

Communities of practice as a knowledge sharing forum (discourse analysis of marketing & communications business practice at accenture Asia-Pacific)

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Abstrak

Three occurrences that in some way interlink to one another have dramatically changed how companies conduct its activities. First is globalization reality, second is the growth of technologies and third, how knowledge is increasingly valued. Spectacular advances and convergence in computer are driving changes in organizations and communication technology - known to be computer mediated communication (CMC) -- and globalization that emerges new network forms in an organization as an integral part of the co-evolution of the new network society.

These organizational and social forms are built around material and symbolic flows that link people and objects both locally and globally without regard for traditional, national, institutional, or organizational boundaries. The unity of people that shares or exchanges information - with or without technology - over time for a sustained pursuit is considered as a Community of Practice. This study is relevant in current organizational communication perspectives as the purpose of this research is to gain understanding how Communities of Practice as a computer-mediated-communication network applies knowledge sharing in a global organization. As Communities of Practice eliminates boundaries between countries and members, several questions of inquiry arise in this study.

The study used ethnographic inquiry for gathering, organizing and understanding the data as well as discourse analysis for understanding how an organizational communication network is constructed in conversation and/or interactions; through the application of electronic discourse based on Biber's dimensions and using type-token ratio (TTR) for analysis (Davis & Brewer, 1997). Electronic discourse-conferences, e-mail, discussion lists, or forums focuses on how individuals use language to exchange ideas rather than on the medium or channel by which they transfer and deliver their messages. In as much as electronic discourse involves interaction among people, the text implies something about the variety of social interactions among its composers.

The particular communities of practice in this study is the Asia Pacific Marketing and Communications business practice, which has more than 40 people from 11 countries and with various levels of expertise and title as members. Although hierarchy does exist, the working relationship is considered as a flat organization to be able to nurture collaboration and sharing. As a community of practice it meets on a weekly basis through a conference call session, conduct monthly training together, and uncounted corresponding through e-mail. The practice also has a technology support database using lotus notes to compile all activities (plan and results) and the "SharePoint" portal as a share-forum.

Based on the study it is obvious that the Communities of Practice build its own knowledge management practice and emphasize to its members to leverage knowledge sharing by using various forms. The community groups, or even as individuals, are also provided access to the use of technology and computer mediated communication networks in strengthening the knowledge transfer. But although a Communities of Practice format is intended to have less control, the Communities of Practice in this study sees that the lead

person as a representative of a formal hierarchy sometimes apply normative characteristics in a functional role, addition to the function as a senior member to coordinate knowledge dissemination to others. In addition, in this study the context of learning and sharing is very much focused on the work the members do - especially that is considered their interest - and do not go beyond the working knowledge they need for their task. Knowledge management tools provided, in the form of various content portals, are not used at a maximum level. Whereas other forms of technology are more likely used to absorb more information or understanding of the work they do, i.e. using telephone, e-mail and messenger systems. Going back to the historical perspectives on emergence of communication structures in organizations, we can assume that a mediated network through CoP is considered more of the relational tradition. This tradition focuses primarily on the direct communication that establishes and maintains communication linkages. Taken collectively, these linkages create an emergent communication structure that connects different people and groups in the organization irrespective of their formal positions or roles. Also, differences in language and cultural background also restrict the dissemination of knowledge that is consistent and equal across all members. For the members who are raised and trained in a Western culture -- in this case the Australians - they are used to having open format discussions and are not shy of expressing their minds. As for the other many Asians, they would only take part if they were requested to do so or feel that they can actually contribute.

Implications of this study are also two-fold. First, on a pragmatic basis, members in organizations have the Freedom to choose how they communicate within the formal and informal networks, and have the right to choose in which network forms they need to engage. The second-level effects also do not always support the intention to be innovative because it actually creates more pressure on task-orientation rather than creativity although it does provide more boundaries crossing communication. This indicates, that cultural understanding is important despite the fact that technology is supposed to decrease cultural differences. On a theoretical perspectives, this study provides a better understanding how organizational communication networks are established, especially emergent models that are informal in a way but correspond closely to the formal communication structures. Further, the increased use of new computer-mediated communication systems has made formal organizational structure as a benchmark against which to use for emergent communication networks.