



Chapter XVIII

The Use of Intranets: The Missing Link Between Communities of Practice and Networks of Practice?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how members of local Communities of Practice (CoPs) have appropriated intranet systems and how their use of these systems has contributed to the emergence of more broadly based Networks of Practice (NoPs). CoPs are groups of interacting agents who share common activities and knowledge. NoPs are composed of people who are geographically separate but who still share work-related practices. This chapter argues that intranet systems provide the means by which members of local CoPs can overcome geographical distance and connect with other CoPs to create NoPs. This argument is based on four case studies that relate how individual CoPs have implemented, managed and used specific intranet sites and how this use has strengthened their local Community of Practice (CoP) as well as fostered links with a wider Network of Practice (NoP).

INTRODUCTION

To deal with worldwide competition, shorter product life cycles and challenging marketing demands, organizations have to learn. When organizations learn, they are able to create new innovative products and processes and to explore new strategic options (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Virkkunen & Kuutti, 2000). Communities of Practice (CoPs) emerge as people work closely together, do their job better and improvise in the face of unexpected issues. CoPs are central to organizational learning; as their members share activities, they develop a sense of a common identity and culture (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Liedtka, 1999; Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, geographically separate, local communities whose members have strong links and interact on a daily basis can be linked to each other through the (at least partial) sharing of knowledge and activities. Thus, aggregates of local CoPs may result in wider and more broadly based Networks of Practice (NoPs) (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Brown & Duguid, 2001).

Surprisingly, the ways in which CoPs might connect with each other, and how this might lead to the emergence of a wider Network of Practice (NoP), have not been examined in any depth. This chapter will consider the influence that the growing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has on daily work and communications. It will examine how members of local CoPs begin to use intranet systems for their own ends. This process is termed “appropriation”. These appropriations are specific ways of dealing with the technology that transform both the technical system and the social group. This chapter shows how appropriated intranet systems transform a local Community of Practice (CoP) and can favour the emergence of a NoP. It draws on evidence from four case studies and relates the process through which CoPs gradually become connected to each other and lead to the appearance of a NoP. In order to be able to trace the appropriation of the new system over time, each case is based on a local community whose members have used a specific intranet site for at least two years.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. The next section defines the notions of CoP and NoP and questions how the use of ICTs might relate to CoPs and NoPs. The following section briefly describes the four cases. This is then followed by an analysis of how the members of these communities appropriate their intranet sites in order to strengthen their links and how their use contributes to the creation of a set of relations among local CoPs and to the emergence of an overall NoP. Finally, some recommendations on how to implement and manage an intranet system to encourage local appropriation and the emergence of overall NoPs are made.

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