



The Communication in the Communities of Practice: Is there a “Best” Tool?

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INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice (CoP) are described as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” [Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002:4]. Additionally, we recognise that knowledge has become the key to success as well as a source of competitive advantage. Organizations are recognizing that the need to nurture the development of “communities of practice in strategic areas is a practical way to manage knowledge as an asset” [*op. cit.*:6]. These communities are not bound to an organization. They can be constituted by elements “from different organizations as well as across independent business units” [*op. cit.*:6]. These communities can be, though, collocated or distributed. For example, “[s]cientists have long been forming communities of practice by communicating across the globe (once by letter and now by e-mail). Some communities meet regularly² (...). Others are connected primarily by e-mail and phone and may meet only once or twice a year. What allows members to share knowledge is not the choice of a specific form of communication (face-to-face as opposed to Web-based, for instance), but the existence of a shared practice” [*op. cit.*:25].

Although these communities are not built around a certain technology, in some cases it is needed in order to help the group to be developed. Some CoP’s grow because they use the “right” tools. They help the members of the community, for instance, to be in touch, to share ideas and opinions, to solve problems together, to socialize, to work in the same document at the same time.

Due to a great effort of the Software Engineering, there are several tools available to help to improve collaborative work. As time goes by, these tools have acquired great usability and thus allowing users to overcome difficulties in its use and improving satisfaction and productivity.

Nevertheless, these tools are not all the same nor have they the same potentialities or functionalities. Some follow a peer-to-peer approach, while others are web-based.

In this communication, we present a CoP – MOISIG – and its characteristics as well as its communication needs. We also describe the tools experienced - (a) a mailing list (yahoogroups); (b) Groove – a peer-to-peer tool; (c) WebCT – a platform of e-learning. Finally, we analyse the cross relation between CoP’s needs and tools’ functionalities and draw some final remarks.

FOOTNOTES

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² One example of such community is the MOISIG – Management, Organization and Information Systems Interest Group. For further information about this community, please see the articles Cardoso *et al.*, 2000; Batista *et al.*, 2001; Sarmiento *et al.*, 2002.

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