Chapter 4
What Can Reverse Mentoring Relationships Contribute to Communities of Practice involving Developed and Rising Economies?

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ABSTRACT

Communities of practice have been proposed as effective means of building cooperative knowledge sharing relationships between locals and experts from emerging and developed economies (including divisions within some multinational companies). Mentoring relationships in general have been found to support the work of communities of practice. Reverse mentoring relationships are the reverse to what is traditionally expected of a mentoring relationship; they involve the mentoring of a mature or more experienced employee by a younger or generally less experienced employee, but also have the potential to offer much to communities of practice. In the context of communities of practice involving developed and emerging economies, reverse mentoring relationships have the potential to facilitate nationals' (the reverse mentors) sharing of local knowledge while at the same time providing them with leadership development courtesy of the developed country's representative(s) (the reverse mentee(s)), a winning solution for communities of practice and multinational companies. This chapter outlines the benefits of reverse mentoring relationships for communities of practice, and identifies some potential challenges for these partnerships. The implications of these for managers and practitioners are outlined. An agenda for research into reverse mentoring arrangements will complete this chapter. The aim of the chapter is to show how reverse mentoring relationships can complement the work of communities of practice in fostering co-operative knowledge sharing between those in developed and emerging economies.

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True globalization requires community…. ….Strong human relationships are key to integration across geographically distributed business units as well as to effective partnerships. (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.135)

INTRODUCTION

Developing Cooperation between Developed and Emerging Economies

According to the third annual McKinsey survey on Research and Development (R&D), one-third of executives around the world stated that their companies are not doing any R&D work in emerging economies. This is the case even though all companies identified by the report as "high performing innovators" *were* actually doing R&D work in emerging economies and were more likely to use centralized databases and draw on global communities of practice to share information than other companies. Among the barriers to developing R&D units in emerging companies, the report cited companies' dissatisfaction with the performance of managers in emerging countries and lack of knowledge sharing as being universal (McKinsey, 2011).

The challenge that this chapter speaks into is to find ways to share knowledge and bridge management practices between developing and emerging economies in a way that defies destructive attitudes and harnesses the complementary expertise of developed and emerging economies. Global communities of practice are a potentially useful means for facilitating cooperation between individuals in both, offering relatively easy access to local knowledge and expertise for the former and the opportunity to interact with experienced employees from developed countries seeking that expertise for the latter. Communities of practice provide a platform for the contributions of experts and members with diverse background and experience to come together. Wenger & Snyder (2004) outline their core purpose as "To develop member's capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge" (p.128). Yet not enough is known about communities of practice and their potential to facilitate cooperation between experts from developed countries and rising economies.

Communities of Practice and Reverse Mentoring

Communities of practice involve both public and private spaces and offer various configurations for cooperation. These include the broader community where active and peripheral members participate as well as private exchanges based on specific knowledge and learning needs (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). It is within the latter space that reverse mentoring has much to contribute. Reverse mentoring relationships are the reverse to what is traditionally expected of a mentoring relationship; they involve the mentoring of a mature, senior, or more experienced employee by a younger, junior, or otherwise generally less experienced employee (Kram, 1996). The term came into being through its application to a multi-generational workforce and in particular the case where younger employees were called upon to mentor older employees around greater use of technology.

While reverse mentoring as a term to-date has mainly been applied to generational partnerships, Baily (2009) suggests that the application of reverse mentoring has applicability to other contexts. Drawing on Murphy's definition, reverse mentoring relationships may also be relevant where there are other "perceived" status differences, opening up a number of other contexts yet to be investigated. We suggest

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