Chapter 23
Communities of Practice in Public Administration:
The Case of Catalonia's Government

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ABSTRACT

Currently, Knowledge Management (KM) is being received very positively by organisations. Nevertheless, there is a particular type of organisation in which there has been less of a general demand for KM: the public organisations. However, in the last three years, a Knowledge Management project, based in communities of practice (CoPs), has been put into practice in the area of the Justice Department in the Catalan government, the Generalitat of Catalunya. The aim of this work is to present a detailed analysis of this project. To achieve this aim, first of all, we are going to introduce the implementation methodology and the results obtained, as well as the success variables involved in this project. This will allow us to offer a guide for implementing CoPs in public administration. Lastly, by way of conclusion, we will provide a series of conclusions and lessons that can easily be applied to the majority of community of practice projects that are implemented in the Public Administration context.

1. INTRODUCTION

A clear evolution has been occurring over the past years in the discipline of knowledge management. There is a growing tendency to make more intensive use of methodology tools that place the emphasis on people and on maximising and increasing their knowledge base (collaborative work and training, and networking), collective intelligence and collaborative innovation. All of this with the back-up and support of new technology tools that have come about with what is called the New Internet or Web 2.0 (Genís & Fumero, 2007; Cobo & Pardo, 2007). The end result of the conjunction of these variables is what some authors (Roulleaux, 2007) have already come to

define as information management for the new generation.

And within this new organisational context communities of practice (CoPs) have reassumed an active role. CoPs were one of the methodological tools that generated the highest expectations. The organisational benefits they can offer have already been amply defined (Wenger, 1998 & 2002; Parcell & Collison, 2001) – among others those that concerning efficiency with knowledge based in the organisation with greater transparency.

Now while we know about the potential benefits they can provide (Juan, 2004), the lack of applied case studies over time within organisations is a matter for concern. Both in the specialised literature as in practice, it is difficult to find this applied experience. And these difficulties become greater again when we switch to the public sector (Juan, 2004). Apart from the few exceptions like IADE (2002, 2005), who launched several projects – the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IEF) and the Spanish Inland Revenue Service (Agencia Tributaria or Hacienda) –no other applied case study experience has been described within the public sector.

Against this backdrop, in 2005 the Centre of Legal Studies and Specialised Training (CEJFE) launched an initiative to structure various CoPs within the Catalan Justice Department. Following the Wenger (1998) early CoP development model consisting in identifying emerging groups among the organisations and subsequent support, over the 2005-2008 period up to 15 CoPs have been set up bringing together more than 2000 professionals. Within these CoPs, evolution has been diverse, as some – two, in fact – have not survived while the remaining thirteen are achieving some excellent results in reaching their objectives.

Although in other previous work, we have indicated some key points to explain how to implement CoPs (Pérez-Montoro and Martínez, 2007) as well as some of the variables implied in their maintenance and survival (Pérez-Montoro & Martínez, 2008), here we will be presenting both the implementation methodology and the results obtained (sections 2 and 3), as well as the success variables involved (section 4). Outstanding factors among these are factors linked to the organisational context, people and the actual role of knowledge among the different professional groups. This will allow us to extract the differential variables implied in success of the CoPs and thus offer a guide for implementing CoPs in public administration (section 5). Lastly, by way of conclusion we will provide a series of interesting conclusions and a number of lessons that can easily be applied to the majority of community of practice projects that are implemented in the Public Administration context.

2. CASE STUDY TO IMPLEMENT COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE WITHIN THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: THE *COMPARTIM* PROGRAM

As previously indicated, the experiment of establishing CoPs was based in a Public Administration department: the Justice Department of the Generalitat of Catalonia, the autonomous government of Catalonia.

2.1. Organisational Context

Regrettably, as with other similar public organisations, Justice Department of the Generalitat of Catalonia usually exhibits some of the main problems related with individual and organisational knowledge.

Such problems are mainly owed to the clear identifying characteristics that knowledge typically displays in this kind of context. Along these lines, there are two groups of factors that act as a barrier, making their implementation and consolidation much more difficult. On the one hand there are the factors linked to the role itself of the awareness within the public context, clearly

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