Chapter 4.29
A Qualitative Study of the Characteristics of a Community of Practice for Knowledge Management and Its Success Factors

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ABSTRACT

A Community of Practice (CoP) is an organizational form receiving increasing attention as a structure for sense making, knowledge management and learning. The central question addressed in this article is how and why these communities form and grow over time. These questions are explored through a qualitative analysis of a CoP formed to help knowledge management practitioners. In this case study, a description of how the organization formed, survived, grew and matured over a five-year period (1999-2004) is given. Several practices and structures related to CoP development are identified; for example, operations, roles and responsibilities, communications, sub-group structures, use of information technologies and other aspects of organizing. Using data from several sources (e.g., membership surveys, interviews with key informants, document analysis), four sets of factors that have helped this organization succeed are identified: Individual, Content, Meeting and Organizational. These factors are arranged into a preliminary descriptive model of the function and structure of CoPs over the life cycle. To practitioners, the work sheds light on how to set up and successfully grow a community of practice.

OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

A CoP should have the ability to sustain and renew itself over time (Barab & Duffy, 2000).

This observation raises several questions. How are CoPs formed? Why do some survive? What is inherent in the structures and operations of successful CoPs that allow them to stay in existence? What other critical success factors are required, such as intrinsic or extrinsic rewards for members? The purpose of this study is to better understand CoPs, how and why they form, and what sustains them over time.

The answers are important to theory and practice. To theory, it can shed light on loosely structured extra- and intra-organizational forms and the factors that lead to their success over the life cycle. We define CoP success here as effectively forming, being in existence for a significant period of time and showing continued signs of growth and development. To practice, the answers provide insight for individuals who wish to set up a successful, long-term CoP within their organizations as part of a broad knowledge management (KM) strategy. For those specifically interested in developing KM-centered CoPs, this study provides insights into the formation, survival and growth of such structures.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CHARACTERISTICS OF COPS

This article is grounded in the literature on CoPs, organizational memory (OM) and KM. The concept of a CoP has emerged as a useful construct to describe a social form that has been in existence for centuries (e.g., guilds), but has been recently been "rediscovered" in the context of corporations and applications in KM. The concept owes its early modern formulation to the works of Lave (1988, 1991), Wenger (1998), Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid (1991, 2001). Initial works focused on the shared meaning and knowledge that developed in occupational groups such as midwives and butchers (Buysse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003) or repair specialists (Iverson & McPhee, 2002). It now is

applied to any knowledge-sharing group within and between organizations (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Swan, Scarbrough & Robertson, 2002) and is viewed as a non-technical component of many KM strategies.

Definition

The definition of a CoP has evolved over time. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) see a CoP as a set of people who "… share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley (2003) observe that "… a community of practice generally can be defined as a group of professionals and other stakeholders in pursuit of a shared learning enterprise, commonly focused on a particular topic…" (p. 4). Swan, Scarbrough and Robertson (2002) define a CoP as "an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their community. Thus, they are united in both action and in the meaning that that action has, both for themselves and for the larger collective" (p. 2). Brown and Duguid (1998) observe that "… collective practice leads to forms of collective knowledge, shared sense-making and distributed understanding that doesn't reduce to the content of individual heads. A group [in which] such know-how and sense-making are shared … has been called a 'community of practice'" (p. 5).

Characteristics

Wenger's (1998) work specifies three characteristics of CoPs: mutual engagement (i.e., interaction among the members), negotiation of joint enterprise (i.e., enacting meaning and significance; defining goals and priorities) and shared repertoire (i.e., the stories, methods, tools and theories used by members). The works of Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley (2003) and Barab and Duffy (2000)

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