

Online virtual communities of practice in organizational settings

It is essential that the Business-to-Business market take notice of the possibilities and advantages, new social media can offer. Creating communities, with selected participants and business partners, have the benefit of gathering ideas and thoughts in internal working processes. New ways to structure knowledge in organizational work processes, via the possibilities of new media, has the purpose to create a shared repertoire between participants. An online knowledge platform will create fundament for stakeholders together, thus work against common goals.

Using Social Media, by creating a online community of practice would be an ideal solution for the Hellenic Culture Centre (HCC), as they are about to start, as coordinators, a new project called Sun.Com(munity), together with eight other organizations. The project, supported by the European Commission and the Program, aims to form a methodology for sustainable networking for an informal language learning Community. It also aims at uniting the two groups, Community of Learning addressed to learners of Greek and Community of practice addressed to teachers of Greek as a foreign language, into an integrated community, which will be the core of an extended and sustainable learning network. The project will be using existent e-learning tools in conjunction with social, participatory technologies (web 2.0) and face to face courses to form a blended learning strategy. What HCC wish to gain from this project is a model for online language learning in an informal learning community, a core community of practice for teachers, a core community of Learning, and e-learning platform with social media applications (Skype, facebook, blogs, wikis, Bing, etc.) and language learning materials.

In the following will a community of practice and strategic communities be defined and explained. Furthermore this will be related to HCC's organizational setting, especially the project Sun.Com(munity), in order to gain an understanding of the benefits that can be achieved using it.

Definition of an online virtual community

An online community is the social configuration of an organization, which adapt to the development in social media. Virtual online communities have the purpose of social interacting, a shared space or location, a common obligations and responsibility. Within a community you will experience the practice of sharing historical and social processes among the members. (Hillery. J, George. A, 1955)

Communities of practice as virtual media

The social media, such as community of practice, is a term used and practiced internally in organizations. Wenger defines a community of practice as "a group of people sharing an interest or

passion for something that they know how to do, and who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better.” This is done through a virtual online community, created through web 2.0, which corresponds with the concept of new media.

Community of practice is a place where we “develop, negotiate, and share” our ways of understanding. Characteristics of community of practice include “joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire” which are developed in the interaction between participation and reification. Participation reflects a group activity. Reifications are objects, which guide and reinforce that practice - i.e. documentation practices. (Wenger, 1998)

Community of practice on the B2B market

The primary purpose of an online community of practice is to create and share knowledge among participants facilitated by the possibilities of web 2.0. Participants in a community become connected by interdependent knowledge, necessarily by interdependent subtasks for a project. (Baker-Eveleth. L., Sarker. S. & Everleth. D., 2005)

On the B2B market, how can community of practice help shape the content of a project in addition to shaping project conception and project planning processes?

Community of practice can shape project content through directing the project focus to acknowledging joint enterprises, which involve stakeholder groups. Community of practice can also direct the project focus to facilitating mutual engagement among stakeholder groups, and/or building and reinforcing a shared repertoire—i.e. shared stories, tools, events, concepts, etc. In effect, community of practice addresses the social side of socio-technical design, offering concepts to shape the human side of usability.

The concept of a strategic community

Strategic Communities are built and planned communities of practice. This concept extends communities of practice through planning and more specific strategies for supporting the community of practice. Key characteristics and the actions which support them offer possibilities for understanding knowledge sharing as embedded in work practices. Through six key characteristics and the actions describing them, the knowledge concepts of strategic communities offers a more specific framework for shaping the work:

Key Principles Supporting Strategic Communities

Community Characteristic	Actions
Interaction format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular face-to-face meetings • Stimulate candid dialogue • Structure for serendipity
Organizational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage common training, experience, vocabulary • Facilitate working around constraints
Mutual interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build commitment by demonstrating visible progress towards a goal

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote continuous improvement of processes
Individual and collective learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize and reward teaching others and learning from others • Leverage knowledge and experience of respected peers • Provide an environment in which reflection about learning occurs
Knowledge Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed knowledge sharing into work projects • Reinforce its value with immediate feedback
Community processes and norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permit a “zone of safety” that builds trust and community identity • Minimize linkage to a formal control structure • Motivate the community to establish its own governance processes

(Storck J. & Hill A. P., 2000)

The notion of supporting strategic communities in projects assumes that stakeholders involved in the strategic community drive the part of the project described through actions in the table above. As in Community of practice, the role of technology is shifted to a supporting role which allows for the action underlying key principles in strategic communities.

A perfect fit

Concluding on the above mentioned descriptions, it is clear that online social communities can generate competitive advantages in organizational settings like HCC and be a solution for the coming project Sun.Com(munity). Communities of practice and strategic communities can be used as the social media to share and distribute knowledge between the nine stakeholders in the Sun.Com(munity) project.

The nine partners is a group of people who want to share their passion for learning and teaching languages, they have the knowledge of how to do so and are still interested in getting better to do this. The project is about creating social interacting between the nine partners, at a shared space or location and together they have a common goal and responsibility. These communities facilitate knowledge management and motivate innovation, knowledge sharing, idea development, long term relationship and efficiency in working processes which makes this Social Media a perfect fit for HCC and their coming project Sun.Com(munity).

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