

ENHANCING PROGRESS THROUGH INCREASED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION: INSIGHTS

A time is reached in all professional careers by a professional when recognition is made, perhaps unfortunately too late, that in order to increase the performance of duties entrance into a professional community is of great value. Not simply value for the individual, but of historical importance to the profession itself. Such communities can take a large variety of names although today and in the context of this paper, they are commonly seen, and will be mentioned as, Communities of Practice or CoPs.

Communities of Practice have been around for millennia in the forms of guilds and recently groupings of professional societies. There was, is, and will always be, a strong need for such communities and the question then turns to how best to initiate one and maximize its effectiveness along with those within the community.

With the progression of modern technology, societies devotional use of the internet and the ease to which groups of likeminded individuals can share information across geographically dispersed regions, it should be of no surprise CoPs can now spring up with remarkable speed, covering all subject matter, and formally structured through online portals allowing for remarkable spread of information and enhanced knowledge sharing.

Benefits

Continuous learning at the tertiary level

One of many benefits is the continuous sharing of knowledge, a continual learning at a professional level through interaction with experts of specific thematic areas. Through an effective exchange of information, expertise, experiences, knowledge, and sharing of skills, time spent actively within a CoP significantly enhances a professional's ability to perform duties along with typical upwards progression through access to a strong networking environment.

Professional Unity

For a profession to become well known if otherwise remaining on the fringes e.g. Alternative Health Care's recognition within Medicine, it is vital for there to be a strong sense internally and externally by those assessing the profession, of unity and solidarity. Universal agreements on qualifications, methods of practice, regulations, and codes of conduct all stem from professional communities and completion along with maintenance of the above are prerequisites for professions to be deemed so, and professionals to be considered as such.

Directional Control of Profession

Thinking in the long term, only through frequent structured exchanges by communities can a profession direct its progress on issues such as growth, influence, longevity, and dissemination of information. Referring to the directional control is not as much of a benefit, rather necessity which when looking at a macro

level, can only be done through CoPs and by means of meetings, workshops, conferences, and steering committees.

Difficulties

Hindering Professional Upwards Mobility

A difficulty is present when the clear realization is made either prior to entering into a free or non-monetarily driven exchange of knowledge which is the natural desire to promote oneself and increase personal or professional worth, rather than decrease it while at the same time increasing value of others. Commonly known in knowledge industries is the direct correlation between the amount and applicability of one's knowledge, as separate from retained information, with that of professional value in terms of the amount which can be charge per consultation or as tenure Academic. Knowing this, or coming to its realization after having joined a community, participation severally decreases.

Free-Rider and Participation

Disregarding altruism, at its extreme outright and even abnormal amounts of devotion to helping or training others with little value reciprocated, the focus is then on how to insure a balance of information flow, between professionals. It is no easy feat and commonly a hurdle in the sustaining, even initiating of CoPs. We must keep in mind, all community engagement occurs within CoPs whether they are made explicit and structured, or kept informal and based upon ad-hoc discussions during conferences. It is a typical Free-Rider scenario which leads to the dilemma and fear that a member's contributions will far outweigh that of any other, and information of value will not be reciprocated.

Information Dumping Ground

Worry can easily arise after only a short time when information being passed between members is done so in a manner which has not been contextually modified or is simply redirection as to where to find information. In both senses information is then being dumped into the community by members resembling a unwilling completion of duty to the profession rather than active and interested participant, the aim which ought to be sought after.

Speaking of the necessity for information which is shared to be modified, we are speaking of responses to queries which, although have all of one's best intentions in mind, is the reposting of an article in an unaltered state making value of its contribution difficult to discern by the recipient. Typically such contributions are in fact ruinous as they take up time with little or no value share or received, falsely indicate that the matter has been addressed, and undesirably taking space within a community's resource base.

Conversely, a problem may arise if ideas on how information is to be shared are made vague and contributions outside an agreed and set format are monitored. A sharing of information on where to find information can result, virtually stripping the community of value and in fact triggering or aiding a regression from a CoP into something other.

Community Engagement

Noting the above, a large CoP however with consistent engagement between members on a typically non-monetary agreement with exchange of information, can be created, sustained, and grown if approached with several key elements kept in mind and addressed in the community's formulation.

Three necessities in development stage include:

1. Making clear that the progress of the community itself is a priority. The strength of the community increases the performance of a member as he/she carries out their professional duties in exchange with the public.
2. Create a set of small steps and easily reached objectives which as a group are to be achieved. This creates an all important confidence in the community and shows validity.
3. Suggested as one of several components in a long range strategy plan of a community would be development of methodology able to quantify and calculate Pareto Efficiency of exchanges and member performance then carried outside of the community. Fulfillment of a standard Pareto Analysis then used for further development of any community as it naturally and expectedly evolves over time.

In efforts to enhance exchanges both in terms of quantity the largest hurdle to face is with keeping the initial flood of new members active. Widely known is the common tendency of original members to lose interest, stop participating, and eventually abandon a community leaving behind a possible irreplaceable void of knowledge contributions of a particular kind. Fresh approaches are always needed in keeping the interest lively while sticking to an earlier agreed upon direction and initial objective.

In terms of value added to discussions or in response to questions posed, the only clearly utilized method in approaching this is through the development of clear guidelines on how to participate. Such guidelines should be laid out prior to a launch, monitored closely, enforced when appropriate, and revised when seen valuable and based upon community self reflection. Although such stringent use of

guidelines will ultimately and unavoidably exclude those who would otherwise participate if given freedom on method, it is needed in addressing not only in a limited fashion Information Dump, but so that the knowledge shared within can easily be found by those in need and assessed for validity and applicability.

In Summary

Above are all merely brief insights aimed at assisting thought while a community is either at a starting point, or attempting to re-establish itself. Keeping in mind the key areas of maintaining exchanges within a community and both the difficulties of doing so with a glance over possible solutions, what must be made clear is their continuous predominance, inherent value, and that a necessary commitment with ongoing upkeep must be made at the beginning. If done, it is also refreshing to know the numerous communities in existence which truly have vibrant activity leading to mutual success and achieving solid results.

A Sample of Bioethics Communities:

1. The Arizona Bioethics Network (<http://www.azbioethicsnetwork.org/>)
2. American Society for Bioethics and Humanities (<http://www.asbh.org/>)
3. American Society for Law, Medicine, and Ethics (<http://www.aslme.org/>)
4. Public Responsibility in Medicine & Research (<http://www.primr.org/>)
5. Canadian Bioethics Society (<http://www.primr.org/>)
6. The Society for Medical Decision Making (<http://www.smdm.org/>)

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