



## Communities of practice, information management ... and librarians!

If you have been following the general management literature recently, you might have noticed that the amount of space devoted to knowledge management is declining. In its place, increasing attention is being paid to the notion of Communities of Practice.

Communities of practice are mechanisms for sharing knowledge among people with a shared interest in a particular practice. A practice is typically a field, a skill, a problem, or a technique. Practices within organizations include marketing, innovation and process improvement, and sustaining the corporate intranet. Practices around which communities might form among people from different organizations are, for example, disaster relief, Dublin Core, or online reference work.

While communities of practice are mechanisms for knowledge sharing, they differ significantly from knowledge management systems (KMS) as we now know them. Most current KMS are designed to record and codify knowledge in a structured way. Knowledge is usually shared through the medium of a secondary source (the knowledge base or 'repository') rather than directly from the primary source, the person or group who originally developed the knowledge. Structured knowledge management systems have been most effective in four situations:

- In call centres and at help desks where the solutions to common problems and questions can be recorded for access by a diverse group of 'operators'. The operators typically call on the knowledge base to answer questions such as 'Why can I not make a call to Australia from my mobile phone?' or 'Why does my computer lock up when I copy a picture from SPSS into Word?'
- In organizations such as government agencies or large corporate bureaucracies where the need for storage of and access to internal documents is well established. In these cases, the KMS acts primarily as an enhanced electronic records management system.
- In international consulting firms that deal with similar projects for similar organizations with similar needs, but in different geographical locations. A typical example is the sharing of methods and documents for design and implementation of enterprise-wide software systems.
- In research and development groups, such as those of pharmaceutical companies, where the knowledge base serves as a kind of shared, electronic research notebook.

But not much of the information that needs to be shared in organizations is as predictable or as stable as these forms. Moreover, the problems of attempting to share knowledge in such an impersonal way are now well known. Many attempts to develop knowledge bases have failed because of the knowledge holders' reluctance to share information or difficulty describing their knowledge so it can be readily retrieved by others. Even when knowledge has been recorded and codified, the people who need it often act before they think about

going to the KMS because it is more natural for humans to turn to other people first. And then there are the problems of ensuring that the knowledge recorded in, and retrieved from, the KMS is up to date. While information professionals can help reduce all these problems, sharing of current knowledge among members of communities of practice hardly encounters them at all!

In a community of practice, the primary method of communication is interpersonal conversation. Information is shared either through synchronous conversations (supported by technologies for chat and online meetings such as ICQ and NetMeeting) or asynchronous discussions (supported by listservs or online conferencing systems). Sharing information within a community of practice therefore fits more closely with everyday modes of organizational communication, without imposing the additional, and more formal, requirements of a KMS. For example, the marketing managers in an international company might communicate regularly with one another about common concerns such as representation in the marketplace, using a listserv, e-mail or chat. Their unstructured conversations seldom need structured documentation, and not all of the outcomes of the conversations could be readily recorded in a structured knowledge base. But, through their regular conversations, the managers have a better understanding of the company and the company is likely to be represented in a more consistent way. Knowledge has been shared, using a more natural means of communication than provided by a structured KMS.

In an effective community of practice, conversations about practice occur over a period of time, and a sense of community develops. Members of the community have a sense of knowing one another and of belonging to a group which has developed its own norms for communication. They have sufficient mutual trust to share real problems and to propose potentially risky solutions, thus overcoming the reluctance of people to share information with one another in the more formal way demanded by a structured KMS.

Communities of practice enable direct sharing of knowledge among people interested in a particular practice, without the need for an intermediary knowledge base or repository. They therefore enable timely access to the current knowledge of other people, without the need for an information professional to design or manage the knowledge base or to assist with indexing and information retrieval.

Does this mean that people with training in information management and information science will have a less significant role in knowledge management? On the face of it, yes. In practice, no.

A community of practice needs a mechanism for recording decisions made, documents written, and ideas, problems and solutions members consider worth recording for the future. It needs a knowledge repository, a structured KMS, and an information professional to manage it.

In addition, a community of practice needs a mechanism for learning what knowledge in its area of practice is being developed outside the community, and for making that knowledge its own. A community that learnt about its practice only by sharing the knowledge of members within the community would be of limited value. An individual community member (a gatekeeper) who reads widely and shares knowledge gained from the reading is one potential source of outside knowledge. Proponents of communities of practice recommend that this role of 'community librarian' be formalized (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002).

Information management roles are being incorporated in existing and proposed communities of practice. Here are some examples:

- A European bank's community of economists includes a 'researcher and librarian' who stimulates discussion by identifying and proposing material to read, and provides access to electronic sources of relevant information by maintaining the community's intranet portal.
- A university-based on-line learning community includes an information specialist who acts as 'resource tutor', providing on-line 'bibliographic' support in the form of reading lists of both on-line and print materials and access to materials available in electronic format.
- A proposal for an on-line community for international disaster relief includes an 'expertise locator' who locates and keeps a database of expertise for disaster relief, and maintains the community's structured knowledge base and acts as an interface to the information within it at the time of a disaster.

Etienne Wenger, a prominent writer about communities of practice, and his colleagues suggest that communities of practice have a 'community librarian' whose activities might include: 'Scanning for relevant articles, books, cases, and other resources; Reviewing and selecting material, writing summaries, reviews or notations; Organizing materials into the community's taxonomy; Providing on-call research services for practitioners about what resources may be most helpful; ... Connecting community members with others expert in the field'; and introducing new members to the community. They further specify the nature of the person who plays this role: '...need some basic understanding of information science applications and technical knowledge of the domain they are supporting. They also typically need Web skills, familiarity with online and physical resources relevant to the domain, and interpersonal skills to consult with practitioners' (Wenger et al. 2002: 103–4). What they are describing is the electronic community's equivalent of the role played (most notably from the 1950s to the 1980s) by the special librarians or documentalists who worked as members of research groups and other specialist organizational teams, a role we have come to call information management.

This is a really exciting development for information professionals! Over the past half century, we have seen changes in information management technologies, information and knowledge structures, and many aspects of organizational structure. These things are, however, simply the infrastructure within which the information professional practises. Within this new infrastructure, the modern information professional is an active member of a community, selecting and providing access to the information that the community needs, and in the tradition of the 'special librarian', understanding the recorded knowledge of a field of practice, pointing out specific knowledge of relevance to current community issues, helping to record and provide future access to new knowledge developed within the community, and putting members of the community with an interest in similar issues in contact with one another and with others outside the community who have knowledge and expertise to share. The titles given to the jobs that these new information professionals fill vary, but it is interesting to see that those outside our field describe what we have come to call an 'information manager' as a 'librarian'. Is it time for a name change (again)?

## Reference

Cultivating Communities of Practice. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School University Press: p. 103.

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