Chapter II

Overcoming Knowledge Barriers with Communities of Practice:

Lessons Learned Through Practical Experience

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ABSTRACT

Many organizations have invested a significant amount of time, energy and resources in overcoming intra-organizational barriers to sharing knowledge. Such barriers prevent individuals who are looking for knowledge from connecting with those who possess it. In this chapter, four common barriers (that the authors have seen in their work with knowledge-based organizations) have been identified that prevent two parties from coming together and sharing knowledge: awareness, access, application and perception. Based on their research and experience, they describe how Communities of Practice can be an important vehicle for breaking through each of these barriers and enabling knowledge to flow more effectively within organizations. In addition, practices are highlighted that organizations can put into place to provide effective support for these communities.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most vexing problems facing organizations is the need to improve intra-organizational coordination. Firms, recognising the need to coordinate activities on a global basis, have spent significant time, resources and energy to bring together disparate functions and systems to eliminate these barriers. For example, pharmaceutical firms have long been organized by corporate functions, i.e., marketing, manufacturing, and research and development (R&D). Often these groups remained insular silos that lacked effective cross-functional knowledge sharing mechanisms. To address this challenge, many of these firms have created cross-functional drug discovery teams that support a drug candidate from the discovery phase through manufacturing and sales. Other organizations facing similar challenges have looked for similar ways of better coordinating their internal resources and activities.

Yet, despite their best efforts, organizations continue to be faced with additional barriers that inhibit the ability of their employees to share knowledge. Issues such as geographic boundaries, differences in regional cultures and a lack of awareness of others with similar interests make knowledge sharing a difficult activity. While these roadblocks are often not visible, and their boundaries not easily drawn, they represent a substantial challenge for many firms to overcome. In many of the globally-distributed companies and government organizations with which we have worked, we have seen a number of difficulties associated with finding critical expertise, transferring knowledge between locations and ensuring that individuals are appropriately recognized for sharing knowledge. Often, these impediments to knowledge sharing can significantly hamper firm performance, as organizations are unable to take advantage of one of their most valuable assets: their employees' know-how and expertise.

In this chapter, we outline how Communities of Practice (CoPs) can help organizations break through the barriers that impede effective knowledge sharing. A CoP is a group of individuals who regularly engage in sharing and learning based on their common interests or methods of working. Within communities, individuals interact with one another to solve problems, test new ideas, learn about new developments in their field and build a sense of affiliation with others in similar circumstances. Membership within CoPs often fluctuates, in terms of both the number of participants and the level of intensity with which people partake in the community activities. These communities can be either self-organized by members, or brought together by the organization to encourage this form of interchange between practitioners. Communities, through their ability to foster the development of connections, relationships and common context between knowledge seekers and sources, can help eliminate many of the common knowledge sharing barriers that plague even the most successful organizations.

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