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Established Knowledge Management (KM) Communities of Practice: Moving Across the KM Product Life Cycle

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Abstract

Communities of practice (COPs) are a sub-set of knowledge management (KM) that provide a channel for people to interact and collaborate to achieve common goals. Benefits of COPs include global problem solving, leveraging best practices, time savings, and identifying future leaders. Since the global adoption of COPs and KM efforts in our industry, most companies have seen a rapid decline in community activity after initial deployment resulting in KM becoming a failed corporate initiative. In the product life cycle, these communities did not make the jump from the introduction to the growth phase. Some KM efforts and COPs do survive to the growth phase; however these established communities are not progressing along the life cycle curve due to little or no continual growth in activity levels and early adopters representing the bulk of users. The challenge for established COPs is to not just sustain activity levels but to create value for more users which will thus enhance the COPs' significance to the global organization.

This paper discusses the effects of several methods used to progress COPs along the product life cycle, moving users from casual bystanders to active participants in discussion. Specifically, adopting Web 2.0 technology provides new ways to engage users to define value-added content, leverage social networking, and embrace collaboration. In addition to implementing new web-based technologies, a full-time knowledge transfer facilitator or knowledge broker fosters the growth of the community. Lastly, over time established COPs tend to gel around certain employee populations, and the knowledge broker must break these arbitrary barriers and engage other users in the organization such as supply chain management or laboratory personnel. With the combination of these methods, the COPs have been shown to progress along the product life cycle with increased adoption and added value for the organization.

Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) has been defined as the process through which an organization generates value from the assets contained in human knowledge. Numerous interpretations exist for the implementation of KM strategies, including content management and collaborative communities (APQC 2000). A major oilfield services company approached KM by developing a collaborative knowledge base through multiple communities of practice (COPs) which meet the needs of a specific product service line (PSL) or support function (Velasquez and Odem 2005). COPs provide a channel for people to interact and collaborate to achieve common goals. Benefits of COPs include global problem solving (Velasquez and Fadul 2004), leveraging best practices, time savings, innovation (Paylow 2008), and identifying future leaders (Paylow 2006).

Throughout the oil and gas industry, many companies have implemented some type of KM collaborative process (Gibby 2006; Khaled 2004; Dizz 2004; Thompson 2008). However, after quick growth at inception, many of the KM initiatives, such as COPs, ultimately fail in the long term. Several factors have led to the decline of COPs specifically, such as lack of long-term enthusiasm, corporate support, and, most importantly, users no longer perceive personal added value for their investment of time.

In the product life cycle model, these communities did not make the jump to the growth phase. Some COPs have been initially successful, due to long-term support and dedicated resources. These established COPs present a unique challenge to remain sustainable and create value for more users thus enhancing the COP's significance to the global community.

Several methods are available to progress established COPs along the product life cycle, adding new users and converting existing users from casual bystanders into active participants in discussion and knowledge sharing. Adopting Web 2.0 technologies allows for users to generate value-added content, leverage social networking, and enhance web-based collaboration. In addition to implementing web-based technologies, a full-time, dedicated resource or knowledge broker is