Chapter XIV
Community of Practice: Aligning Knowledge Work with Organisational Knowledge Strategy

Gerlinde Koeglreiter
Deakin University, Australia

Luba Torlina
Deakin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

In developing a conceptual framework of a community of practice’s (CoP) role in organisational KM, this chapter summarises preliminary findings of a long-term action research study. Interventions address CoP identification, group boundaries, trust-related issues, communication, knowledge work and resources. It is argued that these aspects equally need to be addressed as part of complex multilevel organisational KM strategy. The organisational challenge is to achieve strategic alignment between knowledge activities of informally operating CoPs and formalised organisational processes. The conceptual framework aims at providing a comprehensive approach to KM strategising.

INTRODUCTION

A shift from manual work towards knowledge work has not only opened the discussion on means and technologies to manage knowledge but more recently also the underlying social and informal aspects of work. The increase of knowledge work at lower hierarchical levels calls for corresponding strategic approaches to knowledge management.

This chapter explores a comprehensive model of knowledge management (KM) strategy with an
emphasis on bottom-up initiatives by CoPs. The chapter is based on a long-term action research (AR) study on a small CoP of academic staff, with a domain focus of information technology (IT). CoP members teach technically-focused subjects, but also have substantial technical hands-on expertise in those areas. The chapter discusses three interventions following the recognition of the CoP, some of the problems it has been dealing with in its work and its role and position in strategy.

 Conventionally, strategy development is the task of management in the higher ranks of an organisation. As a consequence, KM strategies have commonly been initiated at the top of organisations and have been propagated downwards. Top-down KM strategies frequently focus on the explicit part of organisational knowledge that can be documented, stored, retrieved and reused. This is often implemented by the use of computer-based information systems. Top-down approach faces a number of challenges. Firstly, strategy makers are often disconnected from the day-to-day work and the knowledge workers at the lower hierarchical levels of their organisations—the very workers that are instructed to follow the KM policies and use the KM systems that are specified by the strategy makers. Secondly, the big challenge to KM is the implicit or tacit part of organisational knowledge that resides within people’s heads, is socially constructed and applied in doing.

 As a consequence of the above, it can be argued that, in addition to top-down KM strategy, a forum of knowledge workers needs to be developed that is not only acquiring and using knowledge to perform knowledge work, but also involved in improving how things are done in an organisation by contributing to KM strategy from the bottom up. The concept of the CoP may be one such forum. Communities of practice (CoPs) have been attributed to a number of positive influences in organisations including collaborative learning and problem-solving, innovation and organisational improvement.

 This chapter studies a CoP’s involvement in bottom-up KM activities and its influence on top-down KM strategy. The role of the CoP in this project is seen as a vehicle for dealing with the complexities of multilevel organisational KM.

 We explore two research questions:

 - What is the role of a CoP’s knowledge work in organisational KM?
 - What are the interactions of a CoP with other functional units and how they impact on the organisational knowledge work and KM strategy?

 The chapter is structured as follows. The Literature Review section provides an overview of the extant literature with regard to the major concepts used in this chapter: organisational knowledge, community of practice, knowledge work, KM strategy, and organisational boundaries. The research approach briefly outlines methodologies applied for data collection for each of the interventions as part of the action research (AR) framework. The Results section summarises the findings of the data collection process. The discussion section describes the conceptual framework that has been built and refined upon the findings of various AR interventions. The final section is a summary of the key insights obtained.

 LITERATURE REVIEW

 Organisational Knowledge

 Starbuck (1992) defines knowledge-intensive firms as organisations that primarily use knowledge as input and might produce knowledge as output. A substantial fraction of the personnel in knowledge-intensive firms will be highly qualified experts in their fields. According to Starbuck (1992) knowledge-intensive firms demonstrate a high degree of individuality and distinctive
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