

Distinguishing Work Groups, Virtual Teams, and Electronic Networks of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice are promoted within organizations as sources of competitive advantage and facilitators of organizational learning. A community of practice is an emergent social collective where individuals working on similar problems self-organize to help each other and to share perspectives about their work practice, resulting in learning and innovation within the community (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Recent advances in information and communication technologies have enabled the creation of computer-supported social networks similar to communities of practice, where individuals are able to discuss and debate issues electronically. Given the success of communities of practice for facilitating knowledge exchange, both electronically and in face-to-face settings, management has recently focused on how to formally duplicate these networks and gather their benefits in work groups and virtual teams. However, with the evolution of new technology-enabled organizational forms, theoretical development is needed to distinguish between these different types of organizational forms since there are significant differences in the dynamics of formal vs. informal membership groups and between electronic and face-to-face interactions (Hinds & Kiesler, 2002).

BACKGROUND

Recently, the concept of networks of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2000) has emerged as a means to describe informal, emergent social networks that facilitate learning and knowledge sharing between individuals conducting practice-related tasks. These authors propose that communities of practice are a localized and specialized subset of networks of practice, typically

consisting of strong ties linking individuals engaged in a shared practice, typically face-to-face. They describe networks of practice as consisting of weak ties, where individuals may never get to know one another or meet face-to-face. In networks of practice, individuals generally coordinate through third-party organizations, such as professional associations, or by indirect means, such as newsletters, Web sites, or bulletin boards (Brown & Duguid, 2000).

In contrast to the use of formal controls to support knowledge exchange, such as contractual obligation, organizational hierarchies, monetary incentives, or mandated rules, networks of practice promote knowledge flows along lines of practice through informal social networks. Therefore, one way to distinguish between networks of practice and work groups created through formal organizational mandate is by *the nature of the control mechanisms*.

A second distinguishing property is the *primary media channel* used for communication between members, for example, face-to-face interactions, remote computer-mediated channels such as newsletters or discussion boards, or a combination of these techniques. The communication media is important for understanding networks of practice, for this is the channel through which the resource of knowledge is exchanged. In electronic networks of practice, the primary communication channel of asynchronous computer-mediated communication has a profound influence on how knowledge is actually shared.

Additionally, networks of practice and formal work groups vary in terms of their *size*, ranging from a few select individuals to very large, open electronic networks consisting of thousands of participants. These groups also vary in terms of *who can participate*. Work groups and virtual teams typically consist of members who are formally designated and assigned. In contrast, networks of practice consist of

Table 1. Macrostructural properties distinguishing formal work groups and networks of practice

Property	Work Groups	Virtual Teams	Communities of Practice	Electronic Networks of Practice
Control	Formal control, not voluntary	Formal control, not voluntary	No formal control, voluntary	No formal control, voluntary
Communication channel	Face-to-face	Text-based computer-mediated, e.g., e-mail, listservs	Face-to-face	Text-based computer-mediated, e.g., listservs, discussion boards
Network size	Small	Small	Small	Large
Access	Restricted, assigned by a formal control	Restricted, assigned by a formal control	Restricted, locally bounded, limited to collocation	Open, no limitations other than access to technology
Participation	Jointly determined, specific task outcomes	Jointly determined, specific task outcomes	Jointly determined	Individually determined

volunteers without formal restrictions placed on membership.

Finally, networks of practice and formal work groups vary in terms of *expectations about participation*. In formal work groups and virtual teams, participation is jointly determined, and members are expected to achieve a specific work task or goal. Participation in communities of practice is jointly determined, such that individuals generally approach specific others for help. In electronic networks of practice, participation is individually determined; knowledge seekers have no control over who responds to their questions or the quality of the responses. In turn, knowledge contributors have no assurances that seekers will understand the answer provided or be willing to reciprocate the favor. The properties and different organizational structures are summarized in Table 1.

FUTURE TRENDS AND CONCLUSION

Although there has been a significant increase in networked communication and a growing interest in virtual organizing, to date, researchers have yet to establish consistent terminology and have paid little attention to how specific characteristics of electronic communication or formal organizational structure

influence social dynamics such as knowledge contribution within the various organizational forms. To address this gap, we have developed a table summarizing the different properties and how they are relevant for distinguishing between electronic and face-to-face as well as formal and informal structures. Identification of these key properties should help managers better understand how to create strategies to ensure the success of these different collectives and recognize that strategies that work in one area may not transfer across all collectives.

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