

Chapter 6

Efficacy of Organizational Learning and Social Capital in Online Communities of Practice: Dualities and Intersections

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ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with the evolution of communities of practice by considering two key components which facilitate knowledge sharing: Organizational Learning and Social Capital. Dualities and intersections between the building blocks of these two components are investigated by discussing organizational learning in its explorative and exploitative forms, while considering social capital in its bridging and bonding forms. As a critical contemporary step of evolution, information and communication technologies are also elaborated in order to examine the impact of constant and instant tools on these facilitators of knowledge sharing. The study aims to derive proxies among these components of organizational learning and social capital in order to design an integrated framework that reflects the nature of online communities of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Be it individuals or communities, all entities that constitute the contemporary business environment are witnesses to the globalization of the world incessantly occurring everyday by means of new channels and forms of communication, and they have become an integral part of the digitalized world by handling the internet and other media conduits which eliminate the limitations of internal constraints posed by boundaries. In parallel with individuals who are able to act globally, communities also have the inherent ability to cross over boundaries. Communities are also able to comprise all related participants of the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2673-5.ch006

global environment by establishing efficient channels and impelling them to be part of the evolution. As an example, Intel Corporation, while terminating its long lasting investment and R&D research collaboration in Cambridge, moved on to launch the Intel Labs Europe project which encompasses a multitude of partnerships dispersed among EU countries, with the main intent of fostering open innovation. The University of Cambridge, chair of Cambridge University's School of Technology, Ian White, declared (Sherriff, 2006) after severing the profound relationship that while the closure of the Cambridge research lab is unfortunate, their researchers will continue to work together, even though they are dispersed across the EU and beyond. In contemporary terms, these groups of geographically dispersed participants, in other words groups of individuals who share their experiences and expertise within the same or similar professional spheres, are called communities of practice (CoP). Literally, the first conceptualization of this term was introduced by a cultural anthropologist, Jean Lave and an educational theorist and computer scientist, Etienne Wenger in 1991. In their book, "Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive and Computational Perspectives)", the subject of community of practitioners receives much attention especially due to the evolving nature of learning, namely from apprenticeship to situated forms. Their assumption "that members of the community have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity and hold varied viewpoints" unseals new explorative opportunities not only for the concept of situated learning but also for CoP. Even only paraphrasing a small anecdote from the acknowledgements section of their book can be helpful here for highlighting the role of CoP in learning. In the acknowledgements part, they are grateful both to organizers and participants for the opportunity to discuss the idea. This discussion opportunity provides a collaborative basis not only for personal or professional development of the individual members, but also for further elaboration of the idea by sharing knowledge, expertise, experiences and best practices in a particular domain of common interests (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Presently, literature has increasingly engaged in expanding the implications of such opportunities (Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002) by the inclusion of knowledge sharing activities held in online spaces. In other words, as a subject matter of the knowledge management field, CoP are one of the critical resources creation mechanisms of contemporary organizations, especially because they facilitate the establishment, management and access opportunities regarding unrestricted knowledge repositories.

For the organizations (reaping the benefits of CoP), the notion underlined here is the critical importance of the optimization of resources (or trade off) between exploring and exploiting efforts for not throwing up the sponge in a competitive environment. From the beginning of the industrial revolution to the days of information age, knowledge based competition has pushed business organizations to become co-located structures not only in cities but also in countries in order to fill their knowledge gaps while struggling to turn their accumulated knowledge into value. Even though knowledge considered as the most strategic resource generating competitive advantage (Grant, 1996) is not a new perception, rapid evolution in such critical aspects as the means of communication, the shared content, and the diversity in the sources of knowledge, render the issue to reconsideration. Focusing these aspects necessitates to deal with the changes in such fundamental conceptualizations about knowledge; e.g. sources of knowledge (where it appears) or forms of knowledge (how it appears). Not surprisingly, CoP is at the intersection (or it is a playground) of these conceptualizations due to a well-known fact: Development in an organization's knowledge base is highly correlated with the development of its intangible assets rather than physical ones. More succinctly, as an intangible asset, intellectual capital mostly based on human resource practices plays a key role as a source of knowledge. When the issue becomes about human resource practices which can be mostly conducted in informal ways, organizations need to find

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