



Chapter XXIV

Where Did That Community Go? - Communities of Practice That “Disappear”

Patricia Gongla
IBM Global Services, USA

Christine R. Rizzuto
NY Software Industry Association and
Project Management Institute, USA

ABSTRACT

Experience has been gained and a body of literature is building about how Communities of Practice (CoPs) within organizations are formed. We are learning about the progression of communities over time, how they evolve and mature, and about the factors that contribute to their sustainability. However, communities, being “living systems”, do not live forever, or even very long. That said, exactly why and how does any particular Community of Practice (CoP) disappear? This chapter will discuss the factors related to the ending of individual communities. Specifically, it will address three basic questions:

- 1) In what ways do CoPs disappear; what are the different paths and patterns?*
- 2) Why do communities disappear?*
- 3) What are ways to help a community transition?*

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The material for this chapter is drawn primarily from observations of and experiences with CoPs in IBM Global Services. A number of these communities over the past years have “disappeared”, but they have not all “disappeared” in the same way. The authors will discuss patterns and variations that have emerged as these communities vanished from the organizational scene. In working with these communities, they have also developed a general guide to aid in the communities’ transitioning. The authors will very briefly describe the steps in this guide.

INTRODUCTION

A Community of Practice (CoP) is an organizational model with deep roots and a long history. From hunting and gathering tribes through modern project management professionals, human beings who share common work goals need to hone their talents and pool their resources and expertise, and have formed community groups. Now called Communities of Practice (CoPs), they vary widely in form and content and can range from stand-alone study groups to professional guilds to corporate or association-sponsored communities.

The concept of a CoP used in this chapter comes from the work of Wenger and Snyder (2000), who define it as “a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise”, or similarly, as a collection of individuals bound by informal relationships that share similar work roles and a common context (Snyder, 1997).

Recently, recognition has grown of the importance of CoPs to the overall knowledge economy and to the goals of organizations grappling with rapid change. Many organizations have started programs to help support communities. As a result, much knowledge about how CoPs form and develop within organizations has been gained and shared. However, less knowledge is available about what actually happens to CoPs as they mature, evolve, decline or vanish. Yet, it is no secret that communities appear and disappear, divide and merge, grow more active and less active and in general show discernable patterns in their progress over time.

The focus in this chapter is on one particular aspect of community life within organizations: the phenomenon of communities’ disappearance. Communities, even those with strong beginnings and of much value to a sponsoring organization, do not exist forever. Thus, our starting question is: What happens to these CoPs? Specifically, how do they disappear, what paths do they take and why do they disappear?

Obviously, CoPs that disappear can become an issue for an organization that depends on their bodies of knowledge and support for competency development, learning, training and market leadership. In these cases, it is important to see how and why communities disappear so that possible interventions may be

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