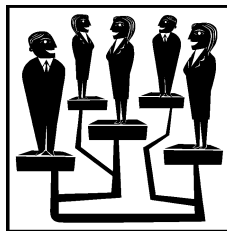


Proposition 95

Building Networks of Practice

In a Word Organizational boundaries have been stretched, morphed, and redesigned to a degree unimaginable 10 years ago. Networks of practice have come of age. The learning organization pays attention to their forms and functions, evolves principles of engagement, circumscribes and promotes success factors, and monitors and evaluates performance with knowledge performance metrics.



Background

Extensive media coverage of applications such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn suggests that networks are a new phenomenon. They are not: the first network was born the day people decided to create organizational structures to serve common interests—that is, at the dawn of mankind. However, the last 10–20 years have witnessed rapid intensification and evolution of networking activities, driven of course by information and communications technology as well as globalization. These make it possible for individuals to exchange data, information, and knowledge; work collaboratively; and share their views much more quickly and widely than ever before. Thus, less and less of an organization’s knowledge resides within its formal boundaries or communities of practice.

Rationale

Knowledge cannot be separated from the networks that create, use, and transform it. In parallel, networks now play significant roles in how individuals, groups, organizations, and related systems operate. They will be even more important tomorrow. Since we can no longer assume that closely knit groups are the building blocks of human activity—or treat these as discrete units of analysis—we need to recognize and interface with less-bounded organizations, from nonlocal communities to links among websites. We should make certain that knowledge harvested in the external environment is integrated with what exists within, especially in dynamic fields where innovation stems from interorganizational knowledge sharing and learning. Therefore, the structure and composition of nodes and ties,¹ and how these affect norms and determine usefulness, must become key concerns. This makes the study of networks of practice a prime interest for both researchers and practitioners.

Networks of Practice

Brown and Duguid (2000) originated the concept of networks of practice. The notion is related to the work on communities of practice of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, and refers to the overall set of informal, emergent networks that facilitate information exchange toward practice-related goals. These networks range from communities of practice where learning occurs to electronic networks of practice (often referred to as virtual or electronic communities).² They differ from work groups created through formal organizational mandate with regard to control mechanisms,³ composition and participation,⁴ and expectations about

¹Nodes are individuals, groups, or organizations within networks. Ties are the relationships between them.

²Clearly, the distinction between formality and informality can be tenuous. Some organizations have cultivated communities of practice to integrate them into their strategies (which might test the loyalties of members). If communities of practice are a localized and specialized subset of networks of practice, typically consisting of like-minded individuals who coordinate, communicate, and reciprocate in a shared domain in face-to-face situations and to a high degree on implicit knowledge, they can be considered to lie at one end of a continuum of network forms. At the other lie electronic networks of practice, the members of which may never know one another or meet face-to-face and display relatively little reciprocity (they generally communicate through electronic mailing lists, bulletin boards, newsletters, or web logs).

³In formal work groups such as project teams, control mechanisms customarily involve organizational hierarchies, mandated rules, contractual obligations, and both cash and noncash awards.

⁴The composition of networks of practice may range from a few individuals to very large, open electronic communities numbering thousands of participants. In the latter case, no formal restrictions are placed on membership. In contrast, the members of work groups are formally designated and assigned.

participation.⁵ The underlying implication is that, to be competitive, organizations should promote participation in both traditional communities of practice and networks of practice and stimulate interactions between the two.

Building Networks of Practice for Collaborative Advantage

Networks are ordinarily founded on the hypothesis that we can accomplish more by working together than by working alone. Successful networking delivers collaborative advantage, viz., something that could not have been achieved without the collaboration. In other words, if the underlying premise is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, a significant benefit of participating in a knowledge network is that each of the parts also becomes stronger. The rewards can include (i) a better sense of belonging, ownership, and understanding; (ii) improved outcomes that would not otherwise be attained; and (iii) higher performance and productivity. To draw such benefits, the learning organization pays attention to the forms and functions of networks, evolves principles of engagement, circumscribes and promotes success factors, and monitors and evaluates operations with knowledge performance metrics.

- **The Forms of Networks** Understanding what knowledge products and services a network offers does not necessarily shed light on how or why it does it. These questions have more to do with its structure. The principal features of a network's internal and external environment relate to function, governance, localization and scope, membership, capacities and skills, resources, communications, and strategic and adaptive capacity.
- **The Functions of Networks** Networks bring together individual and organizational entities that remain geographically separated and institutionally distinct. Driven by technological innovation and globalization, the last ten years have seen a profound transformation in the wide-ranging functions they play. Yet, surprisingly little attention has been paid to what these are, and to the strategic development and management implications from that. Networks can fulfill six,

⁵In work groups, participation is determined jointly. Members are expected to commit to a common purpose and reach agreement on specific performance targets and indicators, a working approach, and mutual accountability. In communities of practice, participation is also determined jointly but individuals seek knowledge from identified experts. In electronic networks of practice, participation is determined individually; knowledge seekers have no control over who responds to their queries. In turn, knowledge contributors have no assurances that the knowledge seekers will understand the answers they gave or reciprocate the favor.

nonexclusive functions.⁶ (The six can be further segregated into supra-functions, namely, agency or support.)⁷ They are: (i) amplifying; (ii) community-building; (iii) convening; (iv) filtering, (v) investing, and (vi) learning and facilitating.

- **Steps to Applying the Network Functions Approach** The six functions of networks can be examined in a structured, step-by-step process to confirm, rethink, or reshape the work of an existing network. The process would entail analyzing the relevance of the network's vision and mission, mapping existing and planned activities against the six functions, identifying the current and planned balance of effort across the six functions, confirming for each function how the network's role is balanced between "agency" or "support", rating efficiency and effectiveness, and reflecting on vision and mission. These steps can clarify thinking, hone strategies, sharpen activities, and ultimately improve performance, thus delivering greater value. (The approach can also be used to guide the design of a new network.)
- **Principles of Engagement** Networks are not magic bullets. They can do what they were designed to do, but to adopt new functions they need long-term investments. It serves to appreciate that (i) there are no templates for success and one should expect setbacks; networks are complex; (ii) one should work with networks to agree on their functional balance and to support that balance; (iii) interventions to develop a network cannot be conceptualized as projects driven by a "logical framework"; other approaches such as outcome mapping offer better alternatives; (iv) networks should be helped to function as networks—with and through their members—and should not be tasked to deliver specific services that can be delivered by other forms of organizations; (v) one should not treat networks as traditional nongovernment or civil society organizations nor allow funds to undermine community-building functions; (vi) when networks carry out a funding role, one should ensure they have the necessary skills and that their other functions are not affected; (vii) network support timeframes should consider the different stages of network development; (viii) appropriate support for networks and their members is needed to develop the right competencies and skills to collaborate; (ix) a culture of knowledge and learning is a cornerstone of network development; an (x) sustainability should be judged against the needs of the members of a network. Toward this, it helps to have clear governance arrangements, strength in numbers as well as authoritative members, representativeness, well-leveraged informal links, good quality and packaging of evidence, information and communications technology that

⁶Networks can carry out one or more of these functions simultaneously—and many activities would fall under more than one category—but one must also recognize that there are important trade-offs between them. Each function requires specific capacities and skills, resources, and systems: overlooking trade-offs can drive networks away from their original roles.

⁷An agency bears responsibility for pursuing a particular change in policy or practice. A supporting role is one in which agency itself remains with the members: the organization exists to support them. In reality, of course, networks endeavor to conduct both functions to some degree.

multiplies networking opportunities, complementing official structures, and persistence.

- **Tools for Monitoring and Evaluation** Just like any other system, networks stand to benefit from feedback. Put simply, they need to be evaluated from two perspectives: the effectiveness of the network (doing the right thing) and the efficiency of the network (doing things right). Techniques that lend themselves to monitoring and evaluation of networks include SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats); results-based management; logical framework analysis; outcome mapping; and appreciative inquiry. Since networks are about relationships, it is also pertinent to leverage evaluation methods from the human resources field.

Summing Up

Networks are an important alternative for individuals, groups, and organizations trying to influence practice. (Indeed, some prophesy that they will become the preeminent collaboration mechanism. Certainly, information and communications technology is well suited to support, develop, and even strengthen them.) However, surprisingly little has been written on their strategic development and management, and even less is known about how capacity can be built. Still, rich seams of investigation relate to their forms and functions, key elements of which relate to the external context in which networks are set out and the interests of their members. Work in these areas provides a natural entry point for thinking about the resources, capacities, and skills that networks can offer or might need to develop. Moreover, since networks exist for a purpose, there surely is interest also in their use of evidence to influence practice, and ways to improve that. Finally, more research is needed on simple but effective means to evaluate performance.

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