# Chapter 6.8
# CoPs for Cops:
## Managing and Creating Knowledge through Networked Expertise

**Maarten de Laat**
*University of Nijmegen and Utrecht University, The Netherlands*

**Wim Broer**
*Police Education and Knowledge Center, The Netherlands*

## ABSTRACT

Managing knowledge in large organizations is a challenge in itself. Modern views on Knowledge Management (KM) focus not only on finding ways to capture and distribute corporate knowledge but also provide ways through which knowledge can be shared, discussed and created. Different types of organizations have different approaches to KM. From general descriptions of these approaches, parallels to the Dutch police will be presented. This chapter discusses how KM within the Dutch police is an integral part of the organization and how explicit and tacit knowledge is shared to create new corporate knowledge. The authors present examples of how Communities of Practice (CoPs) within the Dutch police play a role in both sustaining and developing their own practice, and how these communities are crucial to the learning organization.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN A LEARNING CONTEXT

Organizations are increasingly confronted with the problem of managing and creating knowledge in order to respond flexibly to changes in their working environment. They realise that sharing and creating knowledge brings a competitive advantage. Organizations are transforming into learning organizations and expect their workers to become lifelong learners. According to Marsick and Watkins (1999, p. 12), learning is "the process that makes the creation and use of knowledge meaningful". Huysman (in press) observed that learning and working become interrelated when the practice of knowledge sharing helps workers to do their work better and more efficiently. Providing space in the organization for workers to establish networks can therefore be a powerful way to facilitate workplace learn-

ing. Workers tend to form networks of expertise spontaneously: to facilitate individual learning, collaboration and to discuss work related problems together. Sometimes these networks transform into a Community of Practice (CoP). In a CoP, employees who share a common interest for the field they work in, come together on a regular basis to help each other, solve problems and to share and create knowledge collaboratively (Wenger, 1998). Knowledge sharing and meaning making are two of the core activities of CoPs. It is within this social community structure that workers learn from and develop their practice in a natural way and integrate it with their day-to-day work. Nursing and managing this process is one of the crucial conditions for fostering a learning organization.

The notion of CoPs was first proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) who described them as groups where learning takes place through a process of Legitimate Peripheral Participation. The central issue in learning is about becoming a practitioner, not about learning about practice. According to Brown and Duguid (1991), workplace learning can best be understood in terms of communities being formed and personal identities being changed. This approach draws attention away from abstract knowledge and situates it into the practices of the communities in which knowledge takes on significance. A CoP defines itself along three characteristics (see Wenger, 1999):

- *What it is about* - A joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members
- *How it functions* - Mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity
- *What capability it produces* - The shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary and styles) that the members develop over time

These characteristics can be helpful to identify CoPs in organizations. However, what is more important is not the question as to whether a network is a CoP or not, but whether the framework is used to support learning and KM in the workplace (Glasweg, 2002). CoPs can be found in every organization, but the ways in which they operate and are rewarded differ.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL TYPES

Not every organization is the same, not only in how they are structured but also in how they manage their knowledge. We will use Mintzberg's (1989) classification as a lens to illustrate different approaches to KM and organizational learning.

### Machine Organization

This type of organization has a central bureaucracy with formalized procedures. There is a strong hierarchy in the organization and the communication and change processes are top-down oriented. This type of organization operates in a stable environment where work is standardized and repetitive. In this environment, according to Ståhle (2000), emphasis is placed on explicit knowledge ready to put in manuals and procedures. KM is focused on providing corporate knowledge throughout the organization. Learning in this type is characterised by the acquisition of the organizational knowledge necessary to carry out the job (Huysman, in press).

### Professional Organization

A professional organization is bureaucratic as in a machine organization, but power is decentralised. It operates in a complex changing environment. It tries to understand the environmental changes