

## Chapter 4

# Ba and Communities of Practice in Research and Strategic Communities as a Way Forward

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter primarily examines the concepts of ba and communities of practice. It explores how the concepts have been used in the previous knowledge management, organizational learning, and innovation research during a decade, from the year 1999 until 2009. The reviewed studies show that both concepts have been used in various industries and in various knowledge creation and knowledge sharing situations. The similarities and differences of concepts are compared, and the concept of strategic communities is proposed as a way forward in future research and practice in terms of ba and communities of practice. The chapter includes also a comparative view of each concept, in which its major contributions, limitations and complementary nature are highlighted.*

### INTRODUCTION

The knowledge-creating process is context-specific in terms of time, space, and relationship with others. It needs a place where information is given meaning through interpretation to become knowledge. This chapter discusses the concept

of *ba* as a shared space or context to create new knowledge, innovations and to learn. It is theoretical in nature and aims to find out first how *ba* has been used in research (and practice) in different development and innovation projects and second what has been the major contribution of *ba* in knowledge management and innovation research. *Ba* was first used in business literature by Japanese researchers, and afterward gains its

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significance in knowledge management research and practice worldwide. In previous literature, *ba* has been used in the research of sales force effectiveness, in biotechnology and industrial systems, in the development network of an urban region, how companies use *ba* for successful knowledge transfer, in intangible benefits of work space, in knowledge cities, and in IT and multimedia business in Japan. The major contribution of *ba* is that it gives a basis for developing new concepts (e.g. strategic communities) or a practical tool. *Ba* can serve when trying to create favourable environments for people in different organisations to work together for a common goal, or to create something new (for ex. in a case of eTampere) or to design new office buildings that simulate innovation and knowledge creation. The complimentary nature and usefulness of other relevant conceptual frameworks including the concepts of communities of practice and strategic communities are suggested and discussed.

This chapter is organized in the following eight sections: first the concept of *ba* is being explored, second some critiques of the SECI model and *ba* in the literature are being reviewed. Thirdly the chapter presents how the concept of *ba* has been used in research. The fourth part is about the concept of communities of practice, and the fifth part is of the communities of practice in research. In the sixth part some critics of communities of practice are being discussed. Part seven is talking about similarities and differences of these two concepts. Part eight discusses the concepts *ba*, communities of practice and a way forward: strategic communities. Finally the future trends are being viewed and the conclusions.

## **BACKGROUND**

Since the book Knowledge-creating Company (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), the concept of knowledge creation and the significance of its social processes have become well known for

knowledge management academics and practitioners. Emphasis on the Japanese concept of *ba* also increasingly attracted the attention of Western researchers due to its usefulness in explaining a deeper and broader mechanism for knowledge creation, transfer and sharing. However, knowledge is very much context-specific, and what we know is often and closely associated with what we do. If *ba* is a useful concept in general, the concept of communities of practice leads knowledge management enterprise towards a more specific context of organizations. Communities of practice are, however, criticized for being under stable cultural conditions and suffering from inflexibility in innovation within a fixed organizational boundary (e.g. Hakkarainen et al., 2004). Strategic communities, based on *ba* and communities of practice, has emerged as a basis for coping with market change and innovation in unpredictable and volatile business environments.

## **Concept of *ba***

Based on a concept that was originally proposed by the Japanese philosopher Nishida (1921) and was further developed by Shimizu, *ba* is here defined as a shared context in which knowledge is shared, created and utilized. Fayard (2003) has explained the Japanese concept of *ba* as a Kanji ideogram whose left part means ground, boiling water or what is rising and whose right part means to enable. One can talk about a good *ba* as a relational situation to energize people, making them creative, and the right part referring to the yin and yang philosophy of permanent transformation. And further, according to Fayard (2003) *ba* may also be thought as the recognition of the self in all, *ba* is not produced by the command and control model of traditional pyramid management, it is set up by voluntary membership within an energising and stimulating environment through care and mutual respect.

According to Nonaka and Toyama (2003, pp. 6-7) *ba* should be understood as a multiple

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