THE INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: AN ORGANIZATION FOR MANAGING KNOWLEDGE ACROSS BOUNDARIES

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Knowledge management is increasingly viewed as a crucial factor for competitive success. However, the growing research underscores the many challenges faced by knowledge management, especially across boundaries. Although organizational boundaries are a central phenomenon in management (e.g., Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005; Thompson, 1967), research on moving and managing knowledge across boundaries – organizational, cultural, spatial, and/or temporal– has largely been conducted in traditional hierarchical organizations (Kellogg, Orlikowski, and Yates, 2006). As boundaries are defined as lines marking the limits or edges of something, they are usually seen as restrictions and limitations.

We propose to study an original organizational form, which represents an exemplary type of knowledge management in a cross-boundary context. We spotlight inter-organizational communities of practice (IOCOP). After introducing the specific characteristics of such an organizational form, we explain why an IOCOP generally crosses many boundaries by linking professionals distributed among different organizations. It is proposed to define an inter-organizational community of practice (IOCOP) as an organizational form having autonomous governance, gathering individuals belonging to different organizations, having a common professional practice, voluntarily linked, and aiming at developing their expertise on an individual basis. Conceptual analysis of IOCOPs and knowledge management are here brought together with exploratory empirical work.

Specifically using the case of AUGI (Autodesk User Group International), an international IOCOP around the professional practice of the AutoCAD software, data from multiple sources (interviews, observations, and secondary data) were analyzed to examine the IOCOP's knowledge management thanks to an integrative model: the "Learning Mix". It identifies four facets for managing knowledge: the knowledge portfolio, the information technology, the structure, and the identity. These four facets synthesize the scattered literature relating to knowledge management and organizational learning. The main purpose of this research is to show how IOCOPs, in spite of the numerous knowledge boundaries they face, set an example of integration between the different facets of the Learning Mix and represent a model structure of learning organizations in cross-boundary environments. Our subsequent analyses were directed by the following questions: **Why do so many users across different organizations, countries, and industries take part in AUGI?** We raised this issue during our interviews to reveal users' motivation. Another linked question that followed was: **How is AUGI organized to maintain the relationships between these motivated users?**

Throughout the data analysis process, findings were grouped into four categories reflecting the four facets of the Learning Mix: (1) the portfolio of knowledge is constantly evolving thanks to members' contribution, (2) the tools for spreading the information are robust, (3) the governance of the community is clear and well accepted by the members, and (4) the shared identity is a facilitator for managing knowledge. It is suggested that, through its ability to integrate the different facets of the Learning Mix, the IOCOP, in spite of the numerous knowledge boundaries with which it is confronted, represents an exemplary integrative organization for knowledge management. Users across different organizations, countries, and industries take part in AUGI for two complementary reasons. In the short term they need to improve their practices on a complex tool (AutoCAD software). In the long term, they can professionally enhance their careers by becoming an expert inside the community. The momentum inside the community is maintained by two factors. On the one hand, AUGI wisely uses a consulting company that deploys grassroots efforts in developing a strong community identity. On the other hand, AUGI enjoys from clear governance defined by a representative Board of Directors. This IOCOP, heralded by an AUGI former president as a "*not-for-profit organization*," is an efficient structure for managing knowledge in an inter-organizational setting.

This exploratory study specifically offers some interesting insights into the (1) management literature and for (2) firms and (3) individuals. First, our study explains how IOCOPs contribute to the progressive overcoming of the different exchange barriers. If advances in communication means have enabled to do away with some spatio-temporal boundaries (cross-border exchanges, asynchronous exchanges, etc.), IOCOPs are an original way to free knowledge creation from traditional organizational limits. Although they contribute to reduce some constraints, they do not eliminate cultural, socio-cognitive, or psychological barriers for all that. By contributing to reduce some distances and by making frontiers more and more gradual, permeable, flexible, and dynamic, IOCOPs lead to reexamine the notion of boundaries. Secondly, our study shows that IOCOPs can be turned into a valuable strategic asset by firms. As the value of internal resources is affected by complementarities that span firm boundaries (Lavie, 2006), firms should therefore better take into account IOCOPs' contribution as a strategic leveraging tool in their knowledge management policy (Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2003). Third, IOCOPs offer an excellent means to enrich the professional practices of employees who are more and more confronted to the imperative of improving themselves.

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