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Chapter VIII

Varieties of Virtual Organizations and Their Knowledge Sharing Systems

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Abstract

Provided in this chapter is an analysis of the differences between virtual teams and communities of practice. The chapter links two growing phenomena: virtual organizing and knowledge sharing (knowledge management), based on empirical work from both fields of research. By integrating various types of virtual organizing with corresponding knowledge-sharing systems, the author provides a framework that virtual team leaders, members, and consultants can use to improve management of virtual endeavors. This chapter suggests that calling nearly everything a "Community of Practice" creates unrealistic expectations for spontaneous organizing and knowledge sharing. Indeed, the managers of Virtual Project Teams have organizing challenges that are very different from stewards of Communities of Practice. Practitioners struggling with "one-

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size-fits-all" prescriptions for virtual work or knowledge management can use this chapter's three generalized types to develop communications and management styles appropriate for the unique cultures found in each of the various combinations of virtual organizing and knowledge sharing.

Introduction

Virtual organizations are varied in their designs, memberships, purposes, and uses of technology. Each variation has different reasons and methods for exchanging information and sharing knowledge. Integrated in this chapter are these various types of virtual organizing with corresponding knowledge-sharing systems. The result is a framework that identifies three generalized types of knowledge sharing, each indicative of certain types of virtual organizing. With awareness of the differences in these types, virtual team leaders, members, and consultants can improve communication and management of virtual endeavors by clarifying the goals and purposes of their various organizing activities and related knowledge-sharing systems.

Each of these types poses unique challenges to practitioners for managing and communicating in virtual environments. Practitioners struggling with "one-size-fits-all" prescriptions for virtual work or knowledge management can use these three generalized types to appreciate the reciprocal dynamics of virtual organizing and knowledge sharing and address the needs of both. Each type suggests that calling nearly everything a "Community of Practice" creates unrealistic expectations for spontaneous organizing and knowledge sharing. The managers of Virtual Project Teams have organizing challenges that are very different from those facing stewards of Communities of Practice. Provided in this chapter are analyses of the differences between virtual teams and communities of practice, and linked are two growing phenomena: virtual organizing and knowledge sharing (knowledge management), based on empirical work from both fields of research.

In the first of the three types of virtual organization, including Communities of Practice, knowledge sharing is the main purpose of the organization, and communications are driven by a need to make information available. In this type, the culture is primarily egalitarian. In contrast, the second type, which includes Virtual Project Teams, occurs where organizing is driven by project deadlines or individual agendas. Here, knowledge sharing requires extraction or release of information. The corresponding management culture is directive, and the organizing structure is purposeful. A third type, including joint ventures, favors a direct exchange of information for mutual benefit. Here, the culture is primarily