

Aspects and Issues of Communities of (Mal)practice

Jon Pemberton

Northumbria University, UK

Brenda Stalker

Northumbria University, UK

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *community of practice (CoP)* is now embedded within all areas of public- and private-sector organisations, although the term has different connotations dependent on its context. It is not a new concept, and it could be argued that many of the developments in this area are evolutionary rather than cutting-edge innovations. Informal groupings have always existed, but in the quest to harness and develop knowledge and ‘add value’ to organisations, the CoP has been embraced and developed, as various strands of management practice have fused and merged. Typically, these incorporate knowledge management, management strategy, complex adaptive systems, and latterly, knowledge ecology. Whether they exist as a social gathering or technological network, the sharing of expertise and the creation of new knowledge, often tacit in nature, is a central tenet of a CoP’s existence (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There are clear parallels with organisational learning and the knowledge-centric organisation, and few would dispute the potential benefits that CoPs can bestow on the individuals making up these communities and the organisations that these CoPs reside in (Wenger & Snyder, 2000; McDermott, 2002).

BACKGROUND

Unlike other articles in this book that trumpet the successes, benefits, and reach of CoPs within organisations, this article discusses the possible negative consequences of communities of practice, both from an individual and organisational perspective. It is not intended to denigrate the value of such groups, but merely to flag potential pitfalls and problems

associated with CoPs. This discussion is based not only on published material, but first-hand experience and knowledge of a research-based CoP within higher education.

A number of themes are examined in this article, with discussion centring on why these might have a negative impact, or even lead to inferior practices in the workplace. It should also be noted at this juncture that not all of the issues raised here apply to all groups—it is highly dependent on context, function areas, and so forth.

Time is of the Essence

The emergence of a CoP in any organisation is dependent on a number of factors, not least:

- the context and focus of the group,
- the individual initiators of the community,
- whether it is an offshoot of other formal or informal organisational groupings,
- whether the technological infrastructure exists to support online discussion boards and real-time meetings, and
- through chance meetings of individuals with similar interests and motivation.

Initially, they begin life as a relatively small grouping of individuals or online participants, with membership cascading as word filters through an organisation or additional individuals are invited to participate in the group. Several meetings or online forums usually take place before membership achieves an equilibrium, and the core group is then established. The value attached by individuals to these meetings is a critical success factor, and there is evidence to suggest that this value can dissipate over time, leading to the

demise of the CoP (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

The early stages of any CoP are critical since this is where trust is established between participants and assessments made as to the potential value of these groups by their members (Ardichvilli, Page & Wentling, 2003). Provided this transition is relatively smooth, the CoP may exist for several months or years, but this is highly dependent on the motivation of its members and its internal management. Over time, however, interest can subside—it is, after all, a voluntary commitment and not formally tied to job enhancement or progression. The departure from an organisation of key participants, typically founders or organisers, may also lead to the disintegration of the community. This is certainly corroborated in the authors' case, where membership of their research-based CoP, established in 2002, started in double figures; over time this has diminished, and meetings now generally consist of a core of five regular participants.

Time is also a critical success factor in terms of online communication, as the posting of questions and responses in a written format is a vastly more lengthy process than verbal communication. In this sense, face-to-face CoPs have a distinct advantage over discussion/bulletin board-type communities.

Follow the Leader

Communities are, by definition, groups of like-minded individuals keen to share existing knowledge and practice, and create new knowledge in the process. For CoPs to function effectively, internal leadership and coordination must also be present (Wenger et al., 2002). Leaderless communities seldom survive as groups fragment and momentum is lost.

To ensure the issues discussed have the support of the community, a careful balance between guidance and authority is needed, so that the views of the 'leader' are not solely reflected in the group. This issue should not be underestimated where managers act as CoP coordinators or leaders, as managers tend to command and control; for CoPs to function effectively, it is critical that new skills of brokerage and translation are developed (Brown & Duguid, 1998).

An added complication arises where organisations seek to ensure cultural conformity to a specific organisational identity (Moore & Sonsino, 2003).

Managers typically seek to impose this upon CoPs which may be at variance with the self-regulation enjoyed by CoP members. In this situation, creativity and innovation may suffer as a consequence. Furthermore, CoPs are motivated by a communicative *Habermasian*, rather than an instrumental logic that is driven by deliverables, and seeks to alter the traditional perspectives of managerial control within CoPs (O'Donnell et al., 2003). In essence, managers can foster the cultural context for facilitating CoPs, but should step back by allowing members to negotiate their own norms and agree on their own boundaries.

In the authors' own CoP, the freedom to explore new ideas and set its own agenda, free from the shackles of organisational missives, has been achieved by the commitment of its members and facilitated by a coordinator acting as a 'leader' for the purposes of organising meetings. During meetings, however, equal status is afforded to all participants, and the individual personalities of the members are such that the CoP functions effectively by virtue of the creativity and freedom it bestows on its participants.

Outside in

The emergence of a CoP within an organisation is typically down to an individual, or group of individuals, and its formulation is not a result of management intervention—its existence lies outside the formal organisational structure (Wenger et al., 2002). Depending on the type of organisation, a CoP may emerge without management awareness or, for that matter, other employees not part of this community. Gradually, over time, awareness of the CoP emerges, often through members feeding solutions to problems into the formal problem-solving processes of the organisation (Wenger, 1998). Where these solutions are perceived as beneficial, greater scrutiny of the CoP sometimes ensues, with managers and employees questioning:

- why they themselves are not part of the group;
- whether it is consuming organisational resources that other employees do not enjoy;
- whether members of the group appear to have an advantage, in some sense, over non-members?

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