The Learning Engine: Building Capabilities through Communities of Practice

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The Learning Engine
Building Capabilities through Communities of Practice

By Deb Wallace, Ph.D.

Managing information and leveraging knowledge within organizations creates a strategic advantage through the development of efficient business practice, resulting in increased productivity. A prominent strategy for achieving this state is developing and supporting communities of practice. While the idea of communities is not new (i.e., people have formed groups to address work-related issues for centuries), the term was first coined in 1991 by then Xerox PARC researchers Wenger and Lavé, who were studying how adults learn within an organizational context.

Their early analysis of knowledge-based organizations identified groups of employees getting together to solve work-related prob-

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Communities of Practice—Knowledge at Work

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problems without management directive or involvement. Recognizing the level of information exchange and learning that took place within these groups, management began to pay attention to their loosely formed, often organic, structure. Through a meeting of the minds, community members pooled their expertise, built information stores, shared their experience, tested new ideas, improved on past processes and procedures, and found solutions that resulted in increased capability and improved performance.

A great deal has been written about communities of practice since Wenger and Lave identified this organizational structure in their book *Situated Learning* (1991). Practitioners and researchers alike have spent the past decade contributing to our understanding of communities by refining definitions, identifying underlying concepts, dissecting components, comparing and contrasting their form to other organizational structures, and devising measurement and assessment practices to substantiate their value.

This knowledge-age version of medieval guilds (minus the traveling wagons, mind you) has become an integral component of knowledge and learning strategies around the world—a representation of a concrete approach to building the individual and organizational capabilities required to create and sustain a competitive advantage.

With the volume of information increasing at mind-boggling speed, knowledge walking out the door with an aging workforce demographic, and a global economy that is demanding new ways of leveraging knowledge assets 24/7, communities of practice offer a naturally forming learning engine that can easily be leveraged in any type of organization.

It's All about Capabilities

Successful organizations know that achieving the expected outcomes of carefully devised strategies depends on having the necessary capabilities to enable performance. Figure 1 illustrates the link that capabilities provide between strategy and its intended outcomes. New thinking suggests that creating distinctive capabilities to meet market demands is the most effective driver for strategy development. "In turn, the organization's performance depends on the quality and reach of its strategies and its ability to provide the necessary individual and organizational capabilities that enable employees to take effective action." (Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2003, p. 59)

The need, then, to constantly increase capabilities means that organizations must invest in strategies and approaches that provide opportunities for employees to learn, to create new knowledge, and to dynamically share what they know. As well, organizations must pay attention to building the capability to learn, to enable the continuous generation of new capabilities, often at an accelerated pace.

Even though we've only been formally studying adult learning since the mid-1970s, we know a great deal about what provides the biggest return on the learning and knowledge-creating dollars invested. We know that learning is a social endeavor, that we prefer to learn from trusted sources whether human or material, and that our personal and professional networks are our first point of contact when we "need to know" something. We also know that the majority of what we need to learn in order to do our jobs is actually learned on the job, while working—not isolated in classrooms away from the work environment. And we're getting better at utilizing technology to enable just-in-time learning—from simple forms of capturing threaded dialogues to sophisticated simulations of anticipated events.

Looking under the Hood

For every organization that is still "kicking the tires" or "test driving" communities of practice as a viable approach to achieving desperately needed capabilities, knowing organizations as identified in Choo's seminal work (Oxford University Press, 1999), already "get it." With what amounts to fairly minimal effort, these organizations have provided support in the form of tools and resources as well as people skilled in community development and support. But more important, they have championed the community of practice concept and openly recognized the value derived from dynamic exchange among experienced and novice practitioners.

The term "community" is considered one of the most complex concepts in the field of sociology. Probably the most common understanding is framed by the community in which we live. It has physical boundaries, infrastructure, rules, and of course lots of people! A key component of communities of practice as well as a critical factor in their success is a shared sense of purpose. While each individual's perspective may have unique qualities, a shared purpose unites the community, becomes the bedrock for collaboration, and fosters the building of trust.

Wenger, who continued to work in the field along with co-authors McDermott and Snyder, provides the most referenced definition of communities of practice:

![Figure 1. Capabilities—The Link between Strategy and Performance](image-url)
"Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their understanding and knowledge of this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4)

With this definition in mind, others have identified the various components that make up a community of practice. In our work we found that true communities of practices (as opposed to communities of interest, purpose, or learning) include the following features:

- Self-governance—agreed-upon conventions, principles, and governance structure
- Member support—accountability to support one another
- Knowledge base—knowledge created and updated by members that furthers a practice
- Productive inquiry—iterative method of questioning that fuels knowledge creation and exchange, situated in practice and vetted by the members
- Shared knowledge—collaborating and learning as vehicles to make knowledge more widely available
- Collaborative tools—use of a variety of synchronous and asynchronous collaborative tools, including face-to-face meetings and on-line space
- Facilitation—dedicated human resources to keep the community focused on its purpose
- Organization as a valid way to learn and collaborate; adds value to the organization

Communities come in all shapes and sizes. They range from formal to informal and structured to unstructured, but they all share the common features of being focused on a specific practice and steeped in knowledge creation.

Communities Don’t DO WORK!

One of the distinguishing features of a community of practice is that it doesn’t do any real work. The typical response to this statement is... "Then sign me up!" But it’s a key point that warrants explicit understanding, especially from all levels of an organization’s management. Communities don’t “do work” in the sense that an organization cannot set the agenda for a community nor can its management dictate a set of goals and objectives to be achieved by the community—that’s the responsibility of project teams, workgroups, or units/departments—not communities.

The only “work” that the community does is create knowledge. Once created, that knowledge is captured, stored, and made readily available to other members in a dynamic exchange supported by a knowledge architecture described in Figure 2.

Knowledge access and knowledge exchange form the two main elements of this architecture. Knowledge access puts the full knowledge base of the community at the disposal of all community members. Knowledge exchange allows that knowledge to be put in context and validated by members and drawn out additional tacit knowledge that might otherwise lie unused. This dynamic interchange keeps knowledge relevant while also making it persistent. In the end, knowledge resides in communities—not in isolated repositories or physical libraries. The value of community knowledge is that it goes beyond what has been written and unearths the truly difficult-to-know aspects of practice—the nuances, variations, and subtleties that can only be discovered in conversation.

Catalysts for Change

In the purest sense of the word, learning is about change—about changing behavior through the acquisition of new knowledge. While we tend to be creatures of habit who will gladly go out of our way, often paying a premium, to reach a favorite coffee shop chain, shop at a preferred retailer, or seek the comforts of a particular hotel, we also live in a world where an accepted mantra is "the only constant is change."

Businesses that celebrate 50 years on the New York Stock Exchange are few and far between—and those that have survived have done so because of their agility, their ability to "sense and respond" (see Saint-Onge and Armstrong, 2004) to the changing marketplace faster than their competition.

Central to this capability is the capacity to learn. We’re seeing the expansion of the communities of practice model to include learning communities, professional development communities, and communities of purpose. While the form and formats vary, the function remains the same—social interaction that results in creating and then sharing knowledge.

The place to start is to assess your organizational readiness—your capacity to enable community interactions. In particular, does your organization have:

- Partnering mindsets and capabilities—the values, attributes, and skills necessary to learn, collaborate, and share knowledge
- A supportive context and leadership endorsement—an explicit, collaborative culture that recognizes the value of learning and knowledge sharing with an appropriate rewards system in place
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- A strong technology platform—tools integrated into workflow that support communication as well as knowledge harvesting, storage, and access
- Strategic alignment—a community strategy that is aligned with the organization’s vision, mission, strategic imperatives, and employee codes and contracts
- Realistic expectations for return on investment—the ability of management to anticipate and then measure the community’s contribution in a realistic and meaningful way

Growing Potential

From a life-cycle perspective, communities of practice are still in the early stages of Moore’s adoption cycle (1991)—an organization’s realization of their strategic importance as a means to create and share knowledge, innovate, and foster change. But innovators and early adopters are already on to the next level of community development, utilizing social network analysis to form and grow communities and grappling with the ever-shrinking availability of time by studying the notion of continuous partial attention.

We’ve only scratched the surface of the possibilities communities of practice offer organizations. SLA is well on the road to exploring the potential not only for building individual and organizational capability, but for furthering the profession and its practice.

References and Further Reading


Nancy White and Full Circle Associates: http://www.fullcirc.com

John Smith and CP Square: http://www.learningalliances.net/CP_bib/

Community of Practice Mega Sites: http://virtualcommunities.start4all.com and http://communities-of-practice.pagina.nl

SLA’s Community of Practice Site: http://cop.sla.org/COP

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