

## Chapter 14

# Using Communities of Practice to Share Knowledge in a Knowledge City

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### ABSTRACT

*In the pre-industrial age, communities existed to connect people. People joined guilds to find mentors who would help them master their crafts. During the industrial revolution, workplace tasks were divided into small chunks to help employers define their employees' roles and responsibilities. With the advent of the knowledge worker, the workplace has undergone another transformation. Now, jobs that involve the most complex type of interactions make up the fastest-growing segments in many industries (Sauve, 2007). A 2005 McKinsey & Company report, titled 'The Next Revolution in Interactions,' examines how workplace tasks are completed in developed economies. It describes a shift from valuing transactional interactions, those that are routine and involve noncreative interaction, to complex interactions, those that require people to deal with ambiguity and solve problems based on experience or tacit knowledge. The phenomenon of the tacit worker is continuing to rise. Gartner, a research institute, estimates that the frequency of non-routine situations that require tacit knowledge will double between 2006 and 2010. The reality is that in many industries in which situations change rapidly, formal learning once or twice a year doesn't provide employees with the experience or knowledge they need to find ongoing success on the job. This means that organisations must revamp their budgets and shift their resources from formal learning settings to informal situations in which the majority of learning actually takes place. While the changing nature of work is central, it is important not to overlook technology trends and how they influence the expectations and requirements of workers. The rise of social computing based on highly innovative new Web 2.0 technologies such as MySpace.com, YouTube.com, Digg.com and Facebook.com, offers a new paradigm for how we approach learning and knowledge sharing and is beginning to have a powerful impact on corporate learning (Sauve, 2007). Business cultures are changing rapidly to take advantage of these new technologies. Today the concept of knowledge sharing through new interac-*

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*tive online tools is taking hold in more and more public and private organisations. The change from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy forced many organisations to change their modus operandi if they were going to survive in a sustainable way. The introduction of communities of practice (CoPs) by Lave and Wenger in 1991 shed new light on knowledge sharing and dissemination of information. Sharing, interacting, actively participating, collaborating and learning from one another become the central activities in a knowledge society. According to Wenger (1998), CoPs are everywhere. We all belong to a number of them – at work, at school, at home and in our hobbies. In this sense everyone has experienced a CoP, so it can be considered a common experience. Some have a name, some do not. We are core members of some and we belong to others more peripherally. CoPs are informal, naturally occurring, spontaneously evolving groups and the sense of community comes from defining them in terms of practice (Kubiak, 2003). When it comes to a formal CoP, be it face-to-face or virtual, its success or failure will depend on a number of factors. For this reason it is necessary to investigate its nature, functions, aims and reasons for existence. Then the true value of communities, both for the individual participants and the supporting organisation, will come from the ongoing interaction and work of the group. To sustain that value, organisations should quickly move into a sustaining-and-evolving mode to match ever-changing member needs and business goals (Vestal, 2006). In a knowledge based development approach to modern societies as suggested by Ergazakis, Metaxiotis & Psarras (2006), CoPs can be used as the originators of change and innovation for a 'knowledge city'. This chapter will address the role that CoPs can play in the development of a 'knowledge city'.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In any developed or developing country the shift from the industrial era to one of knowledge era has reached a point of no return. It has become now common knowledge that the only way to prosperity of any nation is through the use of knowledge (explicit/hard or implicit/tacit/soft) which is possessed by people. This makes knowledge not only a valuable asset of an enterprise (Nonaka, 1991; Wiig, 1993; Ergazakis, Metaxiotis & Psarras, 2004; Polanyi, 1961) but a prerequisite to any form of change and innovation to a better future of all the citizens of the world. Gartner, a research institute, estimates that the frequency of non-routine situations that require tacit knowledge will double between 2006 and 2010. At the individual level, the "hard worker" is becoming a "smart worker" or a "knowledge worker". At organisational level, once it was realized that intangible assets (human, social, structural capitals) are the key to competitive advantage, organisations have been

transformed to knowledge organisations, which necessitated management of knowledge. So the birth of knowledge management (KM) was eminent. In the societal level, the industrial society is changing rapidly to a knowledge society: one which places an explicit and principal value on knowledge as the means to achieve economic and social well being. It is one which features knowledge prominently among the basic needs of all of its citizens and wills all citizens to engage productively with knowledge. In such a society, knowledge represents a core national value: the means through which the citizens achieve (i) greater choice and opportunity (ii) deeper social integration and (iii) longer life expectancy, each across very many dimensions (Mallalieu, 2006). In the national level as more knowledge societies are formed the old industrial cities are transformed to "knowledge cities", where knowledge-based development (KBD) is developed. Carrillo (2002) suggests that KBD is a theoretical and technical field which itself derived from the convergence

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