

The Limits of Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

When knowledge management (KM) began to emerge in the late 1980s, it was seen as an innovative solution to the problems of managing knowledge in a competitive and increasingly internationalized business environment. At that time, the term was often used in conjunction with so-called expert systems that dealt with hard¹, structured knowledge (Hildreth, Wright & Kimble, 1999). During this period, knowledge was seen as something that had an independent existence; it could be captured from an expert, codified in a series of rules, and stored in a computer. However, many authors have argued that, in practice, KM was often little more than information management systems rebadged (Wilson, 2002).

More recently, there has begun to be recognition of the importance of softer, less structured types of knowledge (Hildreth, Wright & Kimble, 1999). There has been a growing awareness that knowledge is not found in rules, frames, cases, predicate logic, or document repositories but that other factors were at work. This inevitably raises questions about what these other factors are and how this new softer form of knowledge might be managed.

Communities of practice (CoPs) were identified by many as a means by which this softer type of knowledge could be created, shared, and sustained. From this, it was a small step to arguing that CoPs were in fact a new approach to KM that offered the solution to many of the shortcomings of the earlier, systems based attempts at KM. However, the concept of a CoP is built around a very different set of principles to those put forward by the proponents of KM, and it is not always clear that this argument will hold.

Much of what is now called KM has developed in a formal organization setting. In this setting, groups are often seen simply as collections of people who are

brought together to complete a specific task; once the task has been completed, the group can be dissolved. These groups are often created in a top down fashion, and the structure of the group usually reflects the existing organizational hierarchy. The successful completion of the task (or repeated series of tasks) is usually the basis for financial or other reward. In contrast, CoPs tend to be self-perpetuating and self-directed. The focus of a CoP is not on a narrowly bounded task but on a living and dynamic practice; the rewards are intrinsic rather than financial. Authority and legitimacy are not a function of formal rank or hierarchy but of an informal status in the group. In summary, the members of a CoP have more in common with a troop of altruistic volunteers than a band of paid employees.

This contrast between the nature of CoPs and the demands of a high tech, global commercial enterprise raises two important questions that we will return to in the Communities of Practice Today section. First, do CoPs really offer a way to *manage* the softer aspects of knowledge? That is to say, can they be initiated and directed by management, or will the outcome always be the product of the emergent properties of a self-directed and self-organized group? Following on from this, the second question is: if they do offer ways to manage the softer aspects of knowledge, will they work in today's high tech and increasingly internationalized virtual world?

BACKGROUND: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

When the term *communities of practice* was first used, it was used in relation to situated learning rather than knowledge management. The term was coined in 1991 when Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991)

used it in their exploration of the activities of groups of non-drinking alcoholics, quartermasters, butchers, tailors in Goa, and midwives in the Yucatan. What linked these diverse groups was a mode of learning based on what might broadly be termed an apprenticeship model, although the concept of CoPs is not restricted to this form of learning.

Lave and Wenger (1991) saw the acquisition of knowledge as a social process in which people participated in communal learning at different levels depending on their authority in a group, that is, whether they were a newcomer to the group or had been an active participant for some time. The process by which a newcomer learns from the rest of the group was central to their notion of a CoP; they termed this process Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). However, LPP is more than simply learning situated in a practice; it is learning as an integral part of a practice that give meaning to the world: learning as “generative social practice in the lived in world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35).

LPP is both complex and composite; legitimation, peripherality, and participation each play a part in defining the other. Legitimation is concerned with power and authority relations in the community but is not necessarily formalized. Peripherality is not a physical concept or a measure of acquired knowledge, but concerned with the degree of engagement with the community. Participation is engagement in an activity where the participants have a shared understanding of what it means in their lives. Taken separately, each has no meaning, but taken together, they form the central thread of a CoP activity.

For Lave and Wenger (1991), the community and participation in it were inseparable from the practice. Being a member of a CoP implied participation in an activity where participants have a common understanding about what was being done, what it means for their lives, and what it means for the community. Thus, it would appear that CoPs with their concentration on situated learning and shared understanding might be well suited to the management of the softer aspects of knowledge, but can this idea be applied to the business world?

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TODAY

Interest in CoPs continued to grow throughout the 1990s, and several attempts were made to redefine Lave and Wenger's (1991) original model. In particular, several attempts were made to redefine CoPs in a way that was more relevant to the commercial environment (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1991, 1996). One of the most widely cited, business related definitions of a CoP was offered by John Seely Brown and Estee Solomon Gray in their 1995 article called “The People Are the Company”:

At the simplest level, they are a small group of people...who've worked together over a period of time. Not a team not a task force not necessarily an authorised or identified group...they are peers in the execution of “real work”. What holds them together is a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows.

The main surge in interest in CoPs and business came in 1998, when Wenger (1998) published the results of a ground breaking ethnographic study of a claims processing unit of a large insurance company. In this study, he argued that CoPs were formed through mutual engagement in a joint enterprise and that these CoPs exploited a shared repertoire of common resources (e.g., routines, procedures, artifacts, vocabulary). His argument was that the CoPs he studied (1) arose out of the need to accomplish particular tasks in the organization and (2) provided learning avenues within, between, and outside that organization. Thus, his view of the business was not of a single monolithic community, but a constellation of interrelated CoPs that can even spread beyond the borders of the host organization.

The original description of CoPs as isolated groups based on LPP was now replaced by a different view. According to Wenger (1998), a CoP could now be defined in terms of three constructs.

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