

Communities of Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of communities of practice (CoPs) has rapidly gained ground in fields such as knowledge management and organisational learning since it was first identified by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid (1991). In this article, we consider a related concept that we have entitled “communities of implementation.”

Communities of implementation (CoIs) are similar to communities of practice in that they offer an opportunity for a collection of individuals to support each other and share knowledge in a dynamic environment and on a topic in which they share interest. In addition, and to differentiate them from CoPs, a community of implementation extends the responsibilities of a CoP by having as its focus the implementation of a programme of change. This may well extend to designing the change programme. Thus, whereas a main purpose of a CoP is to satisfy “a real need to know what each other knows” (Skyrme, 1999) in an informal way, we argue that a main purpose of a community of implementation is to “pool individual knowledge (including contacts and ways of getting things done) to stimulate collective enthusiasm in order to take more informed purposeful *action* for which the members are responsible.” Individual and collective responsibility and accountability for successfully implementing the actions/change programme is a key feature of a community of implementation. Without these pressures the members might lower the priority of implementation, allowing competing priorities to dominate their attention and resources. Without responsibility and accountability, the result is likely to be (at best) an

organisation which has not begun a change programme, or (at worst) an organisation which is stuck halfway through another failing initiative.

To achieve these additional objectives beyond those of a CoP, the CoI needs to provide heightened support to its members. In fact often the members will collectively strategise the development and implementation of the change programme they are leading in the organisation.

Other concepts similar to CoPs have appeared in the literature, for example “communities of knowing” (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995), but none have a specific focus on implementation. Perhaps the closest example of a CoI, as suggested by our definition, is reported by Karsten, Lyytinen, Hurskainen, and Koskelainen (2001) who describe a CoP in a paper machinery manufacturer which seems to have the necessary focus on implementation.

The theoretical aspects of this article will explore the relationship between CoPs and CoIs, and the needs for different arrangements for a CoI. The practical aspect of this article will consist of a report on a case study of a CoI that was successful in its implementation of a programme of change that aimed to improve its organisation’s knowledge management activities. Over two years the CoI implemented a suite of complementary actions across the organisation. These actions transformed the organisation and moved it towards achieving its ‘core values’ and overall objectives. The article will explore: the activities that formed and gelled the community, the role of the community in the implementation of actions, and experiences from key members of this community on its success and potential improvements.

BACKGROUND

Communities of practice are “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Kulkarni, Stough, and Haynes (2000) identify various aspects that are typical of CoPs:

- Emphasis on learning.
- Group formation tends to be spontaneous.
- Direction comes from a set of shared problems, professional and/or social problems.
- The role of members is to act as sounding boards for new ideas and help each other learn.

CoPs may be formed within a single organisation, or have cross-organisational or indeed non-organisational membership (e.g., a community group or political-interest group). The literature tends to concentrate on CoPs within a single organisation and CoPs associated with a professional grouping.

As mentioned above, a community of implementation is a form of CoP, but with the distinguishing feature that *its focus is the implementation of a programme of change*. This brings many differences between CoIs and CoPs which the following paragraphs will highlight.

The philosophical differences between CoPs and CoIs require them to be arranged differently. This includes having accountability for outcomes, and more formal arrangements for structure and reporting to allow progress on actions to be monitored and reviewed. Thus, a community of implementation might include fewer members than a CoP (partly to heighten the importance of each individual in taking responsibility for leading actions) and have a less fluid membership (to ensure consistency and joint agreement on actions). The fact that the social processes that lead to the inclusion of some in a group or community lead equally to the exclusion of others (Marshall & Brady, 2001) is also even more of an issue for a CoI than for other forms of CoPs.

It follows, therefore, that the selection of CoI group members is very different to the spontaneous formation of a CoP. CoI members are selected perhaps because they:

- Have complementary knowledge which is of value to the design and/or implementation of

the actions. The aim is not to be “bound together by shared expertise” because CoIs do not want shared knowledge. Instead they need individuals to bring complementary knowledge that adds to the pool of knowledge in the CoI.

- Represent a department which is not already represented and to which the CoI needs access (perhaps for informational or resource reasons). Complementary knowledge and resources are likely to be found across departments in the organisation, rather than being dominated by/housed in a single department.
- Represent a stakeholder group that could facilitate, or hinder, implementation. Often union representatives (or respected individuals) are involved in change programmes because they ensure that the actions are seen as legitimate by their constituents, and can become active in ‘selling’ the actions to their constituents.
- Have authority to commit resources to the initiative. CoIs are not just a collection of people who are interested in change, but have no authority to carry it out. Members of the CoI must have the authority to make decisions and implement actions; otherwise, dissatisfaction with barriers presented by top managers might lower motivation and impede progress.

These philosophical differences and features of membership begin to blur the boundaries between the formal and the informal responsibilities of the group. CoIs may indeed have a formal membership and responsibility for the implementation of the programme and/or its design to be successful. This may require top management resource mobilisation rather than them simply acknowledging its importance/existence.

Many of the features described above are similar to those advocated for a good project team in the literature on business processes (Hammer & Champy, 1993). What distinguishes a CoI from project teams in general should be the commitment of the individuals in it: the key words are “passion” and “enterprise,” as in the Wenger and Snyder definition. Also, the potential lack of a hierarchy in a cross-department CoI could almost remove the usual line-management responsibility and reporting duties found in project teams. Instead, responsibility and accountability will be to the group, its chair, and the

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