Chapter 10
Patterns of Facilitation in Online Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

Communities of practice have gained foothold in knowledge management initiatives. Still, there are challenges for COP to thrive and to serve its purpose. Facilitation can help COP in overcoming some of the challenges. However, facilitation in COP by itself is challenging as we are dealing with different types of COP that exhibit different characteristics. Through content analysis of facilitators’ postings the authors identified several tasks commonly performed by facilitators from different COPs. Knowing how to accomplish those tasks will help COP facilitators in assisting their communities to thrive.

INTRODUCTION

Online communities have become part of our daily life in the Internet era. There are many reasons why people join online communities. Ridings and Gefen (2004) in their survey-based study on online communities listed several categories of motivation for online involvement. Those categories include: (1) exchange information: obtain and transfer information about a topic, educate about a topic or learn new things; (2) social support: obtain and give emotional support; (3) friendship: make friends; (4) recreation: look for entertainment; (5) common interest: love of the topic of the community; and (6) technical reasons: because of technical features in the community. They found that information exchange is the most common reason why people joining online communities, followed by looking for friendship.

There are various types of online communities (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001): (1) discussion communities: communities that provide venue for exchanging information with reference to a defined topic; (2) task-and goal-oriented communities: communities strive to achieve a common goal by way of cooperation; (3) virtual worlds: communities
that provide virtual settings of complex worlds; and (4) hybrid communities: communities that contain several types of communities. Another typology of online communities differentiates five types of communities from business perspectives (Hummel & Lechner, 2002). Those five types of communities are (1) gaming communities; (2) communities of interest; (3) business-to-business communities; (4) business-to-consumer communities; and (5) consumer-to-consumer communities.

As more people are relying on online interaction to satisfy their needs for information, managers have to understand and eventually accommodate these needs in their organizations. They have to take a lead in addressing and looking for the best solutions to serve their employees. One of the goals should be to provide a venue for them such as Community of Practice (COP) which could be considered to be a discussion community (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001). Many view a COP as a type of community of interest (Fischer, 2001). A Community of Practice (COP) is a specific type of community that has gained popularity as part of knowledge management initiatives in organizations (Hildreth, Kimble, & Wright, 2000; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Wenger and Snyder (2000) define a COP as a group of people who are informally bound together by shared expertise and a passion for joint enterprise. Based on this definition, a COP does not have to be within an organization. It can exist as an independent online community. The Internet lowers the barriers to form this type of communities, since finding those who shared expertise and a passion is no longer limited by space and time. Learning in COP, according to Wenger (1998), has four main characteristics: (1) it takes place in practice; (2) it happens as being a member of a community; (3) it becomes meaningful since it is a part of experience; and (4) it helps in developing identity.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND PARTICIPATION

At the same time, a COP can suffer from lack of participation among its members. Several studies have identified challenges related to active participation in COPs, e.g., Ardichvili et al. (2003), Gray (2004), and Wasko and Faraj (2000). Therefore, member participation cannot be taken for granted. It is obvious that an effort is needed to create a functioning COP.

Therefore, our chapter will focus on facilitation of online communities of practice, since this type of community has tremendous potentials for organization as well as Internet users in general and we believe that facilitation can help in overcoming some of the problem with participation. A need of facilitators in COP has been highlighted in several studies, including Johnson (2001), and Gray (2004). Facilitation can be defined as activities carried out to help groups in accomplishing their tasks or achieving their desired outcomes. Studies of facilitation in Group Support Systems (GSS) field have shown that it can benefit groups and making meetings more productive. As members of online communities of practice involve in collaborative activities, they will face challenges such as disagreements and/or conflicts that could lead to disruptive behaviors. Their discussions could become a lengthy debate that is no longer relevant and beneficial to the community. In such cases, facilitator can help communities and guide them through a better way of collaboration. Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) identified 21 structuring characteristics that will influence challenges faced by those communities. They categorized those structuring characteristics into four categories, i.e., (1) demographics of the communities; (2) organizational context; (3) membership characteristics; and (4) technological environment. They found that different characteristics create different challenges for the communities.

Some practitioners differentiate several types of COP based on its main purposes. The three most