Communities of practice in construction case study organisations: questions and insights

Ruikar, K., Koskela, L. and Sexton. M. School of Construction Management and Engineering, University of Reading

Abstract
Purpose – At the heart of knowledge management (KM) are the people – an organisation’s important knowledge asset. Although this is widely acknowledged, businesses seldom understand this axiom in terms of the communities through which individuals develop and share the capacity to create and use knowledge. It is the collective learning that takes place within the social systems, i.e. communities of practice (CoP) that are of particular significance to an organisation from a KM perspective. This paper aims to review, critique, and raise some pertinent questions on the role of CoPs; and with the help of case studies shed light on the “goings-on” in construction practices.

Design/methodology/approach – After critically reviewing the literature on CoPs and querying some underlying assertions, this research investigates how these issues are addressed in practice. A case study approach is adopted. Three organisations operating in the construction sector are interviewed for the purpose of this paper.

Findings – Case study findings highlight the potential challenges and benefits of CoPs to a construction organisation, the role they play in generating and delivering value to the organisation and their contribution towards the collective organisational intelligence. From the findings, it is clear that the question is not whether communities exist within organisations, but how they deliver value to the organisation. From an organisational perspective, the key challenge is to provide an environment that is conducive to developing and nurturing such communities as opposed to merely creating them.
Practical implications – Challenges and benefits demonstrated through the case studies should be taken in context. The findings are not intended to be prescriptive in nature, but are intentionally descriptive to provide contextual data that allow readers to draw their own inferences in the context of their organisations. They should be applied taking into account an organisation’s unique characteristics and differentiators, the dynamics of the environment in which it operates and the culture it harbours within.

Originality/value – Investigating the role of CoPs in the context of case study construction organisations forms the prime focus of this paper.

Keywords: Learning, Knowledge management, Construction industry