

# Knowledge Sharing through Communities of Practice in the Voluntary Sector

**Lizzie Bellarby**

*Leeds Metropolitan University, UK*

**Graham Orange**

*Leeds Metropolitan University, UK*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the concepts of knowledge management and knowledge sharing have been recognised as cognate areas of study and research. To date research has focussed mainly upon the commercial sector. However, this article looks at knowledge management and sharing through communities of practice within the voluntary sector. The work is based upon research carried out within a UK national voluntary counselling and advisory service. For reasons of privacy and confidentiality, the organisation shall remain anonymous and will be referred to as the ‘organisation’.

This article considers the background to the study in terms of knowledge management and communities of practice. It then discusses the study’s methodology and findings. It concludes that knowing and sharing are active processes, and that the natural disposition of the actors was found to be important in how knowledge sharing and learning was undertaken.

## BACKGROUND

The term *knowledge management* (KM) has been around for some time, and has primarily been concerned with the capability of various software products to handle ‘knowledge’. However during the 1990s there was a shift away from these technological issues and towards people. The research project upon which this article is based is people focussed, employing the Grounded Theory Method (discussed below). Contemporary theories of knowledge concentrate on the human dynamic, emphasising that

this is more important than the tools designed to store and network information (Foskett, 1990; Streatfield & Wilson, 1999; Orlikowski, 2000; Prusak, 2001).

Whilst KM has been treated as a scientific discipline by those who have focussed mostly upon the exploitation of IT, there have been some qualitative studies that have explored the human side of knowledge management, and in particular have studied communities of people in the context of knowledge. It is important to study people and groups of people because “most practitioners...have begun to study networks and communities as the most productive units of analysis for doing knowledge work” (Prusak, 2001). Accordingly, links to sociology and anthropology have been explored by Snowden (2000), Delanty (2001), and Scharmer (2001), amongst others.

## Knowledge Management and Communities of Practice

Wenger’s (2000) analysis of Prusak and Davenport’s concept of ‘communities of practice’ is an important one for this article, as the investigation of the voluntary organisation and the teams within it highlighted a strong resemblance to the ‘communities of practice’ described by Wenger.

“Communities of practice are the basic building blocks of a social learning system because they are the social ‘containers’ of the competencies that make up such a system” (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). According to Wenger, if organisations can encourage communities of practice, they can create a “social learning system,” which will increase their knowledge generation, and therefore, hopefully, their economic success. Communities include teams and organisations, as well as virtual communities.

*What are communities of practice? In brief, they're groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise. (Wenger, 2000, p. 139)*

Organisations need to “design themselves as social learning systems” (Wenger, 2000, p. 225) if they are to beat their competitors. Communities of practice are a component of these systems. Wenger “proposes a social definition of learning” (2000, p. 225), as opposed to an individualistic approach. This means that learning by individuals can take place effectively in a social context. By being identified with a group, individuals can learn within the boundaries of this dynamic setting, and the knowledge created is shared within the group. Wenger says that “knowing... is a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities [and] socially defined competence is always in interplay with our experience. It is in this interplay that learning takes place” (2000, 226).

An important facet of the human aspect of knowledge management is undoubtedly that of communication. Senge's work places strong emphasis upon articulation of knowledge and linguistics, and Snowden (2000) uses an anecdotal, storytelling approach to KM. Increasing peoples' personal and socially constructed knowledge becomes of more tangible value to firms when it is communicated to others. Perhaps this is why some IT consultants draw the conclusion that communicated knowledge should be captured and disseminated throughout the firm in order to gain maximum benefit from it. However, the capture and dissemination of knowledge may dilute it and even stifle knowledge creation. Indeed it could be argued that once knowledge is externalised (from the knower) and stored, it loses context, and ceases to be knowledge and becomes information (Orange, Burke & Boam, 2000; Wilson, 2002).

An area of importance is how people are motivated to share what they know, as it is often the issue that knowledge management programmes are the most difficult to address. Rewarding people to use knowledge and impart their own knowledge has been discussed in the literature in a very loose way (Koenig, 1999; Nonaka, 2000; Lubit, 2001), but there are few organisational solutions to motivate employees to create and share knowledge. The research

explores motivation to create and share know-how where there are no financially bound incentives. For this reason, the research was conducted at a voluntary organisation.

## **Methodology**

This research used the Grounded Theory Method (GTM). The method was founded by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 as an attempt to bring qualitative research methods in equal standing with quantitative, scientific research methods. They wanted to establish a method that would have as much authority as quantitative methods in terms of establishing 'truth'. GTM is a “particular style of qualitative analysis of data... for generating and testing theory” (Strauss, 1987). It is so called due to “its emphasis on the generation of theory and the data in which that theory is grounded” (Glaser, 1978).

*We are offering more than a set of procedures. We are offering a way of thinking about and of viewing the world that can enrich the research of those who choose to use this methodology. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 4)*

Strauss and Corbin refer to the procedures as being like a smorgasbord—that is, the researchers can pick and choose methods to suit their investigation. In this research it was decided to use GTM as per Strauss and Corbin's interpretation, that is to use the parts that are useful and filter out those which did not fit the purpose of the investigation, and to acknowledge the impact of the researcher on the results.

An important part of GTM is theoretical sampling, which is where data is collected in order to generate theory. The researcher collects data, in this case through the use of interviews, which is immediately coded and then analysed, before collecting further data. In this way, data collection is steered by the emerging theory.

Following interviewing, the researcher then looks at documents, including interview transcripts, memos, and field notes, for indicators of categories in events and behaviour. “This triad (of data collection/coding and memoing)... serves as a genuinely explicit control over the researcher's biases” (Strauss, 1987). This form of ‘open coding’ hopes to identify ‘con-

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