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Control and autonomy irony in communities of practice from a power-based perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The extant literature provides evidence that control measures employed in communities of practice (CoPs) have undergone significant changes with the evolution of the concept. When it started as a self-organized group, its members had the freedom to pursue their own interests. Now, CoPs are moving closer toward bureaucratic form of control. The purpose of this paper is to discuss that although it might still be difficult to locate the power base in a CoP, undercurrents suggest that they have a strong affinity for managements' interests.

Design/methodology/approach – This approach taken in this paper is to present a historical background, contrast characteristics of present CoPs with its earlier versions and develop propositions highlighting a power-based perspective on leadership, sponsorship and objectives for CoPs within an existing organization.

Findings – The authors have found that power in a CoP has undergone tremendous changes from the time when it was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). When it started as a self-organized group, control exerted was null and void, as the members were given freedom to pursue their interests. The paper shows that CoPs can be formed intentionally, which is quite contrary to the common belief that they emerge naturally. Now, CoPs are moving closer toward bureaucratic form of control with the setting up of governance committees. This has serious repercussions for their autonomy, as envisaged by the early proponents of CoP, who believed that closely knit informal groups would enhance situational learning.

Originality/value – There is a general feeling that the word "autonomy" is a misnomer for CoP today. The power that once rested with the CoP group has been taken over by management in the form of sponsorship, goal congruency, etc. What appears as powerful in a CoP today is the sponsor and the CoP has ceased to exist as they used to be. This paper makes it clear that a CoP approach can provide value to the modern organization. However, if the issues discussed herein with regard to organizational power are not appropriately accounted for, CoP may fall short of expectations.

Keywords Knowledge transfer, Workplace learning, Organizational learning, Learning methods, Learning structures

Paper type Conceptual paper

In post-capitalism, power comes from transmitting information to make it productive, not from hiding it (Drucker (1995)).

Introduction

Communities of Practice (CoPs) has emerged as one of the most influential topics in social sciences during recent years and is informing current debates on managerial control of organizational knowledge (Hughes *et al.*, 2013). CoP in simple terms mean giving people who have similar interests some time, space, attention and resources to collectively solve problems in their workplace. Studies have shown that as organizations grow in size, geographical scope, and complexity, existence of CoP can improve organizational performance (Lesser and Storck, 2001). Organizations are increasingly making use of CoPs as a way of leveraging the dispersed knowledge and expertise of their employees (Cordery *et al.*, 2014). But, in this knowledge era, especially to meet the accelerated rate of change, there is wide consensus that organizations need to learn to leverage CoP for increasing their capabilities with greater speed and use them with greater agility (Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2012).

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The key thesis that follows is that organizations need to provide more than casual support in maximizing the value generated in CoP. This leads to the deterrent that CoP will lose its inherent autonomy at the behest of more control. To build an understanding of how CoP creates organizational value through this dichotomy of control and autonomy, this paper adopts a power-based perspective and comes up with useful propositions for organizations trying to maximize their value through CoPs.

Lave and Wenger, widely acknowledged for their contributions to the concept of CoPs, had proposed that “situational learning” core to CoP was the result of a process of engagement. Situational learning was in fact, a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1996) in theorizing learning. Their proposition was, in fact, an outcome of the research carried out by Wenger during his doctoral thesis that later got published and eventually, went on to become a seminal paper on CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1990), in his research thesis, had clearly articulated what he meant by the process of engagement in a CoP. “The basic argument is that knowledge does not exist by itself in the form of information, but that it is part of the practice of specific socio-cultural communities, called here ‘communities of practice.’ Learning then is a matter of gaining a form of membership in these communities: this is achieved by a process of increasing participation, which is called here ‘legitimate peripheral participation.’” (Wenger, 1990, p. 1). On a similar note, Orr (1996) in his ethnographical sketch of copier repair technicians and Wenger in his later works (Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002) laid the genesis for the development of the concept of CoP.

Legitimate peripheral participation and power

For Lave and Wenger (1991), the idea of CoPs was rather vague with regard to power relations, as they themselves confess, “The concept of ‘community of practice’ is left largely as an intuitive notion[...] which requires a more rigorous treatment. In particular, unequal relations of power must be included more systematically in our analysis” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 42). To put sense into this ambiguous remark, a relook at how they tried to conceptualize power in their seminal work is important. Lave and Wenger (1991) uses five examples to talk about the power relationships that may probably exist in a CoP – meat cutters in a supermarket, quartermasters in the US Navy, Vai and Golan tailors in West Africa, Mayan midwives in Yucatec and a group of non-drinking alcoholics, all having triadic group relations between “masters” (old-timers), “young masters” (journeymen) and “apprentices” (newcomers). It needs to be specifically noted that the power relations between these three groups viewed from a situational learning perspective is different from that of a teacher-student relationship in a formal classroom setting. The newcomer in situated learning starts learning from the master by carrying out simple and routine tasks. Lave and Wenger (1991) calls this “legitimate peripheral participation,” as newcomers get an opportunity to participate and their ongoing contributions make them eligible to become legitimate members of the community. As their mastery over the peripheral practices climbs up, their legitimacy increases and they become more proficient in conducting their tasks. This is how newcomers learn to socialize through “legitimate peripheral participation.” It does not mean that the newcomers are accepted without any disturbances in the power relations upholding the CoP group. When a newcomer enters a CoP, he or she is expected to engage in routine tasks, understand the existing practices and become competent enough to perform other tasks while on his way to becoming an active member. Alongside, the newcomer also has to balance the huge pressure on him to show to the community that he or she is capable of contributing to the CoP group in his or her unique way and get his identity established through “legitimate peripheral participation.” The dilemma that the newcomers often gets caught up is that they do not know what to do and what not to do, while working under specific instructions of not to disturb the status-quo and existing practices. The case of Vai and Golan tailors in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work is the best

illustration of this dilemma. A new tailor on his way to prove his mettle has to find unique ways to establish his identity, while competing for his products based on price and quality. At the same time, to keep his job as an apprentice to the master tailor, the new tailor cannot upset the existing practices and must strictly adhere to the norms of the community. It is quite possible that power relations can get disturbed during this process of seeking legitimate peripheral participation.

Notion of control

Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptualization of CoP had similar underpinnings with the early writings of Brown and Duguid (1991), who attacked the rigid and compartmentalized structures of the traditional bureaucracy. The bureaucratic form of control was based on Weber's theory of bureaucracy that held rational-legal authority as a basis for governing activities in organizations (Walton, 2005). In a bureaucratic control system, it is accepted that the employees give away their autonomy to their superiors in exchange of pay, thus, allowing them to be directed and monitored. An effective bureaucratic system can be created by specifying the rules of behavior and then, monitoring the output. This is exactly what Ouchi and Maguire (1975) meant by the two modes of organizational control – behavior control and output control. The essential element that underlies bureaucratic control is the belief that it is possible to measure performance using these two modes of control suggested by Ouchi and Maguire (1975). The irony is that control alone cannot be the only mode for measuring performance, as explained in the following example. A highly advanced research program carried out by a group of scientists in a laboratory cannot work under fixed rules and constant monitoring of output. The bureaucratic mode of control is expected to fail in such a situation. Since the group in this context is expected to be innovative, communicate laterally and take up individual responsibility, autonomy of the group becomes crucial. Literature talks about "concertive control" best suited for such groups (Tompkins and Cheney, 1985). In organizations adopting concertive control, the control shifts from management to workers, who collaborate to develop their own ways of control. Based on a set of core values, the workers reach a negotiated consensus on the behaviors to be exhibited. The only question that remains unanswered in such delicate situations is the level of control possible in such a group. It then becomes clear that control should not emerge out of the rational rules and hierarchy in this case, but from a value-centered, concertive action of the members of the group (Soeters, 1986). The organization can exert control over such groups by carefully selecting able and committed members to the group, who would be self-motivated to achieve the group goals, in line with organizational objectives. The organization can also exert its influence on the group by rewarding those groups, which display attitudes and values that lead to organizational effectiveness. All the more, stability of membership would be an essential factor for the sustenance of such groups. The move toward forming such self-managed groups was a radical change from the authority-based hierarchical structure that had been followed in an organization (Wellins *et al.*, 1991). The self-managed teams were found to perform better than others since they exercised autonomy in their functioning (Haas, 2010). The historical account shows that autonomous organizations have worked more effectively in the past, too. Evan (1966) was one among the early scholars who brought "autonomy" into scholarly limelight through his finding that less autonomous organizations possessed greater power. Hackman and Oldham (1976) found that autonomy results in internal motivation for individuals to perform effectively on their jobs. The situations which required higher levels of control for getting good results were found to work better with low autonomy (White, 1986). The empirical support for the premise that autonomous organizations work effectively even under high levels of control has been contradicted by the findings of Darr (2003), where sales engineers were found to exist in a sphere bounded

by control and autonomy as conflicting organizational forces. Similar is the case with CoP, where management's direct intervention in controlling CoPs goes against the basic principles of full autonomy for CoP as envisaged by its proponents.

Power in CoP

CoP's have been described as tightly knit groups that have been practicing long enough to have developed into a cohesive community, having a sense of belonging, commitment and a shared identity (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996). The group of people involved in a CoP could be a network of surgeons exploring novel surgical techniques, a group of engineers trying to solve similar problems, a band of musicians seeking new forms of expression or a bunch of managers helping each other to cope up with the pressures. According to Wenger *et al.* (2002), CoPs have "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 area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). In other words, when people in groups confront problems that are outside the realm of their expertise, they are forced to negotiate their own competence with the competence of others. From a power perspective, this is similar to what Baum (1989) says, "Power is the ability of different parties to achieve something together they could not accomplish individually. This power governs a politics concerned with creating new possibilities in a world where resources may be scarce but some interests may be joined and new resources created. This is win-win politics: victory is only collective, and one party's loss defeats all" (Baum, 1989, p. 195). Negotiating thus becomes a significant part of practicing in communities. It is precisely the reason why CoPs are referred to as participatory blocks where meaning is negotiated and practices are developed (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In Brown and Duguid's words, "the communities that we discern are, by contrast, often non-canonical and not recognized by the organization." (Brown and Duguid, 1991, p. 49). This leads us to conclude that the early view among the scholars was that CoPs were small, informal and most often invisible to the outsider.

Let us now focus on CoP and the evolution of power viewed through the lens of Wenger. Wenger (1998) discusses power in CoP with elaborate descriptions of its three unique and distinct dimensions – mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, which makes practice a source of cohesive power in the community. Practice exists in a community because people engage in actions within the community. In other words, membership in a community is a matter of mutual engagement. The mutual engagement depends not only on the competence of the person engaging, but also on the competence of everyone involved in the community. In Wenger's words, mutual engagement "draws on what we do and what we know, as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don't do and what we don't know" (Wenger, 1998, p. 76). Thus, mutual engagement gives power to the community and not to the individual alone. All said, it cannot be interpreted from the cohesive characteristic of practice that friendliness and harmony alone exist in communities, as Wenger (1998, p. 77) reminds us, "A community of practice is neither a haven of togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations. Disagreement, challenges and competition can all be forms of participation." Wenger goes on to say "In real life, mutual relations among participants are complex mixture of power and dependence, pleasure and pain, expertise and helplessness, success and failure, amassment and deprivation, alliance and competition, ease and struggle, authority and collegiality, resistance and compliance, anger and tenderness, attraction and repugnance, fun and boredom, trust and suspicion, friendship and hatred. Communities of practice have it all." The second dimension, joint enterprise means that CoP cannot come to life when mandated by an external party or when prescribed by an individual in the community. Sometimes, a CoP may be formed to meet an outside mandate.

But, what is significant here is that such CoPs develops practice in line with the community's response. The third dimension, shared repertoire includes routines, words, tools, stories and symbols the community has produced or adopted in course of its existence. An interesting observation that needs to be highlighted here is that changes have enveloped the concept of CoP (Cox, 2005; Roberts, 2006) particularly the distinction between the more early conceptual works (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991) and the later sponsored CoP (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Lately, there has been wide resentment that the concept of CoP has undergone a fundamental change in its notion that CoP is now more of a managerial tool for improving organization's competitiveness. The work of Thompson (2005) is a classic illustration of how rigid norms and rules introduced by management (control) could undermine the CoP's interest and creativity (autonomy). Their study talks about a forty member CoP formed in a large, information technology company, given a free hand by the management from commercial and procedural restrictions, enjoyed heavy corporate sponsorship in the form of infrastructure and culturally symbolic artifacts (pool tables, video games, bean bags), worked in a relaxed, informal and creative work environment was successful in achieving their desired outcomes. The management tasting success of the CoP inducted 140 more members into the group, but with restrictions and compulsory formal documentation of procedures. This led to the demise of the original community of practice, as members quickly withdrew from the more formalised structure. The study of Thompson (2005) is specifically interesting because it reiterates Wenger's (1998) earlier assertion that CoPs can be supported or nurtured but cannot be controlled. One does not have go too far to verify the veracity of this assertive statement. A closer look at the works of proponent of CoP, Etienne Wenger, would be enough. In contrast to his earlier works (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1990), Wenger (1998) tilted his attention toward CoP in the formal organizational setting. Wenger's argument is that CoPs arise out of the need to accomplish particular tasks in the organization. "an effective organization comprises a constellation of interconnected CoPs, each dealing with specific aspects of the company's competency" (Wenger 1998, p. 127). His later works (Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Wenger and Snyder, 2000) projected CoP as a tool in the hands of top management for improving organizational competitiveness. Thus, the concept of CoP has taken a U-turn from Lave and Wenger's (1991) initial conceptualization and it has shed off its autonomy to make it more subservient to the direct control of top management. Wenger's later works have been criticized for being "a popularization and a simplification, but also a commodification of the idea of communities-of-practice" (Cox, 2005, p. 538). To borrow Cox's analogy, CoP has now become "a group of people working together to build a boat to anybody who is engaged in an activity related to boat building" (Cox, 2005, p. 538). It becomes an irony in itself that any view of CoP as a community with defined boundaries and established behavioral rules was completely rejected by Lave and Wenger (1991). They had clearly articulated that CoP's do not have "co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98). For them, participation in CoP was seen as, "an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means for their lives and for their communities" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Wenger's (1998) approach toward power conceptualization was very different from Lave and Wenger (1991). There is a shift from an emancipatory discourse to managerialist discourse of performance in his later work. Cox (2005) says this shift in participation as a vehicle for emancipation to participation targeted at improving prediction and control and thereby, performance can be seen as a strategic move toward creating a bottleneck for the autonomy of CoPs. It turns out that in lieu of informality, mutual engagement becomes the essential condition for forming CoP's. Trying best not to contradict his earlier works, Wenger (1998) clings on to informality with an alternative view that the boundaries of a CoP do not have to match the organizational

boundaries since membership is not defined by such boundaries. His claim for informality of CoP does not hold much value because he indirectly supports the viewpoint that CoPs can have a formal status.

Duality

Wenger (1998) plays his weight on the concept of dualities in examining the forces that create and sustain CoPs. He describes duality as “a single conceptual unit that is formed by two inseparable and mutually constitutive elements whose inherent tensions and complementarity give the concept richness and dynamism” (Wenger, 1998, p. 66). He identifies four dualities that exist in a CoP: participation-reification, identification-negotiability, designed-emergent and local-global.

A close examination of “participation” and “reification” duality was undertaken by Wenger (1998) in understanding the power dynamics prevalent in CoPs. He defined “participation” as the social experience one gains by being a member in social communities. Wenger (1998) reserves the term “participation” for actors, who are members in social communities. That means his definition excludes a computer participating in a CoP, even though it may be a part of the practices and playing an active role in the community. “Reification” was described as projecting subjective meanings into the world, to perceive them as existing in the world and to agree that they have a reality of their own. An illustration for reification is “formula,” which expresses in a few terms the regularity that pervades the universe. At the same time, one needs to be aware of the double edge of reification. The knowledge of the same “formula” can lead to the illusion that one fully understands the process it describes, even if, one may not. Taking excerpts from his study of claims processors, Wenger (1998) illustrates how the complementarity of participation and reification can turn political.

Identification, according to Wenger (1998), is the process by which our belongingness becomes constitutive of our identities (e.g. nationality). Here, identity becomes the locus of social power, i.e. the power to belong and to claim a place with the legitimacy of membership. On the contrary, there is also the vulnerability of belonging to and identifying with something that contributes to our definition (identity). Wenger (1998) says that this sort of power has a coalescing as well as conflicting part attached to it. The coalescing part is that some form of consensus has to be reached within the community to be socially effective in exercising this power. The conflicting part is that the meaning of consensus is something that always remains open to negotiation. According to Wenger (1998), power in CoP, thus, has a dual structure which reflects the interplay between identification and negotiability.

Lave (1993) talks about the context of socially situated activity in situated practice. She asserts that persons and the social world of activity cannot be separated in such a situation. The dilemma that this creates is the problem of context. We start focusing more on activities and less attention paid to the relationship between person acting and the social world. Lave (1993) talks about the distinction between pre-given or designed context and emergent context. In the first one (designed), the societal power relations shape local context, whereas in the second (emergent), the context is determined by the local power relations (Lave, 1993).

To explain the fourth one, “local-global” duality, Wenger (1998) uses the notion of boundary object and brokerage. Wenger (1998) talks about boundary object as a source of power. The term “boundary object” is used to “describe objects that serve to coordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purposes” (Wenger, 1998, p. 106). When a boundary object serves different constituencies, each has only partial control over them. An illustration is that an author has control over what he has written, but the reader has the jurisdiction over what it means to him/her. Similarly in a CoP, boundary objects can at the same time coordinate the different constituencies, and they do so, without bridging any of

the meanings or perspectives of the various constituencies. Brokering is defined by Wenger (1998) as the use of multi-membership to transfer some element of practice into another. The problem is that it often results in ambivalent relations of membership. In the case of claim processing unit described in Wenger (1998), the supervisor as broker faces the dilemma of belonging to the practices of both workers and management and to neither, at the same time. In other words, the supervisor is not a “manager” in the eyes of management and “just a glorified processor” in the eyes of claims processors. This ambivalence in membership relationship has serious consequences for the supervisor. The tendency of being pulled in to become full member and tendency of being rejected as intruder always exists for the supervisor. “Brokering therefore requires an ability to manage carefully the coexistence of membership and non-membership, yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective, but also enough legitimacy to be listened to” (Wenger, 1998, p. 110).

Method

We used scholarly data from multiple databases and search engines (PsycINFO, EBSCO, Google Scholar) to ensure extensive representation of the topic of CoP. As mentioned in Tranfield *et al.* (2003), the search began with the identification of keywords and search terms that were built from the scoping study, the literature and discussions within experts in the field. To include the diversity of published research, the search terms (e.g. CoP, legitimate peripheral participation, power, control, autonomy) were then developed through an iterative process that included review of seminal and emerging literature (Chaudhuri and Ghosh, 2012).

Research propositions

There are mainly two types of membership in CoPs – open membership and closed membership (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Open membership means anyone in the organization who has genuine interest in the CoP’s is free to enroll as a member. As Dubé *et al.* (2006) says, membership in CoP is more of a self-selection process because the members evaluate their benefits accruable through participation in CoP’s. The second type, closed membership admits people who meet certain predetermined criteria. The powerlessness of CoP starts creeping in when the enrollment in a CoP is strongly encouraged by the management than the members’ own motivation to join (Lank *et al.*, 2008). In such a situation, the members have no other option than to toe in with the management’s interests. The members cannot act in a state of refusal when there is a call to participate in a CoP from the management. The coercive power of the management would be at display while inducting members into such CoPs. The pressure tactics employed by the management to force someone to become a member of CoP is often underplayed to retain the informal aspects of CoP. There is no second thought that such CoPs will be strongly aligned to the strategic interests of the management (e.g. increased performance or cost reduction). Research has shown that CoPs are sometimes amenable to manipulation and some scholars even recommend forming CoPs to suit the best interests of the management (Probst and Borzillo, 2008). The intervention of the management as a coercive partner can ultimately lead to the demise of CoP as members lose interest when their autonomy is completely withdrawn. If the management is bent upon converting the CoP into a formal organizational unit like a project team, CoP members may decline to be a part of such CoPs. The power given by the management to the CoP members to make decisions regarding who should be members, what should be their objectives, what are the deliverables expected of the CoP group, etc. is what thrives CoP. If there is a deliberate attempt to quash such powers, it would lead to the sad demise of CoP. We cannot rule out the possibility that a CoP that faces excessive control from the management might remove itself from the organizational radar

and exist independently (offsite or outside working hours) to preserve its independence. Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) narrate the story of such CoPs which disappeared for more than six years at IBM Global Services. Thus it is suggested that increasing role of management in coercing its employees to formalize the functioning of CoP would eventually contribute to its winding up:

- P1.* The coercive power used by management to control the CoP would be negatively associated with the group's motivation to participate and result in the demise or disappearance of CoP from formal organizational setting.

Now let us look at the leadership roles in a CoP. The most active one is the "core group." It consists of small group of members, constituting about 10-15 percent of CoP members. The core group has members who are highly knowledgeable, experienced and regarded as super subject matter experts. They play a crucial role in creating and sustaining CoPs. The active members, who are regular in CoP activities but not as active as core group members, form 15-20 percent of CoP members. The peripheral members rarely participate and mostly concentrate on practice development tasks (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). The peripheral members should gain legitimate peripherality before they become active or core group members. The peripheral members' participatory legitimization is vested with the core group, who turn out to be the controlling nodes of the CoP group. Lave and Wenger (1991) views "legitimate peripherality" as "a complex notion implicated in social structures involving relations of power [...] can be a source of power or powerlessness, in affording or preventing articulation and interchange among communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 36). This means that the legitimate peripheral participation is a source of power for the core group to allow or hinder access to or continuing membership in a CoP. The implication for this is that it becomes extremely difficult for an organizational member to become a member of CoP and start learning a practice, if power relations deny him or her access to the community. Lave and Wenger (1991) writes, "Hegemony over resources for learning and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and peripherality of participation in its historical realizations" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 42). Questions and conflicts arise when peripheral members gain expertise over the core group members. When the members move from the periphery to the core without legitimacy from core group members, the internal structure becomes unstable that may result in realignment or dissolution of CoPs. The boundaries would then have to be opened for negotiation and reconfiguration:

- P2.* The core group's expert power is negatively associated with the peripheral members participation, thus restricting the peripheral member's entry to active or core group.

Now let us focus our attention on how sponsorship influences the control-autonomy irony in a CoP. An increasing number of studies have deplored the role of management in constructing and supporting CoPs (Contu and Willmott, 2000). The argument in favor of denouncing such a move is valid because the CoPs started as spontaneous, self-organizing and fluid processes that cannot be established by management (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Orr, 1996). A number of CoPs now have senior executives as "sponsors" who initiate CoPs, decide their objectives, organize funding and continuously monitor whether the CoPs realize their full potential (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Research has also shown that sponsors now take lead role in identifying members for forming CoPs. The sponsor then strongly persuade these members to set up CoPs.

The sponsorship can act as a controlling agent for CoP through its mantle to decide funding for CoPs and by imposing governance mechanisms. Anand *et al.* (2007) and Chua (2006) strongly assert that management support in terms of funding and access to resources is critical to sustaining CoPs. Among the "Ten Commandments" formulated by Probst and

Borzillo (2008) for success of CoPs, the formation of a governance committee led by sponsor and CoP leader emphasizes the need for relinquishing autonomy for sponsorship. The purpose of the governance committee is to regularly assess whether the CoPs make strategic sense to the organization and to request the top management for funding:

P3. The top-down approach with direct interventions of sponsor is negatively associated with CoPs formed through voluntary participation and shared expertise.

Probst and Borzillo (2008) in their study, found that clearly defined strategic objectives would be a key success factor for CoP. Borzillo *et al.* (2008) narrate the story of a CoP leader at Daimler for stressing the importance of objectives for a CoP. "Too much leadership and pressure to pursue objectives could destroy the member's spontaneity and creativity. On the other hand, weak leadership and vague objectives could increase the risk of members becoming sluggish" (Borzillo *et al.*, 2008, p. 8). This points to the fact that when the set objectives are too precise, members may start acting mechanically and experiment with lesser new ideas. Setting qualitative objectives becomes a control mode for the CoP's to function more effectively and the same gets echoed in Gibson and Meacham (2009) words when they say that the good fit between objectives of the organization and focus of CoP would lead to its success:

P4. Setting clear and measurable objectives helps increase the member's dedication to achieve the set goals with reduced autonomy.

Research and practical implications

The paper shows that CoPs can be formed intentionally, which is contrary to the common view that they emerge naturally. This seriously limits the autonomy envisaged by the early proponents of CoP, who believed that closely knit informal groups would enhance situational learning. The control exerted by the management has come to such a level that it becomes difficult to differentiate between CoP and a project team. The sponsorship provided by management in the form of resources, funding and personnel ensures that CoP toe the line.

The lack of empirical studies in CoP literature may be seen as a deterrent for making any generalized conclusions. But the fact is "control" and "autonomy" can only be understood through more case-based qualitative studies. Hence the arguments and propositions put forward in this paper need to be seen from this perspective.

Managerial implications

For managers, this study elucidates the fact that CoPs can deliver real performance benefits to organizations and henceforth, should be actively encouraged. Importantly, as some of the critics say, CoPs cannot be dismissed as just another management "fad" (Gibson and Tesone, 2001). The benefits accrued by CoPs last longer, and by formally integrating and actively managing the CoPs within organizations, managers can get better influence the way in which an organization functions and operates.

Future research

Though there have been critiques on the pioneering work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), the existence of CoPs in organizations and the benefits attached to it has never been called to question. However, it is equally disappointing that few have dared to test the theory behind CoP through ardent ethnographical studies and across organizations (Bechky, 2006). Future studies should focus on research that can rigorously test, validate and suggest modifications of existing frameworks on Wenger (1998) or propose new frameworks.

As we have described in our paper, CoP maintains its relevance and significance when it addresses specific organizational needs. We call upon future researchers to test the propositions that we have developed in this study, so that some of the critical factors associated with CoP can be better understood and addressed.

Conclusion

We have found that power in a CoP has undergone tremendous changes from the time when it was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). When it started as a self-organized group, control exerted was null and void, as the members were given freedom to pursue their interests. Now, CoPs are moving closer toward bureaucratic form of control with setting up of governance committees. There is a general feeling that the word “autonomy” is a misnomer for CoP today. The power that once rested with the CoP group has been taken over by management in the form of sponsorship, goal congruency, etc. What appears as powerful in a CoP today is the sponsor and the CoP has ceased to exist as they used to be. It might still be difficult to locate the basis of power in a CoP, but undercurrents suggest that they have strong affinity for managements’ interests. We end with a contradictory (yet supportive of our arguments) quote by Wenger (1998) that says, “The power – benevolent or malevolent – that institutions, prescriptions or individuals have over the practice of a community is always mediated by the community’s production of its practice. External forces have no direct power over this production, because in the last analysis (i.e. in the doing through mutual engagement in practice), it is the community that negotiates its enterprise” (Wenger 1998, p. 80). An attempt has been made in this paper to understand CoP from a power perspective. Though this paper does not make a claim that it is a comprehensive analysis, but it does capture the basic tenets of power inherent in organizational CoP.

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