



MSc in Technology, Innovation & Entrepreneurship

Report in the module of:

Knowledge Society & ICT Policy

with subject:

**Communities of Practice are the fabric of
the knowledge society. Discuss this statement**

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this report gave us the motive to make a small research on a top-significance knowledge tool of our era, the Communities of Practice. In this report, we are trying to approach the issue as broadened as possible, aiming to analyse and comment on different findings from various sources.

As described in the next section, the “Summary”, our efforts were focused in *investigating the role and level of contribution of Communities of Practice as a fabric in the knowledge-based society*.

The findings were impressive and useful for further reference.

SUMMARY

Purpose – This report is trying to discuss and investigate the existence and the role of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a social entity and as a fabric in the Knowledge Society of our era. Furthermore, an effort for an in-depth approach was made, in order to realize its contribution and incorporation in the global knowledge-based matrix.

Design/Methodology/Approach – This report is based in a number of bibliographical resources such as research and working papers, technical reports, journals as well as relevant books, which were found after scholastic searching. Our feeling is that a number of very remarkable materials were discovered through this research. The methodology used, included the use of a brainstorming and mind-managing tool in order to facilitate and share in a more effective way the findings of this essay.

Findings – Communities of practice are an informal entity, which plays a significant role in the knowledge society having the power to affect other formal organizational units. Management of these entities should be done in a very distinct way and if succeeds may enable them as a key factor in the facilitation of knowledge among society, creates growth and finally prosperity.

Research limitations/implications – All material processed are derivatives and conclusions of research made by various groups of authors/scientists on this issue. I have tried to include material that has approached the issue in different ways in order to cover the subject in a broaden manner.

Practical Implications – This report is aim to help, on the one side, the researchers to find some structured and compressed knowledge on this issue, whiles on the other side the managers to get an idea of how to approach and evaluate the entity of communities of practice.

Originality/Value – This report was prepared as the first paper to submit for the MSc in Technology, Innovation and Entrepreneurship course (University of Sheffield – CITY Liberal Studies). The relevant module for which is submitted is the “*Knowledge Society & ICT Policy*”, with module director Dr. Iraklis Paraskakis.

Keywords – Communities of Practice (CoPs), Knowledge Society, Knowledge, Knowledge Management, Social Capital, Cultivation, Human Capital.

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INTRODUCTION

An African proverb says “if you want to go fast, travel alone, but if you want to go far, travel together”.

Continuous changes in the global environment with the interference of significant components, which supported, shaped and directed these changes, brought in front of us meanings and dilemmas that have to be understood and faced positively.

It was clearly stated by the European Commission, few years ago at Lisbon, that there would be one strategic goal for the next decade: “to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”. “To make Europe capable of sustainable economic growth and with greater social cohesion”. [1]

Adapting to the changing environment, operating pro-actively and most of the times ***acting more and thinking less*** are some of the poles around which we have to construct our plans. For this to happen, a number of tools are necessary to be developed in combination with the idea of ***re-defining our mentality***.

Nothing can be done by itself.

In this new era, more than ever it is crucial to bring together three components which define our world's matrix:

- People
- Knowledge
- Technology

When referring to ***people*** we imply specific attributes that we pay attention such as personal advancement, professional development, enrichment of skills, development of personal competitive advantages and the creation of added value.

Knowledge has long been recognized as a valuable resource for growth and sustainability, a resource proven extremely useful especially when we live in uncertain environments.

The role of *technology* so far, seemed to be disruptive. The widespread dissemination of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the form of knowledge management systems, have raised new opportunities for acquiring knowledge, skills and competences as well as transforming the information and knowledge to learning. Technology introduced new trends and challenges for shaping the future learning and proved to be an effective tool to support knowledge sharing as well.

Under these circumstances, new objectives have to be pursued such as social competence, critical thinking, knowledge sharing, cooperation techniques, acquisition of new digital skills, innovative approaches.

In this report, we will investigate the role of Communities of Practice (CoPs) in the knowledge-based society as a fabric of it, trying to catch its originality and contribution.

CHAPTER 1. Knowledge Management

Knowledge is not simply the result of collection and processing of information but in addition requires the exercise of judgment [2], so in result we understand that knowledge involves the process of accumulation and understanding.

All knowledge has both softer and harder aspects [3] and this division drives us to realize that most of the times what is obvious may have hidden parts that are not easily visible. At this point is worthy to mention *that transfer of knowledge is not simply an exchange*. Soft and hard knowledge may be perceived as the well-known *tacit and explicit knowledge*, two terms that have been used many times in the area of knowledge management as well as relevant expert approaches.

A quick definition will be that *tacit knowledge* is the one that has been internalized by the individual or team, usually knowledge derived from experience, work knowledge, which more or less is difficult to be articulated and captured. [4]

On the other hand, *explicit knowledge* is the one that can be easily articulated as it has been codified, captured and can be written down as rules or guidelines, therefore it can be exchanged and placed into formal boundaries.

Knowledge is an intangible resource that can be spread and be shared in a way of no losing its value or being consumed throughout its transfer. This makes it a unique key resource for every organization, for every society. I dare to say, based on the survey made on the current references, that knowledge is a commodity and as such has to be treated from all. It can create benefit (added value) and develop competitive advantage in the knowledge-based society.

Although it is difficult to understand how to create and leverage knowledge in practice, it is true that traditional knowledge management approaches, have tried to capture existing knowledge within formal systems, such as databases or other expert systems, where the aim was to code knowledge for later use or to manage it.

Knowledge Management (KM) tries to capture-codify-store the knowledge in order to manage it. [5] This is in general terms its mission, combined with the fact that it aims to support the organization *to cope with new challenges*.

Specifically (a) the internationalization of business and social aspects, (b) the obligatory collaboration among different parts and (c) the knowledge sharing, across time and distance, have made the role of KM more than a necessity.

As mentioned before KM theories approached the knowledge rather in a dichotomous way, accepting that it can be either tacit or explicit and in continuous tried to categorize it in articulated or non-articulated. Probably we have to see knowledge as a two-faced process where *there is the structured and the less-structured part*. [6]

So far, we have mentioned the terms of “**knowledge**” and “**knowledge management**” in our effort to understand the parameters that participate in the knowledge society. Another participant is “**learning**”. Knowledge involves the conversion of *data to information*. *Learning refers to the knowledge acquisition after the critical process of judgment*. In addition, learning involves the gathering from different sources and the sharing of existing knowledge. *Sharing requires communication and information processing*.

As it is understood, learning and knowledge are two related and interconnected concepts. By the society’s perspective, the central concern is *the learning* that occurs among its members. Similarly, another serious concern is *the management of knowledge* that derives from the process of learning.

These two aspects are useful to be kept as the main factors of knowledge society.

Learning is the key resource to the knowledge available. At this point, we presume that the root of a society’s competitive advantage, resides in the number of the resources that develops, as well as, in what extent and depth. These resources may be tangible or intangible but needless to say that the ability for a society **to learn** is a major critical intangible resource.

Of course, to guarantee this, some main factors have to exist:

- Data collection (gathering of data)
- Convert data to information (gathering of information)
- Share the information and make it knowledge (transferring and sharing information through communication and judgment)
- Enabling learning in the society

The bottom line of this process is that learning should lead to “*bettering*” *the society*. This will be the main target for a society.

A society has to gain from its experiences and the only way to achieve this is to share these experiences through information and knowledge. This will result in getting full advantage of the knowledge around and transfer it into learning. By combining the experiences and knowledge which are located on every individual or even organization, this will result to develop new products/services, improve existed ones and direct the society towards wealthy and prosperity.

In addition, such an environment may create the conditions where to incubate innovators, individuals who will lead this effort and define the new frontiers.

CHAPTER 2. Knowledge Society

An effort to find a definition of what is “*knowledge society*” have concluded in the following: “A society, that operates within the paradigm of the economics of information and human capital, is valued as the highest asset and is seen as the prime input to production and innovation”. [7]

Knowledge society is a complex phenomenon, which has a pervasive impact on all aspects of human activity. [8] The creation of knowledge is a unique feature that forms major component for any individual.

It is realised that the human factor is the most significant and it is clear to say that individuals have the ability to develop and share the capacity to create and use knowledge. Therefore, the first cell in the society may be considered the individual. In general, individuals have to learn constantly in order to stay competitive and respond flexibly to the continuous changes in the environment. In addition, they manage to learn participating in groups and sharing their findings based on daily interaction.

Over the years, societies through their members’ interaction developed a number of skills, in order to face changes and support their progress. A growing consensus rose, based on a specific principle where knowledge was necessary to be captured, codified and documented in order for the members to acquire and use it. Of course, this knowledge always was framed within rules and guidelines, turned to be struggled and outdated on crucial times, when someone really needed it.

Knowledge societies are not a new occurrence. In the past, people have applied relevant tactics to distribute knowledge and keep contacts aiming to gain experience and help. The process of learning existed but it was laid in a different frame and with different components. Therefore, knowledge societies have progressively acquired new characteristics and this was because of the radical technological changes.

However, things evolved and societies via the use of information & communication technologies (ICTs) acquired a different perspective to approach and manage knowledge.

They adopted the suggestion that it is better to concentrate in ways that knowledge can be shared, discussed and innovated rather than try to capture and manipulate it, following old-fashioned techniques.

By no means, now we have new technological achievements, more powerful and more involved. We are living in a historical period of technological change that is characterized by the development and widening application of ICTs. [9] These are responsible for reshaping the working life, the organization of enterprises and the whole of society. These affect the process and methods of learning, enabling people to embed knowledge.

So far, we have concluded that both *content and human capacity* are the two crucial components of the knowledge society. [10] The existence of both though is not enough by itself. For the knowledge society to develop and evolve, these two components should be placed in the center of the research. *Human intellectual capability* must be prioritized, as this is a factor that facilitates economic growth. *The content* must be usable, which means the information has to be accessible, affordable, available, timely relevant, readily assimilated and in language and context that can be understood.

Needless to point out that freedom of information is a prerequisite. ICT infrastructure and connectivity both guarantee the participation and the physical action of individuals.

The technological evolution offer a number of innovations which are mentioned below:

- Current technologies have *eliminated the constraints* of geographic proximity.
- They are offered in a *fairly low cost* and as a result they are accessible to companies, organizations and individuals.
- Current technologies are offering *much more possibilities* for sharing, archiving and retrieving knowledge.
- Knowledge has become *the most important capital* in the present age and hence the success of any society lies in the effort of harnessing it.
- Under the new conditions and the continuously changing environment, knowledge is *the primary production resource* instead of capital and labor.

A knowledge society as an entity has a number of characteristics. These characteristics affect its behaviour and its reaction to the external stimulations in a way that define its evolution throughout time. We are considering important to mention them.

- Information and in extent knowledge, become the key factors for quality of life and economic performance.
- Both are vital components of the formation of any society because usually every society is formed around some shared concepts.
- The knowledge society realizes the importance of knowledge and the importance of proper knowledge distribution, sharing and building for social development.
- ICTs are the major drivers of a pervasive and diversified change.
- People have a massively increased ability to obtain and process information as well as to create, transmit and manage knowledge.
- For this to happen, it is necessary for people to have ICT skills, interpersonal and communication skills such as cognitive skills: learning to learn, teamwork, problem solving.
- The development of human capacity is a target.
- Central approach and a major characteristic of a knowledge society, is to build knowledge and raise awareness to deliver both productivity growth and job satisfaction, also to find ways and means to reconcile flexibility and security.
- Social and human capital, are two key factors which contribute to social and economic development in combination with the social relations.
- In addition, *social cohesion* is a broader concept than social capital and it involves the shared values and the commitment to the society. Social cohesion and consensus are added values to such a scheme of a society.
- Not only information should be free but knowledge as well, for benefit of the society, further development and crystallization.

A knowledge society need three components to guarantee its trajectory.

- ✓ Freedom of knowledge
- ✓ People from the same or different fields and
- ✓ Infrastructure (physical and technological)

CHAPTER 3. Social Capital

The sum of actual and potential resources: (a) embedded within, (b) available through and (c) derived from the network of relationships, possessed by an individual or a social unit, defines *social capital*. For a social capital to develop is necessary to create and maintain *social ties* the most important resource of the social capital.

The social capital allows people to resolve collective problems more easily, can bridge cultural differences and finally is the one that can deliver value and power to a society. It facilitates cooperation and coordination and as a result, society can benefit from it. Discussing about social capital, it is unavoidable to refer in trust, shared understanding, reciprocal relationships, social network structures, common norms and language. Therefore, the component of social capital is measurable, identifiable and most of all crucial for a society. *The successful trajectory of a knowledge-based society depends on the status of its social capital and how this interacts.*

There are three primary dimensions of the social capital: [11]

- Structural dimension where members are *links of connections*
- Relational dimension where members have a *sense of trust* among them
- Cognitive dimension where members have *common interests* and *common understanding* of issues

The above dimensions may be found any time in a high or a low degree forming the status of the society, organization or community at the specific moment.

Societies though that exhibit highly cohesive forms of social capital, are not necessarily beneficial to themselves, as such behavior may create boundaries, may harm and in result direct to self-isolation. We must not forget that everything is part of a broader entity, thus open links have to be preserved continuously evaluated, and reactions must follow, in any case.

Communities of Practice - *which is our main topic at this report* – with high social capital, have frequent interaction, which in turn cultivates an environment of reciprocity, trust, improving coordination and dissemination of knowledge and learning.

CHAPTER 4. Communities of Practice (CoPs)

4.1 Definition

In our effort to realize at first, what is, a Community of Practice, various definitions have been found.

The term “*Community of Practice*” illustrates a sociological approach in one entity and gives us the basis for the understanding, that there is *a formation and a structure*. In addition, individuals, form connections regarding their engagement with the others and the world.

After a scholastic survey, we are concluding in the following:

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a *social unit*, a *social entity* that includes individuals, informally bounded, who share and learn, based on common interests through their mutual engagement. [12]

This entity operates as an engine for the development of social learning that occurs when people, who have a common interest or a problem, collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions and build innovations.

CoPs generate knowledge simply through participation and sharing, producing social capital as well. This social capital leads to behavioral changes and these changes influence individuals’ performance. Considering that, the individuals are at the same time members in a company, their participation in a CoP, affects - under the chain effect - and their business, personal performance or any other aspect of their life.

So far, what we realize is that a CoP is a small cell of the society.

A small cell that can be in a way, turned into an incubator for dissemination of knowledge and learning.

A Community of Practice is the most versatile and dynamic knowledge resource, operating beyond typical frontiers, based in very different internal mechanisms of communication,

based also in leadership and trust, with specific norms and a strong idea of *the shared practice*.

It is necessary to point out that a Community of Practice is not a typical organizational unit, is not a community of interest, is not a business team and has no connection with an association or a formal society.

The existence of communities of practice is not something new. Throughout the years always existed. The difference is that these days attract more attention as the environment changes, because of their capacity to spread tacit knowledge, accelerate learning and create acceptable hierarchy.

Traditionally CoPs have relied on face-to-face meetings, where physical presence was necessary. Nowadays in the fast-paced and distributed environment, following this policy is slow, costly and time consuming. New collaborative technologies have changed the model of face-to-face contact to a virtual one. Virtual environments have defined new frontiers where members have the opportunity to be creative and exchange crucial pieces of information. Members may come from the same or different background.

4.2 Framework

Although so far, the investigation on the CoPs illustrated that they are entities with no boundaries or at least beyond restraints, we have concluded that there are three parameters, which can form *a framework within they, operate*.

These are:

1. The dimensions of the CoP
2. The key roles involved in the CoP
3. The key components for an entity to be a CoP

Parameter nr.1, DIMENSIONS

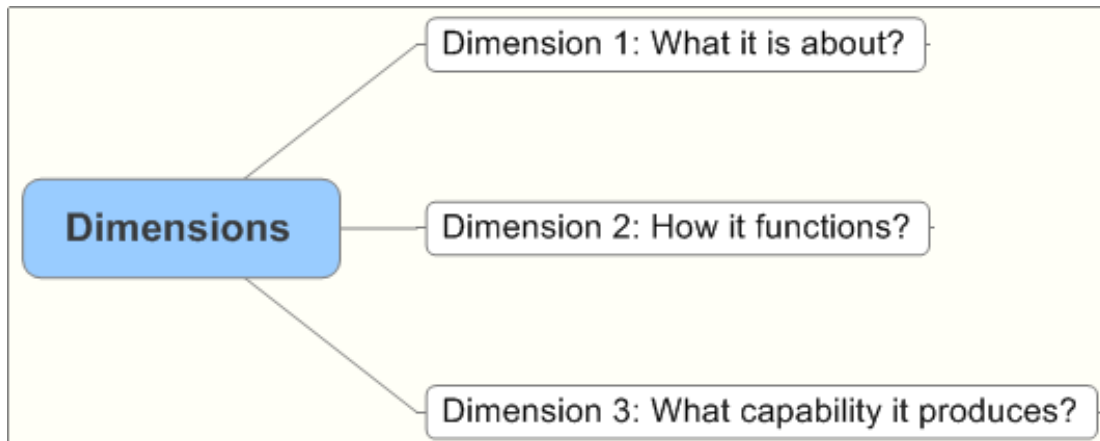


Figure 1. The dimensions of a Community of Practice

As shown in the figure above, a three-dimensional framework defines the matrix in which a community of practice operates as an activity system. [13]

The first dimension to define is: “What it is about?”.

It is a joint enterprise that is continually renegotiated by its members. At this point is examined the kind of knowledge that the community shares.

The second dimension is “How it functions?”.

It functions under the relationships of mutual engagement that bind members into a social entity. ***The sense of community resides in the mind of each member.*** [14]

Here we investigate the degree of connection and identity among members.

The third dimension is “What capability it produces?”.

That includes the shared repertoire of communal resources that members have developed over time, such as styles, vocabulary, artifacts, routines and sensibilities, the amount of derivatives of their action throughout the process of its operation. In addition, another detail of this dimension is how closely, the integrated sharing knowledge with people’s everyday work remains.

Parameter nr.2, KEY COMPONENTS

As mentioned before *not all social entities are Communities of Practice*. Among others, it is necessary to co-exist a number of key components in a group, in order to be characterized as a community of practice. In the figure below, we define these components giving a small description for each one.

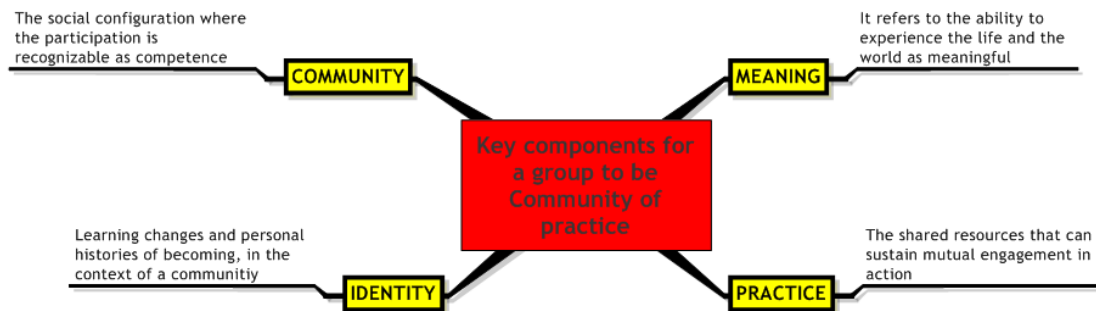


Figure 2. Key components for a group to be Community of Practice

- Meaning
- Practice
- Community
- Identity

It is crucial to remember these four components in our effort to analyze and understand the significance of Communities of Practice as a fabric in the knowledge-based society.

Combining so far the dimensions with the key components, we have a clear view that CoPs really have a set of attributes that need to be reviewed each time we try to work with them.

Parameter nr.3, KEY ROLES

Communities of practice imply new forms of organizational leadership, both within communities and around them. It is an environment where new leaders came up who direct members to the orientation agreed, enable the others find their voice and reinforce the sense of contributing to the community.

These leaders are the persons who can be the links between different CoPs or even between formal and informal aspects of an organization, society or a firm.

The fact is that the leaders who are referred as “sponsors” have a *different* profile and *approach from the traditional management*.

Community sponsorship is not a typical managerial style or a model of administering people and resources. It is inspired by a different culture and perspective of how a social entity can be manipulated based on specific skills that have to be cultivated. *The heart of the community is the individual*.

The community sponsors must possess a number of skills. [15]

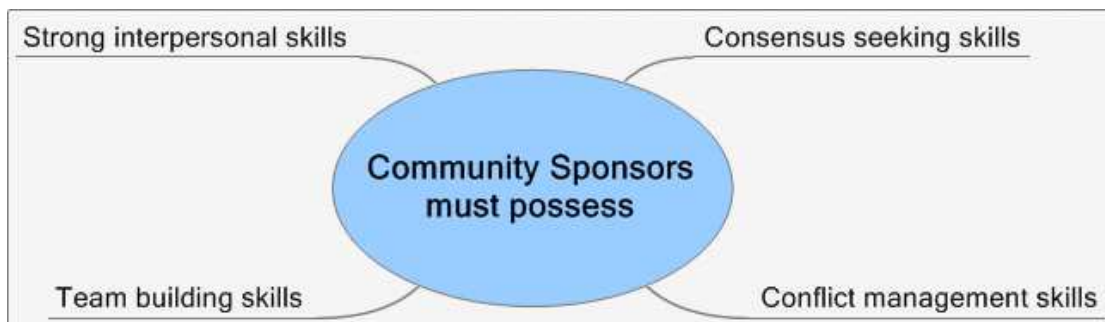


Figure 3. The skills of a community sponsor

The whole concept is based in the “pull effect” motive rather than the “push effect” where in contrary traditional management efforts are usually focused. Individuals are free to choose whether they will participate or not in the CoP.

Another key role who is actively affecting the CoP is the *community coordinators*. The action of intentionally cultivating a community from the inside is of major importance. One person or a small team can fulfill this. Coordinators are actually facilitators, the ones that their mission is to contribute in the facilitation of knowledge and information.

Other worth mentioned roles existing in a CoP are the *networkers*, the ones who are working for the maintenance of the communication network, the *brokers*, whose main role is to bring knowledge from other communities acting as liaisons, the *mentors*, usually older members of the community, whose main role is to undertake and train the new members.

4.3 Key characteristics

Further to the key components for a group to be a CoP, as analyzed above, there is a number of attributes that exist within the CoP. These attributes may vary from CoP to CoP but we can identify their existence throughout the life cycle of it. Our effort is to present them in this report as clear as possible, because we consider them as the cornerstones.

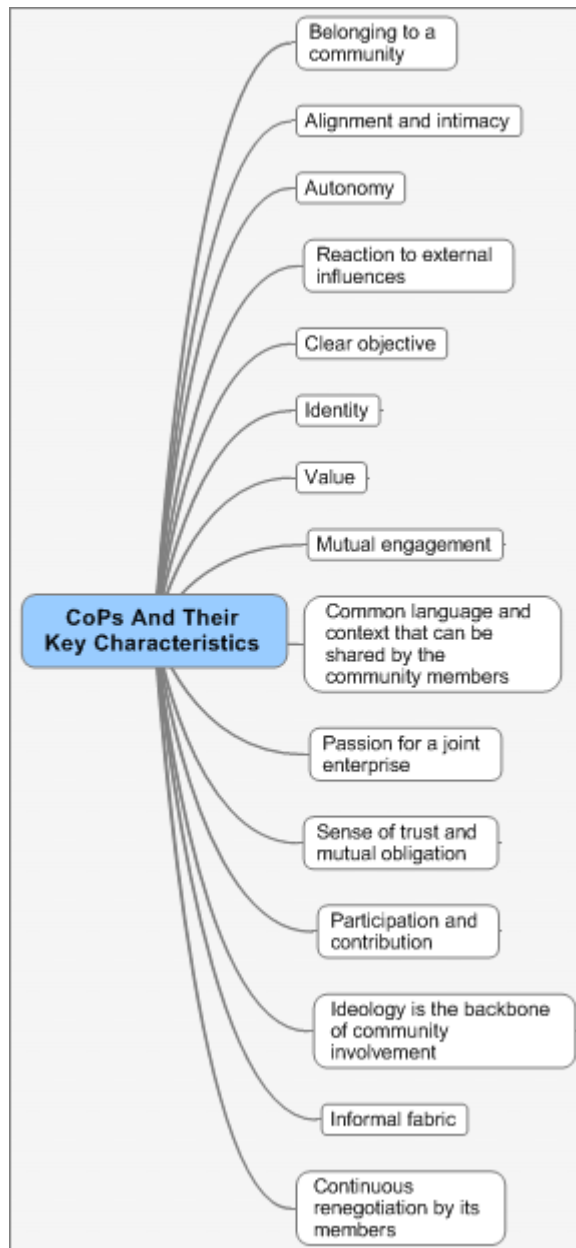


Figure 4. Communities of Practice: Their key characteristics

► ***Belonging to a community:***

A strong sense of belonging in a group of individuals. Each member has to earn its status within the community and this is not derived from any hierarchy. Sense of belonging is getting stronger through participation and legitimation. Legitimizing has to do with the power and the authority relations, which are raised within the community in an informal way.

► ***Alignment and intimacy:***

These characteristics provide to the members a number of psychological and social benefits.

► ***Autonomy:***

CoPs develop their own processes. Relationships are formed around practice and they are determined through interaction. Members develop their own terminology. CoPs are only responsible to their members and vice versa.

► ***Reaction to external influences:***

The practices that are developed within CoPs, reflect its member's own understanding of what is important and what has to be prioritized in a sense, for the community's benefit. Outside constraints and directives can influence this understanding, but first all these are filtered. Even at such situations, members develop practices that are their own response to these external influences. The conformation to the external changes is made through filtering by the inside members. CoPs are self-organizing systems, who define by themselves their reaction to their surroundings.

► ***Clear objective:***

A community of practice is about something and it is not just a set of relationships. There is a strong sense of common purpose.

► ***Identity:***

A community of practice has an identity as a community and as a result, shapes the identities of its members.

► ***Value:***

The life cycle of a CoP is determined by the value it provides to its members and this is not a project with a specific deadline. ***There is a usefulness and return to its members.*** A community of practice exists because it produces a shared practice as members engage in a ***collective process of learning.***

► ***Mutual engagement:***

The shared learning and the common interest is what keep members together. There is the knowledge rather than the task that value. The knowledge combined with the participation creates a significant value for the members. At this point, central feature is the relationships among the members.

► ***Common language and context:***

The community members can share a specific language and context. A shared repertoire of communal resources is developed over time.

► ***Passion for a joint enterprise:***

There is a built-in incentive in each individual. To socialize through participation in groups. If we add in this incentive the common interest, the value and return, the personal advancement we can easily understand the difference and the definition of a passion for something.

► ***Sense of trust and mutual obligation:***

Each member participates, offers, interacts and in return receives the same benefits from the community. Nothing is obligatory and the degree of contribution may vary from member to member and from time to time. Everything resides in the back end of each member's mind. Needless to say that trust and obligation are common goods for the community.

► ***Participation and contribution:***

The membership involves whoever participates in and contributes to the practice. In this way, members develop among themselves their own understanding of what their practice is about. Members' participation may be fully active or less active, operating as peripherals, but this can be changed anytime depending on the member. This periphery creates many

opportunities for learning as information and knowledge is exchanged with less-engaged participants.

► ***Ideology:***

Ideology is the backbone of the community involvement. For any social configuration, a master belief system must exist in order to give an interpretation of the cluster of values and norms.

► ***Informal fabric:***

CoPs have a living process, which is different from formal groups or other typical organizational units. They have more flexible boundaries, different cut on their structure across time and different characteristics.

► ***Continuous renegotiation:***

The community of practice is an entity, which is continuously renegotiated by its members. That means a dynamic structural process that enables the community to react on time and adapt to changes and external challenges.

4.4 Strengths and Weaknesses

Communities of practice demonstrate a number of strengths and weaknesses as a social entity and as an incubator of the knowledge-based society.

We believe it is crucial to take into consideration both. A deeper survey of CoPs has to include a detailed analysis of all those parameters that can be identified as strengths and weaknesses.

Based on our findings so far we are trying to give a number of both in the figure illustrated below.

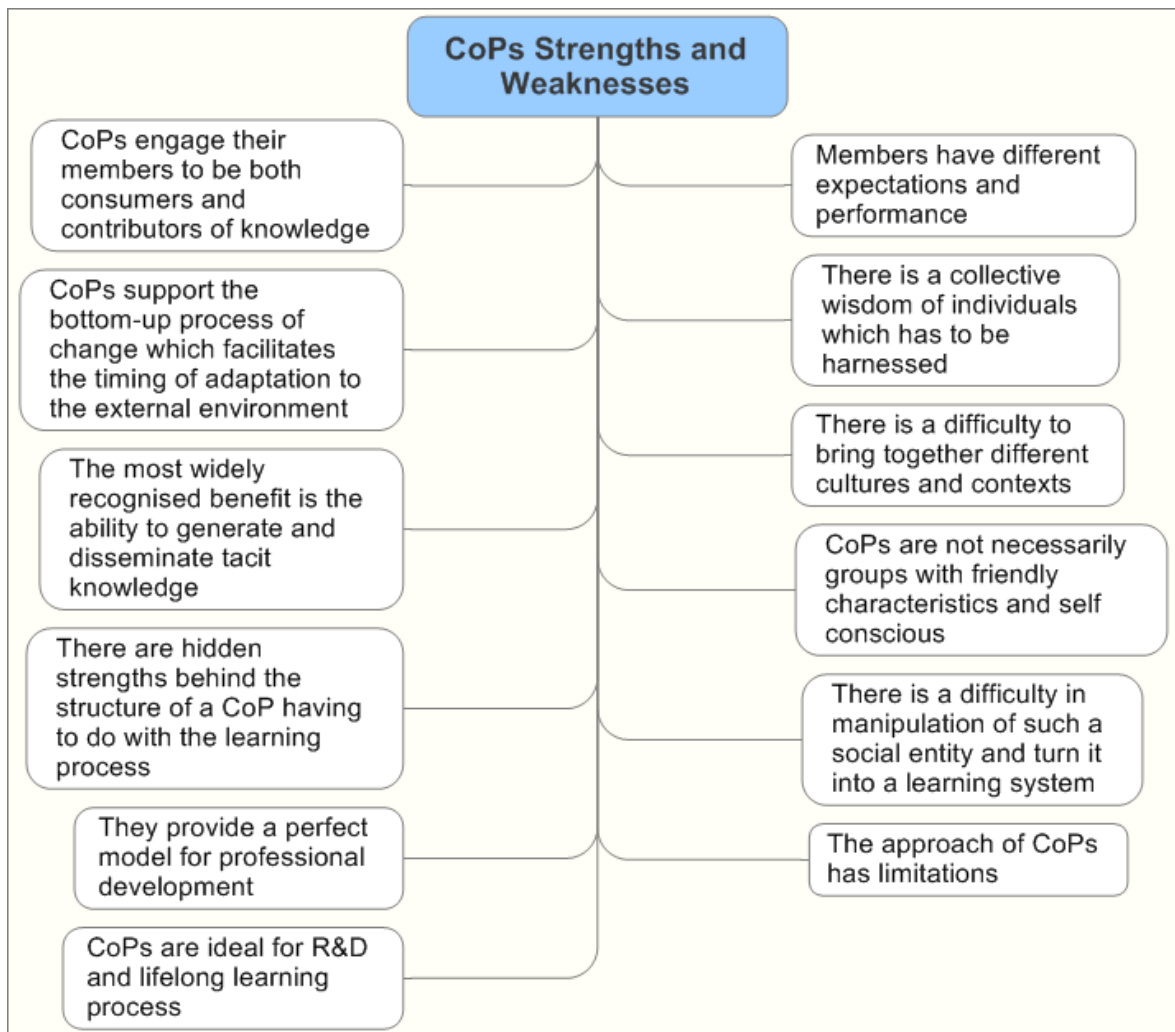


Figure 5. Communities of Practice: Strengths & Weaknesses

It is more than obvious that CoPs can face a number of difficulties in their effort to exist as an activity system, based on individuals with different performance, level of participation and expectations.

The tools themselves cannot guarantee the achievement of anything. Main factor is the individual.

The impact of the broad socio-cultural environment affects the success of a CoP. [16]

In addition; CoPs many times vary due to their size and spatial distributions. So individuals from different continents with different cultures, values and beliefs are brought together to act within a social entity, something actually very challenging, but it requires an immense effort to integrate all these members.

This is the impact of CoPs structuring.

Relationships are not necessarily always positive; knowledge is unbounded and requires extra effort to turn it into active input under these circumstances.

The interaction of a CoP with the society may not result into positive practices as well. The tight knit and the voluntary participation of their members will confront to issues of power and conflicts, non-harmonious relations and low frequency of involvement. This is a common consideration with other social units.

On the other side, it is widely recognized that a CoP has a capacity to spread tacit knowledge, accelerate learning and create acceptable hierarchy. It provides ability to itself of generating and disseminating knowledge [17] and enabling an environment where the learning process may be accommodated.

Such components are a fertile ground for research and development, lifelong learning and innovation. [18]

A mature and experienced approach to the cultivation of a CoP will create a sustainable model for supporting the knowledge-based society's aims.

4.5 CoPs in Learning

Communities of practice are stimulating forces for collective learning. They can provide an alternative learning model for knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination.

We have to start thinking differently. Not only in organizations but mostly in schools we must admit and realize that competitive power and effective learning depends on how we explore, utilize and employ the excessive amounts of information accumulated.

This must be the target: *To create valuable knowledge.*

We can try to think of alternative ways to develop and conduct other learning strategies and encourage intrinsic motivation. We can allow exploration of problems.

CoPs differs from fixed methods of learning in that *create an alternative environment* for fostering learners who can produce valuable and creative knowledge. Here softer aspects

of knowledge can be created, nurtured and sustained as long as it takes to turn them into new inputs and produce new outputs and so on.

CoPs are based in the idea of *situated learning*. [19]

In simple words “*learning by doing*”. [20] In this conception, there is an intimate connection between knowledge and action.

Knowledge and learning are dynamic and collective processes. The situated learning, comes in the occasion where a group of people starts to share their knowledge of, and experience with a practice.

CoPs have extremely important contribution in a number of areas of social activity. For example, in organizations and firms, in the academic area [21], in local societies, in partnerships between firms and the academia as well as other combinations.

CoPs are functionalized learning entities. They are entities where fostering the learning in terms of the learning of others.

4.6 CoPs in Organizations

Organizations are a significant percentage of the knowledge-based society. Actually, these are the typical form of a community. People spend great part of their lives within organizations, working, managing, pursuing targets and achieving results.

Therefore, it will be useful to investigate the significance of CoPs to organizations.

CoPs exist in any kind of organization. *Within businesses* employees form communities of practice to deal with the constant flow of information they need to process. In addition, recurring sets of problems create the need to search for help through communal similar experiences. As we have mentioned in a previous chapter, individuals has a built-in need to socialize. People, who work in *cross-functional units*, keep in touch with their peers to maintain their expertise. At this point, usually when CoPs cut across business units they can develop strategic perspectives that transcend the fragmentation of product lines.

CoPs with *members from different posts* of a product line may discuss together and keep up with constant technological changes.

“When organizations lose people, they also lose their knowledge” [22] and nowadays knowledge means power. Individuals are irreplaceable and organizations should consider the human capital as the most important resource in the knowledge-based society. Further to the research we have made, below there is a number of reasons we have concluded referring to the above question.

Communities of Practice:

- Is one of the best practices for increasing the organizational agility. It encourages emotional and gives instructional support to its members (this is the first and most simple mode of its contribution both to members and the organization).
- CoPs are nodes for exchange and interpretation of information, where best practices can be identified and brainstorming is welcomed.
- They provide home for identities.
- They contribute in training the newcomers and decrease their learning curve.
- Membership is based only in participation, which is voluntary and is not an official status.
- It is an effective tool for organizations to handle unstructured problems, they can retain knowledge while in parallel provide an alternative way to share knowledge outside of the traditional structural boundaries.
- They can span institutional structures and hierarchies. They do not bound by organizational affiliations. Instead, they are replacing the one-way typical flow of information with fluid, multi-pronged conversations. This increases the communicational standards within the organization as well as between organization and external environment.
- They affect the learning structure of the organization by giving flexibility and supporting the collective intelligence practice. This may help in the effort of achieving the organizational goals.
- CoPs fulfill a number of functions with respect to the creation, accumulation and diffusion of knowledge. They structure the organization’s learning potential in two ways:
 - ✓ they develop knowledge at their core
 - ✓ they develop knowledge through interactions at their boundaries

- CoPs are a knowledge tool. They are the key to the knowledge strategy. Its existence is crucial for those who realize that knowledge is a key asset. [23]
- They create organizational value as well as business intelligence. Therefore, it is well understood that they become liabilities for the organization-company. In addition, CoPs may serve as a vehicle for innovation. [24]
- They can steward competencies keeping organization-company at the cutting edge.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook *a number of difficulties* related with CoPs and organizations.

- Usually they are hidden assets and thus are difficult to assess their contribution.
- Their cultivation is not risk-free as it can create a number of uncontrollable factors within the organization.
- CoPs are a self-serving community, which means that sometimes, can be too strong. This may upset the power balance and pull the company to the wrong strategic direction.
- The issue of leaking information to competitors is possible. Members through chatting with external peers can spread confidential information.
- Employees as members may realize their strength during their job and perceive this power in a negative way. For example, it is possible to develop a disruptive attitude.
- The line between the task-orientation and the junket mentality is thin and we have to be focused on this. Appearance of such mentality is better to be avoided.
- Giving importance to the existence of CoP, this is possible to diminish the role of the organization as a whole. We have to comply with the organizational goals and try to keep stacked in the business plan of the company. CoPs are a useful tool and as such have to be treated.
- Although CoPs are based in the idea of shared-practice and the use of communal knowledge phenomena of increasing individualization may appear as well. Furthermore, underground movements are possible to be detected within the organization.

Therefore, in respect to the above it is crucial to give attention in the following *three parameters*, which will help us to minimize the appearance of uncontrollable factors or even create a secure frame within we could avoid such results.

- Create a particular environment for the CoP to be nurtured and developed
- Develop a supportive management approach to handle and administer the processes
- Use of a specific technical, historical and cultural context depending on the community's nature

In the end, the possible benefits are more than the possible risks. Nothing has to be left on its own. Close monitoring and continuous adapt to the events and changes may be the two primary functions which can help us in the introduction and use of CoPs as a knowledge tool in the knowledge-based society.

Finally we recognize *three benefits* from the adoption of CoPs in the organization.

(a) Dissemination of intelligence across departments, (b) wide organization responsiveness to market intelligence and (c) wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs. [25]

CONCLUSIONS

In the era of ICTs, globalization, uncertain environments and the transformation of society to more complex entity, Communities of Practice (CoPs), emerged to play a significant role in the knowledge society as a fabric-organizational unit.

From our findings, we have concluded that CoPs may be able to counteract a slow moving traditional hierarchy in a fast moving virtual economy. They are a useful and powerful knowledge management tool, which - if used appropriately - may support both the individual and the organization to survive, adjust, develop and define the future maintaining sustainability, growth and prosperity throughout the time.

We have learnt that CoP is not a new type of unit. It existed though, with different nature and operated within different environments. However, CoPs were proved to have a strong attribute during the years. They were adjusted to the situations each time.

In any case, we have to investigate first whether a CoP as a knowledge management tool is wise to be applied in an organization related to the timing and the circumstances. In addition never to forget that a CoP is a living entity, and as such it has a life cycle.

Finally, in the appendix attached, we are introducing a model, which can be treated as a daily plan to stick with, during the job (Appendix A). It can serve as a reminder of some basic principles we have mentioned in this report, strongly related with the idea of CoPs and their cultivation and manipulation in our knowledge-based society. In addition, the reader can find a cycle-based approach of all meanings analyzed in this report related to the CoPs (Appendix B).

In fact, this subject needs deeper and broaden analysis, but we hope that we have made an approach in such a mode, thus a researcher or a manager can use this report as a tool among others for own help and support.

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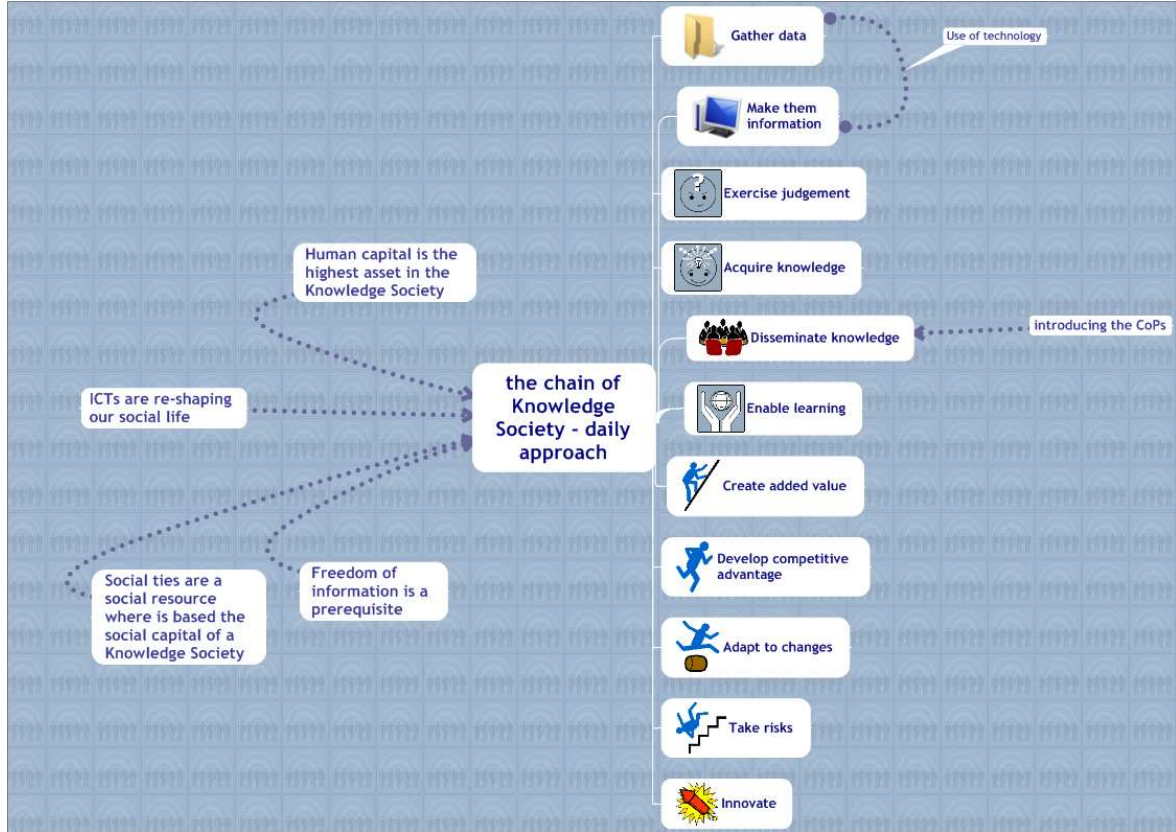
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APPENDIX

A. The chain of Knowledge Society – Daily approach



**B. Communities of Practice –
Essential meanings that have been analyzed in this report**

