INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge nowadays that communication technologies are changing faster than the speed at which people, in general, are mastering them. However, there are many specific technologies that see changes not in their underlying concepts, but in the extra utilities that are added—some of which are used and others not. Examples of such technologies would be cell phones and word processors. Improvements in communication and transportation technology...
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over recent centuries have resulted in shifts in community ties, which have moved from being primarily people-to-people, geographically bound, to being people-to-people irrespective of local geography (Jones & Grandhi, 2005, p. 216). Considerable effort has gone into freeing interpersonal interactions from geographic constraints and enabling communication anywhere, any time. Until recently, state Jones and Grandhi (2005), our ability to use technology to seamlessly locate individuals and provide them with geographical, contextualized, personal information management tools was quite limited. However, this situation is now changing with the widespread adoption of wireless technologies such as the Global Positioning System (GPS), 802.11, Bluetooth, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), and other geographical routing technologies. Using such technologies, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), and location data, such as the geographical location a user is communicating from or to, can be combined to provide appropriate geographic context to interactions. As a result, face-to-face communication can be replaced or complemented by these technologies. Thus, online communities other than face-to-face have begun to emerge—such as CoPs or COP/face-to-face hybrids. For the rest of this chapter, the terms ‘online communities’ and ‘CoPs’ will be used interchangeably.

Jones and Grandhi (2005, p. 220) state that online communities can be networked communities, whose interactions are mediated primarily through the Internet, and with non-geographic affinities leading to shared social ties. These online communities are often built through online community spaces such as e-mail lists, newsgroups, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels and others, which enable a wide range of individuals to attend and contribute to a shared set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions. They can, therefore, be considered relatively transparent and open. These spaces support online communities by providing a space in which ties can be formed between people through public shared interactions. Such spaces are different from personal spaces, such as e-mail inboxes, where interactions are not publicly shared between members of the online community.

Sharing of knowledge, especially tacit knowledge, has been accepted as the way forward for innovation and competitive advantage (Wenger, 2001). Because the aim of KM is the creation, sharing, and flow or transfer of knowledge in an organisation, a CoP can be one of the most informal ways to achieve this aim. In fact, CoPs can be seen as a way to eliminate the limitations of a purely technology-based KM. This chapter aims at discussing, in depth, communication tools that can be used by CoPs (face-to-face, or virtual, or both).

BACKGROUND

For a community to be called a CoP it has to satisfy a number of criteria as described by the originators of CoPs, Wenger and Lave (1991) and McDermott (2000). Akoumianakis (2009) adds that a CoP is conceived as being virtual, and formed and maintained using a variety of tools such as listservs, e-mails, blogs, and wikis and sees a CoP as “an organisation within an organisation.” The most important criterion of a CoP is “sharing knowledge in a voluntary manner.” Online communities are just one of many types of communities: They have a purpose, are supported by technology, and are guided by norms and policies (Preece, 2000). The term ‘online community’ broadly refers to all communities that exist predominantly online, but we acknowledge that online communities vary depending on:

- Whether they have a physical as well as a virtual (i.e., networked, physi-virtual) presence (Lazar, Tsao, & Preece, 1999).
- Purpose (e.g., health support, education, business, neighborhood activities).