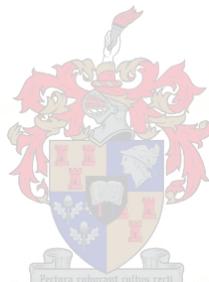


**The Role and Function of  
Communities of Practice as a Tool  
For Organizational Learning**



**Anna Magdalena Kumi Hiscock**

**Assignment submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of (Information and Knowledge Management) at the  
University of Stellenbosch**

**Supervisor: Prof. B. Fouché**

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## **DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

## **ABSTRAK**

Die doel van die studie is om die kenmerke van 'n leerorganisasie te verstaan en te beskryf, asook die doel en rol wat kennisgemeenskappe kan speel binne die konteks van so 'n organisasie om kennis te deel en te bestuur.

Alhoewel sommige organisasies 'n werklike behoefte het om kennis te deel en te bestuur en uiteindelik as 'n leerorganisasie bekend te staan, is daar steeds as gevolg van onvoldoende navorsing probleme met suksesvolle implementering. Hierdie tesis poog om kennisgemeenskappe as een van die vele maniere om suksesvol te implementeer te beskryf.

'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetode is gevolg om die **hoekom** en **hoe** vrae te beskryf, verduidelik en te interpreteer in die bevindinge.

Die literatuurstudie sluit definisies, aspekte en algemene faktore rakende kennisgemeenskappe en leerorganisasies in.

**Sleutelwoorde:** leerorganisasie, kennisgemeenskappe, kennis, tasbare, ontasbare

## **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study is to gain an understanding of the role and function of Communities of Practice in managing organizational knowledge. This thesis views the organization as a learning system and focuses on key characteristics of a learning organization and Communities of Practice. The interrelationship as well as the details of these themes is described in detail.

Some organizations seek to become learning organizations. Yet, implementation is elusive and is not often based on research about what constitutes a learning culture.

The goals of this study is to review and analyze the key characteristics of learning organizations and Communities of Practice how they develop, and where does one start if a learning organization is to be created.

A qualitative research methodology to answer the **why** and **how** question is followed to describe, explain and interpret the findings.

The literature review covers specific definitions, aspects and general factors concerning CoP's and learning organizations.

**Key Words:** learning organization, Communities of Practice, Knowledge, Explicit, Tacit

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to Mornè Louw who taught me the value and real meaning of the words “courage” and “commitment”.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author wishes to express her appreciation to Sasol for its continuing interest and enthusiasm in promoting Knowledge Management as a tool for organizational learning and as a concept among its employees.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS & DESCRIPTIONS USED**

**APQC** – American Productivity and Quality Centre

**BDIM** – Business Development and Implementation Model

**Benchmarks** - A standard of excellence, best-in-class, also a stretch target for improvement

**BPR** – Business Process Reengineering

**CBP** – Core Business Processes

**CoP** – Community of Practice

**CoP's** – Communities of Practice

**Data** - A set of discrete, objective facts about events. Data is transformed into information by adding value through context, categorization, calculations, corrections, and condensation. Facts and figures, without context and interpretation

**Explicit** - Is the information and knowledge that has been captured and catalogued and ready for people to use.

**IBM** – International Business Machines Corporation

**Infonet** – Sasol Information and Knowledge Centre (Electronic Library)

**Information** - a message, usually in the form of a document or an audible or visible communication . . . meant to change the way the receiver perceives something, to have an impact on his judgment and behaviour

**IPS** – Integrated Production / Process Solution

**Knowledge** – a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the mind of the knower. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms. Key concepts of knowledge are experience, truth, judgment, and rules of thumb.

**Knowledge Management** - How an organization identifies, creates, captures, organize, shares and leverages knowledge. Systematic processes support these activities, also enabling replication of success

**PDP** – Personal Development plans for employees

**QMS** - Quality Management Systems

**RCA** – Root Cause Analysis

**Sasol** – An integrated South African oil and gas company with substantial chemical interests

**Tacit** - Is the personal knowledge resident within the mind, behaviour and perceptions of individual members of the organization.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES OF STUDY**

### **1.1 Introduction**

*We need, in particular, to understand ourselves not simply as organisms but as communities. This is because knowledge is, in its very nature, a collective creation, founded not upon isolated judgments, but upon the evaluations, we make together in social situations, according to custom and precedent, and in relation to our communal ends. B Barnes; 1985*

How many times have you worked very hard at something to find out later all you did was reinvent something someone else had already done? That is just the beginning of the many reasons Communities of Practice (CoP's) make sense. (The term CoP will be defined and explained in more detail in chapter two of this research.) CoP's are gaining popularity as a means for organizations to create, share and build intellectual capacity. Until recently, most organizations had never heard of CoP's. Yet, today although many organizations support and recognize the value of CoP's others do not recognize or support CoP's. That however has not stopped them from forming.

(Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) argue that while communities form naturally, organizations need to become more proactive and systematic about developing and integrating them into their business strategy. If Companies realize that knowledge is a key source of competitive advantage in the business world, why is there still little understanding of how to create and leverage it in practice? A Community of Practice (CoP) requires the participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, capturing, communicating, and using knowledge.

As more and more companies realize the importance of knowledge as a corporate asset, the need to nurture and manage this knowledge to effectively create a sustainable advantage also becomes part of their strategies for the future (Davenport and Prusak 1998:12 and 17). Thomas A. Stewart (1997:12) even stated that knowledge has become the “primary ingredient of what we make, do, buy, and sell,” and ventured to say that managing such knowledge, “intellectual capital,” has become the “most important economic task of individuals, businesses, and nations.”

If CoP's have been so pervasive for so long, why should organizations suddenly focus on them? It is not CoP's themselves that are new, but the need for organizations to become more intentional and systematic about “managing” knowledge, and therefore to give these age-old structures a new central role in business. (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder: 2002).

It was discovered that managers cannot mandate most often communities of practice. Rather, the manager's role is to provide the enabling infrastructure, to ensure that the right people get together, and to measure effectiveness non-traditionally.

Tremendous benefits, both in terms of business and knowledge sharing, can be derived from supporting communities of practice within an organization. From the business viewpoint, they can: (Allee 2000) (a) help drive strategy, (b) boost and speed up problem solving capabilities locally and organization wide, (c) facilitate human resource development through staff development, recruitment and retention, (d) diffuse operational excellence practices more rapidly; and (e) cross-fertilize ideas and increase opportunities for innovation.

From the community viewpoint, communities of practice can: (a) help build common language, methods and models around specific competencies, (b) entrench knowledge and expertise in a larger population, (c) enhance organizational knowledge memory, (d) expand

access to expertise across the organization, and (e) balance power and influence within the organization. Finally, from the viewpoint of the individual, communities of practice can: (a) assist people performing their jobs, (b) provide stability through a sense of community with other colleagues and with the organization, (c) promote a sense of identity focused on learning, (d) help develop individual skills and competencies, (e) help a knowledge worker stay current by being able to tap cutting edge knowledge; and (f) present challenges and opportunities to contribute.

## **1.2 Background and Purpose**

Organizations lack a practical and proven knowledge management strategy to manage knowledge for continuous improvement, innovation and ultimately competitive advantage.

The intent of doing this research project goes back to 2000 prior to joining the MPhil program. With a global view on CoP's, and responsible for improvement of business results through the optimization of CoP's as one of the organizational learning tools, through better capturing and sharing internal knowledge in a large manufacturing organization, the following question triggered my intent to do research:

*The question is therefore posed: whether and to what extent CoP's can serve as part of an organizational strategy, what role and function they need to play in order to facilitate and support the learning that is required to become competitive, stay innovative and be sustainable.*

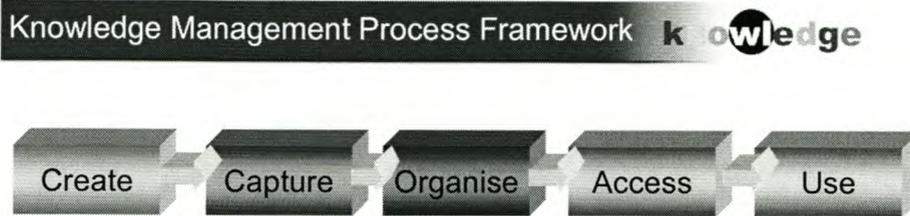
It is the opinion of the author, that every organization is unique in their approach to becoming a learning organization. Therefore, the concept of utilizing CoP's as one of many practical tools for learning to take place within organizations, will be analyzed in more detail in chapter 2 of this research.

Companies recognize knowledge as a key source of competitive advantage in the business world, but still have little understanding of how to create and leverage it in practice. Traditional knowledge management approaches attempt to capture existing knowledge within formal systems, such as databases. Yet systematically addressing the kind of dynamic "knowing" that makes a difference in practice requires the participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, transferring and using knowledge.

We often hear "that people are an organization's most important resource". When people work for large organizations, they learn through their participation in more specific communities made up of people with whom they interact on a regular basis. These "communities of practice" are mostly informal and distinct from organizational units.

### **1.3 Specific goals of this study**

- To review and analyze the key components and characteristics of a learning organization.
- To identify and analyze the characteristics of CoP's, as well as their role within organizations as a strategy to learn, capture and transfer knowledge.



- Create : The activities that result in new knowledge
- Capture : From tacit knowledge in explicit form
- Organise : Categorise knowledge for storage & retrieval
- Access : Knowledge is requested or disseminated by users
- Use : Application of knowledge

leadership

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### Figure 1 – The Sasol Knowledge Management Process Framework

As can be seen from the figure above, the first step in the process is to embark on activities that will result in new knowledge. The second step is to capture information in tacit and explicit form. To organize the information for storage and retrieval, ultimately for employees to share and use this information for the best business results.

## 1.4 Research Methodology

A qualitative approach with the potential to answer the **Why and How** question will be followed to describe, explain and interpret the findings. (Cooper & Schindler, 2001:770) describes a qualitative approach as a means to gain or obtain a detailed understanding of the insights of the research dilemma or problems proposed. Mouton (2001:161-162) describes qualitative research as research where the researcher is concerned with –

- understanding rather than explanation;
- naturalistic observation rather than controlled measurement;

- focusing on implementation rather than on (quantifiable) outcomes;
- the subjective exploration of an insider opposed to an outsider perspective; and
- Fostering improvement and self-determination.

The reasoning is inductive because conclusions are drawn from particular facts or pieces of evidence selected from research previously performed (Cooper & Schindler, 2001:764).

The research design is exploratory in nature. Exploratory research addresses the “what question”. The goals for exploratory Research are to:” (Neuman, 1997:19-20).

- Become familiar with the basic facts, people and concerns involved.
- Develop a well-grounded mental picture of what is occurring.
- Develop techniques and a sense of direction for future research.

In the study, the primary focus will be on secondary data collection methods in that use will be made of handbooks, journals, electronic information and Sasol information.

The literature review introduces the importance of CoP's within organizations. The focus being on the difference between normal work groups and CoP's, different roles, functions, strategies, critical success factors and the different roles of members within CoP's.

**The literature selected was based on –**

- Clarity – whether it is written in a clear and understandable language.
- Holistic – whether it provides a clear and comprehensive context of the subject matter.

- Currency – the most recently available resources as well as several authoritative older texts were consulted.
- Authority of the authors – an Internet search of the subject identified a number of authors who are widely published and cited on the subject matter, and it is accepted that this is an indication of their status as authorities in this regard.

The literature review covers specific aspects as well as general factors concerning CoP's and learning organizations that include definitions. The literature review aims to review some relevant aspects within this study. The main sources of this literature review were found from written books by well-known authors, articles and the Sasol electronic Library.

**Various literature sources were used to:**

- Review the key components and characteristics of a learning organization.
- The potential role of communities of practice within organizations as a strategy to support organizational learning within organizations.
- The nature and characteristics of CoP's and learning organizations.

For the purpose of this study the author decided to embark on a literature study as a suitable vehicle for the attainment of the goals of this study. The research will be based on available selected published data (secondary research) with specific emphasis on the characteristics and key components of a learning organization and CoP's.

“Unlike experiments and surveys, in which the elements of the research design, hypothesis formulation, measurement and sampling are specified prior to data collection, design elements in qualitative research usually, are worked out during the course of the study. A qualitative approach has the potential to supplement

and reorient our current understanding of a learning organization's characteristics" (Mouton: 2001 pg. 195)

## **1.5 Chapter outline**

Chapter 1 is an introduction and background to the research problem.

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 identifies the key components of CoP's and discusses the characteristics and key components of a learning organization.

Chapter 3 follows with a review and development of the concepts and characteristics of a learning organization. The nature of CoP's within organizations, defines and discusses the knowledge based strategies of CoP's and value CoP's bring to a company.

Chapter 4 provides the conclusions and recommendations for future research.

List of Resources, Tables and Figures.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE KEY COMPONENTS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION**

### **2.1 Introduction**

*“Creating a workplace where knowledge is shared and where people are encouraged to learn and to take action on those lessons learned is the surest way to compete in a market-driven economy” (Hackett, 2000:14).*

This chapter reflects the result of a literature review to:

- Describe strategic planning systems within organizational and CoP strategy development.
- Conceptualise different models for organizational strategic planning.
- Provide an overview of the generic strategies focusing on organizational learning and different levels of learning.
- Discuss the key functions that organizations should master in order to learn effectively.
- Define and discuss CoP's characteristics, nature, strategies and components, as well as different roles found within CoP's.
- Explain the ten traits for CoP evolution.

### **2.2 The objectives of this chapter are:**

The objectives this chapter is to review available selected literature and to analyse and explain:

- The conceptual relationships of the key concepts of CoP's as one of many practical tools to enhance and support organizational learning.
- To explain the key components of CoP's and discuss the characteristics and key components of a learning organization.

- To reflect on the Role of organizational learning of strategic management.
- To discuss the nature and role of CoP's within an organizational context.
- To establish whether organizations understand how to create and leverage knowledge within CoP's as a strategic objective.
- To define CoP's.

Many researchers have shown interest in the field of Knowledge Management and in particular CoP's. A wealth of literature in the form of books and articles are freely available from the internet, bookshops and libraries. The author collected information for this research from personal networks, written articles, the internet, and published books.

### **2.3 Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning systems are often equated with strategy development, but planning systems encapsulate strategy development and are in many respects the archetypal manifestation of the design approach to managing strategy (Johnson & Scholes, 2002: 61). This systematic planning approach to strategy development is also referred to as the rational approach.

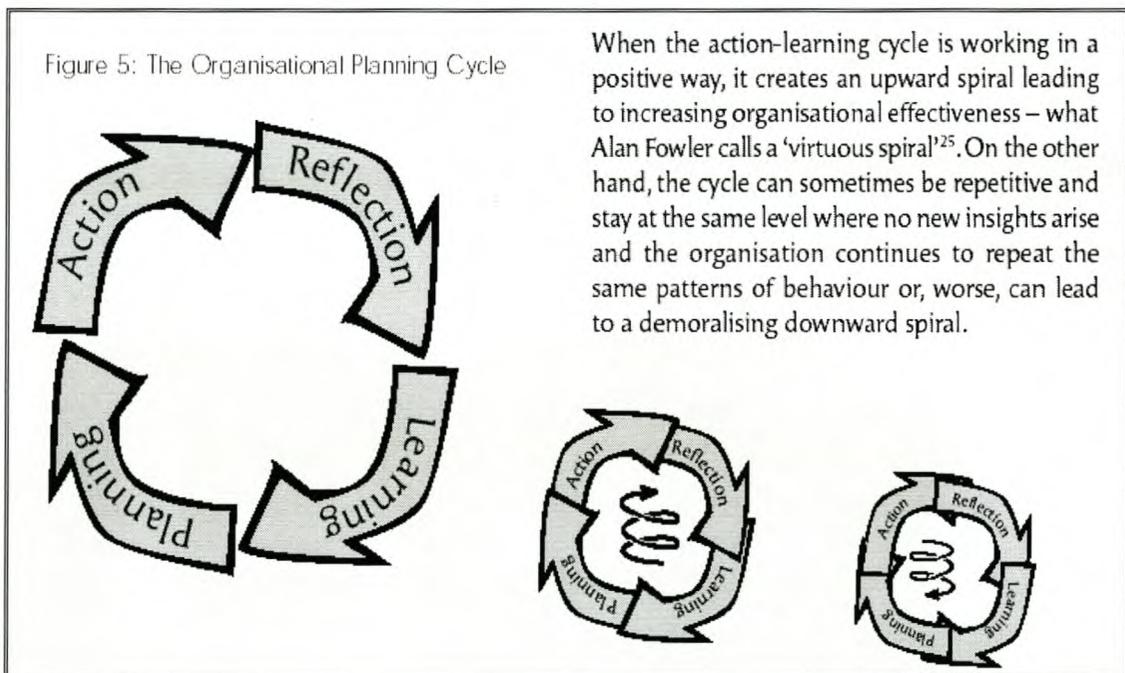
### **2.4 Formalized Strategic planning has the following uses:**

- It can provide a structured means of analysis and thinking about complex problems.
- It can encourage long-term views of strategy.
- It can be used as a means of control by regular performance reviews.
- It can be useful means of coordination and communication.
- It creates ownership and a sense of security and logic for the organization.

Mintzberg (1994) discussed models for strategic planning and confirmed the design approach for the basic planning model. At the front end of the model is

the well known SWOT analysis (**Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats**), when combined with **key success factors** and **distinctive competences** form the basic approach to strategy development. The process is then followed by an evaluation to choose the appropriate strategy prior to implementation. Performance review (as mentioned above) or reflection closes the strategy planning loop.

Britton (2002: 30) also describes general organizational planning as a planning cycle normally thought of as a three stage circular process of planning, action and review. By integrating learning into the planning cycle, learning becomes a



**Figure 2: The Organizational Planning Cycle (Britton, 2002)**

powerful force for organizational change and development (see fig 2). Britton’s view on planning is generic; therefore his model applied to strategic planning recognizes strategic learning in organizations as well. It can be argued that the inclusion of organizational learning brings additional benefits to an organization as discussed in the next section. However, typical formal strategic planning and

reflection sessions occur over a short period each year. Implementation of the strategy typically occurs over a much longer period of time. Britton's model creates the impression that learning should occur outside these short formal planning and reflection sessions, as well as outside the longer implementation or action period.

This view is contradictory to that of Beer and Eisenstat (1996: 606) who stated effective organizational learning should target all elements of the organizational system, including both harder elements of structure and systems, as well as softer elements of skill, values and leadership. The effective integration of organizational learning with the strategic planning process at all strategic levels, therefore requires learning throughout the planning process (development/creation, evaluation/choice and implementation).

Since implementation comprises the typical longer action part of strategic planning, its main planning elements become important. According to Mitzberg (1994), these include scheduling, budgets, controls and programs (clusters of activities). The next section discusses the nature and benefits of organizational learning.

## **2.5 Organizational Learning**

Today's business realities teach us that individuals and organizations must learn, un-learn and re-learn - faster, deeper, and more often. For a growing number of leaders, learning and innovation are considered the only true sustainable competitive advantages.

Britton (2002: 12) provided a more practical way to understand the learning organization by listing its key characteristics:

## **2.6 Key characteristics of a learning organization**

- Recognizes the need for change.
- Provides continuous learning opportunities to its members.
- Explicitly uses learning to reach its goals.
- Links individual performance with organizational performance.
- Encourages inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks.
- Embraces creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.
- Is continuously aware of and interacts with its environment.

## **2.7 Organizational learning happens at five levels**

An important feature of learning organizations is that they are organized, so that learning happens at five levels:

1. Individual learning.
2. Team or work group learning (sharing best practice and lessons between individuals working together in permanent work groups or temporary teams).
3. Cross functional learning (sharing best practice and lessons between departments or sections e.g. between fundraising and operational staff).
4. Operational organizational learning (focusing on improving practice, increasing effectiveness and efficiency).
5. Strategic organizational learning (learning to deal with significant changes in the environment which affects the overall strategy of the organization). In practice, there will be and should be considerable overlap between these levels.

## **2.8 Eight Function Model for organizational learning**

Britton (2002: 14) furthermore provided an action based model (process) for organizational learning. The Eight Function Model attempts to answer this

question by identifying the eight key functions that any organization must master in order to learn effectively.

**These are:**

1. Creating a Learning Culture
2. Gathering Internal Experience
3. Accessing External Learning
4. Communication Systems
5. Mechanisms for Drawing Conclusions
6. Developing an Organizational Memory
7. Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy
8. Applying the Learning

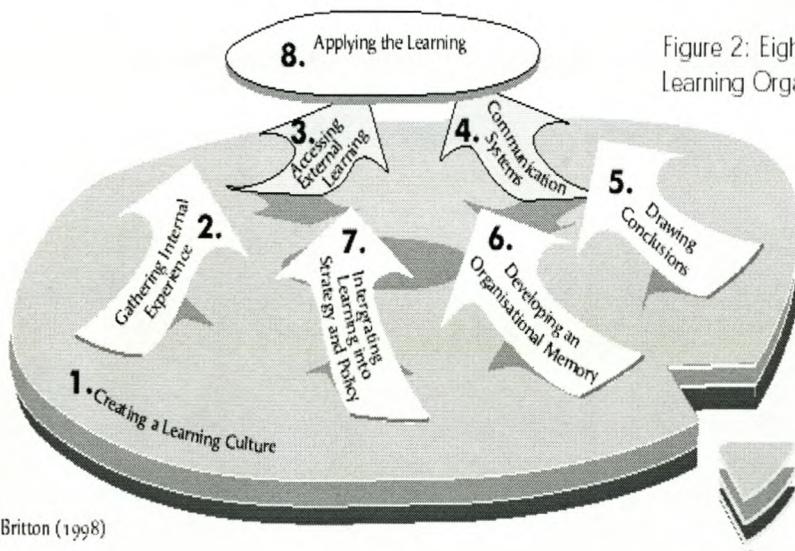


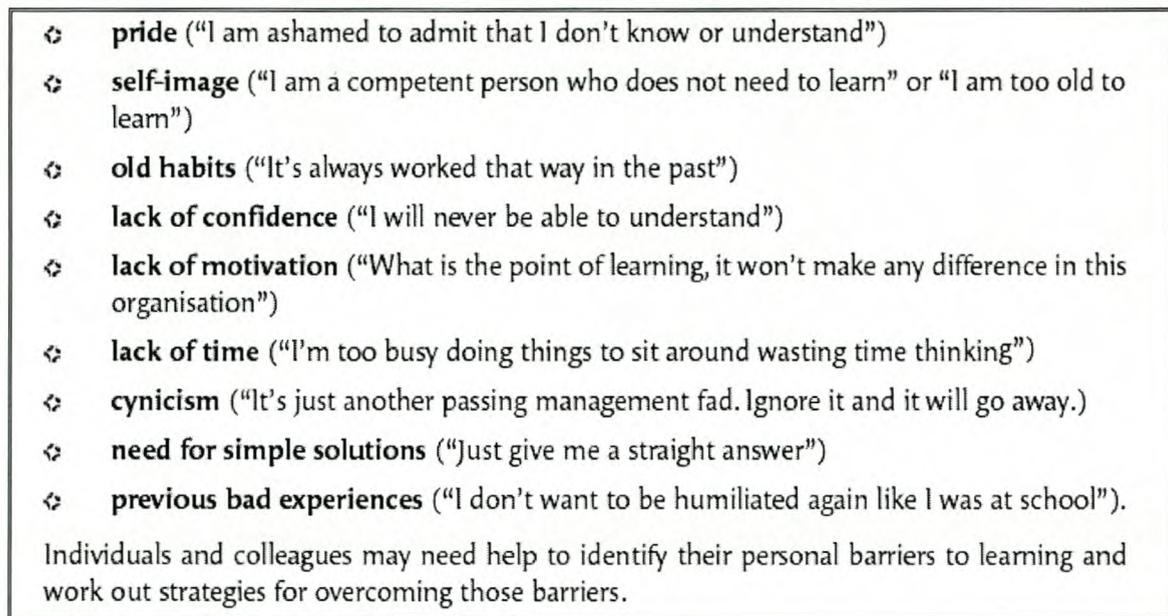
Figure 2: Eight Key Functions of a Learning Organisation

Source: Britton (1998)

**Figure 3: Eight Key Functions of a Learning Organization (Britton, 1998)**

## 2.9 Psychological barriers to becoming a Learning Organization

Britton (2002: 37) lists the psychological barriers people experience (see Figure 4 below).



**Figure 4: Psychological barriers (Britton, 2002)**

Bartlett & Ghosal (1998: 34) related learning to the principles of connecting people, knowledge sharing, and a trust based culture and networking. From a process perspective of learning, criticism against the SHRM (Strategic Human Resource Management) process (Beer & Eisenstat, 1996) is the lack of trust due to the confrontational potential of evaluating the effectiveness of top management by lower ranked employees. Learning is also restricted in that it benefits only those elected to participate in SHRM.

Finally, Porter (in Senge & Carstedt, 2001: 30) states that systems thinking, personal mastery, surfacing and testing mental models and building a shared vision are part of the learning process. This view supports knowledge sharing amongst employees. Trust requires a culture and environment where people can raise questions and recommend alternative ideas in the spirit of learning.

The author would like to argue that the integration of learning into an organization's planning process is strongly supported by the benefits/value to be derived for the company by utilizing CoP's as a strategy for learning. As proof of the value added, Porter (2001: 30) illustrated the benefits of organisational learning at the Ford Motor Company. The project manager and his colleagues completely transformed a troubled project, saved several hundred million dollars in expenditures; reduce launch cost with \$60 million two weeks before the deadline.

## **2.10 Characteristics of a Learning Organization (Britton, 2002)**

A more practical way to understand the learning organization is to consider what its key characteristics might be – in other words, what is it that makes learning organizations different?

One way of summarizing the learning organization is to say that it:

- Recognizes the need for change.
- Provides continuous learning opportunities to its members.
- Explicitly uses learning to reach its goals.
- Links individual performance with organizational performance.
- Encourages inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks.
- Embraces creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.
- Is continuously aware of, and interacts with, its environment.

Britton (2002) lists many other tools useful for organisational learning. Adopting such tools requires an evaluation of their appropriateness and the potential added value before inclusion in the strategic planning process. An example of

such a toolbox developed by Sasol, a global chemical company will be discussed briefly in the next paragraph.

**Table 1: Sasol Knowledge Management Toolkit (Sasol 2004)**

KM Model	KM Rationale	Charter	Roles	Road to here	Decisions	KFA's
<i>The KM Toolkit</i>						
	<b>Create</b>	<b>Capture</b>	<b>Organise</b>	<b>Access</b>	<b>Use</b>	<b>Share</b>
<i>Heads</i>	CoP Rotation PDP Benchmarks Training Content Provider Business Intelligence Recruit	Codes Guidelines QMS Procedures Specs Reports Studies	Taxonomy KM Pyramid BDIM Infonet Key Knowledge areas CBP Talent Management Succession Planning	Infonet External Networks Search Engines Livelihood Retention	Dialogue Listening Understanding Diversity	BDIM CBP Sasol facts Internal publications Business Intelligence
<i>Hearts</i>	Coaching PDP Values Ethics Culture Teambuilding	Culture Example	Change management Communication Ethics Training	Relationships Empowerment Lobby Vision Ask for advise	Recognition Performance review Motivation Leadership Teambuilding	Coaching Mentoring Recognition Culture Internal publications
<i>Hands</i>	Experience RCA Benchmarking BPR/Optimisation Surveys Audits	Livelihood Facilitation Transactions IPS	Facilitation Transactions Data Warehouse Priorities Action plans	CoP Facilitation Data Warehouse Blue Pages Forum Intranets Internal networks	CoP Reporting Tracking	CoP Best Practices Blue Pages Messaging Training

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Table 1 is an example of a toolkit developed by Sasol Ltd. The philosophy of the thinking will be discussed shortly:

- **Head:** Sometimes it is necessary to use one's head in order to understand what must be done, what needs to be done, what can be done and how it works together as a whole. These tools or business processes are normally part of the way organizations do business and can be seen as a purposeful drive to achieve success and drive for competitiveness. These tools and

business processes are normally already available within organizations but the emphasis should be to utilize them as a means to become faster, cheaper and better. (i.e. Recruitment, Business Intelligence, Company codes and guidelines.)

- **Heart:** These tools and business processes focus on the “softer” side of business and normally require the organization to change the culture of the organization. It is therefore important for organizations to fully understand what culture and also what behaviour they are after to sustain the culture. By utilizing these tools within organizations the outcome could result in putting the characteristics and elements of a learning organization in place in order to continuously improve.
- **Hands:** “Practice makes perfect” is the theme when choosing from the hands toolkit. Sasol realised the benefit of using selected tools and processes as an opportunity to exploit the value from past learning. The challenge is to embark on a culture to fit the right skill to the right challenge across the organization. The theory of “there is always a better and faster way to progress and execute” is embedded in the value system of Sasol. Examples of the “hands” category include personal experience, surveys, audits, best practice learning's etc.

In an attempt to becoming a learning organization, the Sasol toolkit will be implemented and sustained across the organization and within all the different business units.

### **2.11 Community of Practice (CoP's) Defined**

Etienne Wenger and William Snyder used the term “Communities of Practice” to describe “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (2000, p. 139). (The term was first used by Wenger and Jean Lave in 1991 in their book, *Situated Learning*). CoP's tend to be bands of individuals who come together for some reason and stay together because of the value added that members obtain by associating with one another and sharing common experiences and knowledge together.

“Communities of Practice are a practical way to frame the task of managing knowledge. They provide a concrete organisational infrastructure for realising the dream of a learning organization.” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this by interacting on an ongoing basis.” (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder). Etienne Wenger is credited by the term “Community of Practice” and he believes that learning is a social activity and that people learn in groups.

### **2.12 A CoP defines itself along three dimensions: (Wenger et al 2002)**

1. **what** it is about – it's a *joint enterprise* as understood and continually renegotiated by its members,
2. **how** it functions - mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity,
3. **what** capability it has produced – the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

In the simplest terms, Communities or Practice can be thought of as people with similar jobs learning from each other how to do their jobs better. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). He goes on to talk about several similarities between CoP's. They are formed around “real work”, which differentiates them from Communities of Interest (hobbies) and other communities. It's the “real work” of a common “domain” to all members of a community and crosses organizational boundaries. It is in these communities where learning occurs, and where organizational knowledge is created and held, not in individuals, as is widely believed.

Communities that form within an organization where people assume roles based on their abilities and skills instead of titles and hierarchical stature. Also referred to as a *community of interest*. (Koulopoulos and Frappaolo 1999)

### **2.13 Nature & Culture of CoP's**

Culture plays an important role in the success of becoming a learning organization.

The culture of a group can now be defined as: A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein 1993: 373-374)

Many well-designed knowledge management tools and processes fail because people believed they were already sharing well enough, that senior managers did not really support it, or that, like other programs, it too would blow over (Mulla 2003). Mulla further argues that however strong an organization's commitment and approach to knowledge management, its culture is stronger. Companies that successfully implement knowledge management do not try to change their culture to fit their knowledge management approach: *they build their knowledge management approach to fit their culture*. As a result, there is not one right way to get people to share, but many different ways depending on the values and style of the organization.

### **2.14 CoP Strategies**

With a knowledge strategy, it is not necessary to manage knowledge. CoP's do. (Lesser, Fortaine, Slusher, 2002 pg. 18). CoP's need support and need to be involved in the running of the organization. According to Lesser et al, CoP's own the knowledge and they steward it. Lesser et al argues this is true Knowledge

Management. With this approach in mind Lesser et al suggested new functions for Knowledge Managers:

- Help map strategic knowledge requirements into practice domains.
- Support community development and coach community leaders.
- Educate managers and advocate on behalf of communities.
- Lead the support team and coordinate with Sponsors.

On the other hand Wenger *et al.* (2002:4), argues that a knowledge strategy depends on CoP's. Skryme (1999) shares this view by stating "... the future organization is most likely to consist of networks of self-managed teams that rapidly reconfigure to adapt to opportunity and change. Teams, not functions or departments, will become the core productive units within organizations."

### **2.15 Community Components (People, Places & things)**

CoP's consists of three components: (Lesser, Fortaine, Slusher, 2002). **People, places and things.** People as the primary ingredient in any community effort. To maintain the relationships between individuals, formal roles and responsibilities are developed for improved performance. This means that people need places to get together to share and exchange ideas and insights. The CoP needs to manage things in the workplace, things in this case referring to rules, norms, procedures and tools. Through the interaction of people, places and things, communities help individuals develop a sense of identify within their organization. Teams interact with wider knowledge networks (Skryme, 2000 pg. 170). Their members will frequently be members of CoP's that span the organization.

Wesley Vestal, 2001 proposed ten traits and evaluation questions when attempting to identify, develop and manage CoP's within organizations. The following is an extraction from his article:

## **2.16 Identifying, developing and manage CoP's**

- 1) A compelling, clear business value proposition for all involved.
- 2) A dedicated, skilled leader.
- 3) A coherent, comprehensive knowledge map for the core content of the CoP.
- 4) An outlined, easy-to-follow knowledge sharing process.
- 5) An appropriate technology medium that facilitates knowledge exchange, retrieval and collaboration.
- 6) Communication and training plans for those outside of the CoP.
- 7) An updated, dynamic roster of CoP members.
- 8) Several key metrics of success to show business results.
- 9) A recognition plan for participants.
- 10) An Agenda of topics to cover for the first three to six months of existence.

Vestal argues that for CoP's to be effective it should exhibit most (if not all) of the mentioned traits. (Knowledge Management Review, 2001).

(Davenport and Probst, 2002) emphasized the importance of the basic principals of trust, care and identity when it comes to sharing knowledge and skills within a CoP.

CoP's are particularly useful in helping to build a global organization when bringing together a lot of individual operating companies in separate countries (Buckman, 2004 pg. 164). The benefit of a sharing process improvement will result in breaking down traditional silos.

## **2.17 CoP Activities and Roles**

(Davenport and Probst, 2002) identified the following roles within a CoP:

- CoP initiator

- CoP Sponsor
- CoP Coordinator
- CoP moderator/manager
- CoP Members
- CoP Support and
- CoP external knowledge carriers

According to Davenport et al, a well skilled moderator has proved to be one of the determining factors in the success of a CoP, as his or her action significantly influences the use of the information platform, the contributions and the communication between members. In addition, the effectiveness of the meetings depends to a great extent on him or her. Moderators are known experts who have enough experience to exert a positive effect on CoP Members, while additionally being involved in the daily activities of other experts.

(Rumizen, 2002) states that being a CoP coordinator could take up a lot of time. According to Rumizen the minimum amount of time needed to support a community is 15 percent of a person's work time. Percentages between 15 percent and 25 percent are not unusual. It could even be higher when starting a community. Some communities launch with a big bang and will need constant support from the CoP Coordinator, while others ease into existence with low-key informal sharing (Rumizen, 2002).

"Gate Keepers" were added on the list by (Liebowitz, 1999) that plays the role of importing external knowledge within the CoP. These gate keepers act as scouts who find potentially valuable knowledge and transfer it to appropriate repositories or individuals.

To assist these different role players within a CoP, a toolkit is proposed by the CoP Coordinator to explain the detailed "how to" activities associated with developing communities at their various stages with designing the surrounding

elements of the knowledge organization (Wenger et al 2002). Normally this toolkit also creates a shared language among participants to facilitate conversations about what to do, when to do it and how to guide members.

### **2.18 Sustaining CoP's**

Organizations that encourage communities as an integral part of corporate knowledge programmes and strategies will gain significant benefits. An easy way to kill a community is to see it as "non-essential work" and members not given the opportunity to spend enough time within the community. Reward systems and culture must support community participation. (Skryme, 2000).

### **2.19 Conclusion**

This chapter reflected and analysed the results of a literature study focussing on the concept of utilizing CoP's as a strategy tool and a strategy to become a learning organization.

According to the literature study a "Learning Organization" is one in which people at all levels, individually and collectively, are continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about.

Innovation through knowledge creation and learning can be a primary source of value creation and competitive advantage for today's business. The accountability of management is also recognized as an important business practice for companies concerned with becoming a learning organization. The literature review indicates that a solid conceptual basis exists to link these two important business challenges in order to create business value. The current reality is that, though understood by 'thought leaders' (and reinforced by this study) the relationship between the two areas of practice is often disconnected, and therefore not effectively exploited by business practitioners.

“Two-thirds of those organizations surveyed have communities of practice in place, citing enhanced innovation, collaboration and learning, and reduced levels of rework as key business drivers. Yet only 11 per cent of these companies can point to tangible success in realising these benefits” (Knowledge Management Magazine Survey, 2003)

The nature, value and roles of CoP's within a learning organization will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 3: THE NATURE AND THE VALUE OF CoP's IN A LEARNING ORGANIZATION**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Even though the communities are affiliated with a common knowledge management program and are an integral part of the overall business model, they can and do act independently, responding to the needs of their members as well as the organizational and marketplace environments within which they reside. Consequently, there is wide variability in how they “look,” talk, organize, and work, even though they have some elements in common.

In this chapter the author will analyse and explain various conceptual models, and views taken from literature, in an attempt to explain the nature and value of CoP's as a practical tool to become a learning organization.

### **3.2 Purpose and Objectives of this chapter:**

- discuss the concepts of a social learning system,
- discuss a community evolution model,
- discuss and develop a Knowledge Management strategy around CoP's,
- discussing the differences between a traditional work group, informal network, project team and CoP's,
- briefly review the different types of CoP's that can be distinguished in organizations with regard to their characteristics, critical success factors and stages of development,
- briefly discussing the different roles within CoP's, and the importance of support from internal leadership

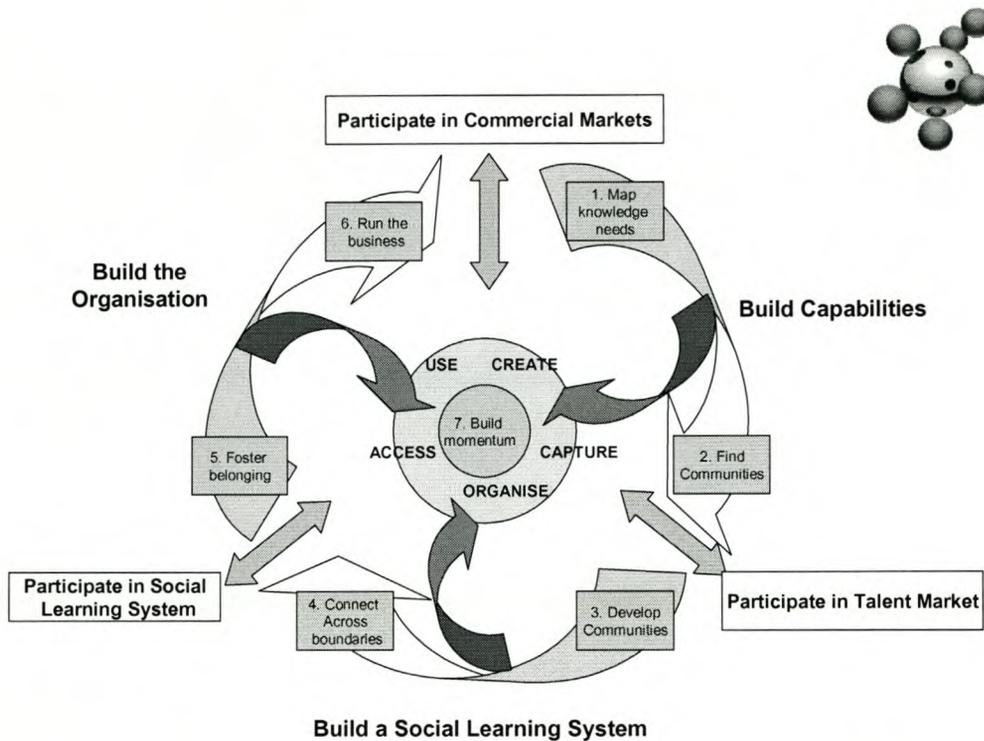
### **3.3 Building a social learning system**

According to Wenger et al, 2002 CoP's provide value through their abilities to develop new strategies as well as implement existing ones. If we agree with this statement it will be important for companies to understand their unique strategic needs and what knowledge is critical to success.

**The seven step model of Lesser et. (Fig. 5) describes a cyclical process.**

1. understand strategic knowledge needs: what knowledge is critical to the success of the organization,
2. find communities: where will people form communities around practices they engage in and identify with,
3. develop communities: the organization's capability to assist key communities reach their full potential,
4. work the boundaries: the importance to link communities into a broader learning system across organizational borders,
5. foster belonging: how to engage people's identities and a sense of meaning,
6. run the business: how to integrate CoP's into organizational strategies and running the business of the organization,
7. build momentum: apply, assess, reflect and renew the organizations knowledge strategy through waves of organizational transformation.

**Figure 5: Build a Social Learning System (Lesser et al. Knowledge and Communities, 2000)**



*Lesser et al; Knowledge and Communities, 2000*

**Figure 5: Building a knowledge strategy around CoP's (Lesser et al 2002:6)**

From this model the author notices that the following are key issues to consider:

- Develop communities: How to help key communities reach their full potential within the organization,
- work the boundaries, how to link communities into a broader learning system,
- foster belonging, how to engage people's identities and sense of meaning,
- run the business, how to integrate CoP's into the overall strategy of the organization and running the business of the organization,
- apply, assess, reflect and renew how to deploy a knowledge strategy through waves of organizational transformation.

### 3.4 CoP's Evolving in Organizations

Based on the work done by Wenger et al. Gongga and Rizzuto, 2001 developed a five-stage model to describe the evolution patterns for CoP's within IBM. The five stages include, **Potential, Building, Engaged, Active, and Adaptive** with clear characteristics that distinguish communities in one stage from those in another as they transform from one level to another. (IBM Gongga, Rizzuto, 2001). See Table 2.

**Table 2: Community evolution model definition (IBM Gongga, Rizzuto, 2001)**

	<b>Potential</b>	<b>Building</b>	<b>Engaged</b>	<b>Active</b>	<b>Adaptive</b>
Definition	A community is forming	The community defines itself and formalizes its operating principles	The community executes and improves its processes.	The community understands & demonstrates benefits from knowledge management & the collective work of the community.	The community and its supporting organization(s) are using knowledge for competitive advantage.

At first glance the IBM Community evolution model appears to be a form of life-cycle model similar to what Wenger and McDermott propose (see fig. 5). However as indicated in Table 2, the IBM Community evolution model differs in important aspects from the models developed by Wenger and McDermott. The Wenger and McDermott model uses a life-cycle concept to describe communities

as developing through stages akin to birth, maturation, and death. Wenger sees CoP's as progressing through five stages: **potential, coalescing, active, dispersed, and memorable**, with levels of interaction and types of activities varying across the stages. Members interaction within the community generally increases through the active level and then declines through the dispersed stage, and pretty much disappears at the memorable level, although memories, stories, and artefacts of the community still remain.

McDermott views communities as living, human institutions that "form spontaneously, grow, mature, change, age and die. He uses this life-cycle perspective to describe five stages of community development, similar to Wenger's model but with more elaboration of the tensions and challenges that stimulate the community to develop and renew itself, but that eventually lead to the community's death. McDermott's series of stages include: plan, start-up, grow, sustain/renew, and close.

The IBM evolution model is similar to Wenger's and McDermott's in recognizing formative and growth stages of development. However, the IBM evolution model is not a life-cycle approach. In this evolution model, a community can mature and dissolve at any one of these stages beyond the initial formation level. The model describes instead how communities transform themselves, becoming more capable at each stage, while at the same time maintaining a distinct, coherent identity throughout.

### **3.5 Snapshot of Comparison**

The most important differences between other organizational teams and the concept of CoP's are self explanatory in Table 3. (Wenger et al, 2002). According to Wenger et al., the characteristics of CoP's vary greatly from the more traditional organizational forms (formal work groups, project teams and informal networks). In general, according to Wenger et al., CoP's operate informally through meetings, video conferences, or virtually, without preset

agendas to exchange ideas and knowledge on topics of immediate interest to the members and unlike in other groups, members of CoP's select themselves on a voluntary basis with the same focus. Members are driven by passion in their area of expertise, and by their enthusiasm to learn socially in a trusting and supportive environment and the lifespan of CoP's depends on members themselves - it can last as long as the members want.

## A snapshot Comparison

CoP's, formal work groups, Teams & Informal networks are useful in complementary ways. Summary of their characteristics (EC Wenger & WM Snyder)



	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Who belongs?</b>	<b>What is holding it together?</b>	<b>How long does it last?</b>
<b>Informal Network</b>	To collect and pass on business & social information	Business acquaintances & Friends	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect
<b>Project Team</b>	To accomplish a specific task	Employees assigned by Snr Management	The project's milestones & goals	Until the project has been completed
<b>Formal work group</b>	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements & common goals	Until the next Business reorganisation
<b>Community of Practice</b> <small>Rev 2: 29 May 2003</small>	To develop members' capabilities to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves (voluntary – same focus)	Passion, commitment, & indent with the group's expertise	As long as there is a need & interest in maintaining the group <small>(c) Marina Hiscock Sasol Ltd</small>

**Table 3: Snapshot of Comparison (Wenger & Snyder, 2002)**

According to Wenger et al., it is important to emphasize the fact that all these distinctions exist in varying degrees and must not be seen as black and white. The extent to which any group is or is not a community of practice is not something that can be determined in the abstract by its name or by the characteristics of members.

### 3.6 Types of CoP's

Blunt, 2001 shares his two types of communities. The **first** is sponsored CoP's which is formally recognized by the organization. They are formed, or chartered, by the formal management of the organization. Sponsored CoP's have more formal roles and responsibilities than non-sponsored ones. They are giving resources (money), and people to nurture and facilitate the CoP, and time to learn from each other. The advantage of sponsored CoP's is that management understands their value and encourages their growth. The disadvantage is that management may expect measurable results for the "bottom line" of the company. A good example of sponsored CoP's is the more than one hundred formal recognized "thematic" groups of the World Bank's Knowledge sharing Network. The **second** type of CoP according to Blunt is "Self-Organizing CoP's" which are, on the other hand, very informal CoP's. They are self-organizing because of their shared recognition of needing to learn for each other and usually have a few "core" people leading the community.

Wenger, 2002 states that by identifying the strategic intent of a community will help define the scope of the community and as well as the kind of community it will share.

### 3.7 CoP Critical Success Factors (CSF's)

Because communities are organic, driven by the value they provide to members, organized around changing topics, and bound by people's sense of connection, they are very different from teams and other organizational forms most of us are familiar with (McDermott, 1999b; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The challenges they pose and the factors in making them successful are also different.

McDermott (2001) describes four key challenges in starting and supporting communities capable of sharing tacit knowledge and thinking together. The management challenge is to communicate that the organization truly values the

sharing of knowledge. The community challenge is to create real value for community members and insure that the community shares cutting edge thinking, rather than sophisticated copying. The technical challenge is to design human and information systems that not only make information available but help community members think together. The personal challenge is to be open to the ideas of others and maintain a thirst for developing the community's practice.

McDermott (2001) describes ten factors dealing with these challenges that are critical to the success of communities of practice. Without them, communities tend to fail.

### **3.8 Critical Success Factors in Building Community**

#### **Management Challenge**

1. Focus on topics important to the business and community members.
2. Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community.
3. Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate.
4. Build on the core values of the organization.

#### **Community Challenge**

5. Get key thought leaders involved.
6. Build personal relationships among community members.
7. Develop an active and passionate core group.
8. Create forums for thinking together as well as systems for sharing information.

#### **Technical Challenge**

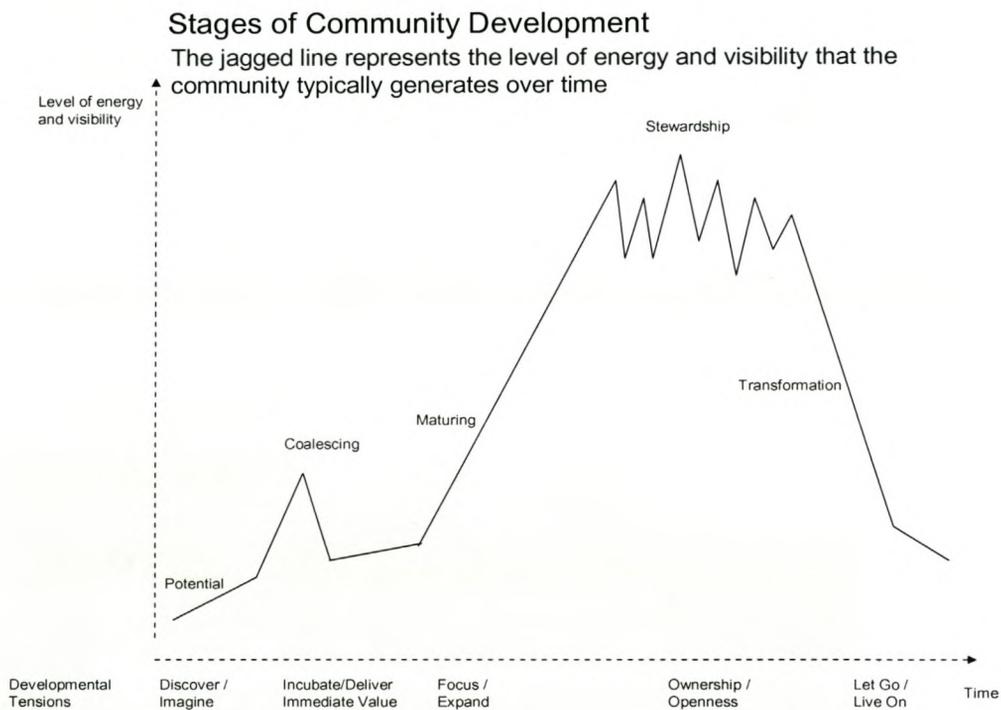
9. Make it easy to contribute to and access the community's knowledge and practices.

## Personal Challenge

10. Create real dialogue about critical issues.

### 3.9 Stages of Development

According to Wenger (2002), for CoP's to be successful, it is essential to move through various stages of development characterized by different levels of interaction among the members and different kinds of activities.



**Figure 6: Stages of Development within Organizations (E Wenger et al. 2002 pg. 69)**

Wenger et al. argues that like many other living things, communities are not born in their final state, but need to go through a natural cycle of birth, growth and death. Wenger et al., observed five stages of CoP development: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship and transformation (see Figure 6). As

indicated in Figure 6, CoP's will typically start as loose networks that hold the potential of becoming more connected and therefore have the ability to become a more important part of the organization. As members build connections, they coalesce into a community. Once formed, the community often grows in both membership and the depth of knowledge members share. When mature, communities go through cycles of high and low activity, just like other living things. During this stage, communities often take active stewardship of the knowledge and practices they share and consciously develop them.

As communities evolve through these stages, the activities needed to develop them also change.

Wenger et al., goes on and explain that while communities will progress through these stages, they will typically undergo several changes in their focus, relationships and practice as well. Normally communities will shift from sharing ideas and tips to stewarding their practices, building, refining and expanding the domain and its relationship to other domains.

### **3.10 Functions of CoP's**

(Dr. Faizel Mulla, (Sasol 2002) argues that CoP's could be utilized as the vehicle for the exchange and interpretation of information and organizational learning. Based on the fact that CoP's are formed by employees who share the same passion and enthusiasm regarding a specific topic, the members of a CoP will have a shared understanding, as they know what is relevant to communicate and how to present information in useful ways. As a consequence, a CoP that spreads throughout an organization is an ideal channel for moving information, such as best practices, tips, or feedback, across organizational boundaries.

CoP's can retain knowledge in "living" ways, unlike a database or a manual. Even when they have certain routine tasks and processes, they can do so in a manner that responds to local circumstances and thus is useful to practitioners.

Communities of practice preserve the tacit aspects of knowledge that formal systems cannot capture. For this reason, they are ideal for initiating newcomers into a practice.

CoP's can monitor competencies to keep the organization at the cutting edge. Members of these groups discuss novel ideas, work together on problems, and keep up with developments inside and outside a firm. When a community commits to being on the forefront of a field, members distribute responsibility for keeping up with or pushing new developments. This collaborative inquiry makes membership valuable, because people invest their professional identities in being part of a dynamic, forward-looking community

CoP's provide homes for identities. They are not as temporary as teams, and unlike business units, they are organized around what matters to their members. Identity is important because, in a sea of information, it helps us sort out what we pay attention to, what we participate in, and what we stay away from. Having a sense of identity is a crucial aspect of learning in organizations.

### **3.11 Roles within a Cop**

Very specific roles are identified as one of the critical success factors for CoP's by Vestal, 2001. See Table 5.

**Table 4: Specific Community Roles (Wesley Vestal APQC 2001)**

## Specific community roles



<b>Sponsors</b>	<b>Subject Matter Experts</b>	<b>Knowledge Manager</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision</li> <li>• Strategic goals</li> <li>• Financial objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific expertise</li> <li>• Content planning</li> <li>• Content gap analysis</li> <li>• Content review &amp; refresh</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish processes to acquire, classify, store, and maintain content</li> <li>• Manage portal design, build and maintenance</li> <li>• Coordinate knowledge planning</li> <li>• Coordinate community activities / processes</li> <li>• Measure / monitor</li> <li>• Train &amp; coach</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Leaders</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communications &amp; community development</li> <li>• Goal execution</li> <li>• Measure goals</li> <li>• Rewards / recognition</li> </ul> <p><b>Community Coordinator</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help the CoP to develop the practice</li> <li>• Help the CoP to develop the community</li> </ul> <p><small>Rev 2: 29 May 2003</small></p>	<p><b>Community Members</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use &amp; re-use knowledge</li> <li>• Create &amp; contribute new knowledge</li> </ul>	<p><small>(c) Marina Hiscock Sasol Ltd</small></p>

The three leadership roles (Sponsor, Community Leader and Knowledge Manager) are often considered the most important roles in a community's recognition, support and legitimisation by the organization. These roles secure funding for the community and often help to fund additional community roles. Leaders provide the overall guidance and management to build and maintain the community, its relevance and strategic importance in the organization and its level of visibility. Sponsors, who are generally not part of the community, are senior managers who recognize the strategic importance of the community and its contribution to the overall business objectives of the organization. Sponsors help secure needed resources, nurture and protect the community, and ensure its exposure in the organization. The knowledge manager acts as mentor and coach and takes a personal stake in helping new members navigate the

community, its norms and policies and their place in the organization. Knowledge managers also need to understand the different technology needs (i.e. video conferencing, e-mail, intranets etc.) of each community and ensure members have access to technology to enable them to connect across the organization.

The Community coordinator will assist the community leader to facilitate and help the community to develop the practice and the community. The subject matter experts will develop and communicate expertise and tacit knowledge and serve as the community's base through leadership and expertise. The subject matter experts contribute knowledge of subject matter to all community activities and serve as the community's keeper of specialized tacit knowledge.

Community members take active ownership in the community by participating in its events and activities and driving the level of commitment and growth of the community. Members contribute to the community conversations.

### **3.12 Leadership support to the CoP**

It is clear from the literature as discussed earlier in this research that the success of CoP's ultimately depends on internal organizational leadership as another critical element for success.

According to Mulla (2003) the internal leadership of CoP's can take many forms, viz.

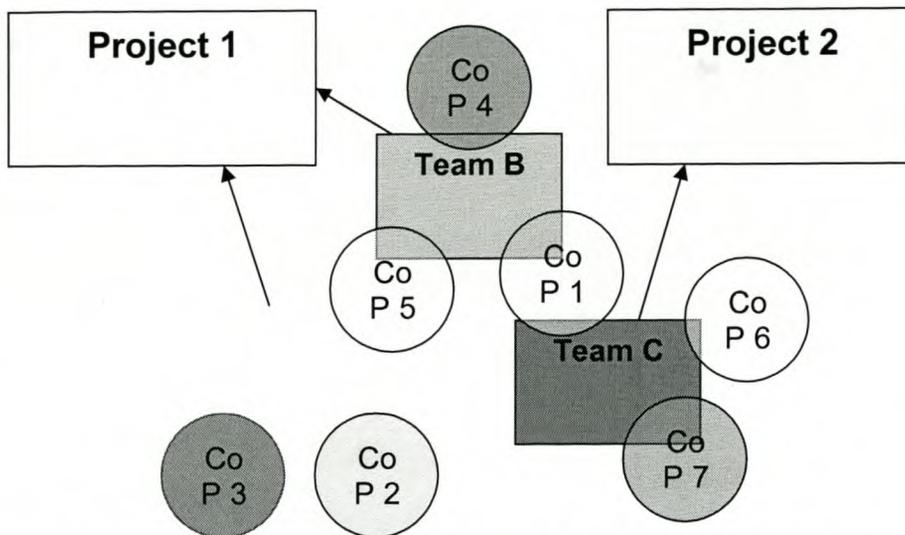
- The *inspirational* leadership provided by thought leaders and recognized experts.
- The *day-to-day* leadership provided by those who organize activities.
- The *classificatory* leadership provided by those who collect and organize information in order to document practices.

- The *interpersonal* leadership provided by those who weave the community's social fabric.
- The *boundary* leadership provided by those who connect the community to other communities.
- The *institutional* leadership provided by those who maintain links with other organizational constituencies, in particular the official hierarchy.
- Out-of-the-box initiatives. Doing things differently, changing the way you think which could result in greater innovation.

Mulla claims that in order for CoP's to be effective, managers and others must work with CoP's from the *inside* rather than merely attempt to design them or manipulate them from the *outside*.

### **3.13 Legitimizing participation for CoP's**

Organizations can support communities of practice by recognizing the work of sustaining them; by giving members the time to participate in activities; and by creating an environment in which the value communities bring is acknowledged. To this end, it is important to have an institutional discourse that includes this less-recognized dimension of organizational life. Merely introducing the term "communities of practice" into an organization's vocabulary can have a positive effect by giving people an opportunity to talk about how their participation in these groups contribute to the organization as a whole.



**Figure 7: Nurturing CoP's, Legitimize Participation (Mulla, 2001)**

### 3.14 Conclusions

In this chapter the role, concepts, characteristics and the benefit of utilizing CoP's within an organization were reviewed and discussed in much detail.

From the discussion it became clear that organizations have come to view and understand that the knowledge of their employees, are their most valuable and strategic resource. In reality however, if this is true, why are most of the organizations still struggle to explicitly manage its intellectual resources and capabilities?

Another interesting view discussed in this chapter, is the concept of organizational initiatives, when properly aligned and integrated with one another, will have the potential to provide a comprehensive infrastructure to support organizational learning. As discussed, one of the tools of doing so is utilizing CoP's as a tool for sharing and learning. I strongly agree with this view, however, I would like to argue that in practice to align and integrate all major or even smaller initiatives, must be of the most difficult and challenging initiatives one could ever undertake within an organization. It is not just about aligning and integrating initiatives, its about the values of the organization, the organizational

culture, organizational leadership, technology, reward and recognition to name a few. In practice, it is a fact that company cultures, even between the different businesses units within the same company differs which brings its own challenges. All this factors would play a major role in the success to integrate and align organizational initiatives.

I also agree as discussed in this chapter, that the appropriate infrastructure could enhance an organisation's ability to create and exploit knowledge, but it does not necessarily ensure that the organisation is making the best investment of its resources or that it is managing the right knowledge in the right way. The question coming to mind is, how should a company determine which efforts are appropriate? Or which knowledge should be managed and developed?

If it is true that a company's strategic context will help to identify initiatives that support its mission, strengthen its competitive position, and create shareholder value, why, in practice are this link between learning and business strategy, still widely ignored by organizations?

If it is true that the link between learning and business strategy as discussed earlier, is CoP's, not only to manage knowledge resources, but also to help organizations succeed in a fast changing economy, why in practice are companies resistant to this "new" trend although many success stories and case studies are published and widely available?

*CoP's will depend on internal leadership for their development, and also in order to legitimise the community as a place for sharing and creating knowledge. Recognized experts need to be involved in some way, even if they don't do much of the work. Etienne Wenger [Published in the "Systems Thinker," June 1998].*

If the above statement is true, the author would like to argue that if Wenger promotes that communities form spontaneously and naturally, and members become part of the community because of a passion for a specific topic, why

should the community depend on “internal leadership” as a critical factor for the success of such a community?

It is clear from the discussion that CoP's can be leveraged as one of the tools within organizations to connect people with people, to support and transfer of best practices within an organization. The question is therefore posed, if organizations are aware of the benefits of these communities, why is CoP's still not part of the overall strategy of organizations, and why is leadership still not convinced of the benefits deriving from these CoP's?

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

### 4.1 Conclusions

In practice learning is more than just tools.

Organizational learning is more than just frameworks and concepts.

Putting either of these efforts into practice takes a long-term and integrated view.

Regardless of the depth or breadth of our understanding from available literature, it is *how* we apply these tools and ideas that really count. Instead of searching for the next big idea, the next big fad, let's make work what we already know is effective. Then, when the next big idea does come along, we'll know how to adopt it and integrate it within our existing environment, using it to move us and our organizations forward, not backward.

One of the drivers towards organizational learning that was discussed is change. It's been said a lot but the greatest constant of modern time is change. With regards to the organizations we are in, change consistently challenges traditional institutional practices and beliefs. Most important, most of the changes we now struggle to comprehend arise as consequences, intended or unintended, of created in some way by the folks from the organizations themselves.

When making a learning organization real and practical, how does organizations:

- Manage, acquiring, capturing, organising, accessing and using knowledge effectively?

We have learned that a learning organization is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself which involves people. When people interact in the course of doing the business of the organization, learning can take place. The concept of CoP's was introduced and

the role discussed for CoP's within an organization. The more opportunity people have to participate in CoP's the greater the learning within organizations could take place, especially when learning is an intentional part of the organizations motivation and strategy for putting CoP's together.

The question now is how does learning at individual and group level lead to organizational learning? The problem is that, while there are many ways in which individuals and teams can learn from their project experience, there are, unfortunately, few mechanisms that companies can use to ensure that this learning is utilized at organizational level. Organizational learning mechanisms become embodied in organizational routines, practices and beliefs, and are considered important for improving organizational performance. Organizational learning can be seen as the sum of changes in the use of the organizational knowledge base.

Within the search for effective methods for managing organizational knowledge, the new economy calls for unique well suited approaches for the management of organizational knowledge. One of the many tools to ensure learning takes place within organizations, are CoP's not only on individual level, but also at group level. It is therefore important for organizations to openly discuss the challenges and experiences of the past if they are to learn from them. CoP's are one way of ensuring results, but can only achieve its full potential in organizations where there is a genuine desire to profit from experience.

It can be conclude that CoP's have the potential to dramatically change how organizations operate and compete because CoP's could be the mechanism through which knowledge gets both created and turned into action.

Over the next few years, we can expect to see CoP's evolve and new management techniques develop as we learn new ways to leverage knowledge to create value.

Literature has shown that the advantages of CoP's within an organization are far greater than the disadvantages. CoP's are an innovative way to foster and leverage knowledge within organization. Good practices can be transferred more efficiently. The CoP helps organizations develop skills of community members and is also a way of spreading knowledge.

However, whereas the number of publications, articles and books on CoP's is on the increase, and companies are intentionally creating and promoting CoP's, only a few people have given any thought to the dangers and risks of such communities. Firstly if it is true that CoP's have the tendency to be self-reproducing, members could tend to restrict themselves to one kind of knowledge, because it has been successful in the past. Secondly, due to the fact that a community develops its own language, identity and knowledge, this may exacerbate the tendency to isolate itself from the rest of the organization and thus not be understood by it.

Trust plays an important role when it comes to sharing knowledge within an organization. Difficulties in cooperation in the community can also arise due to factors such as the formal structure of the organization, a lack of trust, incorrect methods of dealing with conflicts and the struggle for recognition within the community itself.

The author would argue (from personal experience) that organizations that have several management levels will have difficulty implementing CoP's. Hierarchies, divisions and culture differences across different divisions as well as different countries could become huge obstacles in the implementation of CoP's.

Although CoP's are increasingly and intentionally being established in many organizations, they have to fight for recognition. On the one hand, participation is an honour. On the other, it must be continually justified, both within the community and within the organization. The reason being that membership of a community often competes with formal responsibilities. Recognition is attained

by implementing the measures and proposals of the CoP and by achieving success in the process. If CoP's are not seen within the organization as strategically important, and linked to the overall strategy of an organization, the value derived from these CoP's will never be recognized.

It remains difficult to reconcile my conclusion with another piece of reality. It may be hard to define the learning organization, it may be awkward to coordinate all the parts and assumptions of the learning organization theory with the whole, and it may be difficult to implement the learning organization in practice, but the learning organization continues to exert a powerful, intuitive appeal and promise to organizations that must somehow find a way to learn their futures.

#### **4.2 Recommendations for future study**

The research focus of this thesis has been on the fields of a Learning Organizations and to establish whether organizations understand how to create and leverage knowledge within CoP's as a strategic objective for learning.

It is clear that organizational learning and strategic planning involves people. Organizational learning will improve by integrating learning into the daily activities of the organization and also by the way the organization do business and therefore learning could become a powerful force for organizational change and development.

**The following areas have been identified as possible further research topics:**

- Do organizations understand the challenge of learning organizations and if so, how can they ensure they are moving from thinking to doing and become **practical**?
- Should there be a logical way (step-by-step) approach to ensure Knowledge Management principles and practices get implemented and sustained?

- Evaluate the organization's learning ability relative to the need to realign existing knowledge (internal) and relative to competitors learning abilities (external)
- Determine whether an organization's knowledge and strategy are in alignment. If not, determine whether the organization is capable of modifying its knowledge or whether it should instead modify its strategy.
- Regardless of the knowledge strategy position eventually adopted, determine whether Knowledge Management and organizational learning program and initiatives are focused on the internal and external strategic knowledge gaps.
- The ability to transfer enterprise knowledge into shareholder value
- In the modern age it is easy to get information - how to get it

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