

Additional case studies

Success Factors Underpinning a Community of Practice: A Qualitative Case Study

Relevant to: Chapter 12 (Communities of Practice)

Retna & Ng (2011) examine the factors underpinning the success of communities of practice within a single Singaporean multinational (MNC). They define a community of practice as involving an informal group of people who *'share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis'*, (p. 41). Further, they suggest that communities of practice are constituted by three separate elements: a domain of shared knowledge; a sense of community identity; and a common practice.

The MNC they examined developed and sold document and knowledge management solutions. More specifically it provided the software, hardware and support to help businesses manage their document-based knowledge archives. At the time of the research the company employed just over 100 employees, over 30 of who were interviewed for the research. Retna & Ng describe their research as being a qualitative case study, which involved not only interviewing staff, but also the analysis of company documentation, and observation of some company meetings.

The research that was conducted found a diverse range of communities in existence with these communities typically spanning functional boundaries within the company. For example, one interviewee said,

'being in this informal group, I get ideas and good solutions not only from other technicians but also from people who are in different divisions doing different jobs. This helps us all learn from each other', (p. 48).

The existence of the communities was also found to facilitate a sense of shared identity among people. For example, an interviewee said, *'I enjoy exchanging ideas and advice from each other... I enjoy the atmosphere and have a sense of belonging'*, (p. 48). Further, many people believed that the existence of these communities benefitted the company through helping to reduce the time it took the company to respond to customer queries and requests.

Retna & Ng argue that three inter-related factors contributed to the existence and success of the communities of practice. These were leadership, the organizational culture, and people's individual motivation to learn. In terms of leadership, two factors were found to be important. Firstly, the leadership of the company's CEO was argued to support the CoPs. He was visibly and strongly personally committed to supporting them, and provided support for them through reflecting on them within formal management meetings. Further, the CEO also ensured that support for CoPs was integrated into company policies and reward schemes. However, the second way in which leadership supported the communities of the practice was not related to one specific individual. Instead the research suggested that people possessed a sense of 'distributed leadership', where different people felt willing to act and take the lead in carrying out their work and solving the problems that this work generated. One interviewee articulated this as follows, *'each of us think of*

ourselves as a leader. We share leadership and distribute work according to our knowledge expertise', (p. 53).

The second organizational factor which contributed to the existence and success of the communities of practice was the character of the organizational culture. The key features of its culture that facilitated the CoPs was that it had an open attitude to communication and collaboration. One interviewee summed this up by saying, '*we communicate freely and talk about issues openly when we meet. We trust and help each other...*', (p. 53). The strength of the company's vision, which was to be a leader in their field, which many people believed in, was also argued to play an important role in supporting the CoPs.

The third and final, inter-related factor which was argued to facilitate the COPs was that most employees were well motivated to participate in them. Employees were typically happy to participate in the CoPs as they felt that doing so directly helped them in carrying out their work. More specifically, as the company operated in a fast changing and dynamics business environment people believed the CoPs helped them to cope with this through providing a forum to share ideas, reflect on their practices, and implement change.

Question:

- 1) The success of the CoPs in this case is closely related to the character of the CEO and the staff who work in the company. What are your comments on this?
- 2) To what extent would it be possible to replicate its success in managing COPs in an organization which didn't initially possess the same type of organizational culture and leadership style?

Source: Retna, K, Ng, P. (2011). 'Communities of Practice: Dynamics and Success Factors'. *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, 32/1: 41-59.