

Communities of Practice and other Organizational Groups

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INTRODUCTION

A general challenge in communities of practice (CoP) research and practice is how this concept can be distinguished from related terms such as project teams, workgroups, and knowledge networks. What criteria determine whether a group qualifies as a CoP? While these different concepts share several common characteristics, there are also important distinguishing features. Acknowledging these differences is important when assessing which former knowledge and research streams to build upon, and for increasing the level of precision in CoP research. In this article we provide a brief comparison of related terms, based on a set of distinguishing dimensions.

DEFINITIONS

A general definition of CoPs is: “Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). However, being able to bring out the distinguishing characteristics of CoPs requires a more fine-grained perspective. Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of CoPs and three related terms, using the following dimensions: purpose, membership, degree of formality, time frame, management, and role of ICT.

DISCUSSION

The emergent, self-organizing characteristic of CoPs based upon voluntary membership and participation is in contrast to using formal controls to support

knowledge exchange, such as contractual obligation, organizational hierarchies, or mandated rules. Instead CoPs promote knowledge flows along lines of practice through informal social networks on a continuous basis.

Knowledge networks extend beyond the concept of communities of practice, and they are often acknowledged by management to increase innovation and organizational efficiency (Büchel & Raub, 2002). In addition knowledge networks are more visible in the organization than CoPs which exist beside the organizational structure. The organization could achieve more benefits from knowledge networks since they are more acknowledged than CoPs in respect of allocated resources and time to participate frequently. In organizations where knowledge networks are acknowledged, one aim is to link different knowledge networks together to a constellation of networks by applying boundary practices and knowledge brokers to consciously ensure organizational learning.

The choice to participate in a CoP is reciprocal, in that the community chooses their members, and members of a community choose whether to participate or not. This property seems to be the most exceptional compared to the other organizational groups.

Finally, both CoPs and different categories of knowledge networks differ from project teams that are formally mandated, deadline- and goal-oriented, and from workgroups that are formal organizational entities that build upon job descriptions and task performance (Hackman, 1990).

Table 1. Comparing different organizational groups



	Community of Practice	Knowledge Network	Workgroup	Team
Purpose	Organizational learning Share and build knowledge about a common passion through a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire	Similar as CoP, but more goal oriented, innovative	Deliver a service or a product, Fulfill organizational objectives	Accomplish a specified task according to project goals
Membership	Self-selected assignment Voluntary participation	Either self-selected or more managed membership	Mandated from job descriptions and organizational hierarchy	Team members selected by management
Degree of Formality	Low, informal	Low to medium	High	High
Time Frame	Long-time voluntary membership	Either long-time voluntary membership or decided by management	Permanent, as long as the organization structure is stable	Participating part or full time as long as the project lasts
Management	Self-organizing groups, invisible to the formal organizational structure	Varies from self-organizing groups towards more managed and mandated groups Allocated time and resources to participate	Reporting to management of department	Reporting to team manager
Role of ICT	Support creation and sustainment of distributed communities, Choice of ICT—ease of use, efficiency	Support creation and sustainment of distributed communities Choice of ICT—ease of use, efficiency Linking different knowledge networks together—to a constellation of different networks, implementing boundary practices through ICT initiated by management	Distributed workgroups dependent on ICT for interaction purposes	Virtual teams dependent on ICT for creating a shared space, and for coordinating and performing common tasks

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE AREAS OF RESEARCH

Workgroups, teams, CoPs, and knowledge networks have both similarities and differences. Workgroups and teams are more similar in terms of their formal structure, objectives, imposed participation, and directions from management. This is in contrast to CoPs and knowledge networks, where objectives

are more fluid and often emerge during the participation process.

Research on organizational groups is a topic of increasing interest for both scholars and practitioners. However, the boundaries between these groups are not clear-cut, and it is a need for further development of concepts and definitions that are more commonly accepted and universally valid in these research streams.

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