

Chapter 26

Communities of Practice as a Source of Open Innovation

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors define communities of practice. They present the concept as described by the creators of the concept but also comment on the role of these communities in organizational learning or informal learning. They follow with some of the results, centering on the conditions of success and challenges that emerge, as well as limits in the learning and sharing process, which are often underestimated. The authors highlight some results from a study on communities of practice in Canada, in particular the main conditions and challenges of such new modes of knowledge creation and management, which don't always work automatically. They compare these results to other recent research. Research clearly confirms that participants' commitment and motivation in the project, dynamism and continuity of leadership, organizational support and recognition of employees' involvement are the key elements in a community of practice, and they can contribute to open innovation.

INTRODUCTION

In this entry, we first define this new form of learning and knowledge management that is communities of practice. We present the concept as described by the creators of the concept but also comment on the role of these communities in organizational learning or informal learning. We follow with some of the results, centering on the conditions of success and challenges that emerge, as well as limits in the learning and sharing process, which are often underestimated. We highlight some results from a research on communities of practice in Canada, in particular the main conditions and challenges of such new modes of knowledge creation and management, which don't always work automatically. We compare these results to other recent research. Research clearly confirms that participants' commitment and motivation in the project, dynamism and continuity of leadership, organizational support and recognition of employees' involvement are the key elements in a community of practice, and they can contribute to open innovation.

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COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The term ‘communities of practice’ was first used by Brown and Duguid (1991), by Lave and Wenger (1991), and finally by Wenger (1998; Wenger et al., 2002, 2000). It refers to the idea of sharing information and knowledge within a small group, as well as to the value of informal learning for a group and an organization. As is usually the case today, we consider people use technologies (computer, cell phone, ipad, etc.) to exchange with each other, but also to keep track of some information and knowledge the group wants to stock. Wenger et al. (2002) describe a community of practice as a group of participants who:

Don't necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas, and act as sounding boards. They may create tools, standards, generic designs, manuals, and other documents – or they simply develop a tacit understanding that they share. However they accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other's perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people. Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice. (pp. 4-5)

In the 90s, observers mainly studied informal communities that were created spontaneously in a workplace. However, over the years, there has been increasing interest in creating and cultivating such communities in workplaces (Swan et al., 2002; Wenger et al., 2002). Also, more recently, there has been more and more interest in seeing companies and organizations in general as a group of communities of practice and more and more interest in the leadership and empowerment dimension (Cordery et al., 2015), as well as on the impact on innovation (Müller & Ibert, 2015). Many of these communities are teleworking communities or distributed communities (Friberger & Falkman, 2013), often active in an agile and lean environment (Paasivaara & Lassenius, 2014) that use information and communication technologies, and this was the case in the communities we studied.

The following definitions help us to better understand what this concept actually means (Mitchell, 2002):

- Communities of practice are people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis
- A group whose members regularly engage in sharing and learning, based on their common interests

Wenger et al. (2002) as well as Mitchell (2002), among others, indicate that communities of practice take on various forms, and Table 1 highlights the differences that exist between types of communities. In the cases we studied, communities were of the structured distributed type, most of them being formally supported by one organization, a few being inter-organizational, but all having to do with their work activity and not personal interests, as is more often the case in the informal type of community. Over the

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