

Chapter 46

An Introduction to Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

This article looks at the concept of communities of practice (CoPs) in the workplace. The theories surrounding these types of communities are still very new and in the process of development. The practice and the importance of these communities for knowledge transfer are also still to be explored as to the best methods for establishing such communities and how to support and encourage them but we show ideas for potential in our discussion. Below we discuss the background and main threads

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of theory that are under development. This is very much a short introduction to the concept. Further discussions can be found in Coakes (2004), Coakes and Clarke (2005), and Lehaney, Clarke, Coakes, and Jack (2003).

BACKGROUND

Communities of practice are becoming increasingly important in many organisations. As the APQC (2004) says:

CoPs are becoming the core knowledge strategy for global organizations. As groups of people who come together to share and learn from one another face-to-face and virtually, communities of practice are held together by a common interest

in a body of knowledge and are driven by a desire and need to share problems, experiences, insights, templates, tools, and best practices.

To define a community of practice, it is worth considering the words of Etienne Wenger (2001), who is considered one of the foremost experts in this field. He says:

[C]ommunities of practice are a specific kind of community. They are focused on a domain of knowledge and over time accumulate expertise in this domain. They develop their shared practice by interacting around problems, solutions, and insights, and building a common store of knowledge.

The initial concept of communities of practice came out of work by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) relating to situated learning in the workplace and other communities with related interests. Thus, such communities are an aggregation of people who are bound (in their specific context) to accomplish tasks or engage in sense-making activities (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger). Learning, to Lave and Wenger, was the transformation of practice in situated possibilities. Newcomers to a group learn from the old participants, bearing in mind that practices will change over time and place due to changes in circumstances. In addition, intergenerational relationships will affect the learning situation: There may well be a fear from the older group members in transferring knowledge to the younger, implying a loss of power and importance, or a fear from the new or younger group members of demonstrating ignorance. So, the social process of knowledge acquisition affects the practice of knowledge sharing and the desire for knowledge sharing.

The context or domain for these communities is related to the subject matter around which they are formed. Within this domain, communities interact, learn, and build relationships in order that they may practice their skills through

tools, frameworks, idea sharing, artefacts, or documents.

In the recent *Encyclopedia of Communities of Practice in Information and Knowledge Management* (Coakes & Clarke, 2005), a number of particular issues are covered in a multilayered form. Here we see that such communities are governed by internal, informal, and unspoken rules dominated by specialised language development. We also see that there are issues in measuring the output and value of such communities for an organisation, that strategy needs to be developed uniquely for each community as well as for the organisation in general, and that how or even whether to reward participants is a matter of some debate. The psychology of participants and the difficulties with creating a shared meaning within a community can be explored through philosophy and psychology as well as organisational studies, and we find that many perspectives are available to understand communities and their actions. This being the case, many fields of study have a view on how and why communities work and how and why people should or could participate in this work.

Focus on Communities

If we accept that the role of CoPs in the business environment is to share knowledge and improve the way the organisation does business whether in the public or private sector, and that they are community workplaces where people can share ideas, mentor each other, and tap into interests (APQC, 2002), each CoP can be a focus of learning and competence for the organisation. Much of the organisation's work can be facilitated or conversely frustrated through these communities depending on how permissive or permitted they are. Organisational culture, it would seem, plays a great part in communities and how they operate. The members of a community need to trust the other members before they are willing to share their experience and understanding.

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