Chapter XIX

Extending Richness with Reach:

Participation and Knowledge Exchange in Electronic Networks of Practice

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to replicate Communities of Practice online, organizations are investing in Information Technologies that create intra-organizational electronic networks, or "Electronic Networks of Practice". These networks are designed to enable the creation of electronic "bridging ties" between geographically dispersed organizational members to provide a communication space in which individuals working on similar problems may quickly ask each other for help on task-related problems. This chapter compares the dynamics of knowledge exchange between Electronic Networks of Practice and traditional Communities of Practice. In addition, this chapter examines why people participate and help others in the network, as

well as whether participation has an impact on knowledge outcomes and individual performance. In order to investigate these issues, data were collected from a successful electronic network at one of Europe's largest consulting companies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the results and implications for both managers and researchers interested in the dynamics of electronic knowledge exchange.

INTRODUCTION

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are regarded as essential building blocks of the knowledge economy and are being promoted within organizations as sources of competitive advantage and facilitators of organizational learning. In organizations, CoPs traditionally have emerged through the mutual engagement in work performed by individuals who were either physically co-located or who frequently met each other face-to-face (Orr, 1996; Wenger, 1998). However, due to hyper-competitive conditions in the marketplace and the increasing complexity and diversity of global organizations, knowledge workers engaged in the same practice are increasingly becoming more distributed across an organization's geographical locations. Thus, in an effort to replicate traditional CoPs electronically, management in numerous organizations has invested in computer-mediated communication technologies to facilitate knowledge sharing regardless of time and space constraints. We refer to these emergent virtual communities as electronic networks of practice (ENoPs). We follow Brown and Duguid (2000) in their use of the term "networks of practice", yet we add the term "electronic" to highlight that communication within this network of practice occurs primarily through computer-based communication technologies, such as bulletin boards, listservs, etc.

While traditional, face-to-face CoPs within organizations have received increasing attention, we know much less about the dynamics underlying ENoPs and the electronic knowledge exchange supported by these computer networks. Initial research suggests that participation in these networks provides access to useful sources of technical advice for organizational members (Constant, Sproull & Kiesler, 1996). However, there is ample evidence that simply investing in Information Technologies does not directly enhance knowledge sharing. In fact, researchers estimate that 50-70% of Knowledge Management (KM) projects fail to meet expectations and stated objectives and attribute these failure rates to an over-reliance on Information Technology (Ambrosio, 2000). Thus, a key question for researchers and managers alike is how to turn an empty electronic space into a vital, active forum devoted to knowledge exchange.

In this chapter, the terms electronic networks of practice, networks, and ENoPs are used interchangeably to avoid repetition. The goal of this chapter is to provide guidelines to both researchers and managers interested in studying and

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