

Life Cycle of Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Today more and more companies are realizing the value of knowledge, and the benefits of capturing and leveraging it among all employees. Knowledge in the form of data, symbols, facts, and figures has been captured, but knowledge that is tacit (implicit) still continues to pose a challenge. How does such knowledge exist and where exactly does it thrive? The answer to that is “people”—the soft aspect of a company’s asset. Thus intellectual capital (IC), which represents the human intelligence asset of a company, is where both tacit and explicit knowledge reside.

With technology advancing to connect different people across the world, support groups, developer forums, and message lists are probably the most immediate resources that professionals look to for knowledge or solutions to issues at work. This could very well be the first step a person takes to be a part of a community of practice (CoP). Interactions, discussions, exchange of ideas, and solving each other’s problems is in itself a source of knowledge, and although no attempt is made to hold onto such knowledge or guard it as a secret, the wealth of information remains privy to the community that shares it.

Thus we can see that the continuum of informal discussions to a structured process of knowledge sharing can be represented by different stages in a lifecycle of a CoP. This article is an attempt to look at the lifecycle of a CoP, not just in terms of knowledge creation at each of its stages, but also as an example of how social networks are born and how they thrive. Understanding the lifecycle of CoPs will give greater insight into the knowledge sharing process resulting in more companies recognizing the importance of CoPs.

BACKGROUND

Communities of Practice: A Definition

A community of practice is formed when individuals with common interest (shared goals) come together on a mutual basis. Wenger and Snyder (2000) define CoPs as a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise. Thus when people find ways to relate to each other by participating in a knowledge flow process, they form a CoP. CoPs can be formed across functional units, organizations, and even nations. In effect, a CoP succeeds in eliminating the creation of knowledge silos formed due to the “protect your own information” attitude of many organizations.

THE LIFECYCLE OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

As in any other entity, a CoP also goes through a lifecycle process. Wenger (1998) described the following stages in the lifecycle of a CoP:

1. **Potential:** At this stage, people face similar situations but have not yet formed a shared practice.
2. **Coalescing:** At this point, members have interacted and found one common emerging point and its potential.
3. **Maturing:** CoP sets standards, defines agenda, and develops relationships.
4. **Active:** At this stage, the community formed is most productive. Members develop shared practices.
5. **Dispersed:** CoP is no longer active, functions more as a repository of knowledge.

Since a CoP is formed when people with common interests come together, we can look at a CoP as an evolving social network. The stages that mark the lifecycle of CoP when it forms as a social network are:

1. **Scattered:** Individuals that are grappling with similar problems, in search of similar information.
2. **Informal Group:** One has informal contacts that can help with the current problem at hand. Interactions result in informal support groups that one turns to with questions.
3. **Community:** The focus of the informal groups becomes clearer as members come together with similar pursuits to define the core of the community.
4. **Decline:** Maturity of knowledge results in expansion of the core up to a maximum limit. Knowledge still exists, but the focus has fully developed and no more refinement is possible.
5. **Death:** Focus is no longer important or relevant to its members, resulting in a steady decrease in interactions between members. One must understand that death of a community of practice does not signify end of knowledge. Knowledge still exists, however the community that developed it has moved on.

According to Gongula and Rizzuto's (2001) community evolution model, the following stages form the lifecycle of CoP:

1. **Potential:** Where a community is forming.
2. **Building:** Where the community defines itself.
3. **Engaged:** Where community executes and improves its processes.
4. **Active:** Where the community understands and demonstrates benefits from knowledge management.
5. **Adaptive:** Community uses knowledge for competitive advantage.

Thus we can see that CoPs basically start off with the mere process of asking someone for help. As more and more people face similar problems, the need to codify the knowledge emerges. Groups of people with similar issues (for example, it could be developers using a particular platform or people with similar

research interests) start to come together to form what is then called communities of practice. One must however keep in mind that knowledge cannot cease to exist. Thus CoPs, which are basically containers of knowledge, cannot actually die out. What could happen though would be that the relevance of CoPs or the topic at the core of a CoP could face a decline.

Lifecycle of CoP and Knowledge Creation

Most organizations get involved in the process of knowledge management to document or codify ideas, information, or data to facilitate sharing and availability of information to all members of the organization. Thus knowledge management is basically about organizations trying to leverage their tangible and intangible assets.

CoPs act as containers of tacit as well as explicit knowledge. What distinguishes CoPs from other knowledge management techniques is the fact that CoPs are "live" containers of knowledge for that particular domain. It is "live," meaning that CoPs keep refining the main core of the domain. Thus knowledge that exists is not stagnant or just a repository, but is being constantly created by means of community members' interaction.

During the initial stages of formation of a CoP, much that is shared by the members is random and not cohesive in nature. Here the knowledge workers are searching for solutions to their individual problems. Thus "knowledge" is shared as needed by individuals. However once a CoP is formed and its core is defined, members engage in defining the practices and shared understanding of the domain of CoP. This in terms of the lifecycle of a CoP as a social network marks the formation of a knowledge network. It is at this stage that an attempt is made to formalize sharing of the knowledge by means of discussions and exchange of ideas between CoP members. Thus tacit to explicit knowledge conversion, as well as greater knowledge creation, marks the active stages of the lifecycle of a CoP.

Also, CoP members are not exclusive to their particular community. They might be members of other kinds of groups within the organization (for example: project teams, functional group, etc.). In

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