Online Healthcare Communities of Practice: Identifying the Critical Success Factors

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ABSTRACT

Online communities of practice (CoPs) are recognised as a KM initiative, whereby practitioners conduct discussions and share their experiences online. The imperative of the evaluation in measuring the effectiveness of Online CoPs fulfills its role and support for healthcare practitioners knowledge sharing has been recognized by practitioners and researchers in the KM field. Success measures of Online CoPs should support healthcare organizations in different methods; it could suggest ways to improve the design, implementation, usage, and operation of Online CoPs by addressing and understanding the main factors that impact the Online CoPs success and acceptance. Presently, establishing an evaluation framework has become essential for the advancement of research and practice in this area. The author has classified the existing researches, based on the area of evaluation. The study concludes by proposing a conceptual framework to measure the success of online CoPs in health care sector.

KEYWORDS
Evaluation, Healthcare Sector, Human Dimension, Knowledge Management, Online Communities of Practice, Semantic Dimension, Social Dimension, Success Factors, Technical Dimension

INTRODUCTION

This study provides an overview of the pertinent literature of the online communities of practice (CoPs), where the development, main characteristics and dimensions of online CoPs measurement, which are considered in the online CoPs literature have been examined. Moreover, this study has reviewed past empirical studies related to online CoPs success and acceptance that have highlighted the major themes and criteria of online CoPs measurement; in addition to the earlier online CoPs success and acceptance models have also been reviewed. The output of this review has identified the most critical dimensions that constitute towards the success and acceptance of online CoPs.

Online CoPs have emerged as a new robust interactive channel using available social media, by supporting all characteristics used as part of the knowledge management system (KMS) (Tseng & Kuo, 2014). According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), online CoPs help knowledge management by capturing and sharing the expertise of members and by imparting skills, ideas, problems, innovations, talents, and experiences. Members of online CoPs are held together by a common purpose and require information on what others know (Wenger et al., 2002). However, the importance of measuring the effectiveness of online CoPs has been recognized by practitioners and researchers in the knowledge management (KM) field as supportive of knowledge sharing (Alali & Salim, 2013; Kankanhalli & Tan, 2005; Tseng & Kuo, 2014). Measuring the success of online CoPs includes the process of assessing their value in managing knowledge by identifying success and acceptance factors (Alali & Salim, 2013; Nistor, Schworm, & Werner, 2012).

DOI: 10.4018/IJCCP.2016010101

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Success measures of online CoPs support organizations in different ways, such as suggesting approaches to improve usage and operation of online CoPs. Furthermore, success measures of online CoPs can enhance decision-making related to online CoPs and KM projects investments (Ho et al., 2010; Wenger et al., 2002), as well as instruments to be used as benchmarks for future measurement and enhancement of online CoPs. Fundamentally, literature review helps researchers to determine the missing gap that can be compensated in the future (Fernandez, Gonzalez, & Sabherwal, 2004; Kankanahalli & Tan, 2005). From the theoretical perspective, the wide implementation of online CoPs in various industries with high levels of success had been reported by Wenger and other scholars, in contrast to the limited studies that evaluated online CoPs in the healthcare sector. In addition, these existing limited studies are descriptive, and hence have motivated this study to review and to compare the literature pertaining to healthcare online CoPs and that of various industries. Ultimately, this study aims to identify the main dimensions that determine the success of online CoPs. We have analysed and synthesized successful literature of online CoPs to identify the main taxonomy related to their success.

**Theoretical Background**

Evaluating online CoPs is a vital aspect, especially for measuring the effectiveness of CoPs. The evaluation might ensure the accomplishments of CoPs, particularly in supporting healthcare practitioners in their knowledge sharing activities (Alali & Salim, 2013; Kankanahalli & Tan, 2005). Online CoPs evaluation refers to the process of assessing their value in managing knowledge by defining determinants of success and acceptance. Success measures of online CoPs should support healthcare organizations in various ways, such as providing suggestions to improve the design, implementation, usage, and operation of online CoPs, by addressing and understanding the main factors that affect their success and acceptance (Alali & Salim, 2013). Furthermore, success measures of online CoPs can enhance their investment decisions and KM initiatives, as well as aid in the development of instruments to be used as benchmarks for future evaluation and comparison. In addition, online CoPs evaluation provides researchers the opportunity to determine and address missing gaps that can improve online CoPs in the future (Fernandez et al., 2004; Kankanahalli & Tan, 2005; Tseng & Kuo, 2014).

In evaluating online CoPs, researchers and practitioners must consider information technology, which is a component of online CoPs (Nistor, Schworm, & Werner, 2012; Alali & Salim, 2013). According to Wasko and Faraj (2005), online CoPs are self-organizing groups of practitioners that facilitate the process of knowledge sharing specific practices. The users can handle computer-mediated collaborative activities and various types of social media (Wasko & Faraj, 2005), such as bulletin boards, online forums, and e-mail, to build the social space (Fang & Chiu, 2010; Nistor, Schworm, & Werner, 2012). The social space is where users, who experience the same problems, challenges, occupational practice, and interests, will help and collaborate with each other (Wasko, Teigland, & Faraj, 2009; Tseng & Kuo, 2014). Furthermore, Wenger (2004) has stated that, generally CoPs consist of three main elements, namely, domain, community, and practice. The domain refers to the area of knowledge that brings the community together, provides its identity, and defines key issues that members must address. The community refers to the group of people for whom the domain is relevant, the quality of relationships among members, and the boundary that separates inside and outside societies. The practice refers to the body of knowledge, methods, tools, stories, cases, and documents that members share and develop together.

Healthcare organizations spend a large amount of money towards implementing KM initiatives in terms of the development of practitioners and expert resources (Davenport & Prusak 1998; WHO 2005). Executives subsequently question about the actual benefits and the value of investment in KM initiatives (Armstrong & Kendall, 2010; Kankanahalli & Tan, 2005; Wenger et al., 2002). On the other hand, Kankanahalli and Tan (2005a) and Wang et.al, (2011) recommended additional evaluation studies on online CoPs because of reported failures in KM initiatives and the lack of evaluation studies on
Meaning Equivalence (ME), Boundary of Meaning (BoM), and Granular of Meaning (GoM)
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