

Chapter 11

Encouraging Participation in Virtual Communities of Practice within the United States Air Force

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ABSTRACT

With the growth of information and communication technology (ICT) such as the internet, email, and video conferencing, the United States Air Force has become more efficient and productive in conducting its daily business. However, not only do computer technologies increase daily productivity rates among the employees; they also increase the Air Force's capability to digest larger amounts of information while supporting an end goal of being able to share that information across the entire organization. Perhaps one of the most popular methods by which to share such large amounts of organizational information is through informal learning environments such as communities of practice. The Air Force has no doubt embraced the concept of communities of practice. However, as popular as these "communities" are among many employees, there is still a majority of Air Force employees who choose not to use them. The purpose of this chapter is to provide practical ways in which the United States Air Force can increase participation in Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs) among its workforce, as well as providing theoretical frameworks upon which further research can be conducted. Finally, this chapter will propose a set of testable propositions that may serve as the basis for future research.

INTRODUCTION

With the growth of information and communication technology (ICT) such as the internet, email,

and video conferencing, the United States Air Force has become more efficient and productive in conducting its daily business. However, not only do computer technologies increase daily productivity rates among the employees; they also

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increase the Air Force's capability to digest larger amounts of information while supporting an end goal of being able to share that information across the entire organization. As such, terms such as knowledge management, knowledge society, and the information age have become dominant themes within the Air Force. Because of this, it may come as no surprise that there is an increasing desire to emphasize knowledge sharing techniques and strategies that will foster improved performance and effectiveness. The emphasis on knowledge management through collaborative means is an excellent manner in which to achieve this (E. C. Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Perhaps one of the most popular methods by which to share such large amounts of organizational information is through informal learning environments such as communities of practice. The Air Force has no doubt embraced the concept of communities of practice. However, as popular as these "communities" are among many employees, there is still a majority of Air Force employees who choose not to use them. The purpose of this chapter is to provide practical ways in which the United States Air Force can increase participation in Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs) among its workforce, as well as providing theoretical frameworks upon which further research can be conducted.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COPS) DEFINED

Communities of practice (abbreviated as CoPs hereafter) are defined in the early works of Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) as "a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice". This definition centered on the idea of apprenticeship in which CoPs were viewed as a form of socialization into a community (Kimble & Hildreth, 2005). This assumes a unidirectional process by which newer community members integrate themselves

into the community's practices. Lave and Wenger (1991) state that newcomers move from a state of "legitimate peripheral participation" into that of "full membership". During legitimate peripheral participation, newcomers engage in several roles at the same time to invoke varied degrees of experience and interaction. Eventually, members of the community become recognized as they learn the rules and boundaries which guide that community.

Although this definition of CoPs is accurate, perhaps a more modernized and simplified definition is provided by Kimble & Hildreth (2005). They define CoPs as "groups of people bound together by a *common purpose* and an *internal motivation*", often with long-term objectives in mind. Consider this definition in the organizational context. Applying the keywords of the definition provided by Kimble & Hildreth (2005), it can be assumed that the various departments of any organization comprise a CoP (i.e. human resources, finance, and marketing). For example, let's consider an example such as the finance department at a major Air Force base. Each employee working in finance has a common purpose: to successfully control, monitor, and manage the financial assets of the government. Some employees may serve as financial analysts looking at financial statements while others may be in charge of long-term budget forecasting, but in essence their purpose is one in the same. In addition, they are internally motivated to do the best they can to ensure that the United States Air Force continues to have success for many years into the future. As a result of this example, it can be assumed that the practice and purpose of CoPs may be construed as having always existed, even before being formally identified as such.

THE HISTORY OF COPS AND THE SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

The early work of the social learning theory was attributed to Bandura (1977). In general, social

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