Chapter VII

Community of Practice Software Management Tools: A UK Construction Company Case Study

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Abstract

This chapter provides insights from a large UK construction organisation case study where communities of practice have been supported through use of a software tool and management approach that encourages their spread across the organisation. We provide a descriptive characterisation of what the community of practice (COP) software tool does, how it evolved, and anecdotal evidence from interviews with its users of its value to the UK case study organisation. We recognise the need to investigate COP value generation more formally, and we have developed a research proposal to undertake further work in a collaborative study with industry to provide useful COP performance measures to be undertaken. This chapter provides valuable
insights from several years’ reflection upon the tool’s use and application, and we highlight both drivers and barriers to its deployment. The objective was to provide a practical example of what COP management tools could and should address.

Introduction

In the previous chapter of this book, an argument was made that a community of practice (COP) generates knowledge networks that enhance and sustain competitive advantage, and that it is also used to help COP members actually use ICT tools. In that chapter a number of lessons learned from the way in which COPs operated in three Australian construction contracting organisation case studies were discussed.

In this chapter, we provide further practical insights into COPs using a large UK construction organisation as a case study. COPs in this example were supported through a software tool and management approach that encourages the spread of COP beyond the institutional, technical support, and collegial support COPs highlighted in the three Australian case studies reported upon in Chapter 6.

We provide a descriptive characterisation of what the COP ICT software tool does, how it evolved, and anecdotal evidence from interviews with its users of its value to the UK case study organisation. The research required to investigate this dimension more formally is recognised and is subject to further work in developing an argument for a collaborative industry-academic study that is anticipated and currently undergoing refinement. Thus, for this chapter, the approach is anecdotal, but nevertheless based upon several years’ reflection upon the tool’s use and application and drivers and barriers to its deployment.

We have structured the chapter as follows. First we provide some background on COPs and follow this with discussion of several important theoretical knowledge management concepts. This provides a useful framework for us to describe the COP management tool SIGMA CONNECT, followed by how this tool was used by Carillion PLC in the UK. We then offer our conclusions on COPs and how the software tool was used to affectively encourage, enable, and support these COPs. Finally we offer some practical tips and lessons learned.

Learning Objectives

1. Readers should advance their understanding of how construction organisations using COPs can enhance their knowledge creation and sharing, including understanding the meaning of terms such as tacit knowledge, sticky knowledge, and absorptive capacity.
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