

Communities of practice (COP): Drivers of effectiveness

Abstract

“The basic economic resource... is no longer capital, nor natural resources..., nor ‘labour’.... It is and will be knowledge” (Drucker, 1993). Knowledge without doubt has been a key contributor for organizational success today. The ability of an organization to utilise the knowledge which exists within it through the use of systems, networks, and other means has become crucial in today’s world. The use of IT systems to capture knowledge existing in organizations is well documented. Another interesting aspect has been the ability of an organization to capture the knowledge that exists within the social spaces of its employees. The focus of this thesis is on understanding how organizations can tap into the social space of its employees to identify and manage the knowledge that lies therein. The research setting of this study was a mid-sized information technology consulting and implementation organization, MindTree Limited. Along with its IT based knowledge management systems, MindTree has encouraged the creation of many communities of practices (CoP) within the organization. Their aim was to encourage knowledge sharing by creating an environment and culture that facilitated informal interactions between likeminded employees. MindTree was chosen as the research site for this thesis because of their focus on communities of practice as a primary knowledge management mechanism and the fact that I could get access to multiple communities of practice and could control for organizational level factors. An extensive review of communities of practice literature was conducted. The literature review revealed that there were a lot of contradictory evidences that existed in the field with regards to how communities evolve; the role an organization plays in the creation and sustenance of a community of practice and so on. Based on the identified research gaps the key research question that evolved was: How do input characteristics and community processes impact community effectiveness? To address this question, I conducted a qualitative study. With the help of members from the knowledge management department at MindTree, 16 co-located communities were chosen for the study. 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted to include members x and champions (coordinators of community activities) of these communities. Of the sixteen communities chosen for this study, thirteen communities were created to focus on matters that were closely aligned to some department in the organization, while the other three communities were hobby or interest group based communities. The interviews were transcribed and coded using NVIVO, MS Excel and MS Word. Secondary sources like the company website, annual reports, Harvard Business Review case, newspaper and magazine articles, and articles by a founding member of MindTree were also used to corroborate the primary data. Using the method suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) I conducted a within and cross site analysis to develop linkages between the findings. Based on this analysis technique I was able to categorize the 16 communities into three groups and developed causal networks for them. All the communities at MindTree received the support of their knowledge management department and senior management. This support was sufficient for the three communities that had an interest group or hobby focus to function successfully. For communities that focused on knowledge that was closely aligned to some or the other department in the organization, this support was not sufficient. Amongst these thirteen communities, I found that seven communities had the active support and involvement of managers from departments whose knowledge focus was closely aligned with that of the community. On an average they were active for four and a half years. The members perceived that the community satisfied their as well as the organization’s needs. The other six communities that were closely aligned in terms of knowledge focus with some department at MindTree, did not have the active support of the managers from those departments. These

communities on average, actively conducted community activities for two years. Members of these communities perceived that the community was not as beneficial to them or the organization as it had the potential to be. So, they were not satisfied with the community's performance. Communities of practice are largely touted to be an informal space where like minded members interact with each other and share knowledge, work practices, and so on. Literature argues that such systems of knowledge sharing function best when the organization or external members do not attempt to govern or control it (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2003). This study found contradictory evidences to the above. Unlike a naturally evolving community, communities that are nurtured by the organization lose their flexibility. In this case I observed that the communities were nurtured and supported by the KM department and the senior management. As a result they had to abide by certain norms and rules set by them. While these rules were largely beneficial, they have also taken away the flexibility the community would have, had it been self-emergent and operated under the radar of the formal organization. Given this loss of flexibility, communities could not operate in the same manner a self-emergent community could operate. As a result, it was important that all key stakeholders (senior management, KM department, departmental managers and so on) were all actively supportive of the community's activity. When one key stakeholder set (for example departmental managers) adopted the approach that communities should ideally operate without external interference, the community effectiveness suffered. This was because the community faced a lack of flexibility compounded by the lack of active support that it needed to balance its loss of flexibility. Thus, to be effective, it is essential that each key stakeholder actively support the community. This research helped provide an understanding of why certain communities were more effective than others. This understanding is a contribution to the body of knowledge on CoPs, as CoP literature is replete with contradictory evidences on CoP success and failure. In practice, CoPs nurtured by the organization are largely viewed as the responsibility of the KM department. This research helps dispel that notion. It allows a practitioner to identify the key stakeholders and key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a CoP.