Chapter II
Conditions and Key Success Factors for the Management of Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

Communities of practice (CoPs) have been taken into account by both practitioners and academics during the last ten years. From a strategic point of view, CoPs have shown their importance for the management of organizational knowledge by offering repositories of knowledge, improved capacity of making knowledge actionable and operational (Brown & Duguid, 1998) and by facilitating maintenance, reproduction, and extension of knowledge (Brown and Durguid, 2001). CoPs are also reported to achieve value creation and competitive advantages (Davenport and Prusak, 1998), learning at work (Swan et alt., 2002) that promotes organizational competitiveness (Furlong and Johnson, 2003), innovation, even a radical type (Swan et alt., 2002), responsiveness, improved staff skills and reduced duplication (du Plessis, 2008). This impressive list of achievements is not for free; some authors have pointed out the limits of CoP's (Duguid, 2005; Roberts, 2006; Amin & Roberts, 2008) from diverse points of view, including diversity of working environments, size, spatial or relational proximity, but mainly emphasizing the specificity of CoPs as a social practice paradigm, as it was defined by Wenger (1999, 2000) credited as the "inventor" of the term "CoP" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This chapter focuses on the consideration of CoPs as an organizational reality than can be managed (Thompson, 2005), the contradictions that the idea of managing them generates, and how these controversial points can be overcome in a sound and honest way. To do so, we review different cases of CoP's within organizations

intended for the managerial team to achieve important organizational goals. Our analysis provides: (a) a reflection regarding the Key Success Factors in the process of integrating communities of practice, (b) insight to the structure of a model of cultivation, intended as a guideline for new experiences in this area, and (c) an informative account of this model's adaptation to the studied organizations.

IS THE IDEA OF MANAGING COP'S AN OXYMORON?

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are activity systems that include individuals who are united in action and in the meaning that action has for them and for the larger collective (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CoPs are not part of formal structures; they are informal entities that exist in the mind of each member. When people participate in problem-solving and share the knowledge necessary to solve problems, it is possible to speak about the generation of knowledge in CoPs (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, CoPs are groups whose members regularly engage in sharing and learning based on common interests, and can improve organizational performance (Lesser & Storck, 2001). CoPs can (and are more likely to) extend beyond the boundaries of the firm (Malone, 2002), and they are about content (about learning as a living experience of negotiating meaning) not about form. In this sense, they cannot be legislated into existence or defined by order. They can be recognized, supported, encouraged, and nurtured, but they are not reified, designable units (Lesser and Storck, 2001). All these arguments can lead managers to question if it's possible to consider CoP as a managerial initiative oriented to achieve organizational goals.

On the other hand some other authors, considering the epistemic components and theoretical background of CoP's have pointed out that CoP's may not always contribute to business settings, due to their self managed character (Kimble & Hildreth, 2004; Roberts, 2006). Others have shown that CoP's contribution to innovation is not always clear, while it only happens in some specific situations (Swan et al., 2002; Mutch, 2003), and even the negative impact that structure can exert over practice (Thompson, 2005) if the nature of the interrelations is not dressed in a sound way.

All this evidence makes the previous question even more complex: even if CoPs can be managed, it is not evident in which conditions or situation it should be the best option, or when the risks undertaken can exceed the potential gains.

In this chapter, the authors approach CoPs from a management perspective and practice. Although CoPs are organic and spontaneous, the purpose of the study is to analyse the CoPs promotion and cultivation from the organizational management point of view, therefore, as organizational management instrument. This framework can generate incoherencies between the situated and social learning theory and the consideration of a CoP's system as a management tool (CoP). For the purposes of advancing our understanding in this path, we have summarized the main contradictions between the epistemic component of CoPs (theoretical point of view) and its expected managerial use (management tool point of view) in the following questions:

- Should CoPs always be organic or could they be promoted by the organizations?
- Are CoPs designable units by the organizations?
- The cultivation of CoPs should be motivated by individuals or by organizations?
- How is it possible to achieve the sharing of knowledge? Is it necessary a tangible motivation or can it be intangible?