

Chapter IV

The Possibility of Water–Cooler Chat?

Developing Communities of Practice for Knowledge Sharing within Global Virtual Teams

Norhayati Zakaria

Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at a key concept called communities of practice that helps to facilitate organizational learning through increased knowledge sharing within global virtual teams. By using Granovetter's (1974) weak ties theory, I suggest that casual acquaintances, known as weak ties have significant implications for social relationships and context, both of which can benefit virtual organizational team members. Furthermore, based on Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, I also argue that cultural factors can impact one's willingness to share knowledge. Thus, there are three questions that guide this chapter: (1) How do social relationships and context among global virtual teams affect the development of communities of practice? (2) How does culture affect the knowledge of sharing activities? (3) What is the impact of ICTs on knowledge sharing and the emergence of communities of practice?

INTRODUCTION

The advent of information and communication technology (ICT) has changed the way people communicate, exchange information, and accomplish and coordinate their managerial tasks in organizations. Essentially, the use of ICTs together with the increasing pressure for globalization is

driving the growth of global virtual teams. Global virtual teams is defined as a distinct entity that is organizationally dispersed and whose members come from different geographical locations, may not have a common cultural background, collaborate using asynchronous and synchronous technologies, and often assemble on an ad hoc basis (Zakaria, Amelinckx, & Wilemon, 2004). Not only

that, ICT also influences the way people structure their relationships across national boundaries. The current state of ICT therefore offers opportunities for multinational corporations (MNCs) to develop communities of practice so that they can support their geographically dispersed team members who are working on a common business goal to share knowledge within them.

According to Wenger (1998) *community of practice* is defined along three main dimensions: (1) its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members, (2) mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity, and (3) the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time. With the use of ICT, the development of communities of practice is freed from constraints such as time and geographical distance. As such, it is becoming a common platform for people to collaborate and share knowledge using ICTs. Potentially, the movement toward the development of communities of practice is based on the acculturation of cultural values among team members. As Kimble, Li, and Barlow (2000) suggested, communities of practice can help alleviate the barriers of building trust and creating social bonding among virtual team members.

Research on knowledge sharing (including knowledge creation, acquisition, and transfer) or behavior change in the context of organizational learning (Duncan & Weiss, 1979; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1996; Garvin, 1993; Huber, 1991; Senge, 1990) suggests that organizational learning can be categorized into two phases: (i) knowledge sharing, and (ii) behavior change. The knowledge-sharing phase involves the creation of knowledge, the acquisition of knowledge, and the transfer of knowledge among organizational members, which enhances an organization's efficiency by emphasizing the need for understanding the existing organizational context. The behavior change phase involves modification of behaviors among global members, which enhance an organization's effectiveness through organizational restructuring. In this regard, a study by Collier and Esteban (1999) suggested that the advancement of ICT provides a plethora of opportunities for collaborative learning,

self-management, and ownership of work, which takes precedence over the traditional bureaucratic and authoritarian management structure.

It is useful to note that communities of practice are not merely geographically dispersed conventional teams separated by time and space. They also often differ in national, cultural, and linguistic attributes. What makes them prevalent and significant in today's electronic global village is the fact that organizations use ICTs to share knowledge and to collaborate. Communities of practice requires innovative communication and learning capabilities among different members across organizational and geographical boundaries, and the increasing familiarity with ICTs means an easier adaptation to communities of practice. Here, I would like to suggest that virtual intra-team social interactions and work practices should not be compared to conventional work structures, or treated as such by the managers. Instead, there is a need to understand both the social interactions and work practices in light of the process of creating and maintaining effective communities of practice. Several studies further highlight that organizational structure and culture, and communities of practice are the primary factors that impact the success of organizational learning (Inkpen, 1998; Johnson, 2001; Okunoye & Karsten, 2002; Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001). By looking at the concept of communities of practice, I hope to illustrate how people could develop a shared-knowledge base in a geographically dispersed environment such as the global virtual teams.

The concept of communities of practice includes the internal dynamics of the organizational members participating in the community, and the establishment of shared values within the team members. Various relevant viewpoints include practice as meaning, practice as community, practice as boundary, practice as locality, and knowing in practice (Wenger, 1998). In this regard, Inkpen (1998) argued that the acquisition of new organizational knowledge is increasingly becoming a managerial priority for ensuring the sustainability of global competitiveness. Inkpen (1998) also recognized the challenges that surface in a global knowledge-sharing setting. These challenges can be categorized as complexities of acquiring,

16 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/possibility-water-cooler-chat-developing/20481

Related Content

Modern Technology and Mass Education: A Case Study of a Global Virtual Learning System

Ahmed Ali (2009). *Selected Readings on Global Information Technology: Contemporary Applications* (pp. 194-204).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/modern-technology-mass-education/28614

Evaluation of Economic Security of Water Resources and Analysis of Influencing Factors

Licheng Peng, Xiaowei Ma, Wanwan Maand Yuanxiang Zhou (2022). *Journal of Global Information Management* (pp. 1-19).

www.irma-international.org/article/evaluation-of-economic-security-of-water-resources-and-analysis-of-influencing-factors/285007

Complex Network Perspective on Collaboration in ICT Standardization

Timo Ali-Vehmas (2018). *Corporate and Global Standardization Initiatives in Contemporary Society* (pp. 37-70).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/complex-network-perspective-on-collaboration-in-ict-standardization/197458

Client-Vendor Relationships in Offshore Applications Development: An Evolutionary Framework

Rajesh Mirani (2008). *Global Information Technologies: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 614-629).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/client-vendor-relationships-offshore-applications/18994

Analysis of Consideration of Security Parameters by Vendors on Trust and Customer Satisfaction in E-Commerce

Hodjat Hamidiand Saba Moradi (2017). *Journal of Global Information Management* (pp. 32-45).

www.irma-international.org/article/analysis-of-consideration-of-security-parameters-by-vendors-on-trust-and-customer-satisfaction-in-e-commerce/186811