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The co-learning process in healthcare professionals: Assessing user satisfaction in virtual communities of practice

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ABSTRACT

Communities of practice are nowadays an important concept in the healthcare sector. Particularly, the intensive use of ICT has allowed their creation into a virtual environment – Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs) developing optimal conditions to make possible the collaborative learning process. The VCoPs antecedents can be situated on social network phenomenon, where individuals with different traits but a common interest/objective are linked, use ICT potency (especially social media) to interchange information, experiences and contents among them. And as a result, people create and share knowledge, and learn collaboratively. VCoP users have a higher satisfaction level in the collaborative learning process when they can: (1) Achieve benefits related to patient diagnosis and treatment (cost reductions, faster management, quality and accuracy of diagnosis, etc.); (2) Increase the share capital of participants and creating networks of trusted individuals. Given the interest in this topic, the objective of this work is to identify the factors that determine user satisfaction in relation to Community Practice (CoP) and the process of building shared knowledge. For this, a sample of 130 Spanish health professionals participating in an online community, and developed in a virtual community of practice, is discussed. The results obtained from an analysis of logistic regression show evidence of the perception of efficiency and effectiveness in collaboration with the members of the VCoP as positively influencing the perceived satisfaction with the CoP. Also, the degree of individual participation in the community affects the degree of perceived satisfaction. The conclusions provide interesting strategic recommendations in the management process of the CoP.

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1. Introduction

Based on the theory of situated learning, where professional learning occurred through participation in practice and interaction with colleagues, the term of Communities of Practice (CoP) has evolved over time to refer to groups of people who share a concern or problem, and who come together to interact, learn and create a sense of identity, and in the process, build, share knowledge and solve problems (Wenger, 1998).

In the business sector, CoPs have gained recognition due to its capacity to foster the professional development of individuals, as well as improve business outcomes for organization (Alicia-Rivera, 2011; Antony, Rosman, Eze, & Gan, 2009; Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; Swan, Scarbrough, & Robertson, 2002). Based

on these claimed benefits of CoPs in the business sector, the creation of CoPs is being promoted in other professional fields, such as the healthcare sector.

Initially, CoPs in the health sector have been used as a tool to drive knowledge management. But as Díaz-Chao, Torrent, La Casta, and Saigí (2014) and Ikioda, Kendall, Brooks, de Liddo, and Shum (2013) show, additionally, its usage makes it possible to obtain other benefits relative to the improvement of: (a) professional practice efficiency and efficacy; and (b) healthcare organizational performance. On the other hand, user satisfaction is a term frequently used in marketing area, and in general terms it is defined as a measure of how a products and services supplied by a company meet or surpass user or customer expectation. Relative to healthcare sector, especially in relation to user VCoP satisfaction, this concept measures the subjective user assessments of the any outcome or experience regarding to a VCoP as a specific technological tool that makes possible the knowledge creation and sharing, and the collaborative learning process as well.

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In this sense, literature points out the relationship between satisfaction and users' personal and sociodemographic characteristics (Gabbay & Le May, 2009; Vázquez-Bronfman, 2011). Also, some studies show that users' profile characteristics influence on their satisfaction level (Ardichvili, Page V., & T., 2012; Delone & McLean, 1992). Both of them influence on what are the expectations that users have relative to a VCoP, as well as in how this technological tool meets or exceed the users' expected goals.

The wide range of benefits offered by the CoPs in the healthcare sector, and in particular the VCoP, makes it convenient to analyze the determinants of user satisfaction in relation to the VCoP regarding the process of building shared knowledge. To this end, this work presents two distinct parts. Based on the concept of VCoP, the theoretical part starts describing some of the main benefits that virtual communities offer to health care organizations. Then, and based on a thorough review of the literature, we present some of the factors identified as determinants in the degree of satisfaction of VCoPs users as a tool in the process of knowledge construction. The factors considered are relative to individuals' sociodemographic characteristics – gender, professional specialization, or workplace. On the other hand, there also considered other factors relative to the VCoP users' profile, such as, the degree of implication or knowledge that users have on the VCoP, as well as the levels of utility, efficiency or efficacy perceived.

We continue the empirical study describing the characteristics of the study sample of the 130 Spanish health professionals, active members in VCoP, as well as the variables used in the statistics. The results obtained after the development of a logistic regression analysis, show the perception of efficiency and effectiveness in collaboration between CoP members, has a positive influence on the perceived satisfaction in relation to the VCoP. In addition, the degree of individual involvement influences the degree of perceived satisfaction. The conclusion shows interesting strategic recommendations in the management process of VCoP.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The virtual community of practice in the healthcare sector: outcomes and drivers of user satisfaction

CoP is described as informal groups bound together by a common interest or passion. Wenger (1998) suggests that there are signs which indicate that a CoP has been formed. These signs include: sustained mutual relations, ways of communications and sharing information that are facilitated by a common understanding that might be unique to the CoP, forms of practice that assume sharing implicit knowledge of the process and procedures as well as a sense of “how things are going”, a sense of membership that has arisen from experiences of working together, and the development of identifiable practice styles and are unique to the CoP.

The intensive use of ITC has favored the development of VCoP. A virtual community is a community of people sharing common interests, ideas, and feelings over the Internet or other collaborative networks. Alavi (2013) defines VCoPs as a social network of individuals, who interact through social media, potentially crossing geographical, political and psychological boundaries in order to pursue mutual interest or goals. In the same line, Ramalho, Paulos, and Mesquita (2010) show how VCoP arise as a space for conversation, a learning environment, and knowledge sharing. VCoP is a community of practice in which links relationships, and these do not take place in a physical space, but in a virtual space like the Internet.

Individuals use social media in both, personal and professional area. In fact, organizations favor the use of social media as a means

to improve communication, knowledge creation and collaboration among employees. Antony et al. (2009) show how the reason why communities of practice are effective in promoting knowledge creation and sharing in organisations is the fact that most of an organization's competitive advantage is embedded in the intangible, tacit knowledge of its people and that competencies do not exist apart from people who develop them (Dougherty, 1995). Not only new knowledge can be created through the sharing in community, skills are also discursively produced and disseminated during the conversation and networking activities (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Weick & Westley, 1996).

Therefore, one of the ways to help people share and internalize tacit knowledge is to allow them to talk about their experiences and to exchange their knowledge while working on specific problems. Through this process, individual VCoP member's skills, talents and knowledge will be improved and can be identified. This will enhance the community's effectiveness as they recognize which one among them is an expert in a specific area. The community may save their energy and time since they know the right person to refer to and to seek for advice regarding a specific subject matter or problem. By having different skills, talents and knowledge among community members, the organization may leverage on its human capital that is the source of its organisational capabilities. The VCoP may also generate unique ideas for new product and services through the combination of different skills, talents and knowledge that each member possesses (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Weick & Westley, 1996).

Health professionals are using social media tools in a variety of innovative and creative ways – to build and improve social and professional networks and relationships, to share health-related information and to engage with the public, patients and colleagues in shaping future health policies and priorities. Closed online groups are also commonly used for education and peer support. In this sense, literature show how in healthcare sector, social media can offer enormous benefits to different groups, in different professional and social areas. Grajales, Sheps, Ho, Novak-Lauscher, and Eysenbach (2014) show that social media brings a new dimension to health care as it offers a medium to be used by the public, patients, and health professionals to communicate about health issues with the possibility of potentially improving health outcomes. In this sense, recent works such as Tsuya, Sugawara, Tanaka, and Narimatsu (2014), D'Auria (2014) or Kim and Seo (2014) analyze the use of specific social media in treating of cancer or diabetes patients. But also, social media is a powerful tool, which offers collaboration between users and is a social interaction mechanism for a range of individuals, making possible two important process development: (1) knowledge creation and sharing, and (2) collaborative learning.

Especially, VCoPs have made important progress in the knowledge management of health institutions (Nie, 2012). As Alicia-Rivera (2011) shows, the formation of virtual communities represent, possibly the best way to manage knowledge bases in organizations, since they integrate the most important dimensions in knowledge management: the technological, strategic, and cultural or behavioral dimensions.

2.2. VCoPs benefits at healthcare organizations

The interest in identifying the various benefits that VCoP offers is relatively new in specialized literature. And that is, as pointed out (Chang, Chang, & Jacobs, 2009) the various benefits offered: (a) have different kinds, (b) affect various agents and (c) influence different levels of developed activity.

Relative to the benefits nature, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) shows that VCoPs do not simply offer tangible assets, such as professional skill and business outcomes, but also

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