



Chapter XII

Viable Communities within Organizational Contexts: Creating and Sustaining Viability in Communities of Practice at Siemens AG

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about the question of what creates and sustains viability in Communities of Practice (CoPs) embedded in an organizational context. Experience with successful CoPs at Siemens AG has shown that even though most of them differ greatly from each other in many aspects, they all share five common factors that are necessary for the viability of a CoP. These five factors are introduced in the following pages. They represent an approach that can be used to analyse and improve CoPs that do not seem to be viable and as a guide for CoP members and moderators to maintain viability in their own CoPs.

INTRODUCTION

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are one approach to Knowledge Management (KM) that has proved to be very successful at Siemens AG. Like many other international companies, Siemens AG has a globally distributed organizational structure and is embedded in a very dynamic environment. In this context, CoPs create a significant benefit for the company, as they connect the different organizational units and enable the flow of knowledge between them.

Siemens understands a CoP to be a group of experts of different organizational units who are held together by a special interest in a business relevant topic. There are numerous such CoPs at Siemens. They exchange and create knowledge on various topics like specific products, markets, software solutions, functions or working methods. Some of these CoPs integrate employees from all over the world, while others focus on employees of a specific business unit or a region. The various CoPs differ greatly in their sizes. Some of the CoPs at Siemens are very small and have only 10 or 15 active members, while others are large, up to a couple hundred of members.

CoP members meet in large conferences, in smaller personal or virtual meetings, and they share a common IT platform. While conferences serve the exchange of knowledge that is relevant to most of the CoP members, smaller personal or virtual meetings can be held with only some of the CoP members. This is a practical solution, especially when members have a need to share knowledge on more specific topics that apply to only some of them, e.g., the practical implementation of a software solution in the context of one business unit. The IT platform with multiple functionalities (e.g., file storage, time schedules, news channels and discussion forums) enables the exchange of knowledge on a virtual basis. Most CoPs at Siemens have a moderator who coordinates the activities within the CoP. This includes the coordination of CoP meetings (e.g., facilities, agendas with presentations or workshops and the focus of the meetings), the coordination of platform activities (e.g., structuring content and making sure that requests on the IT platform are answered) and the management of the members (e.g., inviting and adding new members). In many cases, the moderator also moderates the meetings. Often the moderator is supported in the tasks by a core team of active CoP members (Schoen, 2001; Davenport & Probst, 2002).

Since CoPs can offer a great benefit for the organizations, companies want to utilize this potential for their own competitive advantage. However, the active involvement of employees in CoPs requires time and resources, and companies want to make sure it is well invested. CoP members can only get long-term value out of the CoP if it is active and alive. In addition to that, the CoP becomes more attractive for new members the more active and alive it is. It is therefore also of importance to the company, as well as to the members, that the CoP is viable.

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