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Communities of Practice

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All of us belong to a number of communities of practice at work, at school, at home, etc. Some of these communities have names and formal membership associations and some don't. We participate as core members in some communities and as marginal members in other communities. Most communities of practice do not have a name or issue membership cards (Wenger, 1998).

You may be a member of a band, or you may just come to rehearsals to hang around with the group. You may lead a group of consultants who specialize in telecommunication strategies, or you may just stay in touch to keep informed about developments in the field. Or you may have just joined a community and are still trying to find your place in it. Whatever form our participation takes, most of us are familiar with the experience of belonging to a community of practice.

Members of a community are informally bound by what they do together from engaging in lunchtime discussions to solving difficult problems and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities. A community of practice is thus different from a community of interest or a geographical community, neither of which implies a shared practice.

Communities of practice develop around what matters to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members. own understanding of what is important (Wenger, 1998).

Definition of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share information, insight, experience, and tools about an area of common interest. In essence, communities of practice are groups of people who share similar goals and interests. In pursuit of these goals and interests, they employ common practices, work with the same tools and express themselves in a common language. Through such common activity, they come to hold similar beliefs and value systems (Wenger, 1998).

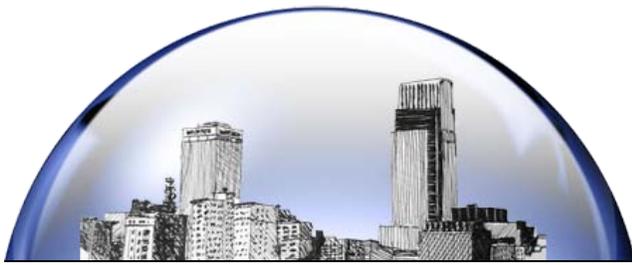The two key words in the term provide a convenient way to unpack the meaning of this complex term:

Community
—refers to the informality and personal basis of many relationships in typical communities of practice; it also suggests that COP boundaries do not correspond to typical geographic or functional boundaries in organizations but rather to practice- and person- based networks.

Practice
—connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in an historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do.

Such a concept of practice includes both the explicit and the tacit. It includes what is said and what is left unsaid; what is represented and what is assumed. It includes the language, the tools, the documents, the images, the symbols, the well-defined roles, the specified criteria, the codified procedures, the regulations, and the contracts that various practices make explicit for a variety of purposes. But it also includes all the implicit relations, the tacit conventions, the subtle cues, the untold rules of thumb, the recognizable

From: Wenger, Etienne. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

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intuitions, the specific perceptions, the well-tuned sensitivities, the embodied understandings, the underlying assumptions, the shared worldviews, which may never be articulated, though they are unmistakable signs of membership in communities of practice and are crucial to the success of their enterprises.

According to Etienne Wenger (1998), a *community of practice*, then, defines itself along three dimensions:

What it is about—its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members
How it functions—mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity
What capability it has produced—the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

Characteristics of Communities of Practice

Although every community of practice is different, they do share overall some characteristics that distinguish them from other kinds of groups.

Members are informally connected by a shared body of knowledge
This characteristic refers to the shared ways of working, expectations for belonging, and rules for negotiating meaning characteristic of a particular community. Members share a body of knowledge that defines their problems and solutions in ways that reflect their membership in a particular community.

Members share common practices and language
This characteristic refers to the ways people naturally work and play together. In essence, communities of practice are groups of people who share similar goals and interests and how to talk about their practices. In pursuit of these goals and interests, they employ common practices, work with the same tools and express themselves using a common language. Through such common activity, they come to hold similar beliefs and value systems.

Members share a common sense of purpose
This characteristic refers to how members work together in the execution of their practice; that is, their real work. Members are held together by a .common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows. There are many communities of practice within a single company, and most people belong to more than one of them.

**Members understand practice as a life-long learning process
of mutual engagement**
This characteristic refers to how members emphasize the learning they have done together and their familiarity with the shared histories of learning characteristic of a particular group. They collaborate directly, use one another as sounding boards, and teach each other. More than a "community of learners," a community of practice is also a "community that learns. They understand that .learning is the engine of practice and practice is the history of that learning (Wenger, 1998).

Members are committed to each other
Members share and benefit from each other's expertise. They are colleagues committed to jointly developing better practices.

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