Chapter 18
Communities of Practice in the Catalan Public Administration:
Promoting Their Improvement

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ABSTRACT

Communities of Practice are one of the leading strategies used to promote knowledge management processes aimed at generating both organisational and individual learning along with innovations that contribute to improving the public administration. The optimal design of Communities of Practice in organisations implies exhaustive knowledge of how they work, and particularly identifying and understanding the factors that determine their operation and effectiveness for organisational change. This chapter presents some of the most important results of a study conducted in two departments within the Catalan public administration. The goal of the study was to analyse knowledge management processes and propose intervention protocols and quality standards. This study enabled the authors to present proposals aimed at improving the dynamics of the Communities of Practice in the public administration and to suggest possible avenues of research focused on improving the functioning of the public sector.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the increasing interest among organisational practitioners and scholars in searching for and applying alternative strategies and policies to promote professional development, and therefore organisational learning and organi-sational improvement, has been reflected in the appearance of multiple studies about Knowledge Creation and Management (KCM) and specifically Communities of Practice (CoPs) as an strategy to develop KCM processes (i.e., Amin & Roberts, 2008; Mingers, 2008; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009; Zheng et al., 2010; Heizmann, 2011). However, while most studies have primarily focused on the characteristics and uses of CoPs in for-profit

organisations (i.e., Aramburu, Sáenz & Rivera, 2006; Chen, 2008; Firestone, 2008), little attention has been given to their incorporation and impact in the public administration (e.g., Hatmaker, Park & Rethemeyer, 2011; Iaquinto, Ison & Faggian, 2011). Likewise, few proposals have been developed in the sphere of the public administration that practically address identifying and understanding the factors that somehow condition the optimal development of Communities of Practice, depending on the context and characteristics of the organisations where they operate.

Depending on the context and the organisational characteristics, the identification, characterisation and comprehension of factors that determine the optimal development of CoP need to be operatively tackled (i.e., Donate & Guadamillas, 2011; Magnier-Watanabe et al, 2011; Retna & Tee-Ng, 2011; Hamel et al, 2012). The task of identifying the conditioning factors is essential in order to design strategies for CoP improvement. These strategies aim to effectively encourage the collaborative work among public administration professionals, and also to generate benefits for both individuals and the public administration and, desirably, for citizens. In this sense, instruments for CoP assessment need to be developed which focus on (1) previous organisational settings, (2) CoP development, and (3) implementation and impact of results on the organisation.

This chapter presents some of the results and proposals from the study "Analysis of Knowledge Creation and Management practices through Communities of Practice in public administration"[1] (ref. GAP/2944/2010) funded by the Catalan School of Public Administration. The aim of the research was twofold: (1) to analyse the KCM procedures through CoPs in the Catalan Public Administration; and (2) to develop intervention protocols and quality standards. The CoPs studied belong to the Catalan Centre for Legal Studies and Specialised Training[2] (CEJFE) and the Catalan Health Protection Agency (APS).

First we address the need for ongoing training as a crucial requirement for fostering systematic innovation processes in organisations. Secondly, based on the existing literature, we present knowledge management as one of the organisational strategies that enables organisations to foster learning processes, and Communities of Practice as an instrument for the effective development of knowledge management. Once the theoretical background is completed, both Communities of Practice analysed are described (CEJFE and APS) and the conditioning factors identified are briefly presented. The chapter closes with several proposals targeted at improving the functioning of CoPs in the public administration, notes on future research and a brief conclusion on the study performed.

BACKGROUND

The need for training to develop both individuals and societies is unquestionable if we uphold the crucial role of people and their direct involvement in building democratic and participative societies. Training is considered necessary for ensuring that people acquire the competences required by the context (OECD, 2007). Training and innovation are organisational strategies that take on particular importance in such a dynamic volatile context as the one where organisations are currently coping. Individual and organisational learning are necessary in promoting innovation processes in any kind of organisation, and in turn systematic innovation processes are a required by today's society (Malloch et al., 2011). Moreover, it is not enough merely to innovate; rather organisations

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