

Chapter 8

Communities of Practice: Context Factors that Influence their Development

Eduarne Loyarte

Vicomtech - Visual Communication and Interaction Technologies Centre, Spain

Olga Rivera Hernáez

University of Deusto, Spain

ABSTRACT

Many organizations have developed Communities of Practice and they are one of the most important vehicles of knowledge management in the 21st century. Organizations use Communities of Practice for different purposes, but both, organizations and Communities, are limited by different context factors. Therefore, different goals are achieved with them: sometimes the intended goals and sometimes unintended goals. With this in mind, this chapter focuses on the context factors that influence the development of Communities of Practice. To this end, we review different cases of Communities of Practice within various organizations. Our analysis provides: (a) a reflection on the Context factors in the process of integrating Communities of Practice, (b) an analysis of the impact of these factors on the development of Communities of Practice in different organizations and (c) the conclusions of the study. This study is based on the general idea that Communities of Practice are a valid management tool for organizations. This chapter is therefore based on the study of Communities of Practice from the perspective of organizational management.

INTRODUCTION

Wenger et al (2002) define Communities of Practice as groups of people who share a concern, a

set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting on an ongoing basis. Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, or who learn how to do it better as they

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interact regularly (Kimble, Hildreth & Wright, 2000; Preece, 2004). This contributes to innovation and knowledge creation across an organization's boundaries, creating a good process flow of knowledge, which is usually well linked with the organization's business strategy, in this way creating strategic benefits (du Plessis, 2008). In all cases, organizations are limited by their context factors and the changes they want to drive. So it is important for organizations to realize that they have choices to make when it comes to the cultivation of Communities of Practice and that they should use the formula that works best for their particular organization.

Identifying more limits to knowledge management, not only organizations are limited, Communities of Practice are too. From this point of view, an increasing number of studies in management literature have provided critiques of the Communities of Practice approach (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Fow, 2000; Handley et al. 2006; Marshall & Rollinson, 2004; Mutch, 2003). Roberts (2006) also argues that there are clearly unresolved issues and difficulties in the Communities of Practice approach. Issues concerning power, trust and predisposition such as Communities of Practice size and spatial reach involve challenges that have to be studied.

In this chapter, the authors approach Communities of Practice from an organizational point of view, including a study of Communities of Practice, which have considerable influence in organizational approaches. The authors of the present study have developed a cultivation model (E. Loyarte & O. River, 2007) in which Communities of Practice are clearly seen as a knowledge management tool which can be applied in certain cases within organizations. Although both Communities of Practice and organizations have their limitations, it now seems important to go one step further, and reach a stage where it is possible to analyze in a uniform way the different contexts in

which Communities of Practice coexist and how they influence the groups they encompass, as well as the organization itself. With this in mind, the authors have focused on answering the following research questions:

- What kinds of businesses undertake the cultivation of Communities of Practice? What size are these businesses? Which sectors do they belong to?
- What objectives drive the cultivation of Communities of Practice within organizations?
- What kind of organizational environment is beneficial to the creation of Communities of Practice?
- Is organizational restructuring essential in order to promote Communities of Practice in organizations?
- What attitude should the members of a Community of Practice have in order to ensure its success?

In order to be able to answer these questions, we have analyzed the contextual factors which influence both Communities of Practices and organizations. The chapter is structured as follows. In the following section, we explain what a Community of Practice is not, the potential phases of its life cycle both within and outside of an organization, the different relationships it might have with its company, its limitations, the ways in which it can bring added value to an organization in helping to achieve competitive advantages, and the contextual factors that may influence it. We then go on to explain the methods behind this study, and present the selected case studies. The answers to the research questions set out in the current section of this work will then be detailed. Finally, the limitations of this study and the work to be carried out in the future will be set out.

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