Organizing professional communities of practice

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5 Conclusions

In this chapter I return to the main research question as well as two of the sub-questions. I also present some conclusions based on the research done in relation to these questions.

In the last chapter I presented the results of six implementations of the CoPOS and analyzed the results in two ways. First I looked at the results in their entirety in the section entitled ‘Aggregate data analysis’. This was in order to answer research question number four: “What does a tested system for organizing CoPs look like”. The answer to this is the final version of the CoPOS shown in Table 4.34.

The second analysis in chapter four, entitled ‘Cross-case analysis’, was done in order to understand contextual factors that might have influenced the success and effectiveness of the CoPs in regards to effects proposed in the research model. This analysis was needed to answer research question five, which was formulated as: “What contextual factors contribute to the effectiveness of CoPs?” The answer to this is found in the discussion itself, but the most major conclusion that can be made from this research is that the organizational setting does in fact influence effectiveness. In organizations where cynicism and/or resistance to change is high, the effectiveness of the CoP is negatively influenced. The opposite is also true; CoPs organized outside of one specific organizational setting, or where management is highly supportive, seem to be more effective.

The next part of the discussion is about the main research question. In order to answer this, I use the entire results of the research. The main research question was formulated as:

*How can communities of practice be designed and implemented as forums for employee learning in knowledge-intensive, service-based organizations such as polytechnics?*
The answer to this question is a combined result of the literature reviews, the empirical testing and the analyses, and takes the form of a set of tested design principles for organizing CoPs. As I stated in the introduction, design principles “...can be seen as offering a general template for the creation of solutions for a particular class of field problems” (Denyer et al., 2008, p. 395). The final version of the CoPOS is actually based on the following design principles and as such, helps answer the main research question as well.

I have divided up the list of design principles by concept. The first group of design principles concerns motivation. Motivating (potential) members to join a CoP is the first step in organizing one, as well as an important factor for its successful continuance. Motivation is also an underlying aspect of each of the design principles and the basis for the concept of generative mechanisms – which can be found in each of the design principles6.

Design principles about motivation
1. At the start of the CoP, members are concerned about the place of the CoP in the organization and how their work will affect the greater collective. In order to assure embeddedness in the organization, specific agreements about the CoP with the management should be made and discussed with CoP members.

2. In the early stages of the CoP, people attend the meetings often out of curiosity. But if they are not quickly motivated to continue to participate, then interest dies off. This means that motivation for continued participation needs to be considered. Focusing on a specific, concrete problem is important because it helps to assure continued motivation by focusing on an important task. Developing the learning agenda is one way of doing this as it gives insight into the different aspects of a complicated problem and allows that problem to be broken down into manageable pieces that can then be explored.

6 I follow Hedstrom and Swedburg’s (1998) idea that generative mechanisms are linked to methodological individualism. Gambetta (1998) also maintains this perspective, describing mechanisms as “...hypothetical causal models that make sense of individual behavior. They have the form, ‘given certain conditions K, an agent will do X because of M...’” (p.102).
3. CoPs are task-based environments, and as such need to focus efforts on developing some specific knowledge product that can be used in the greater organization. Once the problem has been decided upon using the learning agenda as a guide, an intervention like the new product development intervention can be used to give structure to the process of innovating.

The next group of design principles is about guiding and structuring meeting processes, which plays a critical role in the effectiveness of the CoP.

Design principles about process
4. Individual meetings should lead to a definite outcome. If a specific outcome is desired, then use one of the interventions found in the CoPOS. This will raise effectiveness of the meetings by helping the group to focus on content, rather than process.

5. In order to help the group to reflect on the CoP processes as well as gain insight into the workings of the processes going on there, use a mixture of evaluative techniques, such as a combination of a formal survey and a discussion about the important points raised in it. This helps members to understand what is happening with the internal processes as well as give the organizers ideas about needed improvements.

The last design rule is about dealing with organizational context.

Design principle about context
6. In an organizational context where cynicism is high, the added value of participation to the individual in a CoP needs to be strongly and regularly emphasized. This can be done purposefully when presenting the business case and again when developing the learning agenda. Later, there should be group reflection on the value of participation.

The following chapter is a discussion on what CoPs can mean for solving the original problem as given in the introduction.