



Chapter 28

Knowledge Management and Virtual Communities

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A community of people is the best way to handle complex and fast-changing dynamics in any field of the knowledge business. And once you are in the knowledge business, you find you need knowledge communities to run them. (Botkin, 1999, p.85)

The objective of this article is to illuminate the relation between knowledge management and virtual communities. A model which comprises four types of knowledge management is presented. A central theme in this article is the suggestion that knowledge management is not an unequivocal concept. Generalized knowledge management strategies do not enable managers and consultants to form an opinion on the effectiveness of virtual communities for their organization or network. Depending on the environment of the organization, the knowledge management will differ in focus and content. In this collaboration there will (and should) be more attention for virtual communities and the most effective type of these communities in the given situation.

INTRODUCTION

In the literature there is frequent discussion on both virtual communities (VC) and knowledge management (KM). In this article we will indicate that these concepts are also mutually related. This relation, however, is not valid for all kinds of organizations and their KM. We postulate that generalized knowledge management strategies are not effective. More than ever before in the management of knowledge, the environment in which an organization functions will have to be taken into consideration. Thus, for example, in situations of high degrees of complexity and variability, the content of knowledge management will necessarily be fundamentally different from situations with a low complexity and variability.

This article suggests that in a highly dynamic environment new collaboration forms such as the virtual organization, and especially virtual communities, will play a significant role in knowledge management.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section, we will go into knowledge management. In this chapter the importance of the environment of organizations in terms of complexity and dynamics will be demonstrated. The section following is devoted to the concept of virtual communities. Its first subsection describes three models, which show the development of virtual communities. In the second subsection, three types of virtual communities are distinguished. In the section after that, we will state that virtual communities are not a phase in (or rather after) knowledge management but a possible form of knowledge management. This article concludes in the final section with a survey of types of virtual communities and the accompanying management functions, emphases and objectives.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The organization is often viewed as a knowledge-processing system.¹ Much attention is paid to the ever-increasing role of knowledge in the functioning of individuals and their affiliated organizations (refer to Davenport en Prusak, 1998). Measures are proposed, in order to better utilize the knowledge present in organizations and in addition, to promote its development. We define knowledge management as “the way in which organizations organize necessary knowledge.” In this article, we focus on knowledge management as a design issue. We suggest that organizations implicitly adopt a certain manner of dealing with knowledge by choosing a certain organization form.

Complexity and variability

In the professional literature, managers as well as employees acknowledge that the majority of organizations have to function in an increasingly variable and complex environment. Thus, each organization-design model that aims to keep up

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