



PMO managers' self-determined participation in a purposeful virtual community-of-practice

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Received 18 September 2016; accepted 19 September 2016
Available online 3 November 2016

Abstract

Communities-of-practice (CoPs) have received significant attention within a variety of literatures but we remain largely ignorant of the potential of purposefully-created CoPs in global organisations. In this context, the challenge is likely to be convincing 'masters' (Wenger, 1998) on the merits of joining the conversation on practice at a distance, thus making the willingness to exchange a key to the quality and longevity of the community. We posed the question "Why would busy, dispersed, knowledgeable professionals want to join and participate in a deliberately-organised CoP?" Our 2-year collaborative action study allowed us to observe the CoP and its membership at close range. We conclude that autonomy, competence and belonging underscore participation, co-production and diffusion of innovative problem-solving and practice beyond the CoP. The study will inform organisations contemplating similar interventions and also serves as a basis for further investigation and theory building on organized CoPs by the research community.

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Keywords: Communities-of-practice; Knowledge-sharing; PMO; Action research; Motivation

1. Introduction

Organisational theorists such as Galbraith (1994) and Weick and Roberts (1994) had long foreseen peer group connection as a critical challenge in knowledge-intensive organisations (KIOs). The lament, 'If only HP knew what HP knows' by a former CEO (Brown and Duguid, 2002, p429) reflects early claims that knowledge is a key source of competitive advantage (Grant, 1996). This is reflected in the large body of research that has been undertaken regarding knowledge in the context of projects (e.g. Ahern et al., 2014; Bosch-Sijtsema and Henriksson, 2014; Holzmann, 2013; Pemsel and Müller, 2012; Pemsel et al., 2014; Reich et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2014), with the recognition that learning is both valuable and difficult in this environment.

In this paper we bring together two themes within the literature. First, an important line of inquiry around knowledge

production and flow throughout the organisation is the notion of communities-of-practice (CoPs). Second, the role of the Project Management Office (PMO) has also been investigated in terms of its benefits as a repository of knowledge and also in promoting knowledge-sharing within the organisation. However, the role of community-based learning incorporating the PMO is lacking. We chronicle an intervention with a major IT-services organisation to set up a virtual CoP for the purpose of sharing effective practices across dispersed and unconnected groups and individuals and investigate the motivations of those involved.

The paper is structured as follows. Initially we identify the literature that is the basis for our research and explain the relevance of self-determination theory for the project. We then introduce the case organisation and provide a working definition of the case CoP before detailing our collaborative action research design. As the sponsoring organisation did not specify outcome or performance metrics in advance of the intervention, we demonstrate observable aspects of community formation and participation (i.e. membership, attendance and

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outputs from joint activities). We discuss the findings and their implications for practice and theory. The paper concludes with a call for further research in what is as yet, a little understood but important aspect of organisational communities-of-practice.

2. Literature

There is a significant body of literature investigating the role of learning in projects which indicates the benefits that can be obtained (Carrillo et al., 2013; Eriksson, 2013; Sense, 2011; Fernandes et al., 2015). This incorporates learning in projects and programmes (Arthur et al., 2001; Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001; Brady and Davies, 2004; Davies and Brady, 2000; Duffield and Whitty, 2016; Dutton et al., 2014; Keegan and Turner, 2001; Scarbrough et al., 2004; Swan et al., 2010), knowledge transfer and integration (Cacciatori et al., 2012; Enberg et al., 2006), and an ‘exploratory’, problem-solving, approach (Gerald et al., 2011; Klein and Meckling, 1958; Lenfle, 2008, 2014; Lenfle and Loch, 2010). Although learning lessons from projects is a laudable goal, this is very difficult for organisations to achieve in practice (Williams, 2008).

In line with this is the role of PMOs as repositories of learning and as vehicles enabling knowledge transfer (Artto et al., 2011; Dutton et al., 2014; Julian, 2008; Liu and Yetton, 2007; Pemsel and Wiewiora, 2013; Unger et al., 2012). The wide variation of PMO sizes, functions and activities precludes ‘one-size-fits-all’ recommendations, but these organisational arrangements do appear to be valuable in catalysing and improving learning. Capturing and disseminating knowledge from a variety of distributed PMOs does not appear to have been well studied, though.

An alternative perspective is to take a more ‘social’ view of the phenomenon of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) first developed the CoP concept to represent a situated activity system where more experienced members can impart their knowledge to less experienced colleagues. This was later refined by Wenger (1998) as the continuing interaction by a group of people with common concerns and problems or a passion for a subject, or who are looking for practice improvement. Wenger (1998) explains that there are two components of participation: the physical act of taking action and the ‘monuments’, instruments and points of focus around which people can connect and establish a shared identity. The underlying assumption remains: extended participation promotes rich exchange and identity formation, leading ultimately to a cohesive community capable of innovative solutions (Brown and Duguid, 1991, 1998; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Liedtka, 1999; Tagliaventi and Mattarelli, 2006). Hence, social interaction rather than pure managerial ‘process’ (Bartsch et al., 2013; Di Vincenzo and Mascia, 2012; Han and Hovav, 2013; Lee et al., 2015) is central to the effectiveness of the community. To the above we would add that Wenger’s (1998) subsequent refinement suggesting mutual sharing rather than a directional flow of knowledge has significance for knowledge-based project organisations and the *willingness* to connect is key to the longevity of any community.

Definitional differences have surfaced as business models become more transient and remote (Lindkvist, 2005),

prompting some to insist that the CoP concept is still largely normative and under-operationalised (e.g. Koliba and Gajda, 2009; Roberts, 2006). Others are concerned that its evolution into an all-encompassing construct is at the expense of other group-level constructs (e.g. Amin and Roberts, 2008; Lindkvist, 2005). Arguably, the resultant proliferation of labels can create further confusion, diverting researchers from finding out what a community *is* to worrying about what it *should be* (Bell and Newby, 1974). Examples include: *communities of knowing* (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995); *community of practitioners* (Gherardi, 2006); *communities of interest* (Fischer, 2001); *collectivities of practice* (Lindkvist, 2005); *epistemic communities* (Gittelman, 2007); *collaborative networks* (Ahuja, 2000); *networks of practice* (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Van de Ven, 2005) and *constellations of interconnected practices* (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). Each claims to describe a specific set of social practices or level of relationships within an organisation or society but their boundaries are not always definitive. Certainly Lindkvist (2005) is of the opinion that the term *constellation* displays too many CoP-like characteristics to be useful as an independent analytical category.

Distinguishing between ‘old’ and ‘new’ practices, we compared and contrasted Wenger and Snyder’s (2000) community characteristics of high trust, strong shared cognitions and mutual commitment with Lindkvist’s (2005) alternative notion of collectivities characterised by strong goal and task orientations, transient relationships and transactive socialisation. Distilling their different properties, we surmised that learning in more traditional self-generated communities is unintentional, paradigmatic and contextualised through extended situated practice whereas learning in the modern distributed collectivities is goal-oriented, solutions-focused and individualised. We also drew upon the concept of disciplinary networks of practice (Brown and Duguid, 2001) where, as with the Project Management Office employees in this study (discussed shortly), individuals by virtue of their practice will have access to other practitioners through their professional associations. We believed the different epistemological maxims could be used to elaborate motivation for knowledge transference in the case organisation.

Working on the notion that management has a responsibility to harness fragmented practices across the organisation for increased competitiveness (Argote and Ingram, 2000; Brown and Duguid, 2001; Wenger and Snyder, 2000) many companies have assimilated existing informal communities into their formal structures (see McDermott and Archibald, 2010). Others have intentionally initiated organisational CoPs (Meeuwesen and Berends, 2007; Swan et al., 2002). Yet, importantly, Roberts (2006) appears unconvinced that management can engineer a CoP successfully. The need to balance control and autonomy is an unresolved management dilemma especially in dispersed networks (Agterberg et al., 2009). Meanwhile, as more powerful technology arrives, a new generation of web-based communities has emerged moving away from the concept of situated to trans-situated computer-mediated learning (Vaast and Walsham, 2009). Examples from the field include Java Inc.’s (Songini, 2003) sponsorship of a number of global virtual communities to encourage developers to trade

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