

# DEVELOPING NEW COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE UK: A CASE-STUDY OF PARA-INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

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The relationship between the concepts of 'communities of practice' and 'knowledge management' is explored as a backdrop to this article. A case study describes the philosophy and operation of a new type of partnership involving a university level college of higher education and a large local authority who collaborated to produce a higher education qualification for an emergent group of para-information professionals. Implications are drawn from the case study for the theory and practice in which communities of practice may be stimulated and developed in the context of a developing agenda in public administration for 'joined up government'.

## 1 Introduction

The concept of a 'community of practice' was developed from work performed at the Institute for Research on Learning at the Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) [2] and has received considerable underpinning in work of Brown and Duguid [2], Lave and Wenger [8] and Wenger [15,16]. A brief definition is that it 'is a group of people who share a particular practice, interest or discipline and share information and tacit knowledge'[4]. The theory of 'communities of practice' displays the following dimensions [15]:

- Domain* Members of communities organise around a domain of knowledge and understanding that emerges from shared understandings
- Community*: People function as a community through relationships of mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity by regular interaction and engagement in joint activities
- Practice*: There is a shared repertoire and resources such as tools, documents, routines, vocabulary, symbols and artifacts which serves as a foundation for future learning.

It is important to recognise that whilst individual members of communities of practice are typically located within organisations, the communities of practice themselves can be wide-ranging. As Wenger himself observes [16], such communities can be within businesses themselves as functional departments, across business departments in cross-functional teams and transcend company boundaries. Communities of practice emphasise 'the learning that people have done together rather than the unit they report to, the project they are working on, or the people they know'.

## 2 Knowledge Management and Communities of Practice

Knowledge Management is predicated on the assumption that knowledge is a key source of competitive advantage in the business world [9]. Traditionally, an approach to knowledge management has been an attempt to 'capture' and make accessible such knowledge through databases and groupwork software such as Lotus Notes. However whilst it is acknowledged that human assets (the knowledge creators) are the organisation's most valuable resource, the communities of practice concept helps to develop an understanding of the ways in which individuals develop and share the capacity to create and to utilize knowledge. The Knowledge Management literature is typically predicated upon the assumption that organisations need to capture and lever such knowledge (either explicit knowledge or tacit understandings) to pursue organizational objectives [9].

Knowledge Management can be distinguished from the cognate concept of Intellectual Capital [9] in that there is an assumption that Intellectual Capital has to be organised, managed, nurtured and levered by a Knowledge Management process. It is instructive that most of this literature base assumes some or all of the following organizational 'givens':

- Large or federalised companies in the private sector, often operating on a multinational or global scale
- Striving to achieve competitive advantage in competitive market economies
- Knowledge Management is typically a specified policy objective and incorporated as an institutional strategy or imperative. Systems have been installed (e.g. Lotus Notes) specifically to facilitate group work and to lever competitive advantage.
- Knowledge Management is used, explicitly or implicitly, as a control mechanism
- Workers have been recruited specifically for their particular professional knowledge or industry expertise

The case study to be presented below, however, displays *none* of the above characteristics as it is based upon collaboration of several distinctive parts of the public sector. The concept of Knowledge Management may need some reformulation in areas such as we describe where communities of practice have a much more spontaneous character. We suggest that the term *Emergent Knowledge* may be a more useful term to describe the type of knowledge creation and sharing that arises in communities of practice (such as we are about to describe) not driven by a Knowledge Management agenda. A similar Japanese term, *ba*, has been used by Nonaka, Toyama and Konno [10] to describe those situations and places in which we observe *knowledge creation* and possesses a 'here and now' quality, energizing the community members.

### **3 Case Study: partnership between Hampshire County Council (HCC) and King Alfred's College (KAC)**

The county of Hampshire is located in central southern England with a population of 1.52 million covering an area of 375k hectares. The total economy (GDP) of Hampshire is worth £16.3 billion, equivalent to the whole economy of Northern Ireland (at 16.5 billion) and approximately half the size of Wales (29.5 billion). Hampshire County Council has over 20,000 (full-time equivalent) employees on its payroll, of whom approximately 40% are teachers. The County Council is therefore one the largest employers in its own region.

Hantsweb is a comprehensive website providing service to residents, visitors and county council employees alike. In August-September, 2002 the site received 5.1 million accesses for a total of 542,177 unique visits by 169,660 unique hosts [5]. When Bill Gates was currently researching a book and discovered Hantsweb whilst searching the internet for examples of good government web sites, Hampshire County Council's site was selected as "the most comprehensive site of its nature for a local or county government in the world".

Information Services are highly developed in Hampshire. There are four dedicated Information Centres covering the major areas of population, supplemented by over 100 local Information Points, found in a wide variety of public offices including Libraries, Social Services and Age Concern offices, in some Parish, Town and District Councils, Councils of Community Services, in Youth, Education and Health establishments and many more. It was calculated that up to 1,000 individuals work in an information-giving capacity in the Hampshire region and there was an evident need to develop courses of education and training to cater for the future development of such employees who we term *para-information professionals*. Hampshire County Council with headquarters located in Winchester collaborated with King Alfred's College (a university sector provider of higher education) to write a specialised *Certificate in Public Services Information Management [PSIM]* believed to be the first course of its type in the country. Local government employees are released by employers for half a day per week to study four modules a year over

a total of two years. Opportunities then exist for automatic enrolment upon cognate degree courses (in public administration) The results have exceeded the expectations of the course planners with conspicuous patterns of success by course members.

Participants work in local authority information points, handling a range of enquiries about services provided by the local authority. They are drawn from areas such as Social Services, the Fire Service and the Countryside Commission. Accessibility of services to the community is at the heart of the central government's modernising agenda, so the programme must help them establish a clear understanding of the distribution of responsibilities and functions across the various levels of government.

The group plays a key role in supporting central government initiatives. These currently include the commitment to higher levels of customer satisfaction, outlined in the Best Value regime [13] and Accessible Services agenda [6]. There is also a target of delivering services to the public on-line by 2005 [12]. As the first point of contact with the public, the role of these staff in generating satisfaction is hard to over-emphasise. They are influential in shaping the public's perception of local authority services and need to engage with customer care philosophies conceptually and practically.

The PSIM programme invites the group to explore the role of organisational information strategies and communication systems in supporting initiatives like the national agenda for Information Age Government. Although members are 'de facto' information managers, they usually have practical rather than theoretical experience of information management. The course seeks to deepen and extend their knowledge by covering information channels and the design and operation of data collection and management information systems.

To support the growth of electronic information services, the course includes a significant IT component. Students tend to be frequent users of on-line services, email and word-processing and many possess skill levels equivalent to an ECDL. The programme aims to enhance their skills and encourage greater understanding of the ways in which computing technologies can provide solutions to typical problems. A greater understanding of the Internet and intranets is built into the course to enhance the ability to use on-line services to provide sound advice to members of the public. It is clear that the group shares a number of common characteristics which make it a potentially strong community of practice.

#### **4 Implications for the development of a new Community of Practice**

The case study material clearly shows that it is possible for a community of practice to emerge, particularly under the stimulus of what is now known as 'joined-up government' [3] without there being a commensurate intimation that explicit and tacit knowledge be levered for competitive advantage in the way normally hypothesized. The following implications can be drawn from the case study:

*Educational establishments are in a favoured position to exploit the developments of communities of practice.*

A common theme in the literature suggests that whilst communities of practice are self-sufficient, they would benefit from some degrees of support from employers, access to facilities, time and expenses for some face-to-face meetings and so on. In particular, it is important that managers recognise that communities of practice cannot be managed in the conventional sense. If they were to be given a budget, then managers will require deliverables which could effectively destroy the synergies within the group. The case study showed that released from the hour-to-hour pressures of work and entrance into a college environment gave these nascent information professionals time and space to think and develop their own good practice. It is also evident that, as Boland and Tenkasi [1] argue, that the course not only encourages *perspective making* (the strengthening of the group's own knowledge domain and practices) but also *perspective taking* (in which expertise across discipline boundaries is shared).

*Communities of practice may not always aid immediate institutional or strategic objectives.*

It is quite possible that communities of practice, responsible to themselves and not to conventional lines of managerial control, can develop in ways which conflict with traditional company loyalties and responsibilities. It would be possible to think of a continuum along which communities of practice could be aligned in which whilst some communities of practice generated insights that could be levered for organizational advantage, others could develop themes thought to be counter-productive. From the perspective of the individual manager, allegiance to a community of practice could mean employees developing knowledge, perspective and skills that made them dissatisfied in their present position and impels to seek promotion or transfer.

#### *Emergent Knowledge rather than Knowledge Management*

The tacit knowledge [14] shared by organisational members may not always lend itself to conventional knowledge management techniques. The case study by Hayes and Walsham [7] shows that conventional Knowledge Management techniques designed to share expertise amongst members of 'Compound, UK' (a pseudonym for a large chemical company studied for two and half years) were not completely successful in their strategic objectives. Younger, less experienced members of staff keen for promotion were apt to use groupworking software (Lotus Notes) intensively, secure in the knowledge that senior management were using the capacity given by the software for extended monitoring and control. Hayes and Walsham name this the 'political enclave' whilst older, less promotion-conscious workers (in whom there may have been a greater 'collective memory'?) tended to opt out of such visible and community-wide databases, preferring 'safe enclaves' for their knowledge sharing activities. The case study indicates acutely to us that the social and political dynamics of the introduction of groupworking technologies have to be recognised in any analysis. To some extent, the case study acts an antidote to over-optimistic claims that might be made for groupworking software and technologies and alerts us to the fact that factionalised divisions can occur to the detriment of the overall strategic objectives.

It is often regarded as axiomatic that Knowledge Management should take account of the 'taken-for-granted' or tacit assumptions of members of a community of practice and attempt to provide mechanisms for this to be leveraged to further strategic objectives. But as we have seen, members of a community may be less frank and full in their comments and interactions if they perceive that members of senior managements would be able to record and monitor such data. In the *Public Services Information Management* course, this was not a danger. The characteristics of the typical ways in Knowledge management was utilized in large commercial firms, striving for competitive advantage, was not replicated as typically the course members were:

- Located in smaller, fragmented, quasi-autonomous units
- In local authorities themselves divided along strictly functional lines, with traditional bureaucratic lines of control and to some extent a *silo* mentality
- Success was measured by achievement of consumer-centred targets, often specified by central government and enforced through *Best Value* monitoring and quality control mechanisms
- Although heavy users of IT, Knowledge Management software had not been utilized to any great extent. Indeed, with a multiplicity of systems, even sharing basic data sometimes proved difficult
- Workers were still in the process of professionalising (hence their attendance at a college course) and typically had not been recruited for specialist expertise as such.

There are indications that the development of a community of practice, both within the course members and then increasingly their work colleagues and the entire category of para-information workers previously identified may be aided by the following factors

- Shared experience of intensive monitoring exercises (the Government's requirements that services be continuously measured and monitored in *Best Value* reviews [13])
- Adherence to a public service ethic in which cooperation and collaboration rather than competition is a well-internalised value ethic
- A collaborative work ethic which was given some substantive technological help in the form of the College's *Virtual Learning Environment*.

## 5 Conclusions

The opportunities that the course presented for workers to extend their own knowledge, practice and skills and to learn from a participatory learning environment we believe to be an exceptionally useful 'nurturing' experience for this community of practice. It is argued that traditionally defined Knowledge Management theory and philosophies may be too closely identified with the contingencies of large organisations, striving for competitive advantage in a global marketplace. We would suggest that *Emergent Knowledge* more usefully describes the ways in which past experiences and current knowledge may be shared within a newly developing community of practice. In particular, the exhortations of central government for on-line delivery of all services to the citizen by the year 2005 [12], for improved services to the citizen [6] and for more 'joined-up government' [3] create a political background in which communities of practice are envisaged, even if they have not been as explicitly nurtured as is the case of many large corporations in the private sector.

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