

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AS KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOL

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Abstract

Knowledge sharing have become essential requirements for every organization. Knowledge management has emerged as an overarching strategy to enhance knowledge creation, information transfer, utilization, and reticulation in order to generate innovation and improve organizational performance. Part of this strategy involves the creation of Communities of Practice. These are networks of individuals with a common, shared purpose grouped together to facilitate knowledge building, idea creation and information exchange.

Key terms

Knowledge Management, Communities, and Communities of Practice (CoP)

Knowledge Management

According to Davenport et al. (1998), knowledge management is concerned with the exploitation and development of the knowledge assets of an organization with a view to furthering the organization's objectives. The knowledge to be managed includes both explicit, documented knowledge and tacit, subjective knowledge. Management entails all of those processes associated with the identification, sharing and creation of knowledge. This requires systems for the creation and maintenance of knowledge repositories, and to cultivate and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and organizational learning.

Thus knowledge management is to achieve four major objectives which includes:

1. **To create knowledge repositories**, which store both knowledge and information, often in documentary form. These repositories can fall into three categories:
 1. Those which include external knowledge, such as competitive intelligence.

2. Those that include structured internal knowledge, such as research reports and product oriented marketing materials, such as techniques and methods.
3. Those that embrace informal, internal or tacit knowledge, such as discussion databases that store “know how”.
2. **To improve knowledge access and transfer.** Here the emphasis is on connectivity, access and transfer. Technologies such as video conferencing systems, document scanning and sharing tools and telecommunications networks are central.
3. **To enhance the knowledge environment** so that the environment is conducive to more effective knowledge creation, transfer and use. This involves
 1. Tackling organizational norms and values as they relate to knowledge.
 2. Increase awareness on sharing knowledge embedded in client relationship and engagements.
 3. Provide awards for contributions to the university's structured knowledge base.
 4. Implement decision audit programs in order to assess whether and how staffs are applying knowledge in key decisions.
 5. Recognize that successful knowledge management is dependent upon structures and cultures.
4. **To manage knowledge as an asset** and to recognize the value of knowledge to an organization.

Knowledge management comprises people, processes, technology, culture, structure. These are the fundamental tools that facilitate the creation, organization, storing, transfer, retrieval, application, and sharing of knowledge in the organization. The technological tools which could be hardware or/and software include groupware systems, KM 2.0, intranet, extranet, data warehousing, data mining, decision support systems, content management systems, document management systems, artificial intelligence tools, simulation tools, semantic networks, portals, profile, collaborative workspaces, urgent requests, document libraries, servers, databases, knowledge bases, blogs, advanced search tools, e-learning systems, and communities of practice.

Communities and Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Communities come by many names such as learning communities, knowledge-building communities, corporate and professional communities, professional learning communities, virtual/online/e-communities, and communities of practice. These communities overlap and they are closely related.

The communities of practice are a relatively recent coinage and have become an important focus within organizational development. It is known under different names such as Thematic Groups, Learning Communities, Learning Networks, Best Practice Teams, and Family Groups. The term was first used in 1991 by theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger who discussed the notion of legitimate peripheral participation. It served as the basis of a social theory of learning. Communities of Practice are generally everywhere and that we are everyday involved in a number of them whether at work, school, home, or in our civic and leisure interests. In 1998, the theorist Etienne Wenger extended the concept and applied it to other domains, such as organizations. With the flourishing of online communities on the Internet, as well as the increasing need for improved knowledge management, there has been much more interest as of late in communities of practice. People see them as ways of promoting innovation, developing social capital, facilitating and spreading knowledge within a group, spreading existing tacit knowledge, etc.

What is Communities of Practice?

Instead of defining Communities of Practice, Jarche (2003) advocated to start with what Communities of Practice are not. He opined that it is not a help desk filled with subject matter experts, it is not a work group, or even task focused. In supporting this, Dennings (2009) posited that Communities of Practice are different from a work team, principally if those Communities of Practice have no specific time-bound work objective, but exists indefinitely for the promotion of the issue or issues around which the community is formed. Wenger (2002) also associated with this by arguing that a neighborhood for instance, is often called a community, but is usually not a Communities of Practice.

Lai et al (2005), Jarcho (2003), and Wenger (1999:73-84) also contend that instead of defining Communities of Practice, it is rather important to first identify what constitute Communities of Practice. To them, Communities of Practice include:

1. what it's about: joint enterprise and continually renegotiated by its members;
2. how it functions: mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity;
3. what capability it has produced: the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time;
4. relationships that are grounded in information exchange and knowledge creation;
5. membership ranging from novices to old timers;
6. shared learning, which may also occur effectively at the boundaries/peripheries of the community;
7. negotiating a joint enterprise function through mutual engagement;
8. members to develop a shared repertoire of communal resources;
9. learning process and inseparable membership;
10. willingness to join a team; and
11. group and team purpose & objective that one person alone cannot achieve.

So what is Communities of Practice? From the above, what Communities of Practice are not, it is now prudent to consider the definition of Communities of Practice and what they are. Etienne Wenger provided the most widely cited definition for Communities of Practice: *"Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly"* (Wenger, 2005). This definition allows for, but does not assume, intentionality: learning can be the reason the community comes together or an incidental outcome of member's interactions. Not everything called a community is a Communities of Practice.

Dennings (2009) also defined Communities of Practice as consisting of *group of practitioners who share a common interest or passion in an area of competence and are willing to share the experiences of their practice*. Communities of Practice are *Basically formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers*

working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope (Wenger, 2006). The communities are typically based on the affinity created by common interests or experience, where practitioners face a common set of problems in a particular knowledge area, and have an interest in finding, or improving the effectiveness of solutions to those problems. Their emergence may be spontaneous, and held together by informal relationships and common purpose, that shares common knowledge or a specific domain, expertise and tools, and learn from one another. They possess knowledge, which is crucial to the success of the organization.

Communities of Practice can exist wherever there is a will to share information and experiences in a helpful, like-minded community. The group can evolve naturally because of the member's common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally. Hinton (2003) posited that participation in the network is essential. The interactions can help foster relationships and trust within a group (and thereby giving it a “community” feel). Furthermore, Hinton said Communities of Practice can in fact be virtual in the sense that members may not physically work in the same location. Members do not even have to be part of the organization. Thus Communities of Practice can be established by like-minded individuals like farmers, outside any institutional framework.

Purpose of Communities of Practice

Every Communities of Practice and the results expected from it largely depend on the issue, process, or practice area around which it is organized and upon which it is focused. Generally, they are to:

1. stimulate interaction, foster learning, create new knowledge, socialize new members, and identify and share best practices,
2. address key strategic themes and validate knowledge assets,
3. facilitate the sharing of knowledge among academicians,
4. develop expertise of members within a supportive and safe environment,

5. connect people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact, either as frequently or at all,
6. provide a platform for professionals to share knowledge and expertise in a way that builds understanding and insight,
7. facilitate information flow to explore and create new opportunities and solve thought-provoking problems,
8. serve as a vehicle for mentoring, coaching, and self-reflection,
9. introduce collaborative processes to groups and organizations as well as between organizations to encourage the free flow of ideas and exchange of information, and
10. help people organize around purposeful actions that deliver tangible results.

Communities of Practice Systems (Tools/Components)

Social Systems

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. That is, Communities of Practice are part of a larger social learning system which also include the boundary (the borders that determine whether one will belong to the Communities of Practice or not) and the identity (what we know, what is foreign and what we choose to know, as well as how we know) which determine with whom to interact in a knowledge sharing activity, and the willingness and capacity to engage in boundary interactions.

Technological Systems

The technology is the tool that supports the knowledge accumulation, processing, storage, collaboration and sharing such as the Web 2.0 tools that sustain the needs for communication, socialization, networking and collaboration which is important for the Communities of Practice. The technological tools consist of software centered technology (social networking and voice over internet protocol (VOIP) and hardware centered technology (collaborative or real-time conferencing). These tools do not only support and enable the collaboration, but also facilitate the creative work of virtual Communities of Practice. The collaborative tools consist of:

1. synchronous tools (audio conferencing, web & video conferencing, chat, instant messaging, and white boarding),

2. asynchronous tools (discussion boards, calendar, website links, group announcements, messaging/e-mail, surveys & polls, and decision support tools),
3. content integration (streaming audio & video, narrated slideshows, and web books), and
4. document management (resource library, document collaboration, version tracking & control, and permission based access).

People Systems

The people are basically the users of the Communities of Practice and they support the technology. They support the strategic objectives and responsibilities of the Communities of Practice. These represent people who are to affiliate (affinity networks), to learn (learning communities), to practice (communities of practice), and to take action (project teams).

The people have clearly defined roles and they consist of instructors, subgroups, sponsors, facilitators team leaders, core group, team members, occasional participants, lookers, subject matter expert, coordinator, member supports, information resources, website administrator, and individual learners, and outline their responsibilities and interdependencies. Each role can be played by one or more people and responsibilities can be shared throughout the team. It is important to recognize that the prosperity of a community relies upon the enthusiasm of its "core group". These people serve as active and contributing members and ensure the community functions as a knowledge sharing mechanism and also involves in the start-up and growth of the community.

The people capture and share knowledge storytelling (the process of conveying past experiences and know-how in order to give a better understanding of the organization, issues at hand and helps to pass on what we know), scenario (a technique where people act out new roles in front of each other or simulate/model real-life problem situations), and knowledge mapping (the technique that determine who knows what, what are the relationships between stocks of knowledge, and how and where the information is stored). They can also do that through meetings, brainstorming, forums, workshops, conferences, group discussions, etc.

Finally, the technologies and the people operate on a synergy. This synergy is techniques that enable the technology link people with others who have similar practices, provide a shared repository of information resources, and provides a platform for discussions.

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