in the form of, if you were a small web design firm, what could the IT Zone do for you. I'd say what the IT Zone could do for those ideal customers is provide a more specific, a more grad level sort of program. We're not just going to bring you in and talk about marketing and everyone says soft and fluffy things and you have to be positive, but actually get into the nuts and bolts of what your business is. Downside is if you did it, how many of those ideal customers are in it, and how many people that didn't fit into that category would come. It makes that idea very unrealistic.

And Diane would agree, you would have to end up catering to sales, marketing, general everybody's problem sort of thing. I think a way would be to go deeper instead of wider on the problems.

A: What do you think is the most valuable part of the IT Zone?

S2: This is going to sound dumb, but the central location. The space. Because I think the value that our members are getting is really from each other, so having a place to be and having a home and a, obviously for a lot of these people they know what's happening Tuesday night and they know what they're going to see, so I would say having a home, a venue.

A: Can you describe ways in which participation with the IT Zone leads to social or professional opportunities?

S2: For visitors to events... you could make an argument that creating business contacts here leads to employment opportunities and growth, and I'm sure that a lot of our members are service providers, whether web design or accounting or legal, I'm sure they get a lot of good contact. That would probably be the most obvious thing I would see there so that they could come and see others. I don't get a good feel for how much that actually happens. When events go on, I'm usually counting the money, I don't mingle and mix. I don't know how much that actually happens.

A: How do you think people uses the website?

S2: I imagine they pull their hair out, throw things, and spit from time to time.

A: So my next question is, does it meet their needs?

S2: It's designed to. Don't get me wrong, it's designed to. but at some point Satan got involved, and that website really is cumbersome. I know it, and often times don't, I know it, I know the information is there and often times don't know where to go to find it. I think it's too verbose. There's too much just block text and I find it hard to navigate, and I find information hard to catch, even in the event portion, you often have to fine tooth comb it to find out what it is, when it's happening, where it's happening, and I know Sus's behalf how difficult it is to get the info there in the first place with the constant updating. I'd love to have it redesigned, because I don't find it inviting, and I don't find it easy to use. On top of that we have a lot of I tried to sign up for this and this didn't work. I tried to do this and it kicked me to here, You know I didn't know if, you know what I think it does is especially when we're saying come register through the website... give your credit card number to a website you find cumbersome and confusing and bumps you around, I wouldn't do it.

A: You can sign up online for events?

S2: You can sign up online. You can pay online, it's connected to paypal. You can sign up for membership online. One of my biggest headaches is we'll have people come and say I tried to sign up online and it wouldn't let me, or I finished signing up online and I wouldn't know about it because it wouldn't let me hit this report the right way, or they'll get frustrated and they'll hit submit 20 times and I'll have 20 lines of the same thing, so I pretty much hate it.

A: Ok, do you think that there is anything that the website is successful in? Does it reflect the IT Zone's mission or goals?

S2: I don't think it does a good job of reflecting what the IT Zone should be about.

A: What do you feel is a valuable part of the website?

S2: Well, it does capture event registration, and I imagine, this may have something to do with the transition of staff over time, there should be a lot of functions set up to [do a lot of backend things]. There is a backend to it, I've tried to figure out how it works, and I run into a lot of error messages. There may be a lot more function in it's original design that we aren't successfully using anymore.

A: Is there anything as far as content that you feel is missing that should be on the site?

S2: Well it could be visually much more appealing, presentation, I think we could, there are times when we have photos, they are starting to capture presentations on video, some of the presentations could be available. You could create some real online content. For the bootcamp, there is some content available. I don't know how some of the speakers would feel about their content being put up for the world, some of these guys are making money to give these presentations. Maybe it's a member only kind of benefit, maybe it's a couple samples to draw people in. There's a lot of improvement that could be made. Not only the visual aspect, but also the educational content.

A: How do you as an organization communicate with the people who participate here, members and non-members?

S2: The largest way is through the weekly update, which goes out Monday, which was the next 2, 3, 5, I don't know, Suzanne puts it together, weeks of events, um, that is really the lifeline, our reminder to members and non-members. It goes out to a contact list of about 4000 on Monday afternoon to let them know what's happening. If we have something special going on, we'll shoot out, we'll do an email, spam, we'll spam the contact list at random with a message from Diane to let people know there's a big thing coming, and that's actually been fairly successful, where 12 people turns into 50 people. Besides that, there's been a little bit of publicity around different events, the Spark opening, the ace event they do in Jan/Feb, there is some publicity you can see. In terms of day to day it's entirely by email

A: Can you talk about how the committees here function, how they affect the organization day to day?

S2: I don't really know how they function, most of the work I end up doing is behind the scenes. I can't help there.

A: Do you feel that the role of IT Zone has changed since you've been here?

S2: That opens a can of worms in that the SPARK conversation is going to... yes I do think it's changed, where SPARK positions itself is going to determine where the IT Zone lies, and I don't think that conversation is anywhere near ending, there's a lot to be determined.

A: What's the process of becoming a member? How does it work?

S2: They either apply here when they come to an event

A: Do they talk to you? Is there a form out?

S2: There is a form, uh, they talk to any of the three of us "I wanna be a member", okay, fill this out, um, and, most people who apply that way pay at the time. Most of our members are individuals or emerging IT companies. There are several which we call a small associate which are not in the IT area. So 200 or 500 memberships. They usually pay immediately. The website kicks out an email, a membership ID and password.

A: Is that when you enter them in?

S2: Yes, if they sign up on the website sometimes all hell breaks loose. If they pay through paypal or by credit card through the website it goes through a backend spreadsheet and I have to send them an invoice. Their membership becomes active when they pay, and they are a member for a calendar year. In terms of is there big fanfare or a welcome gift or a party... no, there isn't. Near the end of the year I send a letter, an invoice. That's a couple months out. Then one month before I send another one. We've been talking about doing a last gasp one as they expire but haven't followed up on that.

A: What % of people would you say renew their membership?

S2: Somewhat hard to say. When I first came on in the website it looked like we had 200, 250 members. We started organizing the database and learned that we really had about 105

members and more than half had never paid and had been renewed into perpetuity because the old staff didn't want to deal with it. Some had a membership through some arrangement from the past. Now that I've been here a year, I'll say that most people who actually attend events renew, that's about 80

-85%.

A: That's all I have. Thank you.

Interview with S1 on 11/16/05
by Jason Nargis

What is your understanding of what membership to the IT Zone means and what do you think it means to your members?

Well that is a very good question and we have a membership committee, and actually even a membership taskforce working on that very question. And what we've determined thus far is that we have different stratification of customers and for the large corporations that are members, they don't seem to participate very much. They seem to join apparently, we think, because it's the good corporate citizen thing to do, and that they want to be recognized as a leading company in technology in this area. For example, in that category would be Comcast, or ProQuest, where they're not going to really come here to get customers or they're not going to learn more about technology or anything like that. They just join because they want to support a local organization that encourages technology. So we have those large customers and then we have the more medium size companies that are based in Ann Arbor and a lot of those kind of lean in that direction too, where they don't really participate a lot, but they feel like they're leaders in the community and so they join. And then we have the smaller technology companies that join and actually are a little bit more active in the organization and for them I think it's a chance to meet their peer group and to possibly meet people who could be helpful to them...service providers, or people that could introduce them to financial resources, that kind of thing.

The networking resources...

Yeah, networking...and then for the smaller companies and for the individuals I think it's even more the networking. And a lot of times it's not with a specific agenda, but more like if they work on their own or are the only IT person in their company or that sort of thing it's a place where they can come and have sort of a social group of like-minded individuals. They come for that and also the newer companies come if they're service providers, like web developers and so forth, they come to sort of be recognized as professionals in their field.

If you had to distill it down, what do you think the primary role of the IT Zone is?

I think the primary role is to facilitate people meeting each other that are in the technology economy, and a lot of these companies do business across the world or across the country, so they don't tend to socialize with other people like themselves here in Ann Arbor unless they come here. Because the chamber of commerce is much more local business, commercial ventures and these people are people that don't have a lot of roots in the community as far as their customers aren't here, their suppliers aren't here. They may be doing research on their own or maybe collaborating with people overseas, so they're not as connected to the community. So this is kind of a connecting point where those people can come here and they can meet other people through the organization and I think that's really our primary activity.

On a given night, with an event like Tech Tuesday, or any event, what do you think brings people out to those? I'm sure it's different for different events to a certain extent. What do

you think brings people out to them and how do you think they learn about what's happening?

Well I think the core group of people that come, come because this is indeed their social group, social-business group and I think there's a number of people that come because that's the case. Each time we have an event, there's a good portion—a third usually—that are here for the very first time, they've never been here before. And for those I think they must be hearing about because of our media coverage. Like being in the local calendars, being in the Great Lakes IT Report, which is an email newsletter. They must be hearing about it from those sources because the other primary way we reach people is through our email database which is 3500 names and those people—to get on our database—had to have come here, because that's where we collect the information. We haven't had outreach to go out there and find email addresses to send to people outside the people that have been here. So, and those people come I would think, primarily those people come because they're interested in the topic or the speaker. I also think that explains why a lot of them come one time and this doesn't become their social group because they had a particular interest and they came, they heard about it and that's really all they were looking for. I think there are people that come for the first time because somebody recommended that they come and said, "oh, if you want to meet people, or if you want to advance your business, you should meet people at the IT Zone."

Just kind of word of mouth.

Yeah.

Apart from offering this networking possibility do you think that IT Zone fills any other need for the community at large? Is it providing any other sort of service to the community?

Outside of the technology community? Like the whole...?

Not necessarily...I just meant you'd already touched on the sort of primary role of the IT Zone being to facilitate the networking and that sort of social group, but I'm just wondering in terms of connecting to the community. How do you see IT Zone interacting with AA as a community or with this area as a community?

Well, one of the things we've done a whole lot of in the past year is connecting with other groups in the community. And trying to make...the IT Zone in many people's minds is a place, and not a membership organization. They think of this building as the IT Zone and so in order to connect with more people and have people learn about us, we've been actively encouraging groups like tonight's group, the Ad Club, to meet here and now we have a number of groups: The association of women in computing, the AA Computing Society, we had the Washtenaw County bar association hold a lunch here. So we just try to get a lot of groups knowing about this place. Of course they think they're coming *TO* the IT Zone. So instead of just entering the IT Zone, hopefully they learn a little bit about our group and what we do and so forth. But they comfortable coming here and then this becomes kind of a central location where a lot of people come through and then they gather a lot of information.

So just build it from there, just sort of grow from that pearl?

Yeah, I just feel that if there's like 6000 people a year coming through here, you're going to disseminate a lot more information to people than if it's just our group of 200 members or whatever.

Can you talk just a little bit about how you see participation in the IT Zone leading to social and professional advancement or networking. In your mind, either through anecdotes or in general, how do you see that process work?

Well, I think for people new in business, and a good example would be ----- was a very new company and they'd been around for maybe 3 years and it was her first business venture with her partner and she immediately started coming here and to other organizations in town. And I think that doing that and being so public about what you're doing with your business and what your goals are with your business generates a lot of awareness and credibility, even if you don't really know if -----'s business is any better than the 20 other web design firms that you don't usually hear about. But the fact that you see her, you hear her talk about her company just your awareness is so much greater that she's going to be top of mind, so I think that from that standpoint it just builds business for small companies, because when you're out there and you're public people are going to think about you when they have the need for whatever service you provide. So I think it's important that way. [...] are made here and they're enduring. We've been around for six years, which is not a huge long time, but there are people that were here in the beginning that are still here and they're still here because they have a deep feeling about the organization and they've met here and the people that they've worked together with on committees, it's certainly a fellowship sort of feeling.

Uh-huh, absolutely. Could you talk just a little bit about the committees, how they function and how are they sort of integrated into the bigger mission of the IT Zone?

Well we have three primary committees, we have the program committee, the marketing committee, and the membership committee. We've had other committees in the past that have kind of waned; a financial committee and also a website committee, which explains why the website hasn't really been worked on lately. The most enduring, energetic committee would be the program committee and that's the group that's responsible for the content and scheduling for High Tech Tuesdays, which is our primary, our backbone, event that we've always had. They meet monthly, there's about 12 people involved and it's a very established committee. People have been on it for a while. When new people come on it, it's a real commitment to do it, it's not sort of like catch as catch can, it meets every second Friday at 8:30 in the morning and it's very established and quite regimented. The marketing committee, as you might expect from marketing people, is a little looser and that we have found has been a really good committee with good people on it and committed people, but we only meet when we realize we have marketing issues like in the spring when SPARK was being established and we realized there would be a lot of confusion between what is SPARK and what is IT Zone. Is IT Zone going away, blah, blah, blah. So we kind of had a flurry of marketing activity around that to kind of solidify that "we're still here and here's what we are" because again people think of this as a place and then they

suddenly see the building is called SPARK and it's "what happened to the IT Zone?" So there was a lot of work we did on that and with our brochure and that type of thing. And then we're about to have another marketing committee meeting—and it's been probably 3 months since we've had one—and we're having one because we set in motion 3 months ago an advertising campaign and we need to now look at that and say is it doing anything and what do we need to do as we go into the winter's and next spring's programs, so we'll meet again and it's a little looser. And then the membership committee has spun off a membership task force of people involved on our board and people who have been involved with the IT Zone from the beginning and it's tight knit group of about 10 people and the idea of the task force is to really not have to bring in new people that haven't been here and get them up to speed on everything that's been tried and what the history is and so forth, these are all people that have been pretty much involved. To really dive into why hasn't membership increased more. And why to people join and why don't more people join? And this kind of spun out of the membership committee which has old salts in it and also very new people that are just learning about the IT Zone and the membership committee came up with this position and concern that the organization is too event driven. And that it's really based on—and you can see that—that's the primary member benefit is that once you're a member you can come to these events for free. Well, you have to come to a lot of events in order to pay for the membership, so what we were finding is that most people don't come to the 8 events it would take in a year to pay for the membership and even if they do, why wouldn't you want to pay just \$25 at the door just in case you don't come to 8. I mean 8 is almost a monthly attendance, considering there's very few things in December and August. And you know, most people when they join a club they don't expect to come more than once a month so we started looking at that very few people come more than 8 times a year. So then you've gotta go OK, so why are they joining? Because they could just pay at the door. And that's when we realized there is a dearth of membership benefits—direct membership benefits—where people can feel like, well I'm going to join and I'm going to get a customer, I'm going to join: I'm going to find an investor, you know, it's just not that direct an impact on your business. So those are the committees and that's what we're working on, so we're struggling with some of the things that you're also working on so that really dovetails well, because what you come up with may give us some important information.

You touched on it a little bit—because people do join—why do you think that people are joining and what's prompting them to stay?

Well I think there is—I think it's primarily the sense of fellowship. I really think that combined with the fact that IT Zone enjoys a good reputation in the community and people do feel like that's a benefit to them to be a member of an organization that's recognized. In the same way you might be a member of the Better Business Bureau or the chamber of commerce even if you're not that active in it because it just seems good for the image of your business to be participating in something that is known in the community and is respected in the community.

Sort of like civic participation?

Yeah, even though it's not really the same kind of credibility as like being a member of the Home Builders Association because with that you actually apply for membership and the board

has to accept you into membership and you have to show financial responsibility and credibility and so forth and we're not really checking those kind of credentials with our members.

It's hard with the entrepreneurial sort of crowd too, because maybe they don't have a track record yet.

Right, right. So it's a different type of thing. It's certainly not like a certification, I mean we're not gold bonding these companies, but I think most people feel like if you're doing business with someone and they're active in the community and active in the organizations that are important to the community, that you kind of get a sense that they must be upstanding individuals.

Is participation in one of the committees also voluntary or is that sort of an elected process?

It's voluntary, but we do ask certain people, like if we feel like we've lost a few people on the program committee and we need to replace them we'll think about who really is involved and would have good ideas and be wanting to participate.

You mentioned briefly the board. What is the role of the board? How does that interact with the committees and IT Zone in general?

Well, some of the board members are active on the committees. I think every committee has at least one board member that is active on the committee. The board—you know we are a 501c3, so we have a board that is sort of the responsible entity for how we conduct our business. The board also establishes the budget for the organization and they direct really the strategy so some of the things we're doing the membership task force and the program committee and stuff are things that get discussed by the board as well.

Could you talk just a little bit about what you see is the changing role of IT Zone sort of over it's lifespan. Sort of where it was, where it is, and where you see it going.

Well, it's changed a lot because when it was started 6 years ago in 1999 we were experiencing an exuberant economy and there was a sense of celebration and a sense of camaraderie and this idea of let's—we've got enough resources to pool together and form this clubhouse and have this really cool spot where all the really smart people doing all kinds of neat technology stuff would all hang out. And that was kind of before wireless was at kind of the stage it's at now, so the idea was that there'd be a T1 here and people could come in and connect and that was kind of before the coffee shops kind of got into that. So people just kind of had the idea that this would be a fun, great place to hang out and there'd be a lot of really good ideas coming out of it and it'd be a place to connect—a place to connect with people and with the network and all that kind of stuff. So that was the original idea and there was a lot of support for that. We got huge donations of furniture and equipment..Xerox and Compuware, Steelcase...a lot of companies came forward and contributed to the idea and thought yeah, wow, great. Well, by the end of year 2000, that picture had sort of changed. And people, companies certainly weren't feeling generous and there was real concern about where things were going after the dotcom bubble burst. And a lot of people were finding it hard to find jobs and you kind of had the flurry of pink slip parties and you know, those kinds of things. And sponsorship for the IT Zone really dried

up. And sort of the spirit of the IT Zone was deflated so, but fortunately what happened is the governor in I think it was 2002, started the SmartZone Initiative and we were fortunate in being awarded the SmartZone designation for the AA/Ypsilanti area which gave us state funding to provide business acceleration services and education to entrepreneurs, that type of thing. So, it kind of was a turning point for us, but it turned us away from being kind of a social club for IT folks, into an entrepreneurial, start-up support organization. So we kind of continued to do both and had sort of the old group of IT people that were still interested in kind of the original idea, they were still hanging around, but were unable to really support this kind of facility and a staff and those kinds of things. But then the SmartZone initiative provided the funding that kind of filled that gap, but that also meant that we had to go in the direction of working with entrepreneurial ventures and not just in IT, but all kinds of technology. So we really became two in one and that's really how it's continued up until this year and now that SPARK has started, our entrepreneurial portion—the SmartZone funding—has gone to SPARK, because SPARK is now the economic development organization, so they're doing not only the Washtenaw Development Council work, but they are also doing the entrepreneurial, start-up, business acceleration work for our community. So that leaves us at the IT Zone as a membership organization—what do people want? That's why your project is so timely and why our membership task force is busy at work. Because if we're somewhat moving away from serving the needs of entrepreneurial start ups and we really want to serve the needs of more mature technology companies and technology professionals and stuff, we haven't really had a history of doing that and so we're trying to figure out how do we please our current core group, but then also extend in an area where companies have resources and money sufficient to support an organization. And what is that common bond? It's really hard to get at that because we're not a trade association, so you can't say, "well, we have a lobbying effort" or something that draws people together behind a common cause and our common cause is really, well we want to see these technology companies here in AA do really well and have the resources they need and the contacts they need and all that kind of stuff, but that's also sort of the mission of economic development that SPARK's doing. So at the heart of the question in our minds is how do you tap into the desire that people have to see the community doing well, enough for them to join an organization, because people don't have a lot of time and people tend to join organizations that are more specifically targeted to what they're trying to accomplish, like they think they're going to get customers at a chamber networking event or there's a good likelihood they're going to get customers, well then they'll join the chamber. If you're JAVA coding, then join the JAVA users group, if you're worried about telecom regulatory issues you'll join one of the state telecom advocacy groups. There's just like a lot of very specific groups for whatever your particular need is. And in some ways we're an anomaly, I mean there aren't too many organizations that are just sort of general technology group and AA is probably somewhat unusual in being able to support such a group because we do have a lot of technology people in lots of different fields, they're very educated, they want to get together and share ideas and concepts and stuff and so we're able to draw from that. I don't think there're very many other places that you can go in Michigan or whatever and start an IT Zone. I mean AA could probably support the tree-hugging vegetarian group, you know, that not many places can. So I don't think that we're an organization that could really be duplicated a lot of places, so we really need to find out what's unique about AA that has led us to exist for so long and still be here and have so many good people caring about us and being on our board and participating and stuff. What is making that happen and how can we get like a whole lot more of it.

Two kinds of areas that I see, sort of sometimes supporting one another, and sometimes not necessarily so, are the networking side of things and the education side of things. They converge, obviously, in a lot of the events and I was wondering if you had any thoughts about how those are sometimes in synch and sometimes they're sort of at odds. And it puts a lot of pressure on what kinds of speakers you have, too.

Yeah, that's a really good point and we have discussed that a lot because, as our brochure says, it's sort of networking and learning. And there are—we do have purely social events several times a year and they do draw a good-sized crowd. The format of High Tech Tuesday has been the same all these years and we have seen a decline in attendance, even in the past year when we've been working really hard to build attendance at the High Tech Tuesday. And I think a lot of it is, people simply don't have—even if they want to come and network and talk to people, they really don't have time to devote an hour—hour and twenty minutes—to listening to a presentation unless it's something they really need to know about. And so from that standpoint you're absolutely right and we've been concerned that sort of the mixing of the learning with the networking has worked to our disadvantage to some extent and there's been talk of trying some different things like there's networking and then you stay for the little presentation if you want to. The problem is that's kind of insulting to speakers, so they have to be like sort of conditioned to know that there's a small, special interest group that will stay for your discussion group, but a lot of people are just coming to network for a while. The other thing about networking, when you have a smallish group like ours, is that people don't need to network with the same people 3 times a month or 4 times a month or you know, however often we hold High Tech Tuesday. I mean, so people get tired of that. So they need to know that other people, that they don't usually see will be there and that's kind of the idea of having a keynote speaker, because the speaker will bring their friends and some of their employees and also will attract some new, different people that just want to hear that speaker. So it's a difficult balance, you've really hit on something that's really hard and just, we do have an event that's purely social that's hosted here called New Media Friday. And it's purely social, I mean it's pizza and beer, come if you want kind of thing, and because it's Friday evening people with families or other obligations don't tend to come so you get a lot of the single, IT, kind of geekish sort of people that come, and it usually turns into kind of an interesting discussion group, but it is the same people all the time, I mean it's not really good for networking from the standpoint of you're going to attract a new, different crowd and it's going to be fifty people, it's going to be ten people and a lot of times it's the same ten people.

I just wanted to ask you about the general communication strategy for communicating to both members and non-members, if you could just talk sort of in general about that. It seems to be email is the primary sort of channel?

Yeah, well we only collect email information so that's really the only way we can reach out to people that have been here, unless they join and in that case we have their address and phone number and so forth, but when people come to an event we really only ask them for their name and their email. So, yes that is the primary way. We do press releases on all our events so we are in the local calendars, business review, Great Lakes IT Report, and AA News, and Crane's if it's big enough for them to pick up on, and so people read it that way. Otherwise it's email and

we do the weekly update, which basically just an updated calendar highlights, pretty static looking document, I mean the events change, but it basically looks the same every week. And I'm not sure how readership is going with that, I mean I know we can pull some information on how many people opened it and looked at it and stuff. I think it's one of those things that kind of becomes scenery after a while, I mean you get it every week, do you really open it, or do you just sort of say, oh, the IT Zone weekly update, you know—blah—you don't really focus on it, so I don't know how readership is going with that. So, I've taken to supplementing that with my personalized emails about certain programs, to just kind of wake people up and give them—you know—a hey, you don't want to miss this one, you know this one's different, or...

Are those targeted to specific people?

Uh-uh, it spams the whole base of names and that has actually worked remarkably well. I've only had one person complain and want to not receive that, otherwise people have told me that they were glad to get the reminder or that it helped them understand what the program was and it added about 10% to the attendance, so that's been fairly successful. We're in the process right now of working on a monthly newsletter that will be tied in with Michigan Technology News which is an email newsletter that goes out to—you know, statewide, but we will have a subsection of that. Our own newsletter will go out to our group and then as a subset of the Michigan Technology News newsletter our newsletter will be there for the rest of those 35,000 subscribers will be able to access it. And we're hoping that will be able to give us some more visibility and it doesn't cost much because it's sponsored by companies that are involved with Michigan Tech News.

Is there a regular newsletter now?

No.

Has there ever been?

Yeah, there was one. It expired last November and it ran for a year and it was monthly and the general sense was that people—because it had a real static design to it—people had the sense that it was not really our newsletter, that it was sort of a generic newsletter that we put our name on. Like you've seen those, printers kind of send them out and stuff and they have all these tips and information and stuff. Part of the reason why is that our sponsors each did an article every month. One was a law firm, so there was like this legal Q & A. And the other was a finance firm and always did an article on some venture financing kind of thing, well, when people saw that each time it made it seem like it wasn't really our IT Zone news in that folksy sense of 'here's what our members are up to' kind of thing and instead it seemed like it was some boilerplate stock article kind of thing. And readership was terribly low and the sponsors were very disappointed and it was a lot of work, so these sponsors fees that they paid to sponsor it only covered the cost of actually doing it, so it wasn't a benefit really to anyone. And I'm hoping this Michigan Tech News will be a little different because it will be more clear that it's kind of our news, there's not going to be the informational kind of generic articles.

Tied in with an established newsletter that's there already makes it easier.

Yeah.

I just have a few questions about the website. I guess maybe start off by talking a little bit about the website committee and what they do. And at some point I believe there was some sort of survey about the website?

There was a website committee and when I became involved with the IT Zone about 15 months ago, the website committee had not been active for a fair amount of time, maybe as much as a year and when the website committee convened it was a group of people that were involved in website development so it was all people that had businesses doing that kind of work. And they were contributing their time and their suggestions and so forth and apparently there was a proposal written about what needed to be changed and what they wanted and stuff and a particular design firm in town was asked to do some prototype designs—of course with no pay—and they did. And those designs got shot down because they were too far out and creative and not what the board really wanted to see. And then there was some kind of budget established, I think it was \$15,000 for these changes to be made and people on the committee, their companies, all did proposals to do the work and so forth and I think there was the assumption that at least one of them would be picked and would be getting business out of this. Well, then it was somehow the \$15,000 wasn't really approved and the board really didn't want to spend that much and so forth. To make a long story short, everybody on the committee felt like they had been jerked around so much—that they worked hard, that they worked with good intention, that they had done a lot of free consulting and so forth and that just all the good ideas were being shot down and nothing was moving forward and so forth. So when I came on board and I heard the long saga of the website committee I was like—at that point in time when I started there were so many other issues that needed attention that I felt like making improvements to the website is not likely to gain us members or make our members more active and therefore it's not a top priority. I mean it's functioning, you can register for events, blah, blah, blah. We'll just let sleeping dogs lie for a while. I don't like how it looks and I think it's kind of clunky to use. It's basically functional, but I certainly don't want to open up the hornet's nest...because so many of the members here are website designers and programming shops and stuff and so it's kind of like: how does the ad club pick their advertising agent? You know? And it's just likely to lead to hurt feelings and frustration and being a non-profit we're always asking people to donate time or donate their efforts and it's just a very frustrating situation and that is why the website committee has laid low.

Do you think that it meets the basic needs of the members and non-members?

Well, basically yes. I do hear complaints about it being difficult to register for events and I think that's important. I feel that there's not enough reason for people to go to the website so, do they really use it? Or do they just go to the calendar and register for events? There are features in it where members can post press releases and stuff like that, but it's just so inactive. We do have some bootcamp materials—presentations—that you can access through the website, but it's not just that kind of website that people are warming up to and using a lot and opening to see what's new, I mean it's just not there.

Do you feel like that's the website, or it's just not that sort of tool for IT Zone? Do you feel like it could or should be?

I think it probably should be because I think that our membership is very web-involved and internet savvy and all that kind of stuff and I know there are things we could be doing with a blog or even with getting people higher on the search engines by having connections to our members. I mean I know there's things we could be doing that would be of value to the members. And those types of things I'd want to focus on first because if by doing pages that have links to our members helps them rise higher on Google, I mean that's a huge potential benefit and I understand that Google has a mechanism where they sort of weight your connections by how many other connections your connections have and stuff and with our membership and everything we should be able to generate a huge connection. And other things we've talked about doing, some linked in type things, a virtual reciprocity ring sort of communication thing where our members could make a request and it could go out to the interested people. Just more communication networking online and stuff. And I think that would really be valuable.

To have some value-added portions for membership to help them...

Yeah, because right now you pretty much have to come here to an event to really connect with the IT Zone. We're not usually at our desks even for people to call us and talk to us, so I think that—you know—that that would be a valuable thing for people to be able to feel like they can connect and get answers, reach contacts and stuff without having to physically come here to an event and hope that the person they're looking for will be here.

How, apart from the functionality of it, do you feel like the website is successful in reflecting the mission of IT Zone in the services or opportunities that it provides?

No, not really, no. And I think that it projects sort of a dated image of the IT Zone.

I guess the last thing I'm curious about is ideally, where would you like to see the IT Zone go? What would you love it to be in a perfect world, or in reality what's the sort of progressive plan?

Well, I would really like to see it involve more members. I'd like to see people feel that there's value in being a member and there's a sense of excitement and camaraderie and that people would want to come here. We've tried to make the facility nicer so that it is more welcoming and comfortable and people can feel free to come and go. So, I would like it—I like the concept they had early on, that this could be a place where a lot of ideas happen and people feel comfortable coming here and members feel like they could hold their downtown meetings here particularly if they have a home office and they kind of need a place where they could sit down and meet with somebody. And have it be kind of the active center where people feel really involved and really feel like they're meeting a lot of people.

Is there anything else you feel is important to note or any other area we haven't touched on that you'd like to talk about?

No, it was very thorough. You touched on the board and the committees and all that stuff. I think you really hit on the key things that we're looking at...really how to give our members more benefit to membership so that they continue to be members and so we can recruit more members and get people excited about the IT Zone is really what's at the heart of it. And certainly if we're going to be a self-sustaining organization we need a lot of members.

Thank you.