

Chapter 6

Hints for Rethinking Communities of Practice in Public Administration: An Analysis from Real Practice

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ABSTRACT

Communities of Practice (CoP) have become one of the most widely used strategies for promoting Knowledge Creation and Management (KCM) processes in Public Administration. This chapter is based on some of the practical research and consultancy carried out by the Organisational Development Team from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (<http://edo.uab.cat>) over the last 10 years, presenting some ideas to facilitate the introduction of improvements in the usual functioning of CoP in the public administration. Specifically, the purpose of this chapter is twofold: (1) to analyse the procedures of KCM by means of CoP in the public administration and through the intensive use of technology; and (2) to suggest elements which may allow us to rethink and improve CoP. The main results indicate that the most important factors in determining CoP participation are related in greater measure to personal processes (interest in change, curiosity, commitment to innovation, profile within the CoP) than to circumstances (professional category, age or seniority).

INTRODUCTION

Current society is focused on knowledge and learning (Castells, 2000; Drucker, 1993; Duch, 1998; Bauman, 2005; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000; Simone, 2001). It perceives the strategic value of knowledge and seeks conceptual frameworks, procedures and strategies that facilitate its creation and management. Knowledge creation and management (KCM) (Rodríguez-

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Gómez, 2010) has become a key discipline for promoting informal learning, innovation and development in the field of organization (Chen, 2008; Rezazadeh Mehrizi & Bontis, 2009) and has been increasingly prevalent in recent years (Davenport & Prusak, 2001; McElroy, 2003; Holsapple & Wu, 2008; Jemielniak & Kociatkiewicz, 2009; Lloria, 2008). However, few studies have focused on analyzing the impact of KCM on the development and improvement of public administration (Hatmaker, Park & Rethemeyer, 2011; Iaquinto, Ison & Faggian, 2011).

In recent years, communities of practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1999) have become one of the most widely used strategies for promoting KCM processes (Mingers, 2008; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009; Heizmann, 2011) in the framework of public administration (Martínez, Soteras & Vives, 2009).

This chapter is based on practical research and consultancy carried out by the Organizational Development Team of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (<http://edo.uab.cat>) over the past 10 years (e.g., Rodríguez-Gómez & Gairín, 2014; Gairín, Rodríguez-Gómez & Armengol, 2012; Gairín & Rodríguez-Gómez, 2012; Rodríguez-Gómez, 2011). Some ideas are presented to facilitate the introduction of improvements in how communities of practice usually function in public administration. Specifically, the purpose of this chapter is twofold: (1) to analyze the procedures of knowledge creation and management by means of CoPs in public administration and through the intensive use of technology; and (2) to suggest elements that may allow us to rethink and improve CoPs.

First of all, this chapter addresses the need to promote informal learning processes that respond to current workplace learning requirements (Tynjälä, 2013; Littlejohn, Milligan & Margaryan, 2012; Scott & Carrington, 2011) and that help facilitate innovation processes within organizations. Second, we present knowledge management and communities of practice. These first two sections, with a literature review of the main topics involved in this chapter, provide the background to the subject. They also provide a framework for the following sections where we present our study, detailing the methodology, results and conclusions.

BACKGROUND

A changing society requires organizations to adapt and review their coherence and how they act in relation to the needs of their surroundings. Socioeconomic and technological developments, together with current education trends and constant labor market reforms, require a profound review of traditional organizational models and foster the promotion of organizational development processes and innovations to adapt to the new context. Innovation was a goal for creative and cutting-edge organizations a few decades ago but has now become a general necessity and a problem that is constantly addressed at different levels (i.e., society, organizations and individuals) and with different strategies.

Identifying the connections between learning processes, professional development and innovation has become a matter of key importance to organizations. If organizational innovation is considered the result of the combination of existing and new knowledge, which is verified and institutionalized, its connection with individual and organizational learning becomes evident. Thus we agree with the argument that “innovative efforts are also the right consequence of the investment in knowledge and in knowledge workers” (Carneiro, 2000, p. 92).

In this context, one of the greatest organizational challenges for training and development professionals is to promote learning processes that are integrated into usual work activities (what we call workscapes), without these employees necessarily realizing when and how this learning is taking place. We must be

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