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Rocco Agrifoglio

Knowledge Preservation Through Community of Practice

Theoretical Issues and Empirical Evidence

 Springer

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*To Valeria, who inspires me every day
to live a life worth living, and to the little
boy who is coming to brighten our lives*

Foreword

A community of practice is viewed as a group of people informally connected by shared expertise and a common interest in a particular domain or area. It is recognized as an effective organizational form because it enables members to share their experiences and knowledge in spontaneous, flowing, and creative ways. In comparison with existing organizational structures, such as teams, work groups, and business units, it provides an alternative and simpler approach to knowledge management. Communities of practice are self-organizing systems, whose methods of interaction, rules, and life span are determined by community members without constraints of time and space. Such communities are particularly suitable for exchanging and sharing knowledge among their members, because of their integral systems of social relationships and engagement in working activities.

The perspectives in more recent literature on situated learning and practice have superseded those of the pioneering contributions by moving the focus of research from the “geographies” of organization (co-location/distribution) to dimensions of social interaction and collaboration. In this respect, a community of practice can be viewed as a knowledge network in which location, proximity, and distance are determined by relationship rather than geography. Building upon the economic and organizational literature, such communities seem to be an “intermediate” or “hybrid” form in respect of “hierarchy” and “market.” In particular, a community of practice may be interpreted as a particular form of social network, where social coordination and control mechanisms—in terms of social norms, reputation and peer control—are critical for the development, maintenance, and exploitation of knowledge.

In respect of previous research on knowledge management, and on issues of knowledge creation and sharing in particular, this book aims to explore the process of knowledge preservation in a community of practice. The topic is critical for information systems research and organizational literature, since knowledge preservation is not an obvious and predictable process in organizations, but needs to be carefully designed. Organizations are often busy acquiring and exploiting technological knowledge, but forget that such knowledge remains in the heads of the employees if it is not institutionalized in the structure of the organization.

Moreover, knowledge codification and articulation is not always feasible in organizations due to the variety in the forms of knowledge and in the established ways of managing it. Community of practice represents a natural setting enabling members to preserve the various forms of knowledge in organizations. In this regard, it can be viewed as one of the most suitable ways to avoid the loss of knowledge in an organization. However, although the literature recognizes community of practice as critical to knowledge preservation, the different ways in which a community preserves the various forms of knowledge merits deeper investigation.

Chapter 1 reviews the literature on organizational knowledge, highlighting its epistemological and ontological dimensions and the processes of knowledge management. It also explores the various mechanisms and tools that enable employers to create, share, and preserve knowledge in organizations.

Chapter 2 investigates the idea of community of practice by focusing particularly on the different types and main characteristics in terms of domain, community, and practice. It also introduces the topic of knowledge preservation, pointing out the processes of knowledge management, and of knowledge creation, sharing, and preservation in particular, in a community of practice.

Chapter 3 links the literature on knowledge management and research on community of practice in order to understand how a community preserves knowledge over time and space. Building upon practice-based literature, I propose a dynamic framework for analyzing the “community knowledge preservation” process, identifying the various mechanisms and tools that enable a community of practice to select, store, and actualize the explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge.

Finally, Chap. 4 reports four case studies on communities of practice: the scientific community of the ItAIS, the religious communities of Guardia Sanframondi and Palermo, and the WoodenBoat community. These studies provide empirical evidence on various mechanisms and tools that allow members to preserve explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge in a community of practice.

Understanding the working rules in communities of practice can be extremely useful in predicting future forms of work organization, including in the domains of entrepreneurship and management. Individual attitudes and habits with regard to collaborative work, even among people which are connected by weak ties, seem to be innate skills among “digital natives,” who have always been able to use information technologies and systems, now all-pervasive, in design and decision making.

These assumptions lead us to believe that, before long, the community of practice could be recognized as an “ancestor” to which people will refer in explaining how new forms of business and work organization have evolved. Also from this point of view, the volume of Rocco Agrifoglio offers useful and original contributions to the debate on organizational theories.

Naples
June 2015

Prof. Marcello Martinez
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Preface

Since time began, people have always wanted to expand the boundaries of their knowledge. The knowledge they possessed was exploited for scientific and technological advancement, because of the considerable effects of science and technology on the development of any society. The stone wheel, the law of universal gravitation, penicillin, the steam engine, etc., are just some of the greatest achievements of mankind. However, the knowledge that was developed was not always passed down to future generations. History is full of examples where people build artifacts that are useful to their work, but forget about those already built. As in the past, individuals, organizations, and communities are today very busy exploiting acquired knowledge to develop new knowledge, without considering that the latter is not risk free and they may lose track of it over time. Indeed, knowledge that remains in the heads of the employees, rather than being institutionalized within the organization, can represent a severe threat to a firm due to the failure to transfer such knowledge from individual to corporate memory. This problem is of growing concern in knowledge management research, which is striving to identify technologies and infrastructures able to avoid the loss of organizational knowledge. Among these, community of practice has been recognized as one of the most suitable ways to structure and process the various forms of knowledge in organizations.

Communities of practice have always and still do exist everywhere in every aspect of human life. We all belong to a number of them—at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies. They are a natural setting where cultivating practice enables members to develop and share knowledge while also, because it is socially constructed, institutionalizing it within the organizational structure. Practice in a social context, and in a community of practice in particular, comes from and contributes to knowledge, thanks to the interaction that community members have with the world. This assumption leads us to distinguish between “knowledge” (as possession) and “knowing” (as action), so opening an academic debate on the interplay between them and on the effects of this interplay on the preservation of knowledge.

This book links knowledge management literature and Information Systems (IS) research to explore the process of knowledge preservation within a community of practice. It contributes to existing literature in different ways. First, I conceptualize “community knowledge preservation,” i.e., “the process of maintaining knowledge crucial to a community of practice by storing knowledge and activities over time and providing members with the possibility of recall for the future.” In contrast to previous knowledge management research, knowledge preservation is thus viewed as a process in its own right rather than an integral part of knowledge creation and sharing. Furthermore, I also investigate how communities of practice preserve knowledge, by identifying the main mechanisms and tools enabling members to select, store, and actualize the explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge.

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 explores issues of organizational knowledge by stressing its epistemological (explicit and tacit) and ontological (individual and collective) dimensions. It also explains the knowledge management processes by distinguishing between knowledge creation, sharing, and preservation. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on community of practice and addresses some of the challenges identified in studies on knowledge management. Chapter 3 highlights the process of knowledge preservation within a community of practice and identifies the mechanisms and tools that enable members to select, store, and actualize explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge. Finally, Chap. 4 provides evidence drawn from four communities of practice, where different mechanisms and tools allow members to preserve explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge.

This book, like all others, is not the product of one individual, but arises from a joint effort by many people. The ideas and concepts rooted in this book came from observation of, and discussion with, various colleagues and friends who shared my passion for this amazing topic. I have had the good fortune to interact with many academics and practitioners across the world who have influenced my thinking over the years. Among the most influential, I want to acknowledge Christian Rauscher (Senior Editor of Springer—Business/Economics), who has supported me through all phases of publication. I wish also to express my gratitude to Drs. Isidro Peña Garcia-Pardo and Mario Javier Donate Manzanares, who invited me to the UCLM in Ciudad Real, Spain, as visiting researcher, and to Professors Marco De Marco and Cecilia Rossignoli, Drs. Paolo Spagnoletti, Alessio Maria Braccini, and Stefano Za, and all the ItAIS community members. Each of them has provided indispensable suggestions and valuable advice, which has led me to develop and refine on the theoretical speculations and the empirical case studies in this book.

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