



Chapter IV

The Paradox of Communities of Practice: Knowledge Sharing Between Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines knowledge sharing between Communities of Practice, a relatively neglected topic of study. Theory and evidence is presented to suggest that knowledge sharing between communities is likely to be more complex than intra-community knowledge sharing, due to the lack of shared consensual knowledge or shared sense of identity which typically exists in inter-community contexts. In such situations, the development of trust is seen to be a key foundation which requires to be developed before effective knowledge sharing can occur. Three brief case studies are presented to illustrate the arguments made. Practitioner implications flowing from this chapter are twofold. Firstly, to facilitate effective inter-community knowledge sharing requires effort to be invested in developing the social relationship (and hence trust) between members from the communities. Secondly, organizations need to balance their efforts at building Communities

of Practice with supporting inter-community interactions; otherwise they risk developing isolated and inward looking communities.

‘The shared infrastructure of activity that makes cooperation the norm within particular communities of activity can act as a barrier to close collaboration with outsiders’

Blackler, Crump, & McDonald, 2000, p. 282

INTRODUCTION

One issue that has been relatively neglected by the Communities of Practice (CoP) literature is the dynamics of knowledge sharing between communities. Paradoxically, the characteristics of CoPs which facilitate knowledge sharing within a community may inhibit the sharing of knowledge between communities (Alvesson, 2000; Blackler et al., 2000). Consequently, the dynamics of knowledge sharing within and between CoPs are likely to be qualitatively different, with the sharing of knowledge between communities being typically more complex and more difficult (Brown & Duguid, 1998). This chapter sheds light on this neglected area by examining some examples of inter-community knowledge sharing and reflecting on the factors which affect the dynamics of such processes.

The paradox outlined above raises some interesting questions and dilemmas for organizational practitioners. To neglect supporting CoPs risks losing out on their undoubted advantages and benefits. Conversely, there is a potential risk that investing in CoPs may inhibit organization-wide knowledge sharing and fragment the organizational knowledge base through facilitating the creation of discrete, isolated and inward-looking communities.

The importance of examining inter-community dynamics is reinforced by the increasing use of team and project-based working by organizations. For example, team and project work are often multidisciplinary, requiring close collaboration between people from different disciplinary backgrounds and CoPs (Newell & Swan, 2000; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Further, the use of such working practices also raises the issue of inter-project learning and knowledge sharing, as organizations attempt to avoid the twin problems of ‘losing’ project-based knowledge and reinventing the wheel (Prencipe & Tell, 2001).

The chapter is structured into three sections. The first briefly discusses the mainstream CoP literature, outlining its conclusions regarding the advantage of CoPs. The second section then examines the relatively unexplored issue of knowledge sharing between CoPs, using both positive and negative case study examples to illustrate the issues examined. Finally, the third section of the chapter reflects on the practitioner implications of the issues discussed.

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