Chapter 19

Virtual Communities of Practice as a Support for Knowledge Sharing in Social Networks

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge as a result of people's interaction is an essential factor for organizations facing actual business complexity. Social networks, whose creation and usage have been facilitated from the development of information and communication technologies, improved the conditions for interactive and collaborative answers at a very fast pace. In this sense, virtual communities of practice appear as an important way to share knowledge among groups of people joined by common interests, such as the search for solutions for problems, development of competences, professional relationship upgrades, growth of productivity, and general working quality. However, some barriers have emerged to the social network members, such as lack of trust, real incentives, and time to dedicate in order to contribute in these communities. In this chapter, aiming to evaluate such scenarios, a multiple case study methodology was conducted, starting from a literature review of main concepts, giving support for a final assessment of cases to provide better understanding and identification of the main benefits and barriers for the participation and collaboration in these new platforms. As a result of the present study, these reflections could lead to a better comprehension of the application of the social networks structured over virtual communities of practice in the business environment.

INTRODUCTION

Usual organizational tasks and activities became more complex and multidisciplinary. An increasing demand for people's interaction is remarkably perceived. Batittucci (2002) affirms that an organization structured over isolated individuals or sectors cannot keep performance at a competitive level. Independent functional work can no longer reach organizational goals in the new market, which demands cooperative ways of working.

As shown by Davenport & Prusak (1998), people who have the same working culture can communicate better and transfer knowledge more efficiently, mainly because they have common interests and experiences. As the work complexity increases, more multidisciplinary abilities are required, leading to a situation where workers have to collaborate in various phases of product design and development. In this way, people with relevant knowledge need to cooperate to achieve personal and organizational goals (Mason, Castleman & Parker, 2006).

Cooperation among people, institutions, enterprises and groups can potentially generate a social network. These connections are constituted by social interactions, which happen repeatedly, building social relationships with several purposes, such as finding new opportunities, learning best practices and general helpful information to people. In this sense, communities of practice formalize those social networks, allowing specialists to be grouped with the capabilities to share their knowledge. So, group work becomes an attractive practice.

Communities of practice (CoP) is a concept introduced by Ettienne Wenger, which consists of people who are informally connected but have responsibilities in the process. They are united because they have common interests as learning and knowledge sharing (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Mengalli, 2004; Terra, 2005). According to Gropp & Tavares (2006, p.22) "a community creates a knowledge domain from the practice of dealing repeatedly with that physical and social aspects of a non-productive world". These authors also affirm that "the practice of doing together, creates more than products – creates knowledge, creativity, learning – creates communities of practice".

The need for cooperation motivated the development of ways of communication to facilitate interaction among individuals. Information technology advances allow creating new alternatives for interaction in the workplace. Groupware systems were introduced to promote communication for teamwork members because they contribute for a better result than the simple sum of each individual work. As cited by Bock & Marca (1995), groupware can be defined as "software designed to help groups of people, physically distant, but working in groups".

Groupware systems can be exemplified by observing electronic and voice mailing, audio and video conferencing, decision support and collaborative text editors, discussion groups and customer service centrals. All of these relate to belonging to a group or a community in the virtual world.

Along with information technology tools which provide integration among people, communities of practice have gone beyond the limits of physical space, to encompass the so called virtual communities of practice (CoVs) (knowledge-based networks formed over technological connections, such those provided by Internet), which was made possible through the use, for example, of groupware tools. A CoV can be thus understood as a group of people gathered, but not necessarily close to each other, with common objectives using different ways to get together, by applying communication and interaction tools and services. The organizational complexity presented in the beginning of this chapter can be addressed by CoV, resulting in groups sharing and developing their knowledge, and responding better and faster to daily demands (Creed & Zutshi, 2008).

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