

# Chapter 22

## A CoP for Research Activities in Universities

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter investigates how to manage research knowledge and perform research activities in universities of applied sciences by means of CoP. In this investigation we use as an application case CoRe (community of research), the CoP of all researchers of the Swiss Distance University of Applied Sciences.*

*We will explain how we faced the challenge of answering the question of how to improve overall performance in all research activities of our university, and then illustrate our findings by telling the story of how we have been answering it by means of a new kind of knowledge network called CoRe. We will explain the tools we have been developing in order to address the needs of such a CoP and finally reflect on lessons learned while establishing a CoP in a research environment.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Swiss Distance University of Applied Sciences is organized in a radically decentralized way. This structure is consistent with its mission but on the other side it creates some challenging situations, for example an insufficient level of interactions between geographically distributed

university members (academic staff, students), research activities too much isolated in the departments, human resources dispersed and limited knowledge flow.

How to meet the challenge of improving research performances under conditions like these? Our approach consisted in a collaborative knowledge strategy: to create and cultivate CoRe, an intra-organizational knowledge network of researchers (academic staff, students) organized as a

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-802-4.ch022

CoP connecting its members around the common task of stewarding research knowledge.

## **BACKGROUND AND MAIN FOCUS**

In this chapter we will provide an in-depth view of our application case CoRe: we will show how we are designing, implementing and cultivating the CoRe knowledge network and will describe the tools we developed in order to face this task. To this end - after introducing the background of the CoRe project as well as our approach to knowledge cooperation - we will reflect on the development process and focus on the evolution of the network requirements on the example of a specific community instrument: our Yellow Tool. Considerations regarding views of others that support our position are distributed over the related parts of the chapter.

## **THE COMMUNITY OF RESEARCH: CORE**

As previously mentioned, the Swiss Distance University of Applied Sciences is organized in a radically decentralized way combined with traditional hierarchical structures and functional divisions. This has led to an insufficient level of interactions between geographically distributed university members (academic staff, students) so that weak ties have become the norm. For research work one major consequence was that research activities were too much isolated in the departments, human resources were dispersed and research knowledge did not flow enough. Projects were small and less recognized, know how got easily lost and research tools' development was too slow. Our approach for improving research performances under conditions of weak ties like these consisted in a collaborative knowledge strategy: to create and cultivate CoRe, an intra-organizational knowledge network of researchers

(academic staff, students) organized as a community of practice connecting its members around the common task of *stewarding research knowledge* with a community-oriented approach.

The business strategy for research activities that had been given to us by the top management of the Swiss Distance University of Applied Sciences - and that we wanted to implement by means of the CoRe network - had two main strategic purposes: (1) acquiring and realizing major research projects; (2) integrating teaching and research (Bernhard & Bettoni, 2007). Other universities approach the first task by hiring a large number of professional researchers and by putting them together in conventional institutes composed by one or more teams; for the second task the mainstream approach is to simply organize teaching and research activities within one department under the responsibility of one or more professors with remarkable research experience. In our case the situation was different: we did not have the financial resources for hiring a fixed staff of many researchers and we did not have heads of departments with research experience. What we had was research experience distributed over different professors, limited internal research resources within our staff and a large amount of potential external research resources distributed over a wide network of connections.

Given this situation and the mentioned obstacles we found a solution in the new concept of CoRe as a network that connects researchers from two groups: (a) from the internal staff and (b) from the external connections. The new and most challenging aspect of our concept was the way in which we designed the connection between these network members: in fact our idea - based on our constructivist view of knowledge (von Glasersfeld, 1995) - was to connect them around the common task of *stewarding their research knowledge in a participative way* (Bettoni, 2005).

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