

# Formal Work Groups and Communities of Practice

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Knowledge and innovation management scholars (see, for example, Leonard-Barton, 1995; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) have recently emphasized the role of formal work groups, in particular, project teams, in organizational innovation and learning. In the late 1990s, the concept of communities of practice (CoPs) has also become a key concept in understanding the creation, sharing, and application of knowledge within and across organizational boundaries. This article discusses the relationship between CoPs and formal work groups, such as project teams, based on the authors' recent empirical research in software development work in China (Yan & Assimakopoulos, 2003a, b). Moreover, this article discusses how the division of formal work groups in project teams influences the knowledge activities in CoPs.

## HOW CoPs DIFFER FROM FORMAL WORK GROUPS

As can be seen from Table 1, CoPs are informal social structures that are neither defined by authority, nor reflect formal organizational structures as described in organizational charts (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Wenger, 1998). CoPs come into being and grow organically during people's daily-based informal work related interactions. Generally, these interactions are ongoing without any formal hierarchy or management structure overseeing their activities. People are involved in a community of practice as a result of their interest in a specific knowledge domain and need to develop and share related knowledge to this particular area of common interest. The growth and sustenance of a community rely on the existence of a common practice, a need to share knowledge, and passion of

its members for continuing membership. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), CoPs may fade away or transform themselves to other informal or formal social structures, following environmental changes, such as the emergence of new markets or new organizational structures underpinned by technological changes such as the Internet and its ability to foster virtual communities of common interests.

By contrast, formal work groups are always defined and organized by management authority to fulfill a certain business function or achieve a specific work task such as serving a specific market segment or developing a new product. Formal work groups often have the responsibility and power to allocate resources, manage business processes, assign working roles, and be held responsible and accountable for business outcomes. The information flows, reporting relationships, and affiliation structures are also highly formalized in formal work groups with clearly described job specifications and organizational charts depicting in an unambiguous manner who is in and who is out of a group and what role(s) play each and every member. The life cycle of formal work groups also depends on organizational authority or, in the case of a project team, on the accomplishment of a particular project.

In general, however, CoPs do not overlap with the boundaries of formal work units (Wenger, 1998). CoPs may exist within a business function or department, stretch across divisional boundary, or even go farther beyond the boundary of an organization. Based on common practice and the need to share knowledge, people from different work groups may interact with each other and constitute a CoP. The boundary of a CoP is often fuzzy because its membership is based on personal voluntary participation and may have different levels of involvement depending on the members' specific positions in the under-

*Table 1. Distinctions between CoPs and formal work groups*

	<b>Communities of Practice</b>	<b>Formal Work Groups/Project Teams</b>
<b>Objectives</b>	Create and share knowledge based on common interest and practice	Achieve a specific work related task defined by business function(s) (e.g., R&D)
<b>Organization</b>	Informal, self-organizing, lacks clear hierarchy	Formal, affiliation and reporting relations are defined by organizational authority
<b>Activities</b>	Daily-based work practices, in which knowledge is collectively created and shared among peers	Organizational functions and routines define operations, goals, and specific work tasks shared among group members
<b>Boundary</b>	Fuzzy	Clear as defined by formal group membership
<b>Membership</b>	Voluntary participation	Defined by organizational function(s)
<b>Hierarchy</b>	Absent or established after LPP	Leadership and reporting relations are defined and managed by organizational authority
<b>Power</b>	Based on LPP process, a member's power is gradually recognized and accepted by peers	Mainly based on formal organizational and reporting arrangements
<b>Cohesion</b>	Stemming from personal passion and commitment to a common practice	Stemming from work requirements, shared responsibility, and common goals defined by organizational authority
<b>Ending</b>	Depending on a continuing need and personal passion of members	Depending on an organizational decision or accomplishment of a specific project

lying Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) process (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Sometimes, a project team or a business office forms a CoP as the result of long-term knowledge related interactions. In this case, the boundary of the CoP overlaps with the formal work group. In some other cases, there are several project teams existing within a CoP or several CoPs within a function or department. In addition, CoPs do not have any internal hierarchy, though power relationships exist as a manifestation of the LPP process and the core periphery pattern of ongoing interactions over a sustained period of time. The different levels of participation determine power relationship among CoP members. For example, people standing at the core are often more powerful in knowledge activities of the community than newcomers starting at peripheral positions.

**SPONSORED CoPs**

Up to the late 1990s, it was thought that CoPs start enthusiastically without much intervention from an organizational authority. People spontaneously come together because they need to support each other and share knowledge and experience. In recent years with the increasing recognition of the positive role CoPs play in organizational learning and innovation, an increasing number of organizations make systematic efforts to intentionally foster the birth and development of CoPs

(Wenger et al., 2002). CoPs may get moral and financial support from organization and management (especially, knowledge managers) and therefore have more resources to enable its activities such as having real (or virtual) meeting places, holding social events, developing Web sites, or printing publications.

Today CoPs getting organizational support and managerial attention are generally expected to produce measurable results benefiting the sponsoring organization(s). More and more CoPs and the organizations involved make efforts to formalize CoP-related activities. For example, members of a CoP may set formal agendas for knowledge creation and sharing, have regular meetings and publish newsletters. In most cases, however, whether a CoP accepts support from an organization or a degree of institutionalization does not mean a higher level of formality. The work of organizational supporting “is not to formalize them by making them follow procedures or meet efficiency goals, but rather to strengthen them as informal entities” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 217). In this sense, CoPs can still keep their internal drive and informal workings and do not have any commitment to formal authority and management structures.

**PROJECT TEAMS AND KNOWLEDGE ACTIVITIES IN COPS**

Project teams have long been emphasized as flexible working units to achieve some specific organiza-



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