The Role of Informal Groups in Organisational Knowledge Work: Understanding an Emerging Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

Research has focused on formal and informal groups playing a significant role in organisational knowledge sharing. The concept of the Community of Practice (CoP) has emerged as one such form and has attracted the attention of researchers. This paper reports the initial stages of an ongoing study of an emerging CoP. Specifically, we report the initial stage of a longer-term action research study, investigating how individuals within an informal group in a knowledge intensive organisation perceive themselves, including whether they display the characteristics commonly attributed to a CoP (Wenger, 1998) and how their shared practice might be related to knowledge work. Furthermore, reflecting upon the results reported we capture, in a model, how an emerging CoP might contribute to Knowledge Management (KM) in a knowledge intensive organisation, linking top-down and bottom-up KM strategies.

Keywords: communities of practice; group dynamics; knowledge management; knowledge strategies; knowledge work

INTRODUCTION

“Knowledge is always changing. For the moment the best approach to managing it is one that keeps things moving” (Allee, 1997, p. 72). In the past few years there has been a growing interest in turning knowledge into a significant organisational resource, as organisational and managerial practices become increasingly knowledge-focused (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). A growing literature reports a tendency to knowledge work in organisations, highlighting the associated challenges of exploiting the notion of power = knowledge in a collaborative sense, to the advantage of the organisation and to reduce knowledge hoarding of individuals (Lichtenstein & Hunter, 2004). It appears that
both cooperation and collaboration are the keys to effective and efficient knowledge utilisation, expansion and distribution in the organisation.

One stream of research has focused on formal and informal groups playing a significant role in organisational knowledge sharing. The concept of the CoP has emerged as one such form of a group and has attracted the attention of researchers. CoPs are groups of people informally bound together by a shared practice and a passion for a joint enterprise (Wenger & Snyder, 1999). The CoP is a social construct, characterised as a social group that shares common objectives but which is not necessarily structured as an organisational unit.

Investigations of CoPs have found these structures to be highly receptive to knowledge sharing and innovation. Whilst some barriers to knowledge sharing have been identified, CoPs thrive through the open and free sharing of knowledge (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003), and can be sources of innovation that is highly valued by organisations (Brown & Duguid, 1991). CoPs tend to emerge naturally, but often exist initially as relatively ineffective communities requiring support to realise their potential (McMaster, 2001). It has been suggested by some researchers that a firm can be viewed as a distributed knowledge system (Tsoukas, 1996) and therefore as an organisation of CoPs. In accord with this view, we investigate further the role of CoPs in organisational knowledge work.

In this paper we report the initial stages of an ongoing study of what we refer to as an emerging CoP. In particular, we investigate how individuals within an informal group in a knowledge intensive organisation perceive themselves, including whether they display the characteristics commonly attributed to a CoP (Wenger, 1998) and how their shared practice might be related to knowledge work. Furthermore, we report initial work towards a model of how such an emerging CoP might contribute to Knowledge Management (KM) in a knowledge intensive organisation.

The three key questions we focus upon in this paper are:

- How might an emerging CoP be characterised in an organisation?
- What organisational issues arise from the identification of an emerging CoP and how might their shared practice be related to knowledge work?
- How do members of an emerging CoP perceive their place in the wider organisation and in particular how might this relate to top-down and bottom-up KM strategies and to facilitating communication between organisational leaders and CoP members?

The remaining sections of this paper are structured as follows. We first present a background discussion of the growth and changing nature of knowledge work in organisations, outlining the emerging challenges of knowledge sharing. In addition, we provide a brief introduction to informal groups and CoPs, building a link between CoPs and KM by relating CoPs to bottom-up and top-down approaches to KM. Next, we present a brief overview of the organisation under study and the research method adopted. The following section reports the results of the present research, organised according to the three questions noted previously. Finally, we summarise our findings and present some matters for future research.

BACKGROUND

The Growth and Changing Nature of Knowledge Work in Organisations

"The people are the company” is the title Brown and Gray (1995) give to their article, recognising that it is organisation staff who create processes and structure work by implementing their own practices (Brown & Gray, 1995). In hierarchical manufacturing organisations, knowledge is processed largely at management levels. Drucker (1988, 1992, 1999) observes, however, that there is a growing tendency to knowledge work at “lower levels” of the organisation and anticipates that management levels will be reduced and “lower level” knowledge workers will receive increased...
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