Chapter XVI

Building a Community of Practice:
Technological and Social Implications for a Distributed Team

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the work of a team of remote workers and how they have developed into a Community of Practice (CoP). It explores the roles that technology and communication methods have in the formation and development of the community. In telling the story of the progression from a team of individuals to a CoP, the chapter provides a practical guide to others wishing to do the same.
Two aspects of the work of the team are considered in depth:

- *Building communication systems across a Distributed CoP*
- *Building commitment, ownership, engagement and focus in a Distributed CoP*

The team and community on which the chapter is based is one of some 20 people working remotely for Ultralab, a learning, technology and research centre in Chelmsford, UK. The work of the team is online facilitation for the National College of School Leadership (NCSL). The team meet together approximately four times a year, using an online community space, the Facilitators' Forum, as their day-to-day working space.

INTRODUCTION

Wenger argues that 'Communities of Practice are everywhere' (Wenger, 1998, p. 6) and goes on to cite the example of the family, neighbourhood and informal workplace grouping, leisure clubs and societies. He further explains that Communities of Practice (CoPs) are central to learning, saying:

"... engagement with social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are" (Wenger, 1998: Abstract).

With the use of new information and communication technologies, remote working is becoming more common. Where workers are engaged in a CoP, it is now possible for this to be distributed, whereas previously a degree of co-location was the norm (Brown & Duguid, 1999.) This chapter is a practical guide focusing upon the key features of the development, work and collaborative support of a geographically distributed team that shows characteristics of a CoP, and that uses new technologies. The focus is on one of the teams at Ultralab, a research and development unit based at Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) in Chelmsford, England. Ultralab's work or 'domain', using Wenger's term, is research into, and creation of, 'delightful' learning experiences using new technologies. This forms the central mission for all Ultralab work and is the focus for collaborative engagement.

Some 60 people work for Ultralab, either full or part-time. Approximately 40 of these are based at Chelmsford, working on a large number of projects, either individually or, more often, in teams. The remainder, some 20 people, are remote workers who, with four Chelmsford based staff, work on a project that is developing online learning communities for the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). These communities include Talking Heads, an online community for head teachers (school principals) and communities that provide online support for programmes of professional development.

Ultralab's organizational structure can be described as "The Operating Adhocracy" (Mintzberg &Westley, 1992) where the organization relies on informal "mutual adjustment" as the method of coordinating efforts. Handy (1991) describes both 'task' and 'person' cultures; the former being dynamic, flexible and suitable in creative organizations and the latter being focused upon

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