



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, IT AND MANAGEMENT

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COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: THEIR ROLE IN THE CREATION AND TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE IN ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Organisations in the contemporary world are facing the challenge of retaining the willing and competent workforce. When such human capital gets separated from an organisation, they also carry the knowledge treasure about the organisation along with them. Knowledge management in an organisation tries to tackle such issues. This paper focuses on the concept of communities of practice, which acts as a tool to retain the competent workforce.

KEYWORDS

communities of practice, knowledge sharing, tacit knowledge, hidden potential, shared artefacts, golden eggs, repositories, competence, participation, learning mechanisms, conflicts

INTRODUCTION

Due to globalisation of business, many organisations are resorting to the practice of outsourcing various processes and downsizing in order to beat the competition (Hildreth et al., 2000:28). This practice has created a major hurdle to the organisations' progress in the long run. As a result of downsizing, the knowledge is being carried away by the separating workforce. "This knowledge is increasingly seen as central to the success of organisations and an asset that needs to be managed" (Boersma et al., cited in Hildreth 2000:28). It can be either explicit or tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is easy to articulate and capture while implicit knowledge needs to be captured very intelligently. It can be done by people who share similar beliefs, values, assumptions and attitudes. "One must cultivate a sense of community that recognises the benefit and leveraging capabilities of knowledge sharing" (Adams 2000:40). In this direction, Communities of practice have been shown to be groups where the softer aspects of knowledge can be created, nurtured and sustained. (Kimble et al., cited in Kimble 2005:103). Thus the focus is on understanding the nature of communities of practice and their role in creation and transfer of knowledge in the organisations.

DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Lave and Wenger first introduced this concept of a Community of Practice (CoP) in 1991. Lave and Wenger (1991) originally described a Community of Practice as "... a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping CoPs". (Malhotra, 2001:218) The communities of practice are everywhere around us and we are generally involved in a number of them, at work, school, home, civic and leisure interests. In some groups we become core members and in some, we are more at superficial level only.

The issue of communities of practice has been widely discussed in literature. As it was expressed by Wenger (2000) "Communities of practice are the basic building blocks of a social learning system because they are the social 'containers' of the competences that make up such a system".

Furthermore Brown and Gray offered: "CoPs fulfil a number of functions with respect to the creation, accumulation, and diffusion of knowledge in an organization" (Wenger et al., cited in Mittendorff 2006:300). They are very essential to the organisations striving for success with the help of creativity and innovation. "Furthermore they serve as knowledge banks, contribute to strategic development, and stimulate innovation and new business development" (Juriado 2007:50). Thus one of the main reasons for considering the CoPs as important is the tacit-knowledge that is embedded among their members.

So group of individual with some common purpose share some common background, language or experience keeps on regenerating as newcomers join, they learn from others in the group. By sharing new knowledge develops which becomes core knowledge of that community. "Communities of Practice provide an excellent forum for knowledge sharing and a vital question is whether the new communication media". (Hildreth, et al., 1998:275)

NATURE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice in many organizations are intentionally created for stimulating and bringing change in the ways of work. As it is rightly observed, "One of the ways to help people share and internalize tacit knowledge is to allow them to talk about their experiences and to exchange their knowledge while working on specific problems" (Ardichvili 2003:65). This aspect can be substantiated by Orr's ethnographic study conducted in 1990. Orr's (cited in Malhotra, 2001) ethnographic study in 1990, in which she has studied a group of photocopier technicians who were speaking to each other while repairing photocopier machines. When they encountered a difficulty in diagnosing or repairing, they talked and shared among each other "war stories" about similar problems they encountered there.

This exchange between them helped them to arrive at a solution to the problem on hand by their exchange of soft knowledge. This solution then became the accepted way for resolving that kind of problem and this created a new knowledge for team. This happens in every CoPs wherein a new member moved from the peripheral level of participation to a fuller level of participation over a period of them. By constant interaction they move from peripheral to inner circle in CoPs and soft knowledge gets transferred into explicit knowledge. Its existence is sustained by integrity of word and continuous practice and participation and the connections that the members maintain within the group. This participation and connections is fluid and not static. It is forever evolving into new connections.

The above brings out the actual practice of learning, knowledge transfer and knowledge acquisition, which then becomes a stored knowledge in a CoPs.

ORGANIZATION AND CoPs

As CoPs exist everywhere- wherever there are people and naturally it exists in organization. In organization the membership is based on how you participate rather than what your official status is and as such the organizational CoPs are not bounded by affiliations of the organization and go beyond the organization structures and hierarchies. Wang et al., (2008) explains the ways the communities of practice may exist in organisations – they may be from different units of the same organisation or even from different organizations altogether (e.g., Association of all physicians in a particular location or all CEOs from different companies

together) and complement the function of formal units.

Today's economy runs on knowledge. Many organisations work from inside this fact and are having advanced technical knowledge, greater competition and increased pace of change in happening. This has caused the organisation to try new models to sustain and provide agility, flexibility and adaptability. The new models includes cross functional team, customer focused business units and CoP. Raja et al.,(cited in Matos 2007:26) has observed that "organisation have been viewing their employee's knowledge as the most valuable trump". Many organisations have realised that their employees have hidden potential which are not brought in the best of opportunities as these potentiality is in multidimensional. So by having CoPs inside the organisations, these potential is being harvested by horizontal promotions so that these multidisciplinary heroes can work across different boundaries within the organisation. It unleashes the creative powers of individuals individually and collectively as a single enterprise creating new ways to work and learn together. It establishes free association of people passionate about what they do and want to do together. It finally becomes a formal voice in organization.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AS A TOOL TO CAPTURE AND TRANSFER KNOWLEDGE

CoPs- the Killer technique, contributes to help to share and transfer knowledge in the organization in the following ways.

"CoPs are increasingly seen as central means to foster and enhance learning, knowledge sharing and integration in organizations" (Zboralski, 2009:90). They help to constantly discuss new technology upcoming with their suppliers and help their organisation to be receptive to these technological changes.

"CoPs are 'Part of the System'." (Wenger et al., cited in Scarso 2007:379). Communities of practice act as knowledge centers for creating, disseminating and applying the knowledge (tacit and explicit) in various process of the organisation. Hence they are called as part of the organizational system.

"Members of CoPs share a social and organizational context and establish informal personal bonds that support the exchange of knowledge between business units" (Tsai cited in Borzillo 2009:61). They help each other to solve immediate problems and hence contribute to the success of the organisation.

"CoPs produce shared artefacts such as tools, stories and procedures that reify something of its practice" (Wenger cited in Kimble 2005:104). When they face problem, they refine their knowledge and skills with interactions and develop new solutions through such shared artefacts.

"Peer-to-peer technology can complement a centralized technological architecture to help CoP members share their knowledge and enhance their social interaction" (Wang et al., 2008: 529). They use technology as interface for the creation and transfer of knowledge.

CoPs "provide firms with a vital source of organizational learning and incremental innovation as community members improve their practice through the continuous creation of knowledge" (Wenger cited in Schenkel 2008:106). When highly active influential CoPs keep themselves informed of latest innovations not only inside their organizations but also in the market, thereby they can foster new initiatives.

"It not only gives golden eggs but also the goose that lay them". (Wenger & Synder, 2000:143) The strength of CoPs is self perpetuating. Through participation in CoPs, organization learn together by focusing on the problems that are directly related to their work, making their work easier and effective, in long term some practices become best practices. It finally develops capabilities critical to the continued success of the organization itself.

CoPs reduce rework and "reinvention of the wheel". (Baets, 2005:125) Because practices has been stored in the common repositories, every employee or organisations need not start from the scratch, the best practices, procedures, process that are laid down and working in other places can be replicated inside their organisation thereby saving enormous investment in time and finance.

"CoPs are organizational assets since they form the very essence of learning in an organization since it creates a new opportunities for learning". (Wenger, 1998:253) Cops are organizational assets since they transcend boundaries and create learning structure outside the organizational structure. This helps members to go beyond their hierarchical structural boundaries, interact with each other to state point of views creating new opportunities for learning.

The members develop professional skills. As they participate in the peripherals into active and core, the apprentices learn as much as they do from the master craftsmen who would be older members. (Wenger & Snyder, 2000)

"Engage in personal and professional development" (Onge & Wallace, 2003:97) CoPs will be a means for the members to step up their professional skills as they would be interacting with other experienced persons, triggering their need to upgrade themselves.

"A strong community encourages the members to share knowledge, exchange ideas and ask controversial questions" (Wenger et al., cited in Meeuwesen 2007:335). CoPs by providing a forum of discussions and a referral for references, it creates an opportunities for all members to directly and actively participate in knowledge creation and dissemination. It is fun to wonder than to follow straight and narrow path.

ROLE OF MANAGERS IN FACILITATING THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The present day workforce is more knowledgeable compared to the pre- information technology era. Hence they are referred to as "knowledge workers". Managing the knowledge workers poses a challenge to the contemporary managers. In this context, managers of the present day organisations use the concept of Communities of practice to combat this challenge. Recognising how the learning, knowledge capture and transfer is happening between the CoPs members, the ability to problem solving; the management of many organisations have now woken up and have started looking at CoPs as a structure that can be put in place to the advantage of the business enterprise as a whole.

"Communities of practice are not a new kind of organizational unit". (Peltonen & Lamsa, 2004:254) Informally CoPs exist in any organisation. Each members are members due to their participation in it rather their official status. So these CoPs are not bound by any organisational structures or boundaries. They are different cut from the normal organisational structure where each member is interested in learning and upgrading themselves individually and collectively as a group. Here the main focus is on learning, learning by groups rather than task and work schedules.

"Organisations are social design directed at practice" (Wenger, 1998:241) If we look at this objectively, yes, it is through practise that people in an organisation come together to do the things they do together, know what they know and ultimately learn what they want to learn. So CoPs are key to an organisation's success and competence.

"What managers having been missing so far is an understanding of the kind of social structure that can take responsibility for fostering learning, developing competencies, and managing knowledge". (Wenger, et al. 2002:97) This has brought out the very essence of the role that managers can play in doing just this and helping CoPs grow. Basically CoPs organize between themselves with what matters to each members, so here is where the managers can play a vital role in making members practice what matters to themselves becoming what matters to the organization. New organization members can inoculated into this fold of CoPs formally by the Managers and thus new comers would be tapping knowledge from the group, learn and develop competence themselves on their own will. So Managers needs to play a bigger game in these groups.

In all industries, companies are discovering that CoPs offer new possibilities- possibilities for weaving the organisation around knowledge, connecting people, solving problems and creating new opportunities for themselves and their members. So help is needed for CoPs to focus upon those areas which are of interest to the organisation, business enterprise. This focus can be truly guided and practised by Management and Managers

MANAGEMENT, MANAGERS AND CoPs

(Wenger, et al. 2002) gave an analogy of a Park to bring out this meaning very precisely. He says a park would be exciting and appealing if its location provides a short cut between two destinations. It invites people to sit for lunch or chatting on their benches if the benches are slightly off the main path and out of ear-short surrounded by beautiful flowers bed. Similar to this the organisational structure and events should also invite the people for interaction.

A Well designed CoPs invites people for participation in group discussion, one-to-one conversation, reading new ideas, watching experts duel over important issues. A Manager should participate in the design of the CoPs. As community members are not your bosses but your peers, a Manager should see that the structure is not formal in nature. Otherwise the whole design would be similar to any other formal organisational team, network or function. He can rely heavily on informal structure for issues related to knowledge, innovations etc. Domain knowledge should be the focus of creating this.

By doing this, he is ensuring that unlike project teams that come and go, business functions that develop and change, team assemble and disassemble, the CoPs will sustain a under laying layer of stability by having a common domain knowledge connectivity since the members will connect with them for rest of their career.

A MANAGER SHOULD INVITE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

He should not set a whole lot of rules and formal regulations, policies of how the members will participate inside the CoPs but should ensure that confidentiality and appropriateness of topics under discussion should be ensured. He should only facilitate only since facilitation guides the process but the momentum and the CoPs characteristics are created the members of the CoPs.

"The Design for Aliveness" (Wenger, et al. 2002:50) A Good Community should invite different levels of participation from all its members from all levels of the community and across locations. Imagine a busy street- people walking, strolling and rush across each others, some going inside shops, and some viewing the windows, some rushing to catch a transport to some place, Chatting at coffee shops. The street would be busy. Same time, please note there would be some people at the windows of the shops looking out into the street, standing in the aisles watching the whole busy street. The community of the Practice also works the same way. Such "Alive" communities so should need a co-ordinator who provides this aliveness inside the structure. And who else, but the Manager can take leadership role here to organize events and connects the community.

He should rely on creating fun in participating in the beginning. He should design the meetings, events in such a way that every member whether the member (like the members of the busy street rushing somewhere) is at the core of the CoPs or at the peripheral level (like the ones in the shops looking out of the windows) should be willing to participates freely.

A MANAGER SHOULD ALSO FOCUS ON THE VALUE

Value is the main key or result in a community life. Members of CoPs are members because they get value in being members. This knowledge should drive the Managers to keep focus on value creation and fostering in the CoPs so designed by him. Many of the values created would be small, the results of which are not apparent immediately. So Managers encourage community members to be explicit about the value of the community throughout its lifetime.

Short terms values that he can help to create are with new comers being inducted into the fold. Immediate results can be achieved. Members will keep themselves updated on latest development and benchmark their expertise against their colleagues in other organisations, thereby creating value for their organisation.

The Manager should determine the best way that all the members initially by interviewing all the members about their institutional and personal challenges of the subject matter or event and thereby from the ideas that emerge to create to learn systematically and efficiently about each other's perspectives. In this way every members would take back value with them in each interactions.

A MANAGER SHOULD ENSURE ARTEFACTS' ARE MAINTAINED

The members of the Cops have shared repositories in the form of common vocabulary, routines, understanding and artefacts, those members develop over time. (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004) Hence "the task of the CoP manager is to create conditions where a sense of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of actions are possible" (Wenger cited in Garavan 2007:37). This can be achieved by conducting regular meetings, conferences, informal get-togethers and so on. All the discussions, stories, tools of communication that takes place by these meetings are actually knowledge repositories which the managers can rely upon. These artefacts are to be maintained in the repositories so that any members can pull these as and when they require for their use. He should also ensure that such artefacts are maintained that are being current and also learn to unlearn the old and dead artefacts. (Kimble, et al., 2008) He should be involved in managing, classifying and organising the community materials. With time he would be able to arrange the materials so that the community members can easily access the same. This meant that he should attend all the meetings or events that are taking place to know what are the subjects that are current and what subjects should be archived for future use. Both the inventory of knowledge objects and organising of them evolved naturally from the activities and needs of the community. A Manager should ensure about boundaries and create a safe place for members to take risk "CoPs would become a safe place for the head to bring their issues" (Kimble, et al., 2008:262)

The above statement brings out the importance of "safeness" in knowledge sharing between members of Cops. "Furthermore, because communities of practice provide a safe forum where people are comfortable in sharing challenges and perspectives around a common topic they serve as breeding grounds for innovation" (Slater et al., cited in Dewhurst 2004:324). Hence it is the duty of the manager to create a safe environment for the exchange of knowledge among members of CoP. By doing so, the CoP members would be able to share highly confidential, highly sensitive professional views, dilemma in order to reflect and learn more about their own situations clinically in consultations with other members of the CoPs. The managers should emphasize collective understanding among the members for handling the inquiries that might lead towards accessing the confidential information.

Ultimately, the CoPs members would develop a perception that the CoPs is a safe place to go and seek feedback on sensitive, confidential issues which otherwise they would feel embarrassed to discuss about. As the members come to know each other, the barriers they had seen at the start of the CoPs would recline backwards. So the managers would ultimately create and develop "relationships in comfort zone. "Nearer to a friendship footing" (Kimble, et al., 2008:262) A manager should balance the community and knowledge needs of the organisation and community

"A Cop must try to offer a balance of familiar and exciting events" (Wenger, et al. 2002:194) The managers should be able to balance the support for the community and give support for the development of knowledge as well as be the catalyst to bring both together excitingly for members to participate wholeheartedly.

Secondly the balance should be to build on and at the same time change the organisational culture also to sustain itself. Over a period of time, the organisation CoPs develop their own culture and they transform the culture of the organisation by their strong collective influence.

As the existence of the CoPs is an organisation agenda, then he should provide opportunities to learn from those implementing the same. The balance of keeping the organizational agenda in the forefront and meeting the communities need must be taken into account in all aspects. He can have teams working for him that allows for skill required, place people in strategic locations, for that extra synergy required. Having a team that works well together, that understands the purpose and the dynamics of CoPs is very high on the list of success. (Kimble, et al., 2008)

FACILITATING VARIOUS LEARNING MECHANISM

"Members use each other as sounding boards ,build on each other's idea provide a filtering mechanism to deal with knowledge overboard" (Wenger, et al. 2002:34). As a co-ordinator he should facilitate various learning mechanisms to the members strategically spark interest in participation through face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, visits, projects, list serve exchanges, and website moderato. By constant interaction with each other, learning happens between members and these learning needs to be captured as this will contribute to a unique dimension to the overall network participation.

Meeting network partners significantly increased trust to share electronically and over the phone, the ideas brewing and generating between the members. Although these Manager can take advantage of the Internet and the tools it currently provides, they are uniform in their understanding of the importance of sociability and community beyond the constraints of any technological platforms. Managers need to cultivate CoPs actively and systematically for their benefits as well as the benefit of the organisations and also for the benefit of the CoPs members.

CONCLUSION

Management of Knowledge in the organisations is increasingly gaining momentum due to shrinkage of the entire world into one "global village". The knowledge which is developed and built over a period of time cannot be replaced in the short term if not in the long term. Hence, Communities of practice can be used as one of the main tools to sustain the knowledge that is captured in the processes of organisations.

Many professional service organisations (McKinsey and Company, Ernst & Young) whose business expertise relay on their employees expertise and other

professional organisations like HP, IBM, US Army are forefront in capturing knowledge through various practices and show a successful picture of the Community of Practice's being practised.

Furthermore, Managers of the organisation plays a crucial role in the creation and development of CoPs. Starting from the formation of CoPs, developing them over time and nurturing to the extent of reaching the corporate goal, it is the manager who should facilitate them in their activities. Hence it is rightly claimed by Stewart (1996) that "communities of practice are the shop floor of human capital, the place where stuff gets made" (Stewart cited in Meeuwesen 2007:335). Though CoPs are advantageous they are not without limitations. Numerous examples of successful CoPs are available and at the same time we can also come across many failures. "As affirmed by Coakes and Clarke (2006b), communities are often easier to destroy than construct. There is no "one-best-way" approach to CoP's formation and management, and a poorly reflected solution may not produce valuable outcomes" (Pemberton et al., cited in Scarso 2008:376). Thus it is found that CoPs at times block the roads of success in an organisation.

It is important to note that tacit knowledge is difficult to capture and much of the literature on CoPs describes the assimilation of tacit knowledge. "Some investigations conclude that the notion of communities of practice as a self-regulating process is clearly in opposition to a normative goal to steer them to increase performance" (Fox et al., cited in Borzillo 2009:60). As such, sometimes it becomes a futile effort on the part of the management in allowing the growth of CoPs.

"On occasions the various CoPs hit roadblocks and obstacles" (Garavan 2007:45) In other words the indifferences among the members give rise to conflicts which will disrupt the normal functioning of the organisation. At this juncture, the managers have to intervene to provide sufficient morale and inspiration.

Also CoPs are disadvantageous in temporary organisational networks. "A single community of practice can include individuals crossing numerous organizational boundaries, varying from immediate workgroups to a set of contacts on the other side of the world" (Teigland cited in Schenkel 2008:109). As a result of which many organisations may face the problem of cultural differences. Furthermore "Managers of small organisations joined together in an inter-organisational partnership may try to hinder learning, as it is associated with the risk of disclosing too much information to other partners that may become competitors instead" (Barney et al., cited in Juraido 2007:53). In doing so, the very basis of the formation of CoPs is not met and it becomes a meaningless effort altogether. Finally to conclude, Just as a plant is cultivated by nurturing it carefully, waiting and watching it grow, carefully pulling out the weeds when they develop, seeing that the roots are not destroyed but protected, the managers should nurture the development of CoPs, letting it grow naturally and healthily for the benefits to be reaped. (Harvard Business Review, 2000)

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