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Role of Communities of Practices (COP) in Knowledge Sharing

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Abstract: In today era the knowledge is no more just a power, but it became a strategic need of organization for their development. When we look at it to know what it does in the organization? We find it identify, process (codify) and stores the data which is an extract of human brains captured through sharing process. But if we look it more deeply we find different ways and techniques of sharing through which the sharing process is organized to capture the relevant knowledge. There are many ways to share the knowledge like peer Assist, storytelling, Mentoring, coaching etc and even through conducting formal an informal Meetings (Communities of Practice , Forums & Meetings, workshops, training & Seminars , Knowledge fairs. But among all these the communities of practice got special role, it mobilize social and individual –formal & informal knowledge. CoP through forming group makes a way to share knowledge with others who are passionate about the same topic. In return, it makes to learn from their knowledge and experience. Members of CoP share their aspirations. It identifies their needs. They develop a unique, action-oriented perspective. Together, they discuss, innovate and develop a common practice in their respective areas/ domains / fields. Thus the present paper aims at to highlight the conceptual understanding of CoP, and their application in Business, Government and Education sectors and the current paper also provides outline understanding of how the CoP can be helpful in sharing Knowledge.

Keywords: CoP's, knowledge sharing, Business, Government, Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is widely recognized as a critical organizational resource irrespective of its economic sector or type of organization (Stewart 1997; Sveiby 1997; Davenport & Prusak 1998). It is difficult, if not impossible, to maximize the value of this resource without adequate understanding of how to leverage and share knowledge throughout the organization. There has been a growing focus on the role of communities of practice (CoPs) within the KM domain. CoPs have been described as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder 2000). They are different from teams and functional units as they are self-organizing systems whose lifespan is determined by its members, based on the intrinsic value that membership brings. Such communities are not constrained by time and space and therefore can span organizational boundaries (Wenger 1998). CoPs have been identified as effective loci for the creation and sharing of knowledge (Lave & Wenger 1991). Such communities are able to retain dynamic and evolving knowledge within a real-time process that adds context to existing static repositories. Members identify and engage each other with a common set of codes and language. The development of a strong network of likeminded individuals who share a common understanding is conducive to the development of an environment typified by high levels of trust, shared behavioral norms, mutual respect and reciprocity (Lesser & Storck 2001). Such an environment has been identified as being high in social capital, and has been linked directly with the processes of the creation and sharing of knowledge (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998).

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network of likeminded individuals who share a common understanding is conducive to the development of an environment typified by high levels of trust, shared behavioral norms, mutual respect and reciprocity (Lesser & Storck 2001). Such an environment has been identified as being high in social capital, and has been linked directly with the processes of the creation and sharing of knowledge (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). There is an emphasis to the formal codification of knowledge; the CoP perspective shows the relevance of informal information and knowledge practices among people who share similar domains of activity (Lindkvist, 2005, p. 1190).

II. COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. In that process the education is one reason where the community comes together to share their ideas, views to develop knowledge. But the word community is different here from communities of practice, for instance neighbors can make community but cannot practice together. So there are three crucial elements are required to call it as community of practice. They are

A. Domain

A community means not necessarily to be framed by a group of friends, but it could be the gathering of strangers who have common interests and ideas over a particular area or discipline or social issues etc. every domain will have certain unique identity as per there are of interest. A member therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

To being a member of domain it is not necessary that member should have expertise about the area of interest in the external world.

Example: youth from streets can frame a domain where they learned from each other to survive and to maintain a kind of identity for themselves. So that some of them with their domain identity they can get notify by external world.

B. The Community

Community paves a platform to the members, so that they can share information, help each other, getting engaged in activities and discussion to make database and most importantly develops the relationships through which they learn mutually. By just setting up an website, making the title statements doesn't make a practice of community. Unless the members interact with each other and learn together it is not called as communities of practice. The nature of working of COP is not necessary that it work in a particular place and format. it can do its sessions anywhere at any point of time.

Example: The Impressionists, for instance, used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.

C. The practice

A community of practice is not merely a community of interest--people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. The development of a shared practice may be more or less self-conscious.

Example:

- "Windshield wipers" engineers at an auto manufacturer make a concerted effort to collect and document the tricks and lessons they have learned into a knowledge base.

- By contrast, nurses who meet regularly for lunch in a hospital cafeteria may not realize that their lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to care for patients.

Still, in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice. It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community

III. PATTERN OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICES EXITS

There is no such one pattern that communities of practice work, they work in many patterns and many names. In organizations they had been identified with different names like leaning network, thematic groups or Tech clubs etc.

General situations dealt at COP's	Aspects of serving
Problem solving	Brain storming to get feasible solutions
Requests for information	Provide source codes for information
Seeking experience	"Has anyone dealt with a customer in this situation?"
Reusing Assets	"I have a proposal for a local area network I wrote for a client last year. I can send it to you and you can easily tweak it for this new client."
Coordination and synergy	"Can we combine our purchases of solvent to achieve bulk discounts?"
Discussing developments	"What do you think of the new CAD system? Does it really help?"
Documentation projects	"We have faced this problem five times now. Let us write it down once and for all."
Visits	"Can we come and see your after-school program? We need to establish one in our city."
Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps	"Who knows what, and what are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?"

Table.1: The working style of Cop's

IV. APPLICATION OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A. Organizations

The concept has been adopted most readily by people in business because of the recognition that knowledge is a critical asset that needs to be managed strategically. Initial efforts at managing knowledge had focused on information systems with disappointing results. Communities of practice provided a new approach, which focused on people and on the social structures that enable them to learn with and from each other. Today, there is hardly any organization of a reasonable size that does not have some form communities-of-practice initiative. A number of characteristics explain this rush of interest in communities of practice as a vehicle for developing strategic capabilities in organizations:

Communities of practice enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognizing that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this. Communities among practitioners create a direct link between learning and performance, because the same people participate in communities of practice and in teams and business units. Practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects. Communities are not limited by formal structures: they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries.

From this perspective, the knowledge of an organization lives in a constellation of communities of practice each taking care of a specific aspect of the competence that the organization needs. However, 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 organizations. How this challenge is going to affect these organizations remains to be seen.

B. Government

Like businesses, government organizations face knowledge challenges of increasing complexity and scale. They have adopted communities of practice for much the same reasons, though the formality of the bureaucracy can come in the way of open knowledge sharing. Beyond internal communities, there are typical government problems such as education, health, and security that require coordination and knowledge sharing across levels of government. There also, communities of practice hold the promise of enabling connections among people across formal structures. And there also, there are substantial organizational issues to overcome.

C. Education

Schools and districts are organizations in their own right, and they too face increasing knowledge challenges. The first applications of communities of practice have been in teacher training and in providing isolated administrators with access to colleagues. There is a wave of interest in these peer-to-peer professional-development activities. But in the education sector, learning is not only a means to an end: it the end product. The perspective of communities of practice is therefore also relevant at this level. In business, focusing on communities of practice adds a layer of complexity to the organization, but it does not fundamentally change what the business is about. In schools, changing the learning theory is a much deeper transformation. This will inevitably take longer. The perspective of communities of practice affects educational practices along three dimensions:

Internally: How to organize educational experiences that ground school learning in practice through participation in communities around subject matters?

Externally: How to connect the experience of students to actual practice through peripheral forms of participation in broader communities beyond the walls of the school?

Over the lifetime of students: How to serve the lifelong learning needs of students by organizing communities of practice focused on topics of continuing interest to students beyond the initial schooling period?

From this perspective, the school is not the privileged locus of learning. It is not a self-contained, closed world in which students acquire knowledge to be applied outside, but a part of a broader learning system. The class is not the primary learning event. It is life itself that is the main learning event. Schools, classrooms, and training sessions still have a role to play in this vision, but they have to be in the service of the learning that happens in the world.

V. COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICES – KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Communities of practice are relevant for both connecting and collecting aspects of knowledge sharing.

Connecting people who need to know with those who do know requires an element of trust that is often lacking in large organizations, particularly when it comes to sharing knowledge across organizational boundaries. Thus, asking for advice or other opinions can be seen in a low-trust environment as tantamount to an admission of ignorance. Advertising that ignorance across the entire organization is unlikely to occur if there is a risk that it may have personnel sanctions, particularly in organizations that are downsizing, or looking to save costs by laying off personnel.

Collecting knowledge so that it can be shared through the web or other technology also comes to be dependent on communities, since it is only in communities of practitioners that share common objectives and pre-occupations that it can become apparent as to what knowledge needs to be shared. Efforts to build knowledge collections in the hope that "users will come" almost always encounter a disappointing response, since the builders find it difficult anticipate what knowledge users will want, and even if they succeed in theory, the users will regard the collection as something external and foreign unless they had a hand in designing and constructing it. The experience underlines the difference between a reference tool such as an information system and knowledge collections: the former can be effective if the information is relevant and correct, in the same

way that a yellow-pages telephone directory can be useful. The latter depends for its dynamic and living quality on the active participation of those who use it, since knowledge is a much more personal affair than data or information.

Communities depend on the fundamental finding that communities thrive on passion, and die from lack of it. That is to say, communities depend on the members of the community being interested in, enthusiastic about and committed to the issues around which the community is formed. Communities comprise volunteers, not conscripts, and the community exists only so long as the members are willing to contribute their time and effort to promoting the community and its interests. Communities cannot be commanded into existence, and if this is attempted, they will become something other than a community, except in name.

Launching and nurturing communities of practice for knowledge sharing programs can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

Endorsing informal communities that already exist: In almost any organization, there are bound to be at least some informal communities that exist, without management support or even awareness. Finding out what they are and where they are and how they can be supported can be an important first step in demonstrating that communities of practice are not something foreign, but something "home-grown".

Asking practitioners what issues they care about: Often the most effective way of nurturing communities of practice is to consult practitioners as to what issues they care about, and worry about, and would like to find out more about. The results of such consultations which can take place in informal focus groups or in structured groupware sessions can then be used to elicit volunteers to come forward and lead communities built on the issues about which the practitioners care most. In this fashion, the chances of having communities built on issues issues about which members are passionate is enhanced.

Instructing leaders to form communities: Having the management instruct leaders to form communities is usually a recipe for disaster, unless the leaders so designated happen to be informal leaders on the relevant issues, or unless they elicit the co-leadership of others who possess this informal leadership status. Without such support, the communities may exist on paper and may occasionally perform functions for the organization, but the dynamism and energy of genuine communities is likely to be lacking.

Launching purely virtual communities: Purely virtual communities are known to have come into existence where the members are so strongly passionate about a particular issue that the question of trust is set aside, e.g. communities of individuals who are affected by an obscure disease, and who take to the Web in order to make contact with doctors or other patients who might be able and willing to share relevant experiences related to the disease. Inside large organizations, this kind of passion is rare, and organizations tend to find that purely virtual communities either cannot be effectively launched without face to face meetings, or if launched, cannot be sustained without regular physical meetings (say, once a year). Once the community is formed, however, a community may be very effective in its virtual communications even though its members are scattered around the globe.

Launching communities among the "incorrigibles": In any organization, one will find staff who is naturally and enthusiastically attracted to participate in communities of practice. One will also find staffs that are naturally antipathetic to communities for a variety of reasons, including habits of hierarchical behavior, distrust of fellow practitioners, or organizational game playing. Provided that there are many active communities in core areas of the business, the knowledge management program might choose to ignore these "incorrigibles" either totally, or until such time as the measures to encourage compliance with organizational priorities (budgets, formal incentives, measurement) eventually "kick in", so that even incorrigibles find it difficult to go on working successfully in the organization, unless they at least go through the motions of participating in communities.

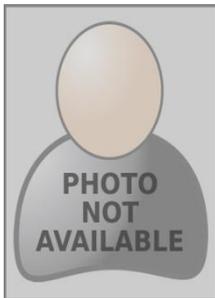
VI. CONCLUSION

Under different cultural environment of organizations, most of them found that the CoP is acting as significant nurturing process to enable the practice of knowledge sharing. As the CoP which is based on a concept that practitioners of different communities with their common interests or experiences, participate to share their set of common problems faced in a particular knowledge area, and have an interest in finding, or improving the effectiveness and solutions to those problems. Further the culture of sharing can be used to bind and promote the society in developing various aspects like finding feasible solutions to their problems through their experience and available information. Further it also paves way to discuss probable developments extensively with coordination of concern experts opinions, visits etc. to identify the gaps and mapping the available knowledge.

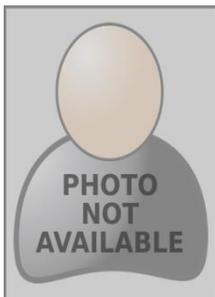
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