“I’ve Got a Situation and Would Appreciate Your Experience”: An Extra-Organizational Virtual Community of Practice for Independent Professionals

Enrique Murillo, Department of Administration, ITAM, Business School, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Mexico City, Mexico

ABSTRACT

Virtual Communities of Practice (CoPs) that are launched and managed by organizations have been amply documented in KM literature, but extra-organizational virtual CoPs have received little coverage. This study performs an ethnography of an extra-organizational Usenet-based CoP of tax professionals, using a longitudinal Social Network Analysis to map a tight-knit long-lived community and identify its members. The result is a naturalistic description of the ways in which the Wenger dimensions of Mutual engagement, Joint enterprise and Shared repertoire manifest themselves in day-to-day interactions in an online CoP. The study highlights how energetic voluntary participation by members produces a successful long-lived virtual CoP, even in the absence of organizational KM or IT resources. For independent professionals, extra-organizational virtual CoPs can provide a powerful support group and the means to constantly update their personal competence. For organizations intent on developing formalized CoPs, these results are a useful reminder that member commitment is the ultimate driver of a CoP’s success.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Independent Professionals, Newsgroups, Usenet, Virtual Communities

INTRODUCTION

Since their introduction by Lave and Wenger (1991), Communities of Practice (CoPs) have achieved considerable popularity in organizations, thanks largely to Knowledge Management (KM) practitioners who have championed them as the best approach for managing organizational knowledge (Su, Wilensky, & Redmiles, 2011). Seminal CoP studies portrayed these groups as informal and emergent, driven by voluntary member commitment (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Early advice for harvesting the knowledge of organizational CoPs suggested respecting their independent informal nature or at most providing modest support while taking care not to stifle their self-organizing drive (Stewart, 1997; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Nowadays, KM literature has turned toward a more prescriptive approach, arguing CoPs benefit from management oversight (Borzillo, 2009; McDermott & Archibald, 2010; Bourhis & Dubé, 2010). Indeed, numerous studies describe the benefits of launching and actively managing CoPs.

DOI: 10.4018/jvcsn.2012100104
(McDermott & Kendrick, 2000; Schönström, 2005; Loyarte & Rivera, 2007). However, others warn that institutionalized CoPs can become just another committee (Gongla & Rizzutto, 2004) or can alienate their assigned members (Thompson, 2005; Pastoors, 2007).

There are also many studies championing “virtual” CoPs that interact through electronic networks (e.g. Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2005; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Usoro, Sharratt, Tsui, & Shekhar, 2007; Land et al., 2009). Some of them actually describe temporary online teams, that by disbanding at the end of the project differentiate themselves from CoPs, which are persistent communities (Bogenrieder & Noteboom, 2004, p. 299). Others describe permanent virtual teams (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000), or large, weakly-tied collectives of mostly anonymous participants (e.g. Chiu et al., 2006). These “virtual” CoPs thus bear little resemblance to the small, tight-knit CoP described in seminal studies (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Some online CoPs develop entirely outside of organizations (e.g. Hara & Hew, 2007; Murillo, 2008), and have received scant coverage in KM literature. These CoPs ‘in the wild’ constitute interesting research targets because they clearly display the traits described in seminal CoP studies: they are informal, they emerge spontaneously, they are driven by member passion and commitment, and they set their own agenda. Moreover, they display a level of passion and energy that organizations have struggled to reproduce in institutionalized CoPs (Thompson, 2005; Pastoors, 2007; Bourhis & Dubé, 2010).

The aim of this research is to contribute to this neglected area of KM literature by examining an extra-organizational virtual CoP, embedded within the Usenet newsgroup misc.taxes.moderated. It closely follows Wenger’s (1998) framework, and applies a novel combination of ethnographic methods and Social Network Analysis (SNA) to target key members of the community. Within the space limitations of a journal article, it produces a naturalistic description of how Wenger’s dimensions play out in the text-based interactions of a newsgroup, and how they build up the community and produce situated learning for participants.

Extra-organizational CoPs can be a valuable resource to the growing numbers of independent professionals (Handy, 2001; Lincoln & Raftery, 2011) nowadays working outside of large organizations, the traditional locus of CoP research (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Thompson, 2005). For organizations and KM practitioners, the enthusiasm displayed by this Usenet CoP is a useful reminder that ultimately member passion and commitment is the key driver of CoP success. Furthermore, it suggests that organizations must not only manage their internal knowledge, but also their insertion into wider ecologies of knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1998), through intentional participation in extra-organizational CoPs.

Beyond this Introduction, the paper is organized in seven sections: the first describes the theoretical background and the Wenger framework; the second presents the research strategy. Then comes the ethnography proper, which starts with an overview of the targeted newsgroup, followed by three sections presenting each of the Wenger dimensions. The last section presents the implications.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The CoP concept was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) in the context of an ethnographic analysis of various apprenticeship arrangements. They coined the term communities of practice, to designate the communities apprentices joined, which function as living repositories of practices. However, explaining these communities was not their aim; they left the concept of CoP “largely as an intuitive notion” in need of further development (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 42).