

Chapter 20

Knowledge Sharing Within and Between Communities of Practice in a Knowledge Intensive Organization

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to link communities of practice to the knowledge creation and dissemination in the specific context of knowledge intensive organization. This is done by pointing out the role that CoPs may have in relation to knowledge sharing and innovativeness in the knowledge intensive context.

CoPs can fulfill numerous functions in respect to the creation, accumulation, and diffusion of knowledge. Thus, Wenger's (1998) clarifying categorization of those knowledge-related functions has served as a foundation and inspiration in this context-specific description: exchange and interpretation of information; retaining knowledge; steward competencies and provide homes for identities.

However, it is worth noting that while communities of practice are traditionally seen as the creators of knowledge and innovations, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges and even obstacles of these tightly-coupled groups may bring to the organizational knowledge sharing and learning processes. These issues are mainly defined through our empirical case examples we have linked to the theoretical review.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

“A great deal of [organizational] knowledge is both produced and held collectively. Such knowledge is readily generated when people work together in tightly knit groups known as communities of practice” (Brown & Duguid, 1998, pp. 91)

In this chapter we aim to describe the role of CoPs in the knowledge intensive context, where value creation is based on intellectual knowledge capital and thus knowledge has more importance than other inputs. In knowledge intensive contexts, human capital is dominant, in comparison to physical or financial capital (e.g., Løwendahl, 1997; Alvesson, 2001; Starbuck 1992). The most work is said to be intellectual in nature and well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the workforce (Alvesson, 1995; Alvesson, 2000; Robertson & Swan, 1998; Starbuck, 1992).

In these organizations the dependence of organizations on its employees is strong, many times because of the embedded nature of expertise. Thus, replacing employees due to resignation is often extremely difficult (e.g., Sveiby, 1997), even impossible. Intensive and continuous knowledge sharing among workers diminishes the vulnerability of the organization in those situations. In addition, effective expertise and customer-related knowledge sharing among the knowledge workers can be seen as one crucial prerequisite in perceived customer value and innovativeness in this context (see e.g., Kothandaraman & Wilson, 2000; Nätti & Still 2007). As Løwendahl, Revang & Fostenlokken (2001, 912) put it: ‘they [knowledge organizations] employ a very high percentage of highly educated people and they are extremely dependent on their ability to attract, mobilize, develop and transform the knowledge of these employees to create value for their clients.’ Indeed, defining and describing knowledge sharing related to its specific context is important because of the characteristics of an organization: all of its units

and individuals influence the creation, transfer, accumulation and utilization of knowledge (Argote, 2003a)¹.

One important organizational element strongly influencing knowledge creation, sharing and accumulation in knowledge intensive contexts is “the community of practice” (from now on CoP). The term was first coined by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave (1991). Since then, academics, technologists and management professionals have discussed the role of knowledge and learning, within and between these communities both from a theoretical and a practical perspective. Indeed, this conception seems to provide a useful perspective on knowing, learning and improving the organizational performance in many kinds of organizations and within various sectors of organizational life (see e.g. Wenger, 2005). John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid (1991) find that organizations consist of several CoPs that often cross the formal boundaries of organizational units. They argue that organizational learning should be studied by analyzing how these networked communities create new insights and learn.

In knowledge intensive organizations there are certain contextual characteristics which are noteworthy in relation to their learning ability, both internally within single CoPs as well as in the web of different communities. For example, experts are likely to collect into their collegial groups, creating stronger bonds with colleagues they feel “similar” to (Thomas-Hunt, Ogden & Neale, 2003; Empson, 2001) based on such features as their educational background, working experience and organizational status. Thus, CoPs in knowledge intensive contexts are often also occupational communities. An occupational community according to Barley and Kunda (2006) is a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in similar work; who identify (more or less positively) with their work; who share a set of values, norms, professional identity and perspectives that apply to, but extend beyond, work

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