ActKM: the story of a community

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report on a research project that sought to discover the value of the online KM discussion list, ActKM, to its members; how members manage the postings, the degree of off-list activity generated through the list; and the impact of the list on KM practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through the use of web-based questionnaires to the full list membership and a second questionnaire to members of the list’s core management team. Telephone interviews were conducted with a sample drawn from the frequent contributors to the list. A basic assumption of the research was that the discussion list ActKM is a community of practice.

Findings – The results indicated that ActKM is indeed a community of practice and that off-list activity is considered a valuable extension of community life. Other findings are that ActKM is a significant tool that facilitates learning for members and there is strong agreement about the type of postings that are preferred.

Research limitations/implications – The paper provides useful insights into the value of list membership for individuals. However, while the results suggest that there has been an impact on the practice of KM more generally, this research is not able to identify the degree to which this has occurred.

Originality/value – Online discussion lists proliferate. This paper provides useful guidance for list managers and for those wanting to support and nurture online communities of practice.

Keywords Knowledge management, Group discussion

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a small research project funded by the University of Canberra and conducted in early 2004. The project also had the support of the management committee of ActKM, the community that grew through a shared interest in knowledge management (KM) and that formed the subject of the investigation.

The interest of the authors in such a project stemmed firstly from their interest in communities of practice generally but, more specifically, because each is a member of the online discussion list ActKM (one author was one of the two foundation members) and had begun to wonder about issues such as what attracted people to the list and what impact it might be having on the practice of KM.

ActKM was formed in 1998 with the purpose of promoting public-sector knowledge management. At the time of the investigation it had 890 members who participate in an online discussion forum, some of who meet monthly, while some convene a yearly conference that attracts approximately 100 attendees. In addition to these formal activities, informal activities include site visits among members, workplace discussions, and spin-off collaborations (Callahan, 2004).

A core team, consisting of four to eight volunteers, manages the logistics associated with the community. They decide who will speak at the monthly meetings, manage the e-mail list,
organize events, encourage participation at all levels, and ensure members receive maximum value from the community. The core team members are enthusiastic and altruistic. They believe in the community’s topic and are willing to volunteer their time in the interests of sustaining and enhancing the community.

The aim of the research was to:

1. develop a conceptual framework for the study of communities of practice;
2. apply the framework to an investigation of ActKM; and
3. explore the impact of ActKM on the understanding and practice of KM.

Specific research objectives were to discover:

- the value of ActKM to members;
- how members manage postings;
- the degree of off-list activity generated through ActKM; and
- the impact of ActKM on KM practice.

A fundamental assumption of this research was that ActKM is indeed a community. Furthermore, it is a particular type of community referred to in the literature as a “community of practice”. Before expanding on this concept it is important firstly to acknowledge that even defining “community” is more difficult than it might seem and defining “online community” can be even more difficult (Kleinman, 2003, p. 75).

In a work that has been described as a “landmark”, virtual communities are defined as:

> The social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5).

Substitute ActKM for “virtual community” and the analogy is not difficult to conceive. Kleinman (2003, p. 75-76) suggests that while indeed online groups can be considered communities they do differ from traditional communities in a number of ways. Online communities:

- bring people together on the basis of shared interest rather than geographical proximity;
- build community faster;
- are more transient because membership is unrestricted and people can join or leave at any time without repercussions;
- are difficult to measure demographically as people have control over their own personae and the ability to read messages while not posting any (this means it is usually difficult to get a comprehensive picture of who is in the community); and
- evolve without central governance.

While it is obvious that online and traditional communities differ in several respects, even including the reason for their existence, there is no doubt that members of online discussion groups can constitute “community”. Members provide support for one another and there is a growing body of research on online discussion groups that has found that online groups are supplementing and, in some cases, supplanting traditional communities as resources for support, information, and friendship for the people who join them (Kleinman, 2003, p. 76).

Moreover, as suggested by Loader (1998), communications networks offer the prospect of greater opportunities for seeking advice, challenging orthodoxy, meeting new minds and constructing one’s own sense of self. Entirely new notions of social action, based not upon proximity and shared physical experience but rather on remote networks of common perceptions, may begin to emerge and challenge existing social structures. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that ActKM is a community.
Wenger et al. (2002, p. 4) have described a community of practice as a:

Group 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.

Is ActKM a community of practice? As will be shown, the fundamental assumption that it is, is well supported by the results of the research.

When discussing a community of practice within the legal fraternity, Samborn (1999) refers to this type of online discussion list as a “virtual water cooler”:

Attorneys are flocking to these groups in all their forms primarily to develop relationships with colleagues. This is especially true for . . . who don’t have someone down the hall in their practice area to chat with daily. For them virtual communities are like international water coolers, offering information, mentoring, friendship and humor – all invaluable commodities.

Of all the participants, there was only one dissident voice regarding this point, an interviewee from the group of frequent contributors. This respondent was adamant in making the distinction that ActKM is “only a community of interest” and does not fall within the range of Wenger’s definition of a community of practice. The results of this research do not support this view. Neither does the work of Henri and Pudelko as reported in their discussion of types of virtual communities (Henri and Pudelko, 2003, p. 485). For example, they suggest that while members of a community of interest “gather round a common topic for information exchange” the learning gained is “knowledge construction for individual use”. By contrast, a community of practice involves professional development through sharing of knowledge and the resultant learning is the appropriation of new practices and development of involvement.

Of particular relevance to this research is the issue of whether learning can occur in an online community of practice. Henri and Pudelko (2003, p. 485) have shown that participation in these communities leads to various types of learning but that any evaluation of the process must take into account their social context of emergence and their given goal, their evolutionary aspects as well as the activity they carry out. The social context of ActKM is an existing, real, community of practice. Its activity is professional practice development through sharing knowledge among its members. The resultant learning is the appropriation of new practices and development of involvement.

Several aspects of the research have already been completed and reported. The authors have proposed that the conceptual framework developed by Axelrod and Cohen (1999) and based on complexity theory is suitable for exploring and studying communities of practice. Complexity theory is gaining in prominence as a way of thinking about organizations (Holland, 1995; Kauffman, 1995; Kurtz and Snowden, 2003) because there are parallels between the basic features of complex systems and modern organizations and that observations of community and complexity inform one another (Stevenson and Hamilton, 2001, p. 73).

Communities of practice are, in many ways, microcosms of larger organizations – but without a formal hierarchy and rigid bureaucracy. Consequently, the arguments for applying complexity theory to organizations pertain equally to communities of practice. Furthermore, many leading thinkers on communities of practice have alluded to the complex nature of communities with reference to emergence (Wenger, 1998) and self-organization (Wenger, 2004).

The suitability and application of the framework have been discussed in two earlier papers (Callahan and Milne, 2004a, b). The purpose of this paper is to provide a report of the findings of the research itself.
Data collection

The data for the research was collected using a variety of methods:

1. **Web-based questionnaire that was open to all members.** This questionnaire sought to establish some demographics and discover:
   - why members joined the list;
   - how they managed the postings;
   - how frequently they contributed;
   - whether the list has sparked any KM initiatives in their organization;
   - which contributors comments were most valued and why;
   - reaction to controversially heated debate and what members; and
   - derived from being a member of the list.

2. **Web-based questionnaire to the core team.** This questionnaire sought to discover:
   - why members of the core team were prepared to devote time to this activity;
   - how much time they devoted;
   - what they gained as a result being on the core team;
   - what examples of core team activities had substantial impact on ActKM;
   - what examples of significant interventions had been used to modify list member behavior;
   - when members of the core team felt most proud of their involvement as a core team member;
   - when members of the core team experienced frustration;
   - the impact of the monthly meetings and yearly conference on the “health” of ActKM;
   - the purpose and objectives of ActKM as understood by the core team; and
   - whether the core team felt ActKM was fulfilling its role.

3. **Telephone interviews with frequent contributors.** A total of nine interviews were conducted from a selection of frequent contributors from Australia and overseas. The aim of the interviews with the frequent contributors was to discover:
   - when they had been most excited about making a contribution;
   - when they felt they could not be bothered;
   - what frustrates them most about ActKM;
   - whether they usually take time to formulate considered responses or whether they usually respond immediately on reading a posting;
   - how they managed the postings;
   - whether they censored their own responses in any way;
   - how much “off-list” contacts they receive as a direct result of their list activity; and
   - their attitude to “controversially heated debate”.

Population

When the data from the main questionnaire was analyzed it was discovered that of the 20 percent of ActKM participants who responded, 78 percent had never, or only infrequently, posted to the discussion. This gave a rather unique picture of what are somewhat disparagingly referred to as “lurkers” or as what Wenger has described as “legitimate peripheral participants” (MacDonald *et al.*, 2003). Did this result detract from the research? John Seely Brown was reported as suggesting that the culture of the internet has provided a platform for the most successful form of learning that civilization has ever seen. It allows
people to link, and learn and lurking is a form of cognitive apprenticeship in this environment (MacDonald et al., 2003). Moreover:

\[ \ldots \text{most community members rarely participate. Instead they stay on the periphery, watching the interaction of the core and active members. But they are not as passive as they seem. They apply their own insights from the discussion, having private conversations about the issues being discussed in the public forum. Some feel that their observations are not appropriate for the whole. Others feel they don't have enough voice to really contribute \ldots In successful communities peripheral members drift into the centre as their interests are stirred and fires are deliberately created in the “centre” to invite this involvement, the ebb and flow so created sees core members drift to the sidelines as topics change (MacDonald et al., 2003, p. 11).} \]

It has also been suggested that lurkers, or legitimate peripheral participants, “hear” the debate. Some people have to be in the debate to understand, but lurkers can hear the debate, then speak with clarity and precision in a type of individual constructivist approach where each person makes meaning in his/her own head based on what is happening (MacDonald et al., 2003, p. 4).

Perhaps of significance to this research is a point made by one of the respondents. This person pointed out that it was not appropriate, as a public servant, to participate in online discussions of this type. Apart from the fact that it might appear that the person was speaking on behalf of the organization, it was inappropriate to discuss internal operations in the public domain. Given that a significant proportion of the list membership is from the public sector, this could account for their unwillingness to participate in the discussion but still fulfill an important role within the broader concepts of a community of practice.

This raises the question of whether participation would be higher in an online community of practice drawn from the private sector. Research that examined online communities drawn from 15 private sector organizations made the distinction between “access” and “contribution”. While half of the online community coordinators in that study reported that more than 50 percent of their members “access” online community resources on a frequent basis, almost three-quarters reported that frequent “contributors” represent less than 15 percent of total membership and almost one-third placed the number at less than 5 percent (On-line Communities in Business, 1999, p. ii). In the present study, less than 6 percent of respondents indicated that they would only contribute on a monthly basis. This shows that although the rate of participation or contribution to online discussion in both studies was still quite low, there was a higher participation amongst the private sector respondents.

The final report from the On-line Communities in Business study concluded that, because of the imbalance between the rate of contribution and the rate of access to the resources of the community, a relatively small group of members determined whether an online community succeeded or failed. However, the study also pointed out that this small group is not static – individual participation and levels of participation did change over time. These results were also found to be true in the present study where, in their responses, many participants indicated that their rate of participation changed over time and for a variety of reasons. This is discussed more fully below where it is also shown that the tone and content of postings directly impact on member satisfaction.

Rather than focusing on the issue of “lurking” itself, albeit acknowledging the role and legitimacy of “lurking” in an online community of practice, an important point to make in relation to this research is whether there is potential bias in the results because the sample was drawn through a process of self-selection. Although the views from the main questionnaire are primarily from those who rarely or never participate, these are balanced by the interviews conducted with frequent contributors and the core team. The similarity in the findings from each group suggests that bias was not introduced through the sampling process.

Results

Primary questionnaire

There was a 20 percent response rate to the main questionnaire with participants coming from nine countries. Just more than 75 percent came from Australia, approximately 5 percent
from each of the UK, the US and New Zealand. Other countries represented were Singapore, Canada, Norway, South Africa and Switzerland. Of these:

- 34 percent had been members for less than one year;
- 14.5 percent had been members for over four years;
- 38 percent came from the public sector;
- 38.9 percent came from the private sector; and
- 16.7 percent from the university sector.

The composition of the list membership is interesting given the overall aim of the list is to promote KM in the public sector. It was reported in an earlier paper (Callahan and Milne, 2004a) that a significant change in membership type occurred when the NSW list merged with ActKM bringing with it a large number of members from the private sector and academia. That the list has managed to hold and even increase its membership despite a potential conflict of interest on the part of its members perhaps indicates that the fundamental issues of KM remain the same, regardless of sector.

While 46.7 percent had a designated KM role in their organization, these were too varied to categorize meaningfully. Some of the way respondents identified their roles included knowledge manager, IT manager, EDMS manager, chair KM committee, KM strategist and even “experience transfer manager”.

The positions the respondents held in their organization were also too varied to categorize meaningfully. These included many “types” of managers, as well as directors, consultants and academics.

The main reasons for joining ActKM were that they wanted to keep current with KM issues, develop and/or maintain a KM network, be part of a KM community and that they wanted to learn about KM. They joined ActKM because they believed the list had “an excellent reputation” or that it was recommended to them.

Respondents manage the postings in a variety of ways. Almost 26 percent read and delete the postings immediately while 34 percent move to a folder to read later. Not unexpectedly, there are many variations of this general pattern. Many in each category either only read those where the subjects are of interest or only read those from particular contributors. In addition, 9.4 percent read all postings in full while 52 percent only skim long messages, almost 5 percent of respondents simply ignore long messages and 64.2 percent only read messages where the subject is of interest.

More important perhaps than all of this is the impact that ActKM is having on the application and practice of KM, on individuals and on their organizations. Over 21 percent of respondents indicated that ActKM has sparked initiatives in their organizations. Others indicated that if it has not actually sparked initiatives then it has helped to confirm and clarify issues or inform existing initiatives. It is drawn on as an immediate and valued source of current information on KM and, most significantly, it has helped to increase levels of personal confidence through the learning that individuals have gained from reading the postings and/or through the networks that it has allowed them to build.

Over one-third of respondents indicated that they have made off-list contact with list members and 80 percent of these contacts were with people with whom they had not previously communicated. They initiated these contacts to follow-up comments made to the list, when they wanted to pursue an issue in more depth or when they believed the issue was
sensitive. Over 72 percent had regular discussions with work colleagues about list postings and almost half of the respondents indicated that these conversations were with non-list members.

David Snowden was, by far, the contributor whose comments were most valued. The other international contributor who was singled out was Hubert St Onge. As well as these two contributors who were identified as ‘thought leaders’, eight other list members were noted for the value that their comments provide to others.

In response to the question asking why the nominated contributors were valued reasons given included: their practical approach to KM, their comments were thought provoking and insightful, they expressed their thoughts clearly and intelligently and did not waffle and finally, they were considered to be knowledgeable about KM.

Every now and again postings to the list fall within what could be described as ‘controversially heated debate’. How list members, as well as the list moderator, react to this is of interest. Comments from list members fell along a spectrum from ‘love them’ to ‘ignore them’. Most agreed that this type of debate is acceptable, and can even be productive, as long as it does not get personal. A number of respondents supported the view that the discussion should not be censored unless it borders on libel or pure invective. A number of people commented that it is often from this type of emotionally charged debate that new ideas or initiatives are grown.

What do list members gain from their membership? By far the greatest value identified was the networking opportunities list membership provided. Without exception all respondents listed networking amongst the values they identified. Other valuable aspects of list membership include: the greater awareness gained of, and exposure to, KM issues, the fact that they can learn from the experience of others, it shows ‘who is doing what’ and it provides current information about KM. One respondent commented:

> It is worth being a member for that one gem in 100 messages.

This is particularly significant given that 78 percent of the respondents had never, or very rarely, posted to the list yet all considered themselves part of a networked community. Not only that, the values they identified are compatible with Henri and Pudelko’s (2003, p. 485) definition of a virtual community of practice.

These results also supported the findings of the On-line Communities in Business study. A significantly higher number of members of the on-line communities in that study used the resources provided through the list compared with a much smaller number who contributed.

Respondents felt that the main purpose of ActKM is to provide an infrastructure for a community of practice, to act as a facility for knowledge sharing and to stimulate and promote new thinking and discussion. There was an overwhelmingly positive consensus that it is performing at a high level in all three areas. However, there was also wide agreement on two other points. Firstly, that the list should not be used to market goods and/or services or for any type of self-promotion and that ActKM is the most interesting of the KM lists available and that the level of intelligent contributions is much higher than on some others.

**Interviews with frequent contributors**

One of the areas of interest in the research project was to discover why those who contributed most frequently bothered to do so and what, if anything, they gained. This is particularly important as it was found, after the results were analyzed, that all of those interviewed had been nominated as contributors whose comments were most valued by respondents to the main questionnaire.

Frequent contributors indicated that they are most excited about participating when the issue resonates with problems they are currently dealing with, when the discussion provides guidance on practice or is about lessons learned. They also enjoyed participating when they felt their contribution made a difference and when the discussion was somewhat
They explained that this type of discussion often led to new insights and understandings.

In contrast, there was general agreement that they cannot be bothered contributing when the discussion becomes ethereal and has no practical application. In a similar vein, they become frustrated when people respond with one or two lines or with a comment such as “I agree” or “good point”. They feel that it is not worth opening and reading the posting.

They also become frustrated when participants go off target and the discussion loses focus, when it degenerates into personal attacks or respondents are overly “opinionated” and are not willing to explore ideas that differ from their own. Frequent contributors became frustrated and lost interest with discussions that were overly academic and where the participants tried to argue the case from a “black and white” stance.

They became most exhilarated when a trust group developed and they were able to “chew the fat” and explore ideas that pushed the boundaries of thinking and practice. They valued discussions where there was “great input” from thought leaders and debate progresses at a high level. They became quite exhilarated when they realized that they had contributed something others found useful.

Generally, this group tended to respond immediately to a posting that interested them without spending time considering and editing their reply. Only two indicated that they, on occasions, would write a response and reflect on it for a time before posting. Only occasionally did they censor the reply they had initially planned and they did this when the debate had become polemic.

There was agreement amongst this group that their pattern of reading the postings had changed over time. While they agreed that reading the postings as they arrive gave them a gauge of what is happening, they now read much more selectively. Most also felt that they contributed far less than they did in the past.

The group agreed that they were recipients of some off-list contacts from people whom they do not know but who “know” them through their contribution to the list. Membership of the list is the entrée into the contact. Sometimes the frequent contributors will initiate an off-list contact to pursue a more personal or more in-depth discussion, particularly if there is a sense that the discussion is losing interest for most list members. There was general agreement for applying the principle that the discussion should go off-line when there are only two, or a very small number of people, involved. One of this group indicated, that when taking part in what became a fairly controversial debate, to receiving supportive e-mails privately from people who did not want to post them to the public discussion.

The reaction of frequent contributors to “bad” behavior was very similar to the reaction of the respondents to the wider survey. They agreed that some controversially heated debate could be quite helpful but that they usually stopped reading when it became personal. They were in agreement that using the list for any type of “self-promotion” is inappropriate as is any form of comment that could be viewed as patronizing to another list member. There was also general agreement that anonymous postings were inappropriate. This was because knowing the identity of the person posting gave context and authority to their comments. However one interviewee did not disagree with the practice of anonymous postings making the point that while knowing who the person is does carry weight, what is said is ultimately more important than who is saying it. This respondent commented that it reflected a lack of trust in the group and probably meant the person posting anonymously was “afraid of being hammered”.

For the frequent contributors the value in list membership is found in:

- the lessons they can learn from the experience of others;
- using what they do learn to shift management thinking;
- participating in discussions that help to keep their own thinking current; and
- the off-list discussions that occur because of their list membership.
There was general agreement that the great value of ActKM can be summarized under three main ideas. The first is the human network that sits behind the list, followed by the expertise embedded in the list, expertise that can inform any topic, and finally the direct links the list provides to international thought leaders. Several commented that the KM community in general is much stronger and the experience of its members much richer because of ActKM.

**Questionnaire for the core team**

Why be on the core team? A variety of reasons were given to this question but “a passion for KM” was a reason that was provided by most core team members. Other reasons included that they wanted to support the KM community, to be able to apply their own learning from the experience in their workplace, that they have learned a great deal from watching the group grow and change over time and that they “just enjoy working with the core team”. Several singled out being involved with the conference or the monthly meetings.

The time spent on core team activities varied amongst members of the group depending on their role. For example some activities required an enormous commitment of time and dedication, particularly moderating the list or working on the conference committee or the awards program.

The role of the list moderator is clearly an important one. There was agreement that the list moderator did have a role to play when discussion degenerates to personal attacks although there is a very “grey” area regarding when the point is reached at which the intervention should occur. It is important that “intervention” does not translate into “censorship”. The ideal is for the list to be its own moderator and indeed this has occurred once or twice over the life of ActKM.

The views of the core team in relation to the considered purpose of ActKM were very similar to the views of the respondents to the wider survey. Summarized they included:

- acting as a forum for KM practitioners;
- assisting in the implementation of KM in the public sector;
- raising the profile of KM;
- supporting people involved in KM; and
- facilitating a “fellowship of like-minded people.”

In answer to the question “is ActKM fulfilling this role?” the core team’s response was “yes” and “no”. Those who felt that it was not fulfilling its role to some, or to any degree, generally felt it was because it is not active enough in providing leadership and/or promoting KM at the higher levels of influence in the public sector. This could be accounted for because the composition of the membership is made up of a high proportion of practitioners and academics but not higher levels of management.

Those with a more positive response to the question also added the caveat that it was doing so “slowly”. One respondent noted that the public sector needs to be more motivated to deal with issues around KM.

The role of the monthly meetings in Canberra and the annual conference in the overall life of the ActKM is an interesting issue because clearly not all members can participate in these activities. The views of the core team on this issue are that face-to-face meetings strengthen...
connections, develop higher levels of loyalty, keep topics alive, allow people to vent about list discussions, and allow additional opportunities for learning.

Members of the core team singled out monthly meetings and the conference as some of the areas where the activities of the core team have had a significant impact. The degree of this impact on the overall “health” of the ActKM community cannot be determined from this research. Perhaps it is a matter of what those members who cannot participate and therefore do not experience do not realize they are missing. However, as a community of practice, all members of the Core Team believe that ActKM does an excellent job.

Conclusions

Clearly the underpinning assumption that ActKM is a community of practice is borne out by the results. It has a very high value for its members, both frequent contributors and for those who might be described as “peripheral participants”. Off-list activity is considered to be a valuable extension of “ActKM community” life. The monthly meetings and the conference are important for those who can attend.

It is quite clear that ActKM is a significant tool that facilitates learning for most members – even those who others consider to be “experts” or “thought leaders”. Discovering a new idea, what one respondent called that “one gem in 100 postings” is what excites list members the most.

There is a high degree of tolerance to controversially heated debate, but agreement that this should not develop into personal attacks on other members. There is no tolerance for postings that seek any form of personal publicity or self-promotion. Neither should members appear to take a “superior” attitude so that their posting becomes a personal “put down” for another contributor.

There are clear feelings about the type of postings that are preferred. They should be kept relatively short, to the point and without any “waffle”. They should have an applied rather than an academic focus. Respondents indicated that they gain a great deal from case studies and illustrative “stories”.

There is strong evidence that ActKM has supported individual learning and even personal and/or professional growth in its members. However, it is not possible, from this research, to suggest the degree to which it has had a direct impact on the practice of KM generally. Certainly there is limited evidence that the list has sparked some initiatives and much evidence that it has informed many others. The annual conference is an important vehicle for spreading “good practice” and as it grows in significance will play an ever-increasing role. So while the results do suggest that there has been an impact, the degree to which it has occurred must remain the focus of another piece of research.

References


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