Distinguishing Work Groups, Virtual Teams, and Electronic Networks of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice are promoted within organizations as sources of competitive advantage and facilitators of organizational learning. A community of practice is an emergent social collective where individuals working on similar problems self-organize to help each other and to share perspectives about their work practice, resulting in learning and innovation within the community (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Recent advances in information and communication technologies have enabled the creation of computer-supported social networks similar to communities of practice, where individuals are able to discuss and debate issues electronically. Given the success of communities of practice for facilitating knowledge exchange, both electronically and in face-to-face settings, management has recently focused on how to formally duplicate these networks and gather their benefits in work groups and virtual teams. However, with the evolution of new technology-enabled organizational forms, theoretical development is needed to distinguish between these different types of organizational forms since there are significant differences in the dynamics of formal vs. informal membership groups and between electronic and face-to-face interactions (Hinds & Kiesler, 2002).

BACKGROUND

Recently, the concept of networks of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2000) has emerged as a means to describe informal, emergent social networks that facilitate learning and knowledge sharing between individuals conducting practice-related tasks. These authors propose that communities of practice are a localized and specialized subset of networks of practice, typically consisting of strong ties linking individuals engaged in a shared practice, typically face-to-face. They describe networks of practice as consisting of weak ties, where individuals may never get to know one another or meet face-to-face. In networks of practice, individuals generally coordinate through third-party organizations, such as professional associations, or by indirect means, such as newsletters, Web sites, or bulletin boards (Brown & Duguid, 2000).

In contrast to the use of formal controls to support knowledge exchange, such as contractual obligation, organizational hierarchies, monetary incentives, or mandated rules, networks of practice promote knowledge flows along lines of practice through informal social networks. Therefore, one way to distinguish between networks of practice and work groups created through formal organizational mandate is by the nature of the control mechanisms.

A second distinguishing property is the primary media channel used for communication between members, for example, face-to-face interactions, remote computer-mediated channels such as newsletters or discussion boards, or a combination of these techniques. The communication media is important for understanding networks of practice, for this is the channel through which the resource of knowledge is exchanged. In electronic networks of practice, the primary communication channel of asynchronous computer-mediated communication has a profound influence on how knowledge is actually shared.

Additionally, networks of practice and formal work groups vary in terms of their size, ranging from a few select individuals to very large, open electronic networks consisting of thousands of participants. These groups also vary in terms of who can participate. Work groups and virtual teams typically consist of members who are formally designated and assigned. In contrast, networks of practice consist of