Strategic Objectives of CoPs and Organizational Learning

Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay
University of Quebec in Montreal (Teluq-UQAM), Canada

INTRODUCTION

There is more and more interest in different forms of knowledge creation and management, and the conditions necessary to succeed in such initiatives from the point of view of individuals and organizations. A great deal of this interest stems from the fact that organizations expect substantial gains from knowledge. Knowledge management is seen in many organizations as a source of potential competitiveness and innovation. The concept of communities of practice stems from this interest, but is viewed as a specific form of knowledge development, in principle more centred on the individuals and their exchanges than on "management" by the firm, although the firm does seem to have a role to play in fostering such initiatives. Thus, the use of communities of practice has emerged as a way to develop collective skills and organizational learning, in order to foster innovation and success for the organization.

Organizational learning is part of a broader concern related to the development of collective skills. We know that a large proportion of effective relations within organizations are informal, a characteristic that relates to the concerns of the communities of practice, which are usually based on informal relations. Organizational learning goes beyond individual learning, which can lead to relatively permanent changes in the individual's behavior, because it results in the development of a knowledge base which could translate into a more significant change of another kind within the organization. The knowledge is disseminated throughout the organization, is transmissible between members, is subject to consensus, and is integrated into the work processes and the structures of the organization. From this perspective, organizational learning is closely linked with "meaningful" organizational processes, which are basically routines used by decision makers to detect certain problems, define priorities, find solutions, and attempt to improve performance. In this article, we will present research results on some strategic objectives of CoPs and the attainment of these objectives, from the viewpoint of organizational learning.

BACKGROUND

The results presented in this article are derived from action research on a dozen communities of practice (CoPs) conducted under the aegis of the *Centre Francophone D'Informatisation des Organisations* (CEFRIO[1]). To date, a dozen CoPs have actively participated in the research, which was carried out from 2001 to 2003. One hundred and eighty (180) participants answered questionnaires on starting up a CoP, and slightly less than 100 participants answered evaluation questionnaires six months later. In addition, focus groups and recordings of critical incidents in each of the communities were also conducted so as to better understand the dynamics of each of the CoPs. We will focus on the aspects related to learning, paying particular attention to the conditions and challenges that emerge from our results.

Attainment of Objectives

Although the objectives of the communities of practice can differ (Jacob, Bareil, Bourhis, Dubé & Tremblay, 2003), they were mainly aimed at learning through exchange and collaboration in our cases. From this perspective, it is interesting to note how the objectives have evolved over time. When the communities were starting up, the objectives identified by the participants were usually related to exchange and sharing of information and knowledge, better utilisation of delocalized resources, as well as the creation of a collective memory—objectives which actually pertain to knowledge sharing.

However, after a few months of work in a virtual CoP, the achievement of objectives seemed to be uneven. In fact, although certain CoPs felt that they had achieved their objectives, as was the case of a CoP in the health sector (Tremblay, 2004a), this was not so true of other CoPs. Perhaps it was still too soon to assess the achievement of objectives since, unlike project teams or groups, CoPs are not supposed to have a specific schedule and they have to learn new operating modes in a short time.

Concerning the partial achievement of the objectives of CoPs, there were various possible reasons for this, including the frequent change of CoP leader, the loss of interest on the part of management or participants, or the lack of time for participation. However, it must be stressed that developing learning and experimenting with a new problem-solving approach, which were not always among the objectives considered to be the most important at first, seemed to have been relatively well achieved by a number of CoPs, and these forms of learning are greatly appreciated by the participants.

It must be stressed that all of the CoPs operated with a knowledge-sharing tele-software. The participants were either not very familiar with the software or had to more or less master it in a few months, depending on how easy or difficult it was for them to use this software and the time—which is generally limited—that they had. The use of software such as Knowledge Forum or Lotus Notes, which was different in each case, allowed CoP participants to exchange messages. These were then grouped together on a space, and could be reviewed and re-organized according to the themes discussed in the exchanges. In principle, this is how virtual (i.e., tele-working) communities must jointly develop knowledge.

We analysed the data on success or attainment of objectives according to various demographic variables, but only two (gender and age) came out significantly in some of the analyses. For various reasons, often lack of variance in the respondents, the other variables tested did not show up as significant: level of schooling, professional category, and language have however been tested and should eventually be the object of more analyses.

The success of the CoP was evaluated in different ways, amongst which was the attainment of the strategic and operational objectives of the CoP according to the demographic variables; as mentioned, analyses (ANOVA) revealed few significant links, except with gender and age, the latter which we highlight here.

In Table 2, all statements are significantly differentiated according to age. There are some differences with gender, but almost none with all other "demographic"[2] variables tested.

As concerns differences according to gender, in terms of strategic objectives, only the objective of valuing excellence presented a gendered difference (detailed tables available in Bourhis & Tremblay, 2004). For operational objectives as well, differences according to gender are not numerous, since only the objective of facilitating exchange and sharing of information was differentiated according to gender.

Success was measured in different ways, not only in terms of attaining objectives as shown in

Table 1. Links between the attainment of strategic objectives and age

AGE		Innovation was valued	Relation with client became better	Quality became better	Excellence was valued	Rationalization	Competencies were valued	Efficiency
Under 35 yrs	Mean	3.7500	3.1333	3.4118	3.5789	3.0625	3.4000	3.6111
	N	20	15	17	19	16	20	18
	StanDev	0.85070	0.74322	0.79521	0.83771	0.85391	0.82078	0.84984
35 - 49 yrs	Mean	3.6170	3.2162	3.3810	3.5625	3.0000	3.3846	3.3529
	N	47	37	42	48	24	39	34
	StanDev	0.87360	0.82108	0.79487	0.84818	0.88465	0.96287	0.84861
50 and over	Mean	2.7000	2.8571	3.1111	3.2000	2.0000	2.7500	2.2857
	N	10	7	9	10	6	8	7
	StanDev	1.33749	1.21499	1.45297	1.31656	1.09545	1.28174	0.95119
Total	Mean	3.5325	3.1525	3.3529	3.5195	2.8913	3.3134	3.3051
	N	77	59	68	77	46	67	59
	StanDev	0.98120	0.84718	0.89384	0.91206	0.94817	0.97248	0.93319