Chapter 5.3
Discovering Communities of Practice through Social Network Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of a community of practice is emerging as an essential building block of the knowledge economy. Brown and Duguid (2001) argue that organizations should be conceptualized as consisting of autonomous communities whose interactions can foster innovation within an organization and accelerate the introduction of innovative ideas. The key to competitive advantage depends on a firm’s ability to coordinate across autonomous communities of practice internally and leverage the knowledge that flows into these communities from network connections (Brown & Duguid, 2001). But how does an organization do this? A key challenge for management is understanding how to balance strategies that capture knowledge without killing it (Brown & Duguid, 2000).

BACKGROUND

Typically, top-down business processes aimed at leveraging knowledge flows end up stifling creativity by institutionalizing structures promoting rigidity. In order to understand knowledge flows, managers need to change their focus away from a process view of knowledge creation to a practice-based view. When individuals have a common practice, knowledge more readily flows horizontally across that practice, creating informal social networks to support knowledge exchange.