Chapter 6

Conceptual Foundations of Communities of Practice as Organizational Structures

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the interest in and development of communities of practice (CoPs) has undergone exponential growth. However, this uncontrolled expansion has, to a large extent, led to the name of community of practice being attributed to working groups or communities that are not communities of practice. The aim of this work is to shed a little light on this confusion and identify and characterise communities of practice compared with other types of groups or organizational structures. To achieve this aim, first of all, we are going to introduce an intuitive and agreed definition of community of practice. In a second movement, we will identify and define the principal groups or organizational structures that are used, besides communities of practice, by organizations to improve their strategies when meeting these aims that they are pursuing. We will then present a comparison between these organizational structures or groups and communities of practice. The chapter ends by offering a number of conclusions and providing some guidelines on the future development of communities of practice.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have been witnessing the appearance of a new scenario in organizations in which information and knowledge have become benchmark economic assets.

There are many interpretative proposals that attempt to identify the reasons that justify this new situation. In any event, and even though the whole is very wide, there are two variables, one of a technological nature and the other of a more directly economic nature, that may justify these changes.

On the one hand, a series of new information and communication technologies have permitted the access, management and intensive use of information and knowledge to previously unknown levels. Furthermore, we find that the evolution of the market of these technologies has ended up allowing their costs now to be accessible to the majority of medium and small companies.

On the other hand, a new economic panorama, presided over by the globalization of markets and a new culture of competitiveness, has also been consolidated. In this new economic scenario, companies design new policies of alliances and of organizational culture that may serve as a strategy of adaptation to this new and changing environment. The intangible – and not just the material – assets of companies begin to be understood as that added value that can ensure their correct operation and survival in globalized markets.

Within this economic perspective, and motivated in part by the need to look for new organizational strategies to tackle and survive the phenomenon of the globalization of markets, a new discipline is emerging: Knowledge Management. This new management strategy can be understood as the discipline responsible for designing and implementing systems aimed at systematically identifying, capturing and sharing the knowledge involved in an organization so that it can be converted into a value for the organization.

In this new organizational context, the interest in and development of communities of practice (CoPs) has undergone exponential growth caused in many cases – although not all – by knowledge management itself. The need to manage that part of the professional experiences and practices of the members of an organization where conventional knowledge management systems do not reach has led to its spreading like wildfire. The words of Richard McDermott, "the key to driving change towards sharing knowledge probably lies in communities of practice" (McDermott 1999), have in some way become the *abracadabra* of many entrepreneurs who have seen in communities of

practice the solution to many of their problems. From being a term very much restricted to university spheres and just a few organizations, it has spread unstoppably to all environments: professional or otherwise. This uncontrolled expansion has, to a large extent, led to the name of community of practice being attributed to working groups or communities that are not.

The aim of this work is to shed a little light on this confusion and identify and characterise communities of practice compared with other working teams or groups, and compared with other types of communities such as communities of learning and communities of interest.

In order to achieve these aims, we will be pursuing the following strategy. We are first of all going to introduce an intuitive, and to some extent agreed, definition of community of practice. This definition will enable us to be aware of the principal characteristics that describe this type of community. In a second movement, we will identify and define the principal organizational groups that, besides communities of practice, are used by organizations to improve their strategies when meeting the aims that they are pursuing. We will then present a comparison between these organizational structures or groups and communities of practice. The chapter ends by offering a number of conclusions and providing some guidelines on the future development of communities of practice.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

No one now doubts that the subject of communities of practice arouses increasingly more interest in the academic field and in that of professional consultancy.

However, this widespread interest is simultaneously bringing about a curious and, to some extent, perverse phenomenon. As occurred with the term "information" in the 1980s and 1990s, in recent years the expression "Community of Practice" has become a clear example of a buzz

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