The Reformation of Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

A “knowledge set that distinguishes and provides a competitive advantage” to a firm is considered to be that firm’s “core capability” (Leonard-Barton, 1992, p.113). Firms cultivate groups or communities of practice to create, integrate, and disseminate organisational knowledge in particular fields of knowing (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Creating, sharing, and integrating knowledge is mission-critical to a firm because firm-specific advantage flows not from an organisation’s resources per se, but from the knowledge that enables it to deploy such resources to leverage maximum benefit within its operational environment (Penrose, 1959).

Knowledge must be managed in a way that differs from the management of a firm’s other resources (Spender, 1996). This requirement stems from the intrinsic qualities of knowledge; it emanates from individual thoughts, which shape and are in turn shaped by the social dynamic within an organisation, a fusion of cognitive and societal processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The inherent qualities of knowledge affect its appropriability (Teece, 1998). Leonard and Sensiper (1998) assert that knowledge is a combination of tacit and explicit. Polanyi (1967) contends that explicit knowledge is knowledge in the abstract, while tacit knowledge incorporates experience and intuitive knowledge, which results from subconscious learning. Itami (1989) argues that it is impossible to separate the individual from the tacit knowledge that he or she possesses. The replication and transfer of knowledge is often impossible without the transfer of actors (Teece, 2000).

BACKGROUND

Many firms are confronted with a dilemma when they seek to transfer or replicate knowledge, as they are ignorant of the knowledge creating dynamics in operation within their own organisation, even though managers are cognisant of their exiting capabilities (Fransman, 1998). Lippmann and Rumelt (1982) use the term causal ambiguity to describe the ignorance of many firms concerning the interaction and combinations of resources, which producing their capabilities. They note that some resources are not tradable, as they are combined in ways that are difficult to reproduce because of causal ambiguity. This lack of clarity hampers the knowledge creation and integration processes. To circumvent this difficulty many organisations have increasingly opted to assign the task of knowledge creation and integration to communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

The creation of a community of practice is a social and economic process that is nurtured through the ongoing interaction of individuals (Zuboff, 1988; Brown & Duguid, 1991). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) consider that individual intuition is a source of organisational knowledge. New members of the community of practice are enculturated in the values and norms of their communities (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Storytelling plays a unifying role in group formation, and indeed adopting the role of “storyteller” is a rite of passage for new group members (Orr, 1990). Storytelling also preserves group knowledge and supports and forms group values and beliefs (Jordan, 1989). Hence, organisational actors should be viewed as active participants in vibrant communities where social, cultural, and past forces contribute to a collective learning process aimed at satisfying individual and communal needs (Barney, 1986). An organisation’s ability to learn and to cultivate its knowledge asset is therefore dependent upon its capability, through its evolving social character, to influence its employees’ values, sense of self, and consequently their sense of community (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Spender, 1996).

Unfortunately, not all organisations possess this capability, therefore the creation of communities of practice is not without danger to the firm (Wetlaufer, 1999). Communities of practice can develop community-specific values, which may or may not be aligned with the values of the firm (Child, 1972).
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