Chapter 4
Communities in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Communities in a work setting—also known as communities of practice—are groups of people coming together as a consequence of work or occupation-related responsibilities. This chapter explores how these groups allow practitioners or knowledge workers to share stories of their experiences and compare notes on topics such as procedures, vendors, and teamwork. Engaged communities encompass a range of activities including regular meetings or conference calls, storytelling, speaker series, participating in intranet or online discussion groups, information sharing and content curation, sharing calendars of events and key dates, polls and surveys, review of resources and software, thought leadership, professional development and business development. The chapters shows how benefits of communities can be augmented through improved engagement of community members, community management and administration, and implementation of a subject taxonomy.

INTRODUCTION

What are Communities?

For centuries, community has always been the place where people congregate and it is the place where social ties initially form. Years of social anthropological observation tell us that the majority of relationships in our social network were first established in some sort of communities. Certainly, most of my friends are people [...] I grew up with (in my neighborhood community), went to school with (in my campus community), my colleagues (in the same professional community), and fellow researchers (in the same research community). These are people who share some common

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communities with me at some point in time, and these communities can be geographical, cultural, interest-based, and/or institutional.

Knowledge management has traditionally referred to communities of practice, or CoPs, inside the organization or across organizations, although the term is starting to go out of fashion. In *Sharing Hidden Know-How*, Katrina B. Pugh describes the community of practice: “A group of people who come together, generally crossing organizational boundaries, to build out a shared body of knowledge and to network with each other” (Pugh, 2011, p. 215).

Those who study communities have identified a number of types of communities (CoPs, Communities of Interest, Communities of Purpose, and the like), but the differences can be unclear. Organizations have started to take on the social media terminology when talking about communities. For the purposes of this chapter, the term “communities” is used for groups that form based on work or occupation related activities or interests. These groups allow practitioners or knowledge workers to come together to share stories of their experiences and compare notes on topics such as business processes, work procedures, vendors, and people related challenges.

Communities are an effective instrument for knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer. Informal groups may simply come together for commiserating and for mutual moral support of members; more formal groups may actually set an agenda, record minutes, and share notes to exchange best practice thinking and develop checklists and model documents for the use of members or their organizations. Pugh (p. 215) describes effective communities as having “strong leadership/facilitation and sponsorship, meaningful working groups to put knowledge to work, good measurement and incentives, and a regular, real-time meeting.”

Communities will quite often form on the grassroots or staff level as employees look for others who do similar work or face similar challenges. Steve Denning (2009) says that “[I]n almost any organization, there are bound to be at least some informal communities that exist, without management support or even awareness.” They may form across different business units, ignoring the organization’s formal structure, and they help to break down silos and foster a culture of sharing (even if it is not their intention).

**What Communities are Not**

Communities are not project teams or departments (Wenger et al., 2002, pp. 41-43). Work product is not typically the focus and does not always get delivered by communities inside the organization. They differ from one-on-one mentor arrangements since they are often made up of colleagues or peers and usually have more than two people participating.

We often hear of brand related communities, most typically initiated and run by the company owning the brand and using it to raise consumer interest in the brand’s products. Brand communities are sometimes used to bring customers and potential customers together to discuss matters related to the brand and take in suggestions, ideas, and other feedback related to the products. My Starbucks Idea (mystarbucksidea.force.com) or Dell’s IdeaStorm (www.ideastorm.com) are well known examples of idea or feedback platforms. Sometimes, the brand communities are formed by the brand or product enthusiasts themselves, appearing on the surface to be very much like fan clubs or fan forums.

Brand related communities and personal interest and hobby related communities are not included in the coverage of this chapter.