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Another cog in the machine: Designing communities of practice in professional bureaucracies

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Summary This paper explores the purposeful design and development of a community of practice within a professional bureaucracy. The view of communities of practice has shifted from fundamentally organic entities to ones that can be deliberately designed and developed and they have frequently been presented as a panacea for knowledge sharing and creation, a basis for innovation in organizations. However, evidence that organizations have succeeded to achieve this challenge is lacking. Through the processual analysis of such an organizational intervention, this longitudinal study shows that these two contexts – the community of practice and the professional bureaucracy – do not mesh well and create tensions for those employees who are also community of practice members. This implies that the community of practice approach may not serve all types of organizations. The findings also lead to the reconsideration of communities of practice in organizations and a critique of the main appraisal of this approach is presented. It is suggested that communities of practice should be regarded as a social phenomenon rather than an organizational learning tool.

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Introduction

Today's successful organizations must be regarded as institutions where knowledge and skills are continually developed, refined, updated, and protected through complex learning processes that lead to innovation. Yet, according to 400 senior executives of major organizations across the globe, connecting people and know-how across units re-

mains one of the greatest human issues facing organizations (IBM., 2008). Managing knowledge is indeed easier said than done. It does not consist of simply assembling information as if it were books in a library or files on a hard drive (McDermott & O'Dell, 2005; Zhang & Zhao, 2006). Managing knowledge means creating a social and material infrastructure that encourages knowledge sharing, application, and creation (Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Jacob & Parlat, 2000). There are different means to attain this end, one of which is the community of practice (CoP) (Brown & Duguid, 2001a; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

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It is suggested that CoPs need to be developed systematically and strategically (Kimble & Bourdon, 2008; McDermott, 2000; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Wenger, 2004; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). Indeed, according to Wenger et al. (2002), CoPs are unlikely to achieve their full potential without organizational intervention. However, such an intervention is said to be an art and evidence that organizations have succeeded to achieve this challenge is lacking.

In this study, we investigate the purposeful design and development (PDD) of a CoP within a professional bureaucracy. This study is at the crossroads of several avenues of research. First, while scholars have invited research to explore in which organizational contexts the CoPs approach is the most appropriate knowledge management tool (e.g., Roberts, 2006), the CoP theory and Mintzberg's seminal work on organizational configurations (1980) have never been considered in relation to each other. Second, for the first time in the literature in this domain, a processual analysis of such an organizational intervention is provided. A grounded theory design is adopted, using empirical findings to understand the failure to design and develop a CoP in sustainable development within a large labour union. Third, the findings show that the two contexts – the CoP and the professional bureaucracy – do not mesh well and create tensions for employees who are also CoP members. This implies that the CoPs approach may not serve all types of organization. Organizations' management should therefore consider the CoPs' context before deciding to adopt this model. The findings also lead to the reconsideration of CoPs in organizations and a critique of the main appraisal of the CoPs approach is presented. It is suggested that CoPs should be regarded as a social phenomenon rather than an organizational learning tool.

The paper is structured as follows. The literature review begins with a review of the origins of the CoP concept and its growth, which shows how the view of CoPs has shifted from fundamentally organic entities to ones that can be deliberately designed and developed. The literature review then introduces a number of accounts which focus more specifically on the management of CoPs, and considers how far insights drawn from these can inform and strengthen their PDD within organizations. The next section describes the case itself and outlines the research method that has been adopted. The empirical findings and their discussion are provided in the next two sections. The focus is put on the theory that emerged about the PDD process of the CoP under study. The paper ends with implications for practice and offers some conclusions about the need for future research to look at the PDD of CoPs within other organizational configurations.

Background

Community of practice: the roots and development of the concept

Since the pioneering work by Lave and Wenger (1991) on the integration of individuals within a community built around a common practice, the literature on CoPs has constantly evolved, providing increasing recognition of their role in knowledge management. Thus, according to Wenger (1998), CoPs are currently not only seen as a context for

the learning of newcomers, but also as a context for new insights to be transformed into knowledge, which can lead to innovation. In this sense, Amin and Cohendet categorically state that: "The proper unit of analysis for knowledge formation in terms of knowing found in practice should be neither individuals nor organizations, but socially distributed activity systems, such as communities." (2004, p. 30).

"Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4) More precisely, three key interconnected features define a CoP: the mutual engagement of the members, the negotiation of a joint enterprise, and the development of a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). Here, mutual engagement refers to the amount and pattern of interactions in which individuals engage with one another. More absorbing than having a title or holding a certain position, this engagement is illustrated by the ties that bind individuals and through which they engage in a joint enterprise. Subsequently, by referring to a common purpose or a unifying goal, a joint enterprise creates mutual responsibility among individuals and bestows coherence on their actions. Third, a shared repertoire can be defined as the outcome of the previous two features. This outcome can be either formal (forms, procedures, tools, etc.) or informal (concepts, stories, jargon, etc.), but traces the history of the community's mutual engagement. In sum, a CoP is a structure within which members show great self-determination in their ability to contribute to the practice and take collective responsibility for managing the needed knowledge. Furthermore, social learning systems like CoPs involve three modes of belonging: members become engaged through doing things together, talking and producing artifacts; they reflect on their situation and envision themselves in the world through imagination; and they align their activities with processes as they evolve to maintain efficiency (Wenger, 1998).

The learning that occurs within a CoP is interactive. Members learn by engaging in their practice within a collaborative structure, which goes beyond an individual mind. Learning is also mediated by the different perspectives of the individuals participating in the learning context. In this sense, CoP members develop and reinforce their knowledge domain by entering a process known as "perspective making" (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995) through the unfolding of their actions and conversations. These socially embedded mechanisms provide access to the CoP members' experiences and reflections. This in turn allows them to enter cognition-inspired and socially embedded learning paradigms grounded in a common practice.

Over the years, CoP theory development has shown a lack of consensus (Roberts, 2006). From one point of view, a number of scholars (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1991; Cox, 2005; Duguid, 2008; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Raz, 2007) argue that CoPs emerge spontaneously, self-organize their activities, and set their own learning agenda. From this perspective, CoPs cannot be artificially created and managed. On the other hand, many scholars have moved away from the view of naturally emerging CoPs and argue that managers can design and manage them (e.g., Kimble & Bourdon, 2008; McDermott, 2000; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Wenger, 2004; Wenger

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