

Chapter 15

Collaborative Approaches for Communities of Practice Activities Enrichment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of communities of practice (CoPs) in knowledge management (KM) and how various collaborative practices can be used to enrich the activities of CoPs in organisations. The objectives of the chapter are firstly to define and explain the role of CoPs as a form of social and team networks in KM, secondly to identify the role and importance of collaborative approaches, specifically focusing on collective learning, creativity, innovation and problem-solving in CoPs and how these impact on the KM process, and thirdly to make recommendations to enhance the collaborative approaches to ultimately enrich the activities of CoPs in a digital age in organisations. Recommendations are made that management needs to support the forming and activities of CoPs in KM strategies, and that a suitable organisational structure and culture are needed to stimulate and support collaborative approaches to enrich the activities of CoPs.

INTRODUCTION

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1996, p.7) defines knowledge-based economies as “economies which are directly based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information”. Powell and Snellman (2004) explain that a knowledge economy uses knowledge-intensive activities, there is a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities, and it is critical to manage knowledge effectively and efficiently at various levels in society, especially at an organisational level.

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Currently a technological revolution is taking place that is altering the way people live, work, and relate to one another (Schwab, 2016). The technologies that underpin the Fourth Industrial Revolution, also referred to as Industry 4.0, are having, and will be having, a major impact on organisations and are creating opportunities for generating and disseminating new forms of knowledge across organisations. Various organisations however do not fully understand what is required to create, manage, access and use knowledge to achieve organisational objectives (Williams, 2016). Yet, knowledge is a critical resource for organisations. Sir Francis Bacon declared, “Knowledge itself is power” in 1597 after he realized the importance of knowledge (QuoteHD, 2017, p.1) and Brooking (1999, p.18) added, “Knowledge is a business weapon”. It can be said that knowledge is an important source of competitive advantage in organisations and societies, especially the implementation of knowledge, which led to the development of knowledge economies. However, the full impact of the technological revolution on knowledge economies is not yet known, and should be considered when knowledge is generated and disseminated in organisations specifically.

Knowledge management (KM) has its roots in a number of different disciplines, which include Information Science, Management Science, Computer Science, Economics, Sociology, Human Resource Management, Philosophy, and Psychology (Jashapara, 2011). Definitions of KM are also developed based on these different roots, which gives the concept of KM a multidisciplinary nature. Kamhawi (2012), states that KM is a multidisciplinary concept that can increase intellectual capital and enhance organizational performance. For this chapter, KM can be defined as the “organization’s knowledge creation and conversion mechanisms; organizational memory and retrieval facilities; organizational learning; and organizational culture” (Frost, 2012, p.1). According to Saito (2015), KM refers to the capability of an organisation to deliver a competitive advantage due to the origin and nature of the organisation’s processed information, as well as its knowledge transfer and sharing processes that reconstruct and recombine knowledge. Saito (2015) explains further that various information and communication technologies need to be used to support these processes from a managerial, innovative and learning perspective.

In addition to the complexity of the concept of KM, the thinking in most organisations has been that knowledge is only of value if it adds to the bottom line and business leaders expect that the acquisition of the right knowledge should produce benefits immediately (Murray, 2002). The benefits can only materialize if business leaders focus on and take ownership of KM initiatives; if they do not rely on technology only; and if they create proper structures and strategies to capitalize on knowledge assets.

However, it is important to take note of the fact that knowledge in the Fourth Industrial Revolution is no longer the main source of a competitive advantage for organisations due to the development of intelligent machines and artificial intelligence (Seidman, 2014). The development of intelligent machines and artificial intelligence is and will lead to high automation that will rapidly alter the ways people interact, work and share information (World Economic Forum, 2017). There are organizations that are changing their thinking about knowledge, human capital and KM as drivers of the future (Botha, 2007). These organisations are realizing that human creativity, passion, character, and its collaborative spirit cannot be fully programmed into software yet, which can make these the sources of competitive advantage and superiority in the fourth industrial revolution. This realization makes this chapter important because knowledge production, transfer and sharing will still be important if it can be linked to what makes humans special – their collective creativity and innovation to learn, generate and share knowledge and their collaborative efforts to solve problems. The main aim of this chapter is to explain how collaborative approaches can enrich the activities of CoPs in KM to create a competitive advantage focusing on innovative knowledge products. To achieve the main aim of this chapter, three objectives were identified, namely:

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