Chapter 2

Sharing Knowledge through Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is deepening into the concept of 'Communities of Practice' (CoPs) as a useful scope to share knowledge, trying to present some key issues about a practical knowledge management approach. CoPs are a main trend inside innovation strategies, including not only management, but also knowledge creation and development, a richer focus for knowledge governance.

There is a wide range of strategies to improve intangible assets management but practical side around two case studies is the main added value for this chapter. For this reason, the purpose is not about a model configuration but CoPs as a useful mechanism to knowledge governance. First of all, a reality based on consultancy activity inside military sector, Isdefe, with a three years project aimed to knowledge management as a core business plan, taking into account a technological development. Secondly, a framework related to nuclear power plants in Spain through "CoPs Project" an initiative aimed to improve organizational performance linked to tacit knowledge transfer.

INTRODUCTION

Communities of Practice (CoPs) concept has a formal consideration in 80s describing a group of people naturally created inside an organization oriented towards sharing experiences about professional expertise (tacit and explicit) as a "knowledge space" developing a process about "training in working" (Orr, 1987 and 1990) or "cognition in practice" (Lave, 1988).

Therefore, Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups of people in organizations that form to share what they know, to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work and to provide a social context for that work. Although the term Community of Practice is new, formally appear the last years in 80s. Such groups have been around ever since people in organizations realized they could benefit from sharing their Knowledge, insights, and experiences with others who have similar interests and goal. One important goal is to develop innovation.

Last perspective represents the core of this work underpinning CoPs concept as a strategic tool for knowledge processes following a knowledge governance scope (Bueno et al, 2008). Obviously such approach is inside a business focus where knowledge creation is a key issue (Nonaka, Toyama & Kono, 2000) over all from a tacit dimension what is much more oriented towards competitive advantages creation (Nonaka, 1991; Kogut y Zander, 1996; & Wenger, 1998).

In the third point CoPs role is analyzed as a bridge between working and learning in order to obtain innovations (Brown & Duguid, 1991) taking into account relationships among internal and external flows of knowledge under "open innovation" atmosphere creating a more dynamic and flexible system. CoPs is a discovering organization are not he archetype of the conventional innovating organization, one which responds-often with great efficiency-to changes is detects in its environment.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) should not be confused with teams or task forces. A task force ties to a specific assignment. Once that assignment is completed, the task force disbands. A team ties to some specific process or function. A team is structured so as to deal with the interdependencies of different roles in that functions or process. In team, roles and tasks of the way; in a COP they are generally the same (Wenger, 1998).

In this sense, through an analytical methodology to support COP approach for value creation based on social networks as instrument for knowledge governance, fourth an fifth points present two study cases what showing empirical COP experiences.

First one a case developed for an engineering organization inside Spanish public sector where CoPs play an important role for knowledge management strategy. Fifth point is about CoPs for Spanish nuclear power plants in order to support a safety culture. The project has been developed during three years around knowledge retention mainly for tacit or expert knowledge as a key organizational asset.

The two business cases offer a quite significant investment in terms of today's resources and capabilities, organizations can reap huge rewards in terms of tomorrow's results.

Finally conclusions are presented to provide main ideas about CoPs taking into account intangible assets management where people share knowledge creating an interaction between knowledge model and business focus is showing impacts inside two case studies with strategic interest.

INTANGIBLE ASSETS AS ORGANIZATIONAL DRIVERS

Strategic role for intangibles is only a valid approach if organization considers knowledge as an asset, putting into practice a leadership, culture and actions to create, develop and manage it.

In this context, the strategic approach of businesses in the current economy has an important part related with certain support processes linked to analysis tasks corresponding to dynamic processes of decision making, as an attempt to diminish the risks inherent to such processes. In this sense, such argument on intelligent or learning-capable organizations (Senge, 1990) gains a high value for the extraction of information and the creation of both appropriate internal and external knowledge.

Then there is a focus what insisting on the importance of basic resources for strategic

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