An introduction to Communities of Practice

by Will Allen & Marina Apgar

The concept of a 'community of practice' refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations. These social networks are emerging as an integral mechanism in helping organisations build skills in areas important to sustainability that cross departmental and organisational boundaries (e.g. community engagement, resource minimisation, energy efficiency). This paper provides an introduction to this social area of innovation.

Defining communities of practice

The term 'communities of practice' (often abbreviated as CoP) is new, but the phenomenon it refers to is age-old. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop collective resources including stories, experiences and ways of addressing recurring problems – in short they develop a shared practice. The concept emerged from a model of situated learning proposing that people learn through engagement in a 'community of practice', and has been introduced as a useful management practice by the work of Etienne Wenger. These communities exist everywhere and we are all involved in a number of them at any time. In essence, communities of practice are learning networks that provide for non-formal education opportunities. They are made up of groups of people who share a concern for a practice, and build relationships that help them learn from each other to improve their practice.

Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless the members interact and learn together. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Learning in communities of practice occurs through minimally structured individual and group interactions, and such communities tend to be self-organising. It is the interactions between people that build trust within the community, binding members together into a social entity that share a repertoire of communal resources to improve practice. In turn, the community develops over time through this mutual engagement and sharing.

Why communities of practice are useful

It has become increasingly important for organisations to enhance opportunities for learning and adaptation, especially in the current knowledge era, where the rate at which organisations learn becomes a source of competitive advantage. Through use of knowledge management tools, organisations are able to enhance organisational learning. Much of an organisation's knowledge, though, is not explicit, but is stored as implicit knowledge of its employees, bringing truth to the belief that an organisation's best resource is in fact its people. Organisations' tacit knowledge stores the potential for innovation that is necessary to deal with rapidly changing markets and thus needs to be shared. Communities of practice provide a way to enhance interaction and trust for the sharing of tacit knowledge within organisations.

Another characteristic of successful organisations in an economic era that is moving towards innovation and complexity is the need to work collaboratively and form alliances. Communities of practice are particularly useful mechanisms for developing social capital, new knowledge, stimulating innovation or sharing existing tacit knowledge within a wider organisational setting. They can be developed as informal forms of alliances that allow for the flexibility needed to survive in rapidly changing environments.

Value at different organisational levels

The benefits of building communities of practice within organisations or between organisations are multiple, and provide benefits at all levels - from the individual to the wider organisation.

Individuals participating in the community receive direct benefits through improvement in job performance due to skill enhancement by learning best practices. The more important individual benefit, though, comes from an increased awareness of one's own knowledge – and as one becomes more proactive in improving it, professional identity and job satisfaction are enhanced.

The community as a collective receives benefits through increased trust between its members, and development of a collective resource of best practices that can help solve problems.

The organisation benefits from the community of practice by having a social structure that can take responsibility for fostering learning, developing competencies and managing tacit knowledge. At a practical level, the community can work to improve collaborative relationships across departments within an organisation or in inter-organisational alliances by building social capital and trust. It can also help increase innovation through sharing of ideas, support the training of those new to the area, and increase job satisfaction.

Stages of development

In order to support communities of practice it is necessary to be aware of the different stages they go through. It can be useful to think of four stages of development, with each stage requiring different support mechanisms (van Winkelen 2003):

- At the first stage, there is potential for community development through the tightening of already existent loose networks. Support is required initially in defining such networks as an appropriate area of shared interest so as to ensure genuine participation; in choosing the right people for leadership roles to support behind the scenes and maintain energy; and in fostering initial contact between potential members.

- In the second stage, members begin to tighten networks and form a community. There is a need for establishing the community's value and a clear purpose to encourage participation, sharing and building trust.

- In the third stage the community matures and concentrates on managing knowledge. In the early part of this stage there will likely be an emphasis on sharing, while later stages may also involve active development and stewardship of new knowledge products. These stages will be interspersed by periods of low activity, requiring support to maintain engagement.

- The final stage is one of transformation when the community has been seen to resolve the initial problem that brought it together.

How to grow and support communities of practice

Enhancing learning within and between departments, organisations and even communities requires a comprehensive strategy, and communities of practice are one of many tools that can support this learning.

Internal roles

Whether these communities arise spontaneously or come together through seeding and nurturing, their development ultimately depends on members collectively contributing to a number of leadership roles (Wenger 1998)

- The *inspirational* leadership provided by thought leaders and recognised experts

- The *day-to-day* leadership provided by those who organise activities

- The *classificatory* leadership provided by those who collect and organise information in order to document practices

- The *interpersonal* leadership provided by those who weave the community's social fabric

- The *boundary* leadership provided by those who connect the community to other communities

- The *institutional* leadership provided by those who maintain links with other organisational constituencies, in particular the official hierarchy

These roles may be formal or informal, and may be concentrated in one or two people or more widely distributed. But in all cases, as Wenger (1998) stresses, leadership must have intrinsic legitimacy in the community. Their success relies on their being able to foster open and honest discussions that build trust for learning-through-sharing to occur. To be effective, therefore, managers and others must work with communities of practice from the *inside* rather than merely attempt to design them or manipulate them from the*outside.*

Organisational roles

Although the strengths of communities of practice rely on their being spontaneous and self-organising there are a number of guidelines that an organisation or community development agency could follow to create the environment to help them flourish. These include:

- An appreciation that it is better to start small and grow, than try to be too ambitious

- Understand and respect informal initiatives that are underway. These are the natural building blocks of communities of practice

- Legitimise participation

- Have a core group that is engaged, but invite different levels of participation

- Provide appropriate technologies and forums that support easy participation for sharing lessons and other knowledge resources

- Focus on values being delivered; celebrate contributions and successes

- Acknowledge the self-organising nature of communities of practice and consequent need for flexibility

- Encourage the formation of new links with related networks

- Have enough regular interactions to create rhythm without limiting diversity of activities

- Encourage trust building through activities that support personal contact, dialogue and respect

Measuring the value of communities of practice

An individual's motivation to participate in a community of practice and an organisation's willingness to support that community both stem from an expectation that it will deliver a particular value. However, each party may have different indicators of value. The process of designing appropriate indicators should therefore be conducted with the participation of all the interested parties, including the participants of the communities, in order to take into account the differentiated values perceived. Measures should consider both process and task outcomes. Some potential indicators of CoP outcomes include:

- New knowledge created

- Joint learning enhanced

- Problems solved

- Knowledge reused

- Innovations produced

- Process performance improved

- Job satisfaction increased

Future challenges

From a community of practice perspective, societal knowledge about sustainability lives in a constellation of communities each managing a required competency. However, as Wenger (nd) points out, the very characteristics that make communities of practice a good fit for stewarding knowledge –autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries – are also characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organisations. How this challenge is going to affect these organisations remains to be seen.

References

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