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Dysfunctional Communities of Practice – Thread for Organization

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Abstract

The paper is dedicated to the problematic of dysfunctional behavior of communities of practice. Community of practice is a group of people who have some common interest (domain) and are able to share knowledge, experiences, tools and best practices to solve problems. Human relationships in a community are friendly and supportive. Organizations usually profit from communities of practices but these groups of people can also jeopardize organizational objectives when behave in dysfunction way. The paper provides the review of literature on communities of practice and dysfunctions they may suffer with. The importance of the problematic is demonstrated on a case on dysfunctional behavior of community in telecommunication organization in post communist European country.

Keywords: Knowledge, Community of practice, Classification of communities of practice, Dysfunctions of Communities of practice,

1. Introduction

Community of practice (community) is a group of people who have some common interest (domain) and are able to share knowledge, experiences, tools and best practices to solve problems. Human relationships in a community are friendly and supportive. Organizations usually profit from communities of practices in many directions; communities accelerate collaboration, increase innovation, increase speed and quality of decision making, improve organizational learning and performance, flexibility, enable better work with knowledge and an ability to envision the future. Community members benefit from the transfer of knowledge, collaboration, pleasant environment, place of stability, and the feeling of being part of something.

But role of community may also be negative to organizational objectives. This happens when community suffer with so called dysfunction. Typical dysfunctions of communities are knowledge monopolies, elitism, arrogance, jealousness or behavior that directly leads against the interest of organization.

The problematic of dysfunctional communities is very sensitive. The troubles such community causes may be accelerated when members of community are knowledge workers. Knowledge workers are clever educated people for whom knowledge is a basic tool and resource. Due to the tacit dimension of knowledge, knowledge as a whole is of intangible character and we cannot control how knowledge workers use it to create values. Community created by

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knowledge workers may stay unrecognized for the organization. If dysfunctional behavior occurs, managers discover it late.

The paper discusses the problematic of dysfunctional communities. First the review of literature on chosen topic is done. The theory and dangers related to this topic are then demonstrated on the example of dysfunctional behavior of community from telecommunication organization in post communist European country.

In this paper we do not make difference between community of practice and community of interest or other types of communities. We understand and use the world community (community of practice) in its broadest sense.

2. Literature Review And Hypotheses

2.1. Knowledge Workers

Although all different types of employees can create and participate in community of practice, knowledge workers are major protagonists of case study in this paper. That is why the literature review starts with specification of term knowledge worker. Peter Drucker was the first who mentions knowledge workers and he argues: 'Today the centre is the knowledge worker, the man or woman who applies themselves to productive work ideas, concepts, and information rather than manual skill or brawn.' (Drucker, 1968). Knowledge workers often posses knowledge that is not widely available and even their managers do not have it. They are well educated or experienced, create their own work standards, and make decisions independently. Many of them make the final control of their product or service themselves (Mládková, 2011).

The literature on knowledge workers classifies knowledge workers to three groups (Brinkley, Fauth, Mahdon, Theodoropoulou, 2009); conceptual approaches, data (industry) driven approaches, and job content approaches. Conceptual approaches explain the term knowledge worker from the point of view of employees' importance for an organization, and his style of work with knowledge. Drucker (1954), Vinson (2009), Reboul (2006) support this approach. Data driven approaches see knowledge workers as all those who work in particular organizations or in particular sectors or institutions. Representatives of this approach are K. E. Sveiby (1997), M. Alvesson (1995). Job content approaches see knowledge workers as people who do a certain type of job. This approach can be identified in the works of A. Toffler (1990), R. Reich (1992), A. Kidd (1994), G. E. Nomikos (1989).

As J. Vinson (2009) summarizes it – knowledge worker is a person who uses his brain more than his hands in his job and whose ability to learn is critical to what he does, even if he works with his hands (Mládková, 2012, Mládková, 2014).

Despres and Hiltrop (1995) say that knowledge workers differ from other workers because they manipulate and orchestrate symbols and concepts, identify more strongly with their peers and professions than their organizations, have more rapid skill obsolescence and are more critical to the long-term success of the organization. Suff and Reilly (2005) add the following characteristics. Knowledge workers are:

- Highly mobile and quick to change jobs.
- Driven by accomplishment.
- Sensitive to peer-group assessment and praise.
- Responsive to being 'pulled' rather than being 'pushed'.
- Part of a network of peers, both inside and outside the organization.

Knowledge workers tend to get job satisfaction from

- Challenging work.
- Continuous training and coaching.
- Tangible results and organizational values.
- Organizational values or missions that mirror their own (Suff, Reilly, 2005).