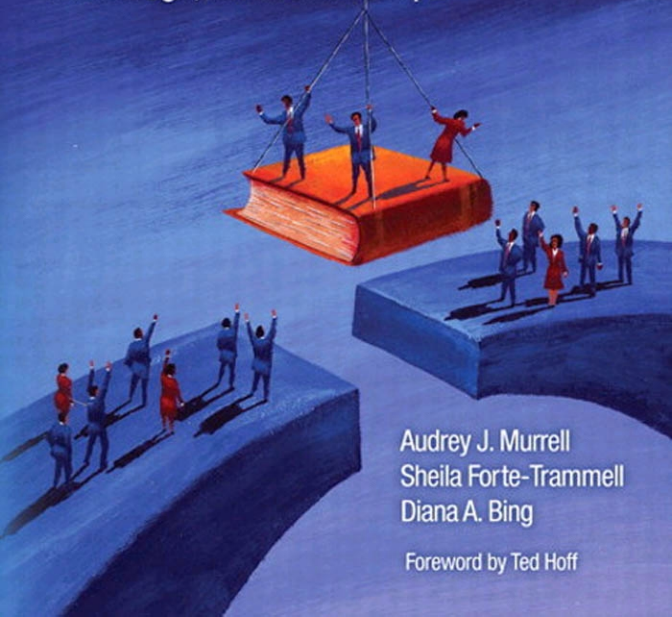


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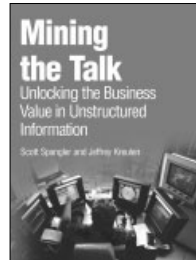
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Organizational Intelligence: Fostering Communities of Knowledge

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Overview

One of the early lessons learned within IBM is that knowledge is a social process. Creating, cultivating, transferring, and retaining the knowledge needed to sustain a competitive advantage reside within the people of IBM. Whether in formal think tanks, face-to-face meetings, e-mail exchanges across project teams, or informal conversations in the cafeteria, the social aspects of problem solving, innovation, and creative thinking are facilitated by fostering communities at work. The notion of communities of practice is not new or unique to the IBM culture. Many firms focus on the notion of knowledge communities, a term attributed to Lave and Wenger as part of their 1991 book, *Situated Learning*.¹ They describe communities of practice as a network of people who either formally or informally share ideas, solutions, and interests for the purposes of problem-solving, collaboration, and innovation.

Clearly, these communities of practices are a way to create, facilitate, and transfer knowledge—the kind of knowledge that builds organizational intelligence. While many organizations recognize the value of these knowledge communities, few understand or have developed a deliberate process for creating and cultivating them. Mentoring at IBM has been one important tool for developing and fostering the work of knowledge communities throughout the global business enterprise. As we examine some of the specific types of mentoring efforts that help to build a sense of community around knowledge and ideas, an important message here is that organizational intelligence involves strengthening the social process of connecting people and ideas within a culture of collaboration. Mentoring is an essential tool that helps create and sustain that culture of collaboration within IBM.

Employees who are engaged in the activities of communities of practice are in essence contributing their knowledge and practical “know-how” to the members of the community. Overall, when knowledge is fluid among groups in this manner, it builds the intellectual capability and capacity of the team. In addition, the collective knowledge base improves the organization’s capability to quickly respond to market volatility and the dynamic needs of global clients. Because knowledge is a core component of communities of practice, there is a tendency to use the term interchangeably with communities of knowledge. This practice of knowledge sharing is a typical characteristic of an “intelligent organization” in which employees share their complementary skills, create opportunities for teammates to acquire new skills and enhance old ones to collaborate for the purposes of innovation,

solve problems, and deliver value to the organization. Inherent in communities of practice is a great opportunity for mentoring to take place; in particular, members of the community are known to mentor others to gain knowledge in certain disciplines that are important to the group and to the organization. This chapter is intended to show the many ways knowledge can be transferred through the use of approaches such as communities of practice and other forms of group mentoring.

Learning through Communities of Practice

One of the key notions within the idea of communities of practice is that organizations must understand the link between knowledge and the social context in which knowledge is created and shared. Learning seen as knowledge creation and transfer is a social process that requires participation, or what Lave and Wenger call, “social co-participation.” This means that instead of just trying to figure out how to stimulate an individual’s judgment and decision making, companies should focus attention on building social environments that support learning and knowledge among interrelated people. An employee does not learn or create knowledge in a vacuum; rather he must be connected to other employees within an environment that both values and supports collaboration. Thus, learning is a social enterprise that requires co-participation from communities that reside within and are supported by the organization.²

The original idea of communities of practices was developed from research looking at learning through the apprenticeship process. A well-known method for developing skill and expertise among newcomers, the apprenticeship approach is fundamentally about the transfer of knowledge. Inexperienced craftsmen interact with and learn from well-known experts, thus developing key skills within their trade and allowing them to put those skills to use. The apprenticeship process involves mutual engagement and a joint enterprise during which knowledge sharing and innovation frequently occur.³ The nature of the apprenticeship process involves the sharing of knowledge that by its nature is complex, not easily replicated, and based on deep expertise.

By examining the apprenticeship process, we see that a key aspect of learning using this approach is the transfer of “tacit knowledge.”⁴ This category of knowledge involves nonroutine or nonexplicit types of information or ideas. Tacit knowledge is often distinguished from explicit or “codified

knowledge,” the latter being more straightforward and unambiguous. Being able to develop and transfer tacit types of knowledge frequently involves more complex types of learning. This is especially true for what Cross and Sproull call “knowledge-intensive work” because it requires that people continually solve complex, nonroutine problems under time pressure and with limited information.⁵ They argue that when problems are complex, tasks are ill-defined, and solutions require more than a simple answer, the process of knowledge transfer is best facilitated by networks and social relationships.⁶ Knowledge created and transferred by networks and social relationships involves not only finding correct answers but also constructing new ideas and developing innovative approaches. Interactions among people within networks and relationships frequently require people to approach both problems and solutions differently than they would as individuals.⁷ In addition, knowledge that is created by a community of individuals is more likely to be accepted by those within the broader organization and, thus, more likely to be implemented.⁸

At IBM, the notion of building and leveraging communities that support strategic objectives of the company is also not a new idea. Establishing and maintaining a knowledge workforce that has flexibility, resilience, and agility has long been a goal at IBM. One of the ways of achieving this is through the development of expert communities, but a major challenge for IBM has been how best to retain and transfer the knowledge from these communities across the global business enterprise. In addition, IBM’s core business involves knowledge-intensive work that must be actionable and yet flexible enough to adapt in response to the changing environment. Thus, IBM employees must be engaged in co-participation of knowledge, which can be transferred, replicated, and adapted to meet both current and emerging business needs.

While this challenge may appear straightforward, the solution for IBM and similar world-class organizations is extraordinarily complex. Tacit forms of knowledge are quite valuable, but they are also complex and difficult to transfer.⁹ Developing employees who are capable of meeting this challenge requires a different relationship between the employer and employee. Producing this type of workforce involves developing a culture that is “dedicated to the idea of continuous learning but also stands ready to reinvent itself to keep pace with change.”¹⁰ The lessons learned from IBM as it attempts to solve this complex challenge show the important link between learning, communities of practice, and mentoring. Cultivating knowledge through communities of practice is accomplished through a broad portfolio

of programs within IBM that involve a diverse array of mentoring activities. While the specialized use of mentoring has helped to strengthen learning and knowledge transfer throughout the organization, cultivating these communities is accomplished first and foremost by a fundamental emphasis on employee development within IBM.

Building Communities of Practice at IBM

The goal of producing a culture of learning and collaboration is one that has been a focal part of IBM's strategy. As a consequence, cultivating an employee's ability to seek and leverage perspectives from different sources is a vital component of its employee development activities. In 2003, IBM employees participated in what was called a "Jam Session," which helped to define the values that will take the company through the twenty-first century and beyond. IBM is a company that continuously redefines and reinvents itself while maintaining a strong connection to its core identity. For example, during the early years, Chairman T.J. Watson, Sr. crafted the company's basic beliefs which have guided IBM through many changes and challenges. Throughout these transformations, the IBM identity and brand remained intact. More recently, the core commitment that emerged from the employee jam session made a strong statement that a global company can change the way it does business based on the marketplace and needs of the clients, but at the same time maintain its core identity and values.

Thus, IBM defines and preserves its culture in a number of ways, including:

- A dedicated focus on excellence
- Adherence to a set of values that govern the actions of all employees
- Innovation that matters
- Maintenance of a high-performance culture that offers employees opportunities to develop new skills

Because employees co-participate in defining and shaping the culture, IBM can build a sense of community around its core values as they are defined, implemented, and refined. The various forms that communities of practice take across IBM encourage employees to become personally invested in acting on these core values and keeping them alive in practical ways. Using these values to drive the way employees work and partner with one another also helps to reinforce the importance of collaboration throughout