Life Cycle of Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Today more and more companies are realizing the value of knowledge, and the benefits of capturing and leveraging it among all employees. Knowledge in the form of data, symbols, facts, and figures has been captured, but knowledge that is tacit (implicit) still continues to pose a challenge. How does such knowledge exist and where exactly does it thrive? The answer to that is “people”—the soft aspect of a company’s asset. Thus intellectual capital (IC), which represents the human intelligence asset of a company, is where both tacit and explicit knowledge reside.

With technology advancing to connect different people across the world, support groups, developer forums, and message lists are probably the most immediate resources that professionals look to for knowledge or solutions to issues at work. This could very well be the first step a person takes to be a part of a community of practice (CoP). Interactions, discussions, exchange of ideas, and solving each other’s problems is in itself a source of knowledge, and although no attempt is made to hold onto such knowledge or guard it as a secret, the wealth of information remains privy to the community that shares it.

Thus we can see that the continuum of informal discussions to a structured process of knowledge sharing can be represented by different stages in a lifecycle of a CoP. This article is an attempt to look at the lifecycle of a CoP, not just in terms of knowledge creation at each of its stages, but also as an example of how social networks are born and how they thrive. Understanding the lifecycle of CoPs will give greater insight into the knowledge sharing process resulting in more companies recognizing the importance of CoPs.

BACKGROUND

Communities of Practice: A Definition

A community of practice is formed when individuals with common interest (shared goals) come together on a mutual basis. Wenger and Snyder (2000) define CoPs as a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise. Thus when people find ways to relate to each other by participating in a knowledge flow process, they form a CoP. CoPs can be formed across functional units, organizations, and even nations. In effect, a CoP succeeds in eliminating the creation of knowledge silos formed due to the “protect your own information” attitude of many organizations.

THE LIFECYCLE OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

As in any other entity, a CoP also goes through a lifecycle process. Wenger (1998) described the following stages in the lifecycle of a CoP:

1. **Potential:** At this stage, people face similar situations but have not yet formed a shared practice.
2. **Coalescing:** At this point, members have interacted and found one common emerging point and its potential.
3. **Maturing:** CoP sets standards, defines agenda, and develops relationships.
4. **Active:** At this stage, the community formed is most productive. Members develop shared practices.
5. **Dispersed:** CoP is no longer active, functions more as a repository of knowledge.
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