# Chapter 7.17
# The Search for 'Hidden' Virtual Communities of Practice:
## Some Preliminary Premises

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the possibility of discovering a "hidden" (potential) Community of Practice (CoP) inside electronic networks, and then using this knowledge to nurture it into a fully functioning Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP). Starting from the standpoint of the need to manage knowledge and create innovation, the chapter discusses several issues related to this subject. It begins by examining Nonaka's SECI model and his notion of Knowledge Transfer; the authors follow this by an investigation of the links between Communities of Practice (CoPs) and Knowledge Management; the chapter concludes by examining the relation between Nonaka's Communities of Interaction and CoPs. Having established this the authors start their examination of the characteristics of "hidden" Communities of Practice. Following on from the previous discussion, they look at what is meant by "hidden" CoPs and what their value might be. They also look at the distinction between Distributed CoPs (DCoPs) and Virtual CoPs (VCoPs) and the issues raised when moving from 'hidden' CoPs to fully functioning VCoPs. The chapter concludes with some preliminary findings from a semi-structured interview conducted in the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network (UK). These findings are contrasted against the theory and some further proposals are made.

*Jackson Grayson, chairman of the American Productivity & Quality Center, tells a story about a big-company CEO who, in a moment of con-*

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*templation, revealed a deep desire: "I wish we knew what we know," the CEO said. That wish is shared today by managers at dozens of large, decentralized companies. They fear the knowledge in their organizations is going to waste simply because hardly anyone knows it exists.' Information Week, 20 October 1997*

## INTRODUCTION

It is important for institutions and companies to manage the knowledge they have. This knowledge represents not only the main asset an institution or company has, but it also can represent the future and survival in the time to come. As result, the majority of large companies include knowledge in their list of assets. This is not a new issue. For instance, Boersma and Stegwee have discussed this before (1996), but in our time that is more important than ever.

One tool that can help to reach this objective is represented by the social communities that reside within such organisations. These communities can create specialized knowledge that is vital for the 'host' institution. A special case of social communities, Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) have been object of constant studies and analyses for several years. This interest can be explained by the fact that many see Communities of Practice as a powerful instrument for the management of knowledge and as source of innovation.

However, it is also necessary to take into account the advances in technology and communication present in today's world. The improvement in performance and the reduction in prices of personal computers, together with the spread of access to Internet in 1990s, resulted in an improvement in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). That enhancement has changed the nature of enterprises and institutions. As result, a new framework emerged, allowing social communities to grow and flourish across geographical boundaries – so-called virtual communities. With the creation of virtual communities came the possibility of easier 'transfer' of knowledge between people in different locations, even at an international level (Hiltz & Turoff, 1993; Sproull & Kiesler, 1992).

It is therefore important to examine the possibility of helping the growth of these communities, as this could open new possibilities for the management of the knowledge, which in turn could influence the success of an enterprise. For example, companies and institutions could create an environment suitable for innovation through the facilitation of contact between geographically separated groups with shared interests, thus, allowing the nurturing of Communities of Practice that could be of use to that organisation. These communities might be the 'seed' of an innovation that could lead to the development of new technologies, which in turn might lead to improvements in the company and institution or to the creation of new products and services. Similarly, research institutions might wish to discover potential groups and/or areas of collaboration and research as sometimes innovations are held back by a lack of communication or awareness, since the existence of similar groups inside the institution is unknown. The first step in this direction would be to discover the existence of 'hidden' communities that could, in time, represent the starting point of a fully functioning Community of Practice (CoP).

To accomplish this, it is necessary to analyse several related issues. First, we must be certain that 'hidden' communities can be located. Second, as we are considering distributed communities, we must also be sure that, what are often loosely termed Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs), can actually be considered to be CoPs. Finally, if the two previous conditions are met, we need to know if these 'hidden' communities can be developed to a level of fully functioning CoP. This chapter will discusses each of these steps and conclude with a small-scale study where the first premises under this approach are drawn.