Book review

Ana Neves reviews Knowledge and Communities

TITLE: Knowledge and Communities
EDITORS: Eric L. Lesser, Michael A. Fontaine & Jason A. Slusher
ISBN: 0750672935

A community is a group of people with similar interests that gather around in a determined place (physical or not) to discuss and share knowledge. To accomplish this and as a result of this, documents are created, tools are used and values are set. These latter, for convenience’s sake, we call ‘things’. So, people, places and things: these are the three elements of a community according to Lesser, Fontaine and Slusher.

Based on this belief, they have selected a sequence of chapters written by different authors, each reflecting upon at least one of the above-mentioned elements. The book is divided into two parts; the first offers a practical perspective, while the second explores the theoretical background.

The practical part starts with what I find to be the most interesting chapter of all. It is written by Etienne Wenger, the man who coined the expression ‘communities of practice’ (CoPs). In this chapter, it is these he talks about. Although not a new concept, CoPs have recently assumed a special importance. Organisations are committed to assigning them a more central role, and to taking an intentional approach to their creation. The justification for this relies on the belief that “knowledge is an act of participation” and that those who produce and use it on a daily basis should manage that knowledge.

The chapter introduces Wenger’s knowledge strategy, based on CoPs. His model has seven steps and suggests a cyclical process. After identifying the steps (map key knowledge needs, find communities, develop communities, connect across boundaries, foster belonging, run the business, and the momentum) the author delves into each one of them. Right at the end, Wenger reflects upon the true responsibilities of a knowledge manager.

Introducing some organisations’ practices as an illustration for the author’s ideas, this chapter is a wonderful starting point to anyone wondering what CoPs are and how to support them. It is also a wonderful starting point to this book.

McDermott reflects, then, on technology’s incapacity to change cultural behaviours and achieve true knowledge management alone. He points out the characteristics of knowledge and suggests some actions to leverage it. In his conclusion, the author briefly talks about the four challenges of creating a community: technical, social, management, and personal.

The characteristics behind a creative and innovative workplace are the subject of Judge et al. This is also the focus of Seely Brown and Duguid’s chapter. They consider working, learning and innovation, and prove that big organisations paying attention to the informal communities within will be prepared to innovate as much as the smaller ones. Judge et al also point out some management actions to support innovation, as Teigland, and Lesser and Prusak do.
Training versus learning, and theory versus experience, is the basis for Stamps and Brown and Duguid’s work. The latter establish the difference between canonical (based on books and training) and non-canonical (based on daily experience) practice. The second is the one that can really help in day-to-day tasks. To leverage those practices, the authors suggest storytelling, among other activities.

Teigland suggests ways of assessing individual performance of CoPs elements, based on an exploratory study performed at an internet firm. The study led to the still unanswered question of whether virtual communities where nobody knows anyone can be considered CoPs. Computer-supported communities are also the subject of a study by Wellman et al. The authors consider network-based electronic tools and the social effects these produce, in terms of communication, cooperation, and creation of ties.

Franco et al mention computer-supported interactions and analyse ‘flaming’ (the act of talking rapidly about an uninteresting subject). Context is mentioned in this chapter, having been overlooked in the rest.

From the whole book, I should emphasise Armstrong and Hagel III’s ideas about the economical value a strong online community can bring to an organisation. They consider four types of communities (transaction, interest, fantasy, and relationship) to address members’ requirements, and four ways of generating value (usage fees, content fees, advertising, and synergies). The appeal of this chapter is the direct applicability of most of the ideas. It considers today’s reality and organisations’ ambitions in the virtual world.

I also emphasise the knowledge managers’ responsibilities as suggested by Wenger: map strategic knowledge requirements into practice domains; support community development and community leaders’ training; educate managers to foster communities; lead the support team; understand the environment and its effect on the process behaviour; connect internal and external organizations; specify supportive technology platforms; lead a CoP; and devise an assessment process and redirect the knowledge strategy if necessary.

Strategic communities, as mentioned by Storck and Hill, also deserve to be highlighted. They are introduced as communities created by top management to do some strategic business task. CoPs and strategic communities share relevant characteristics. However, they have much dissimilarity, the most poignant being the spontaneity of the former against the formality of the latter.

Finally, I have to mention the return of social capital, here recalled by the work of Lesser and Prusak. The authors start off with the assumption that social capital supports knowledge management. Then go on to show the important role CoPs play in fostering social capital, thus demonstrating the importance of CoPs in facilitating knowledge management.

Most of the chapters offer lots of examples. Some of them are presented as the basis for authors’ work, while others are given as illustrations of their ideas and theories. The large amount of bibliographical references, despite the academic impression it gives, constitutes a precious treasure to those who want to explore CoPs in more detail.

My overall opinion of this book is good. It provides a mixture of both field and research ideas. It also considers different types of communities. I only dislike the fact that all the chapters have already been published elsewhere, and some of them date back to the beginning of the 90s. The editors offer an initial introduction and abstracts, but little more is added to the value of the chapters.

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