

Chapter 1.6

A Classification of Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice have been in existence since the days when individual craftsmen got together to share ideas and issues. Eventually, these developed into craft guilds and finally into professional associations. But more specifically, focused communities of practice have recently begun to attract a great deal of attention in the business community because they provide a way for strategically growing and managing knowledge as an asset (Grant, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Powell, 1998). The increasing complexity in products, services, and processes requires more specialization and collaboration between workers. However, orchestrating the involvement of disparate groups that work on complex projects requires finding a balance between differentiation, when teams work separately, and integration, when groups meet to exchange knowledge. For example, development projects usually benefit when expertise is drawn from diverse sources,

including potential users, where the interests, skills, and formal and tacit knowledge of the different groups can be drawn together by skillful project managers (Garrety, Robertson & Badham, 2004). By responding to new economic pressures for rapid transformation, communities of practice can help improve knowledge exchange in critical areas, so organizations can maintain or improve their competitive positions.

The growth of interest in communities of practice has resulted in their spread into several classifications of modern organizations, all of which must share knowledge and learning to thrive. How effectively communities of practice perform in these different environments is of great interest, and, in order to study them in detail, we suggest classifying them according to the structure of the organizations they serve. We have been able to identify four such classifications: internal communities of practice, communities of practice in network organizations, formal networks of practice, and self-organizing networks

of practice. Among these four classifications are characteristics of particular interest, especially when successful practices exhibited in one classification can be replicated in others. This article outlines the characteristics of each classification, explores their differences and similarities, and summarizes the findings from a review of the literature. The objective of this article is to encourage the migration of successful ideas for knowledge transfer and learning among the different classifications.

BACKGROUND

As the realization grows that knowledge is a critical business resource with a pivotal role in the marketplace, knowledge management, transfer and learning are attracting a great deal of attention in today's organizations (Kraatz, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nooteboom, 2000; Norman, 2002; Parise & Henderson, 2001; Powell, 1998). Knowledge management is related to the wider field of management in the context of overlapping and synergistic relationships in such activities as learning and innovation, benchmarking and best practice, strategy, culture, and performance measurement (Martin, 2000). While knowledge can exist in both tacit and explicit forms, the embodied expertise that exists in the tacit form may be the most valuable, especially if it is difficult for competitors to replicate. However, tacit knowledge is often difficult, if not impossible, to transform into written form, often making it necessary to transmit to others in the form of stories, coaching, or apprenticeship (Lam, 1997; Leonard & Sensiper, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Explicit knowledge is knowledge that exists in documents, software, hardware, and other instruments (Zack, 1999). It is more easily transmitted to others, but, for the same reason, it is more difficult to safeguard from unauthorized use.

Certain knowledge management problems arise out of the difficulty of current management

paradigms to manage intangible/tacit knowledge, as compared to tangible/explicit knowledge. The latter may be supported by extended information resource management approaches, but the former has overlapping and synergistic relationships with such personalized activities as learning, innovation (Bogenrieder & Nooteboom, 2004), and benchmarking and best practices (Bardach, 2003). Such activities need not be confined within an organization, and they can cross organizational, international, and cultural boundaries with attendant transmission of knowledge of both types (Inkpen & Dinur, 1998).

Communities of practice are an organized way of implementing knowledge management, learning, and transfer. With appropriate support, motivation, and coordination, these communities can create both codification and personalization channels to distribute knowledge and support learning within and among organizations, and among individuals both internal and external to any particular organization. However, the value attributed to knowledge that gives an organization a competitive advantage will inhibit its sharing with other organizations, unless there are formal agreements relating to how and what knowledge and information is to be shared. There are a variety of motivations for professional participation in communities of practice, including tangible returns, intangible returns, and community interaction (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). However, harnessing technological innovation through communities of practice is a major organizational application (Persaud, Kumar & Kumar, 2001), potentially leading to competitive advantage (Liedtka, 1999). Communities of practice have been used widely for brokering a variety of knowledge within organizations (Burnett, Brookes-Rooney & Keogh, 2002; Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Communities of practice need to have a defined objective and scope in order to succeed. Wenger et al. (2002) indicate the three most important elements to be domain, community, and practice.

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