

Intellectual Stimulation

Communities of practice contribute to corporate survival through innovation

by John Harney

Most of you have hobbies — in the IT world, many people are obsessed with golf, although I've met plenty with less popular passions such as sailing or singing country music. You don't get paid to do these activities — you do them, in fact, to get away from work. Through communities of practice (CoPs), organizations such as The World Bank build on their employees' passions and obsessions by encouraging staff to move beyond their job descriptions and explore subjects and perspectives that could benefit the entire enterprise.

INTELLECTUAL OSMOSIS

Imagine an activity in which you are passionately interested and has some relevance to your company — multimedia application development at a software company, herbal remedies found in the Amazon rain forest at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), or aerodynamic automobile design at a car manufacturer.

Now imagine having your job performance partially rated on how much you participate in a group of people with a similar love of this subject. Imagine your company supporting you with some kind of collaborative infrastructure, office space, maybe even a venue for annually reporting discoveries that might be useful to the company at large — but with the caveat that you don't necessarily have to produce anything, just participate.

If this sounds too good to be true, then obviously you haven't heard of CoPs. Learning theorist Etienne Wenger defines a CoP as a self-organizing social entity engaged in a joint enterprise in which the members develop a shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, vocabulary, and so on) in the process of collaborating on a subject. But the subject must matter to the members and is never divorced from the practice in which it's embodied.

Unlike more official groups, CoPs have an "enterprise," not an agenda. Enterprise is the process of adding value to members' shared knowledge and negotiating the meaning — but not the goal — of that knowledge. Members stay in CoPs not because they have to but because they continue learning there. So CoPs are voluntary and, therefore, best thrive under minimal hierarchies of command.

CoPs can also promote intellectual osmosis across organizational structures and hierarchies within businesses, across business units, and even company boundaries. NIH scientists might share research in alternative medicine within their workgroup, with their NIH peers in traditional Western medicine, as well as with medicine men of indigenous tribes in the rain forest.

MEANINGFUL FLOW

CoPs are more about pursuing a passionate interest and making friends than doing business. Therefore, they're a source of genuine meaning for their members — they possess a powerful, positive emotional component born of personal relationships. The personal aspect makes CoPs more manageable and collaboration within them more intimate and direct than traditional methods, such as meetings and workgroups.

Large organizations, by contrast, are formal abstractions used by management to market and sell to customers and inspire employees — they tend to be big, anonymous, and bureaucratic. Foremost, they are profit engines for management and a paycheck for workers — their meaning might not coincide with the personal meaning most important to individual workers. The structures and hierarchies of large companies often stifle innovation and creative problem solving — precisely the skills needed by organizations to weather difficult economic times.

CoPs have structure, but it's called emerging structure because it's more dynamic than static — whereas corporate structure is more static than dynamic (think of your company's organization chart). They are therefore consistent generally but always changing specifically — learning is the flow that drives the CoPs' structure, which is its form.

CoPs can take many forms, but their infrastructure exists as a public Web site or on an organization's intranet. Community content can range from case studies to best practices papers, research results, forum postings, published articles or academic papers, books, and other relevant resources. Community membership may span the globe, depending on the subject of the community, and most members assume active roles in managing, updating, and contributing to community content.

INSTINCT OR INNOVATION

The corporate mandate to eliminate unproductive time from work processes helps companies execute more efficiently. Execution is the overriding instinct of most corporations — often superceding innovation. The mandate to execute often crushes creativity, which can be at odds with fiscal quarter objectives — even though innovative thinking is perfectly consistent with the overall corporate mission of being, for instance, the best network router manufacturer in the industry.

The drive for efficient execution is especially true in industries governed by Internet time where companies must execute faster to compete. Ironically, innovation is often a critical defense against competition in Internet time because it helps companies adapt to constantly changing industries and survive in the long term.

On the other hand, the enterprise, or mission, of a CoP stimulates members to invest time in learning — and practice what they learn. This fosters an environment where they tend to innovate more creatively. So CoPs exist in a somewhat inverse relation to the organizations that host them.

Similarly, real jobs at organizations often exist in inverse relation to the formal job descriptions maintained by the organizations. Unfortunately, official job descriptions can't predict the fluctuating conditions of, say, the stock market that might affect company strategies next quarter and evolve to address those conditions.

Companies that don't acknowledge this fact and fail to adapt to reality tend to get increasingly dysfunctional. In the absence of guidance relevant to changing conditions, workers develop covert agendas, alliances, and off-the-organization-chart processes in an effort to control their environment, maintain power, and survive. The company dynamic gets way out of whack to accommodate the institutional fiction.

HIERARCHIES OF WISDOM

As in medieval trade guilds, acknowledged masters of a practice comprise the core of a CoP and, to learn, other members serve as their apprentices. But the dynamic is not a one-way slavish ingestion of dogma. Masters are the ferries that get the apprentices across the river of their own inexperience — once on the other side, competence becomes their means of transport. But this metaphorical leave-taking isn't rebellion — as when you quit a dysfunctional company. Having learned the practice, the apprentices become the masters' masters and recycle their own innovations back to them to keep the state-of-the-practice vital.

This is quite different from corporate management hierarchies. I once consulted for an international chemical company on how to help its customer service representatives (CSRs) use a new worldwide order management system that executives and IT had designed to improve sales and customer service.

There was a problem, though — the designers hadn't taken a customer's order in 10 years. Thinking their seniority made them right, they chose not to ask the CSRs how it was currently done — and automated processes they used a decade earlier. Aside from being furious at management's arrogance, the CSRs also soon discovered that the multimillion-dollar system automated inefficient and inaccurate processes. But they had to use it.

Within a month, the CSRs devised workarounds not sanctioned by management so they could do their jobs right and survive, despite the new system. In short, management stopped being masters of their practice and, in forcing outmoded methods on staff, made them rebel.

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

Knowledge management (KM) — somewhat unfairly — has been stigmatized for too often lacking quantifiable ROI. As a KM subset, CoPs might draw the same fire. From the explanation thus far, I think it's obvious they have merit — but, for the skeptics, let's get more specific. Both organizations and members benefit from CoPs for numerous reasons.

First, they are low- or no-cost forums for improving employees' expertise. A CoP can subsist on a simple email infrastructure, and employee members can be CEOs as well as floor workers. (Imagine Steve Case at AOL TimeWarner as a member of a public/private sector CoP with the Library of Congress on, say, digital libraries. I think he'd enjoy the experience, pass on knowledge, and learn something as well.)

In eliciting responses from members, CoPs make tacit knowledge in people's heads explicit knowledge, usually captured in an electronic archive. That archive becomes, in time, a virtual communal memory that all members — and, later, the host organization — can tap. With such virtual technological help as well as willing and qualified human aid, members can tackle projects too unwieldy for them to handle solo.

When they span business units, CoPs can help prevent duplication of different departments' efforts and promote cross-functional product design and business strategy. And, of course, as innovation incubators, they can be instrumental for companies coping with technological change in fast-moving industries.

ABILITY TO IMPROVISE

But what most appeals to me about CoPs is their potential to improve employees' motivation and make their daily work experience more meaningful. That's because CoPs generate real learning, creativity, and growth for workers and management. Granted, that's hard to quantify. It's like trying to train carrier pigeons to optimally perform by calculating the average number of wing-beats it takes 10 birds to get a message from point A to point B. At best, you'll get a number with such a margin of error that it would be of little practical use. At worst, you'll create robot birds that fly in straight lines oblivious to both changing outward conditions and their own unique talents — when confronted with reality, they'll encounter obstacles. Better to let them internalize reality into their flight smarts and navigate accordingly. Eight times out of 10 they'll take the route you like because it's the best way to execute their mission. When they have to improvise, though, they're up to the task — because sometimes the shortest line between two points is not the best path.

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