

The Evolution of Communities of Practice

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Abstract: In this document we introduce communities of practice. We define them and give examples from the real-world. In the end we try to foresee their development for the future.

Keywords: community; practice; domain, interest; communication.

1 Introduction

The prosperity of a country is today looked upon by measuring its gross domestic product and its growth over time. Little attention is given to other factors that may have an effect on the inhabitants. The GDP does not show all that is influencing the everyday quality of life of a country's population. That is why scientists have been trying to find an alternative way to measure people's well-being. One such example is a study done in Hong Kong [18] to identify the main areas of concern and quality of life for the locals. These were identified to be Education System, Environmental Protection and Healthcare.

Environmentalism Edward Lorenz is considered to be the founder of the so called Chaos Theory or Butterfly Effect. He said that „A flutter of a butterfly's wings may cause a hurricane on the other side of the plane“ [5]. This quote has since then taken on a life of its own with manifold interpretations. However, predominantly it took on an environmental connection where any action that we do has some kind of, even if unforeseeable, consequence somewhere in the world. This is true for both, positive and negative deeds. The reality of today shows that this is indeed true. We can no longer consider any actions involving the environment to be autonomous to the country where such changes happen. From disasters such as Chernobyl, to hydro power plants, we see that the repercussions are not only environmental, but also ethical, economical and social.

With the exponential of growth population and the onset of globalisation, the issue of sharing is becoming more and more prominent. We all need to learn to share with an ever-increasing number of people the space that we inhabit, the resources we need to sustain our life, the means to survive. The sharing of these resources can be voluntary or may arise from a need that is natural to humans. However, this sharing can also bring on a positive result. That is when people realise that they can gain certain benefits from sharing their thoughts, ideas and even knowledge. The technology today enhances such communication of ideas in an unprecedented way. Let us take a closer look at how people used to share their thoughts and what the future may hold for the so called „Communities of Practice“.

2 Goals and Methodology

The aim of this paper is to define the Community of Practice. We shall look at how such communities are formed. Further we will look at different viewpoints in this newly coined term. Later we shall describe the communities of practice that are involved in activities related to sustainable development. We will look at their formation, background and also what the future may hold for them. In the end we conclude that such activities should not be only left

up to the initiative of the private sector, but should be supported by the government as well, as they are so important.

To do the above, we will need to analyse secondary resources. We shall find these in the Proquest Online Database, scholarly papers and textbooks. The emphasis is on academic articles and textbooks for the theoretical part.

The examples of communities of practice described are a result of primary research done over years of cooperation with these organisations, numerous personal encounters mostly in the organisations themselves or at events they organised, or at guest lectures they themselves offered at City University of Seattle in Bratislava. One could boldly say that by this, these organisations themselves have become a community of practice since they cooperated and contributed to improved environmental education of university students on regular basis.

3 Definition of Communities of Practice

To be able to discuss the issue further, let us examine the definition of the term „Communities of Practice“. Anthropologist Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. [19]

Wenger et al. [19] defines Communities of Practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.“ The author then goes on to define the three crucial characteristics of a community of practice. These are: the domain, the community, the practice.

According to Wenger, community of practice „has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. ... The domain is not necessarily something recognized as “expertise” outside the community.“

In other words, the domain could be any interest the group has, even a passion for some rock band or the knowledge of some illegal practices. It is also important to stress that the fact that you belong to the same network may not even be known to you.

“In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together.“ [19] This view is supported also by Asbjorn Karlsen who in his work “*Cluster*” *Creation by Reconfiguring Communities of Practice* [7] shows that just by gathering in one place and forming a cluster, companies do not necessarily benefit from this. The author studied 6 Norwegian municipalities and came to the conclusion that it is actually beneficial to allow new start-up companies to join the industry from outside. While these new startups learn from the big enterprises, the enterprises also benefit as they are pushed into communication about the latest developments in their industries.

Here what is crucial is the necessity of communication that enables a community to form. The members of this community need to share their knowledge. This does not have to be on daily basis, but the interaction needs to happen. Being only part of the same institution, therefore, is not enough to actually create a community. This is often a misconception in schools or organisations who think that by simply sharing the same space, they have become

a community and interactive learning will occur. This proves that large classes where interaction among students is not encouraged hinder the creation and later exchange of knowledge by the students among themselves as well as with the teacher.

This characteristic would also prove that if an organisation with an environmental cause truly wants to make a change, it is not enough just to „get together“. They must have a clearly defined domain and provide a platform for the community members to communicate. Simply presenting its own agenda is not enough. In other words, any organisation that wants to become a community of practice must provide some forum for the exchange of ideas. This is done more easily today with the advance of social media. However, the threat is that an organisation may feel that by simply having a Facebook page, they have fulfilled this criterion. However, they must constantly be checking the opinions and exchange presented and should manage these conversations and direct them to some goal or form some tangible outcomes.

Lastly, the domain and community must be combined with practice. „A community of practice is not merely a community of interest- people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.“ [19]

We see that for a community of practice to function, all three conditions must be met and applied at the same time. Otherwise, the community of practice does not exist and it is merely a group of people in perhaps the same place, working even on the same project, but once the interaction fails, no practice occurs. Again, we could look at examples in real life where this could be applied. Even families become dysfunctional unless they actually work together on solving issues rather than just sharing the fact that they exist.

From all of the above we can see that the concept of communities of practice can be applied in organisations, schools, the social sector etc. Smith and McKeen [16] state in their paper entitled *Creating and Facilitation Communities of Practice* that: „Communities of practice (CoPs) are an emerging, unstructured organizational form that many believe will help companies to truly leverage what they know. CoPs appear to have the potential to galvanize knowledge sharing, learning, and change thereby improving a company’s performance and making it more competitive. However, a major problem with them is that their organic and informal nature makes them highly resistant to management supervision and interference in their activities. CoPs are therefore controversial because there is no clear role for management in them. In fact, if management does get involved, the community often dissipates. Yet paradoxically, CoPs require specific managerial efforts to develop and support them so that their full power can be leveraged.“

We can see that we have a peculiar situation here where the nature of the community of practice requires informality while its creation may require formality. It can, therefore, be inferred that communities of practice will thrive in an environment with liberal or democratic leadership style. These seem to be supportive and not afraid of not having utter control over all the happenings in an organisation. In a more centralised institution, from the point of view of power and management, we can expect the formation of communities of practice to be very difficult, if not impossible. Or they may form without the knowledge of the management and are thus useless for the benefit of the company’s further direction. In this case they may be looked upon as the source of apprehension or even revolt.

4 Real-life Examples of Communities of Practice

In order to better understand the activities of communities of practice in the real world, let us now look at several examples. The first is an example from Finland, where the state has taken the initiative to create a community of practice from basically the whole country. This project is called Team Finland. It is an example of cooperation that reaches far beyond a single department, company or even market sector. It was officially launched on September 10, 2012 with the goal to create economic synergy by "avoiding the fragmentation of export oriented activities through various players"[15]. The "network promotes Finland and its interests abroad: Finland's external economic relations, the internationalization of Finnish enterprises, investments in Finland and the country brand"[17]. Cleantech is at the core of Team Finland's agenda. [15]The Finnish government annually approves the shared goals of these actors at home and abroad. The core of the "Team Finland network are three Ministries – the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Culture – together with publicly funded bodies and Finnish offices abroad (including Finland's diplomatic missions, the offices of Finpro and Tekes, and national culture and science institutes), all operating under the ministries' guidance". They put large emphasis on the long-term perspective and continuity"[17]. In many other countries or companies the emphasis is more or less on the short-term. In many cases it also seems to be the problem of nobody wanting to assume responsibility, which in fact is what politics should be all about. Just like in the case of Nokia, the Finnish government is now focusing on creating a favorable business environment for Cleantech. Their "aim is to commit all actors to the achievement of a mutual goal" "[10]Such sentences are not rare in business, but usually they mean to commit people within perhaps just one company. In this case they apply to all the 'actors' that can influence Cleantech 26 growth- not just one or two companies, but all companies in the Cleantech conglomerate including their employees and even the Finnish government. The politicians are more than aware of the importance of the task and aim to optimize national and foreign policies to suit. They are committed to "identify and eliminate [...] legislative or practical bottlenecks hindering or decelerating growth"[10]. An example would be to allow foreign labor to have a low and flat income tax, just like they did in the case of Nokia. The main advantage of the Finnish system is that it does not favor any specific political movement.

Looking back at the criteria of a community of practice, Team Finland fits. It has a domain, a common interest or goal. In this case it is the issue of defining Finland's future focus and direction. It also has a community as all the actors are sharing and communicating with each other. It also has a practice as they are producing materials and know-how that can be used for the future development of the country. The fact that the public and private sector are sharing this common goal is truly remarkable.

Finland is not the only example. In their article *Insights into Operationalizing Communities of Practice from SSM-Based Inquiry Processes*, Ison, Blackmore, Collins, Holwell and Iaquinto [6] look at the case of Australia forming a community of practice in order to change their knowledge management strategy. The government realised that it is not possible to carry out by conventional means and they actually based their approach on Wenger's article.

Another example of a community of practice that is more local could be the Slovak Green Building Council. Essentially it is a Slovak version of the World Green Building Council that has its headquarters in Canada. It has branches in almost 100 countries, has more than 27,000 organizations under its wings and over 50 corporate and institutional partners. The main goal

of the SKGBC is to be the main ambassador for green buildings in Slovakia. [14] What the organisation does is that they try to recruit companies involved in the building industry to become their members and to change their business to a more sustainable one. They do this by organising different events, such as conferences, workshops, field trips etc. as well as by publishing different education materials. They form strategic partnerships with other institutions, such as the Slovak Technical University, Eurostav etc. so that they gain credibility and access to a greater knowledge base in the given area.

Again, they share a domain - they strive for a more sustainable future. They have a community – members and partners. These communicate regularly at events organised by the Council or even as part of their business operations. They also have a practice as they produce new knowledge base based on the unique experiences of individual members. This is then stored in their so called „green library“ together with publications about this exclusive topic from around the world.

With the onset of new technologies, it was only a matter of time before they would be used to form communities of practice. In their extensive study, Cheung, Lee and Lee [1] looked at an interesting phenomenon – the formation of online communities of practice and what is behind. Apparently people have an inner drive to share their knowledge and communicate it to others. The authors proved by their extensive empirical study that communities of practice may indeed function in the online environment. They conclude: „results show that when members’ expectations of reciprocity and capability of helping others were fulfilled, they were satisfied. In addition, when members found that their contributions could successfully help other members in the community, their knowledge self-efficacy was enhanced. This in turn increased their level of satisfaction with the knowledge-sharing experience. The post-knowledge-sharing evaluation processes have been validated in the context of online communities of practice.“

An excellent example of such a community where members actually help a good cause is the community Solved. [11] They started as a public-private company, partly financed by the Finnish government, partly by a private Slovak-Finnish company. Their motto is that „Together people achieve great things“. The stress is on the word „together“. Their goal is to provide a platform where experts from the whole world come together in order to cooperate on projects that help sustainable development in the world. Their view is to do it primarily through innovation. The platform works in such a way that different experts are recruited from all over the world and without ever meeting each other they cooperate online on solving problems connected to the environment, society or community. The project goes through three stages. First it is defined and then presented to the experts. The next phase is cocreative and the last one is the solution.

This unique concept shows that innovation in the field of sustainable development is brought on with the help of the internet and joins people that would otherwise never know about one another. It further saves a lot of costs and brings great results as the projects are carried out by true experts in their fields.

Again, we can see that Solved is indeed a community of practice as it has a domain, members – the experts, and they have a practice. They produce an utterly new knowledge base of innovative solutions for new projects around the world.

The Green Watch (Zelená hliadka) is the name of a non-government organisation that had a fable-like start. In 2011, Matúš Čupka, the founder, cleaned up an area of Bratislava in order to make the place look cleaner for the upcoming ice hockey championships. He was later

joined by his brother and family and once they shared the photographs of their actions on social media, more and more people got inspired. In the space of one year they already had almost three hundred „fans“ that joined them in their cleaning effort. [2]

What began as the result of an individual's frustration with non-functioning municipality has turned into a full-blown NGO with hundreds of followers. The organisation was able to attract media and the attention of local governments. Currently, the cleaning events are being suggested and organised by the Green Watch with the support of the local council. The Green Watch has also managed to push for changes in environmental policies, perhaps the most publicised is their campaign against visual smog in Bratislava and illegal billboards.

Not only is Green Watch a great example of a grass-roots movement, but also of the evolution process of a community of practice. Initially an individual action later amassed many followers. These have a domain – to clean the city and make it more attractive. The members are still on the rise and organise themselves via Facebook. They certainly have a practice. The results of their work are not only bags full of rubbish, but changes in policies and legislation regarding environment in Bratislava.

5 Closing Remarks

Returning to the study we mentioned in the introduction, the areas of Education, Environment and Healthcare should not be left only to the initiative to individuals and the private sector. From all the examples shown, it is clear that while communities of practice may be formed by individuals, government intervention enhances such a practice. To further prove this, more cases would need to be examined.

It could also be concluded that the activities of each community of practice grow in diversity, complexity and quality over time. This happens as more members of community join adding their own expertise. In this way a community of practice creates its own knowledge base that can then be shared with other communities. This differentiates communities of practice from purely information societies as these are deeply based on information. [9]

From what we have discussed we may conclude that communities of practice are examples of learning organisations. Their knowledge base grows over time and the education they go through is an ongoing process based on the experience of the community per se as well as its individual members. [8]

All the examples shown had in common was that they were connected to environmental issues. This, maybe naturally, meant that government interest, involvement or even support would be called for. However, according to a study done by Rivera and Carlos [13] it is important also for private companies to support the creation of communities of practice. They claim that organisations that are good in knowledge management tend to focus mainly on technological and strategic dimensions. The formation of a community of practice should, according to them, be highly encouraged, as it „integrates all aspects of organisational knowledge.“

Today the formation of a community of practice is seemingly easier due to technology available. Even from the mentioned examples we can just how crucial the online environment is. Of course, this also brings challenges together with the obvious benefits. Wei Zhang [20] talks about the issue of knowledge absorption in an online environment. Since the members cannot see each other or meet regularly face to face, the knowledge absorption can be

distorted by different external elements. The author states that better design of software systems will help overcome this phenomenon. This brings us to the topic of virtual teams, but these were not the primary subject of our study. An overlap with communities of practice cannot be denied though and they have been named Virtual Communities of Practice by numerous authors. (for example, Davis [3], 2010, Goettsch [4])

We can conclude that the idea of a community of practice is as old as humankind. The term has been formed recently, but communities of practice have been in existence for centuries. What is new today is the interest countries and companies are paying to the benefits of communities of practice. However, for them to function they must have a domain, a community and a practice. Real-life examples show that they are a beneficial form of sharing knowledge and that people are naturally inclined to share knowledge even in the online environment. This brings a lot of optimism for the future as long as the knowledge shared is of benefit to more people than just the given members of a community.

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