Chapter 10
Communities of Practice for Promoting Organizational and Informal Learning in Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

Professional development of the members of any organization is a key and essential factor to promote innovation and, ultimately, the improvement of public organizations. Communities of practice is one of the leading strategies used to promote knowledge management processes aimed at generating organizational and individual and informal learning. This chapter presents some of the results and proposals from an extensive study developed in two phases which focus on some key factors for promoting innovation in public administration. The first phase tries to identify some of the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder learning, organizational and informal, in public organizations. The second phase is focused on analysis of knowledge management practices through communities of practice in public administration. The results enable us to suggest some proposals and future research lines aimed at improving both organizational and informal learning, along with innovations that contribute to improving the public administration.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation is an indispensable requirement for Public Administration (Bason, 2018), since it must respond to a rapidly changing context, needs and demands. The aim is to achieve a model of public administration in accordance with the citizens and social organisations demands, which would provide effective, efficient, sustainable responses. The changes to be promoted not only affect the general orientation of the administrative structure, which should be aligned with the European 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

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Communities of Practice for Promoting Organizational and Informal Learning

Development but must continue to focus on key issues such as transparency, public ethics, periodic review of actions and implementation of effective systems of accountability (Arenilla, 2017) closely linked to the activities of its human resources. The innovation capacity of any organisation is directly linked to its learning capacity and, consequently, to the professional development of its workers (e.g., Brix, 2017; Choi & Chandler, 2015; Rodríguez-Gómez, 2015).

Individuals’ professional development is fundamental for the development of any organisation. If we consider learning organisations as those that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself, we are highlighting the value of learning as the fundamental basis of the organisation. The development of the organisation is based on the development of people and their ability to incorporate new ways of developing their tasks. Learning can thus be considered as a necessary requirement that enables the achievement of organisational goals, as an organisational element that acts as a tool at the service of the organisational needs, as part of the strategy that places the organisation in an advantageous situation in the face of possible changes or as the essence that justifies the training and learning proposals in organisations.

In recent years, the increasing interest among organisational practitioners and scholars in searching for and applying alternative strategies and policies to promote professional development, and therefore organisational learning and organisational improvement, has been reflected in the appearance of multiple studies about Informal Learning (IL), Knowledge Management (KM) and Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a strategy to promote innovation (e.g., Dolinska & d’Aquino, 2016; Goodyear, & Casey, 2015; Inkinen, Kianto & Vanhala, 2015).

Strategies promoting workplace informal learning are contributing the most to the professional development of the workers and impact more clearly on their daily professional activity (e.g., Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro & Morciano, 2015). Workplace informal learning requires a constant interrelation among workers (e.g., Greenhow & Lewin, 2016), thus justifying the development of strategies such as Knowledge Management and, specifically, communities of practice.

However, as we already highlighted in a previous publication (Rodríguez-Gómez & Gairín, 2014), while most studies are focused in for-profit organisations, little attention has been given to the use of IL, KM and CoP in the public administration.

Based on an organisational learning approach, this study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the factors that affect organisational learning in the public administration. Particularly, the study describes informal learning processes and strategies used by public administration workers and identify factors affecting communities of practice success in the public administration.

This chapter presents some of the results and proposals from an extensive study developed in two phases which focus on some key factors for promoting innovation in public administration: organisational learning, informal learning and communities of practice. The first phase tries to identify some of the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder learning, organisational and informal, in public organisations. The second phase is focused on analysis of knowledge management practices through Communities of practice in public administration1.

First, we address the need for ongoing training, individual and organisational learning as a crucial requirement for fostering systematic innovation processes in organisations. Secondly, based on the existing literature, we present knowledge management and CoP as one of the organisational strategies that enables organisations to foster informal learning processes. Once the theoretical background is completed,