Chapter 1.7
Sociotechnical Theory and Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice (CoPs), by their nature, are social entities. Such communities may be large or small, geographically dispersed or located within a confined region. Essentially, communities of practice consist of members who chose to come together because they have a passionate dedication to sharing knowledge and a desire to develop their own and other’s capabilities (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). No matter what type of CoP (collocated or virtual; intra or interorganizational) communication is one of the prime desiderata. Thus, it is highly likely that technology of some form will be involved. For instance, a virtual community of practice may use e-mail or a more sophisticated groupware application to keep in touch. CoPs within a knowledge management environment will certainly have access to technology.

To understand the workings of such communities requires a theory that enables us to deal at the levels of the individual, the group, and the larger world in which the community is embedded (Lave, 1988). Any such theory must be able to account for the role of technology within the community as well as its social aspects.

BACKGROUND

Sociotechnical Theory

As the compound word sociotechnical indicates, it is, according to Coakes (2002), a combination of two ideas or paradigms—the social and the technical. It is an attempt to provide a view of technology, organizations, and people that is more holistic and less biased than either could be on its own. Furthermore, “[s]ociotechnical perspectives can be characterised as holistic, and whilst not being panoptic in character, take a more encompassing view of the organization, its stakeholders in knowledge and the environment in which it operates, than [many other perspectives] …which are limited by their origins and paradigms” (p. 4).

Information systems, as with knowledge management systems, should not be seen as technology
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