

PMO managers' self-determined participation in a purposeful virtual community-of-practice



Liz Lee-Kelley and Neil Turner, *International Journal of Project Management* 35.1 (2017) p64-77

KEYWORDS

- Communities of practice
- Knowledge management
- Project management office

Article highlight:

Member motivation within communities of practice (CoPs) is initially for finding best practices, exchanging knowledge and finding out 'what is going on' in the wider community. This was, though, not static. The findings of the study show that the epistemological motivations appear to shift from 'know-what' towards 'know-why' as the community matures, despite the continuous influx of new participants.

What does the paper cover?

CoPs have received significant attention within a variety of literatures but many organisations remain largely ignorant of the potential of purposefully created CoPs. This paper poses the question: Why would busy, dispersed, knowledgeable professionals want to join and participate in a deliberately organised CoP?

The purpose of this two-year study was to understand the self-determined nature of CoP participation by busy, distributed, project professionals, and was a component of a larger five-year programme of research with Hewlett Packard Enterprise Services (HPES).

Methodology:

Data were collected over two years from an initial open workshop, two rounds of qualitative, fact-finding and status questionnaires, 12 field visits, in-depth interviews with project management office (PMO) staff from eight key HPES account groups, direct observation at all the CoP events, and five additional interviews with senior managers who commissioned the research and documentary reviews.

The inquiry team was present at all 17 of the organised monthly events to observe the formal presentations, practice discussions, social interactions and behaviours, and made 12 visits to interview and collect evidence of community development at eight local accounts across the UK (e.g. Rolls-Royce, UK Ministry of Defence, UK Department of Works and Pensions).

Research findings:

The findings of the study are split into three parts:

1. Evaluating the CoP formation

To ascertain the motivations of the participants and their perceptions of the benefits of the CoP, the convener and the research team polled the members during the action-taking phase. When asked 'How has the participation in the CoP helped you?', 69 per cent said 'Greater awareness of expertise within the organisation' and 68 per cent said 'Increased knowledge to apply to the job'.

2. Discernible relationships and joint activities

There were three distinct groupings of collaborative interaction, each capable of producing their own embodied forms of practice:

- The local PMO community, which gave rise to characteristics found in traditional communities such as high trust, shared routines, a common language and strong shared cognitions.
- PMO workers when assigned to support projects, who tend to communicate electronically or over the telephone with the core delivery team.
- The wider organisational CoP, which draws its membership primarily from the constellations of PMO knowledge communities.

3. Specifying participation and learning

Participation was tentative at the beginning, led largely by the convener and core group, and individual connection strategy was mostly about information gathering. But over the course of the study, the authors observed an epistemological shift in the presentations and exchanges.

Conclusions:

Two initial conclusions were reached from the findings:

1. It is possible to design and form a purposeful virtual community and maintain it over a substantial period.
2. The process of sharing tacit dimensions from the workplace for mutual problem-solving and learning can flourish in a virtual setting.

The study then concludes that autonomy, competence and belonging underscore participation, coproduction and diffusion of innovative problem-solving and practice beyond the CoP.

Significance of the research:

Organisational theorists have long foreseen peer group connection as a critical challenge in knowledge-intensive organisations (KIOs). This is reflected in the large body of research that has been undertaken regarding knowledge in the context of projects, with the recognition that learning is both valuable and difficult in this environment. This study brings together an important line of inquiry around knowledge production and flow throughout the organisation, as well as the role of the PMO in terms of its benefits as a repository of knowledge and also in promoting knowledge-sharing within an organisation.

Comments from the authors:

We work with many organisations and it is clear that learning from experience is extremely difficult in practice, and frustration is far more common than success. In this study we identified a method that appears to be valuable, although it must be noted that significant effort was required to support the CoP as it developed. Organisations considering such an intervention should therefore consider the benefits they anticipate against the time expenditure involved.

Complete article

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Glossary:

Communities of practice (CoP)

Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

Knowledge-intensive organisation (KIO)

A company or organisation whose main activity is based on the employment of professional knowledge.

Project management office (PMO)

A group – internal or external to a company – that sets, maintains and ensures standards for project management across that organisation.

Action research

Research initiated to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a community of practice to improve the way they address issues and solve problems.



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