Chapter 11
From Theory to Practice: Communities of Practice across the Canadian Public Service

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ABSTRACT

As the average age of Canada’s public servant inches toward 50, it is expected that between 30-40% of the government’s key knowledge workers will retire in the next five years. Consequently, the government is challenged with attracting and retaining new employees and ensuring that all public servants have the necessary skills and knowledge to do their jobs well. Since formal learning does not alone prepare employees to perform in complex work environments, the federal Public Service is implementing informal learning strategies to facilitate knowledge creation and exchange and to manage tacit knowledge. This chapter describes how technology-supported communities of practice are being employed across Canada with the support of the Canada School of Public Service. The strategic context, challenges, lessons learned, and vision for the future are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. (Wenger, 1998, p. 11)

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-826-0.ch011
theory to practice with examples of the design, development, implementation and evaluation of technology-supported CoPs. Related to the goals of this book, the following chapter is further aimed at demonstrating how the specific context of Canada’s Public Service plays a key role in the design and implementation of collaborative technologies and social learning approaches.

Specifically, authors will discuss how CoPs contribute to the challenge of capturing and storing knowledge and how they stimulate interaction among colleagues to improve upon performance in the workplace. The chapter will also address key challenges, lessons learned and the future vision of social learning technologies in the Public Service.

PUBLIC SERVICE OF CANADA

The second largest country in the world, Canada is composed of 10 provinces and 3 territories that stretch from the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west. Northern Canada reaches into the Arctic Circle, while southern Canada stretches below the northern points of the United States. Canada has one of the lowest population densities in the world, with a population of almost 33 million (Statistics Canada, 2008). Canada’s two official languages are English and French and the nation’s capital is located in Ottawa, Ontario.

With approximately 260,000 Canadians employed in 392 departments, agencies and sub-agencies, the Public Service of Canada is the country’s largest employer. Like many organizations, the Public Service must address a significant demographic challenge. In particular, over half of its employees are over the age of 45 and the Public Service must renew its workforce in the strongest labour market in over 35 years (Dutil & Reid, 2007). Consequently, the government is challenged with attracting and retaining new employees and ensuring that all public servants have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively perform their jobs.

Public Service Renewal is the ongoing and deliberate process of ensuring the Public Service can continue to serve Canadians with professionalism, integrity and excellence. Public Service Renewal is about ensuring that all public servants have the support and tools they need to deliver results to Canadians. Recruitment is a top priority in the context of an aging and retiring population as well as orientation and training of new employees to the organization (Lynch, 2008).

Related to this process of renewal is the government’s Policy on Learning, Training and Development (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2006) which was created to ensure that the Public Service is equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Specifically, the objectives of this policy are to:

- help build a skilled, well-trained and professional workforce;
- strengthen organizational leadership; and
- adopt leading-edge management practices to encourage innovation and continuous improvements in performance.

CANADA SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE

As the common learning service provider for the federal government, the Canada School of Public Service (also referred to as the Canada School) serves the learning and leadership needs of public servants across Canada. Headquartered in Ottawa, the Canada School employs approximately 800 dedicated professionals that are geographically dispersed across six regions. Operating in a bilingual and diverse environment, the Canada School directly supports Public Service Renewal by: (a) fostering a common sense of purpose, values and traditions in the Public Service; (b) helping public servants gain the knowledge, skills and compe-

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