

The Contribution of Communities of Practice to Project Management

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INTRODUCTION

More and more organisations are using projects as a means of managing their business; increasingly, ‘new initiatives’ are the focus of organisational life. Such initiatives could include cultural change programmes, organisation redesigns, or process improvements. Tackling the sociological and psychological aspects of the project is a great enough challenge, but there is often a requirement to develop a technological dimension too. Accelerating technical advancements brings an extra level of complexity to the projects so that, in general, projects have become more complex—not only do they tend to have a wider variety of customers to satisfy, but they also tend to utilise more sophisticated technology and have more far-reaching implications than ever before. It is not too surprising that some projects ‘fail’; the increased complexity of projects brings an obvious rise in the associated risks. However, the increased complexity of projects also brings a rise in the opportunities for learning through the management of knowledge therein. These are opportunities that are not being fully exploited at present, as illustrated by the continuation of the ‘failure-to-learn’ and ‘learning-to-fail’ themes in the literature (e.g., Lyytinen & Robey, 1999; Cannon & Edmondson, 2004); a more active stance would consciously draw lessons from projects, from ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ alike.

Parallel to the growing emphasis on projects in organisational life and their changing nature, there is growing recognition of the interplay between the fields of project management (PM) and knowledge management (KM). Reference has already been made to the opportunities for more effectively managing knowledge within a project setting. This article operates at a finer level of detail and draws attention to the potential synergy between project teams and a much popularised social network derived from the KM

arena—that of communities of practice (CoP). In doing so, the disciplines of PM and KM are explicitly bridged and, it is put forward, the prospect of breaking the ‘learning-to fail’ and ‘failing-to learn’ loops is raised.

BACKGROUND

New Knowledge and a Commitment to Action

The following brief literature review is a platform from which to launch the main thrust of the article when CoPs are compared and contrasted with project teams. Inevitably the reference material is taken from the second-generation KM arena where human and social aspects are central. Most authors agree on the general characteristics of CoP; this agreement can be tracked chronologically. Of more interest and significance to this article is the changing emphasis on CoPs’ intention to act and the distinction that is, at times implicitly, made about the possibility of CoPs generating new knowledge.

Seminal works on CoPs are those of Lave and Wenger (1991) and, later in that decade, Wenger (1998). The concept is now well known throughout the second-generation KM movement and used by various authors. Pór (1998) describes communities as “connecting islands of knowledge into self-organising, knowledge sharing networks.” Skyrme (1999, p. 170) goes on to say:

While some communities focus on a particular profession or discipline, the most powerful communities are customer or problem focused. They transcend disciplines and bring in different perspectives. They exchange, develop and apply knowledge.

The indication from Skyrme is that CoPs share knowledge and in turn increase their knowledge base and their sphere of application. However, this is through the development of knowledge rather than through its creation.

When distinguishing between their concept ‘enabling context’ and CoPs, Von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka (2000, pp. 179-180) assert:

While a community of practice is a place in which members learn knowledge that is embedded there, an enabling context helps create new knowledge. The boundary of a community of practice is firmly set by the task, culture, and history of that community, but an enabling context is determined by the participants and can be changed easily. Membership in a community of practice is fairly stable, and it takes new members time to become full participants. But the many organisational members who interact in an enabling context come and go. Instead of being constrained by history, an enabling context has a here-and-now quality—and it is this quality that can spark real innovations.

There are various angles from which Von Krogh et al.’s (2000) work could be challenged—aspects such as the stability of a group and notions of ‘participation’ and ‘task’ will be clarified in the next section. However, Wenger (2000, p. 206) confronts the aspect of whether CoPs generate new knowledge when he states:

What these groups have in common is that engaging with each other around issues of common interest, sharing insights and information, helping each other, or discussing new ideas together are all part of belonging to the group.

He goes on to be more specific when he states that CoP provide “the resources that members use to make sense of new situations and to create new knowledge” (Wenger, 2000, p. 209), and refers to good practice in World Bank and Daimler Chrysler. So the notions of new knowledge and of action are reinstated, and Von Krogh et al.’s (2000) interpretation of CoP is refuted.

In current times authors, such as Lehaney, Clarke, Coakes, and Jack (2004) retain Wenger’s (2000) line, even though, initially, the foci on new knowledge and

on action are not obvious. Lehaney et al. (2004, p. 46) say that CoPs are “willing to develop and share tacit and explicit knowledge” and that CoPs have become important means for “sharing information within professions and between like-minded people” (p. 50). However, the balance is redressed when they also say that CoPs may encourage creativity and problem solving through the diversity of their population (p. 49).

This article goes forward with the understanding that KM is concerned with the generation, capture, storage, and sharing of knowledge with an intent to take action in order to increase an organisation’s competitive advantage. Therefore, if CoPs are an effective tool for KM, their capacities to create new knowledge (as well as to develop ‘old’ knowledge) and to apply knowledge, are crucial. The same is true for the argument to embrace CoPs in PM. Otherwise, there could be a tendency to continue to work with the same knowledge with little intention to move into the practical arena, and the ‘learning-to-fail’ and ‘failing-to-learn’ cycles of current projects are supported.

COMPARISON OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE WITH PROJECT TEAMS

Sapsed, Besant, Partington, Tranfield, and Young (2002) and Crawford and Cooke-Davies (2000) started to draw together the notions of KM and teams, and KM and PM respectively. I move specifically to project teams and communities of practice, at a different level of focus from these authors. CoPs and project teams probably implicitly co-exist in practice. This section makes their co-existence explicit by identifying their differences and their areas of overlap. In doing so, it is anticipated that the areas of overlap and their associated untapped synergy will be better managed.

A holistic approach is taken and attention is given to features such as purpose, culture, composition, structure, and accountability. Melcrum (2000) was a useful starting point for a comparison, and the table below builds on some of his key themes.

Project teams and communities of practice are not one and the same. One is accepting that project teams are formed for the purpose of completing a project within agreed time, budgetary, and quality

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