

Actors and Factors: Virtual Communities for Social Innovation

Susan G. Restler and Diana D. Woolis
Knowledge in the Public Interest, New York, USA

srestler@kpublic.com

dwoolis@kpublic.com

Abstract: Virtual communities of practice (COPs) are fast becoming a basic work unit in a networked world. The relationship between COPs, Knowledge Management, and the Learning Organisation is a question of priority for social sector leaders, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as they seek to establish ways to maintain relevance and effectiveness in the volatile environments in which they work (Thomas et al, 2005). When well executed, virtual COPs produce results because the knowledge is *stewarded*: organised for learning, poised for action, and planned for sustainability. In this paper, we document and analyse the actors and factors that, in our experience, contribute to success: Enlightened Leadership, Compelling Work, Appropriate Technology and Knowledge Sustainability. Over the last two years we have worked with new virtual COPs in both the public and non-profit sectors. The outsized successes prove the power of this approach to work. The under-performers help define the parameters for more effective implementations. Perhaps surprisingly, the critical success factors for a high-performing virtual COP have absolutely nothing to do with technological aptitude. The two key determinants of community success harken back to Business Management 101: the strategic clarity and capacity for collaborative leadership in the organisation, and the specificity and practicality of the community mission.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Innovation, Knowledge Management, Virtual Communities, Non-profit Management, Public Administration

1. Actors and factors: An introduction

In 1990 Charles Savage (1990) was one of the first to define the “networked infrastructures” required by the emerging “knowledge era.” He articulated the transitions required to move from the industrial era to the knowledge era, from “confusingly complex to elegantly simple enterprises”:

- "Chain of Command" to "Networked and Networking"
- "Command and Control" to "Focus and Coordinate"
- "Authority of Position" to "Authority of Knowledge"
- "Sequential Activities" to "Simultaneous Activities"
- "Vertical Communication" to "Horizontal Communication"
- "Distrust and Compliance" to "Trust and Integrity"

In our view, virtual Communities of Practice for Social Innovation – those communities working within organisations whose mission it is to advance the public good – are such structures. Virtual COPs are tools for effective organisational leadership in the digital age, or at least an early and promising entry into this arena. As such, they need to be consciously planned, intelligently introduced, actively supported and, over time, firmly and creatively pushed to do more for the organisation’s mission. In other words, they require stewardship.

1.1 What is a virtual community of practice?

Wenger has written widely on communities of practice, which he defines as: “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” We accept this definition and further posit that VIRTUAL communities of practice involve a dispersed group of people who work together in a virtual environment (primarily but not exclusively) to achieve a specific objective within a defined time frame. It is an organisational structure for getting work done whose advantages are at once practical and transformational. Because work in a virtual space can be largely asynchronous, it affords participants not only scheduling flexibility but also saves them the time and cost of travel, conference calls etc. Because of the reach of the Internet, the circle of resources, both human and documental, that can be tapped as inputs to decision-making expands exponentially, thereby dramatically shifting a team’s analytic framework. Because discussion is the central work element of a virtual community, a record of each exchange is subject to after-the-fact analysis, which serves to highlight issues and clarify needs and opportunities. In the hands of an able leader these inputs allow for accelerated reaction and resolution, leading ultimately to faster, deeper work that, owing to its collaborative origins, holds high potential for adoption and implementation. Last but not least, in the realm of the transformational, the organised and analysed output of virtual communities becomes highly accessible knowledge for an on-

going organisation; at last a means of effectively capturing the experience of practitioners as a resource for new staff and for the field at large.

1.2 The four requirements for effective Virtual COPs

We have discerned through our work that virtual communities are organisational structures; that is to say, they make possible, and even easy, collaborative work that was heretofore challenging. However, as structures, they support but do not guaranty outcomes. Dysfunctional offline communities, if anything are more dysfunctional virtual communities. Indeed there are four requirements for a productive virtual community and none is more critical than enlightened leadership. There are several kinds of community leadership, but the most essential is sponsorship by someone who is clearly identified as leading or helping to lead the organisation. The leader explicitly ties the CoP to the organisation's mission and overall strategic plan. The criticality of senior leadership to the success of a virtual COP cannot be overestimated and is, in part, a function of the "newness" of the medium. Senior leadership's endorsement and modelling through personal engagement is key to shifting the groups or organisation's thought and work habits. The second requirement for success is compelling work. We have learned that this extends beyond the criticality of the work to be accomplished, to encompass the group's investment in getting the work done (the program developed, the policy defined, the decision made, etc.). This investment turns in part on the group's perception of the value the leader places on the outcome. However, we have found that each person's perception of the benefit of the work done in the community to their *own work* is equally important. Our engagement with a variety of professionals has lead us to believe there is a strong correlation between a person's commitment to the social imperative of their organisation and their willingness to alter long established ways of working, learning, and contributing to the work of others. The third requirement is appropriate technology. It goes without saying that it is impossible to have a virtual COP without the basic supporting technology: electricity, a computer, access to the Internet and software that enables a specific set of activities. However, the best technology on its own fails to produce effective COPs – and thus is not the most important requirement for success. That said, there do exist minimum technological requirements – and many "nice to haves" – that ease and support virtual COP work, including functions that allow participants to contribute resources and access those of others, to, search the community and locate items easily, to be

assured of the integrity of community security, etc.. Today's virtual COP software market has many choices. So far, everything works and nothing works perfectly – meaning that all available software allows individuals with limited technological skill to participate easily in virtual work, but no single option for creating virtual COPs includes every design feature and function that would make it as easy as possible to collaboratively solve problems and make decisions online. Increased user demand and experience hopefully will drive software designers to improve their online COP products. The fourth requirement for an effective virtual COP is active knowledge stewardship, which we divide into three components. Knowledge Creation is the support for initial engagement and the facilitation of work in the community. Organising a work plan, implementing it, caring for the community and organising its knowledge objects are all needed for members to engage productively together. A second element of stewardship is harnessing Knowledge for Action. This involves managing the information that emerges as the community works and capitalising on it to help the community achieve its goals. While meetings in the "real world" are often messy exchanges of views and ideas, replete with digressions and irrelevant contributions, meetings that occur online create their own record – a "digital paper trail" that facilitates the creation of "minutes" that exclude the messiness and summarise the work while allowing the original commentary to serve as an unmediated account. The record that emerges when the discussion is read and analysed as a whole has consistently proven to be invaluable to the community and to management. Again and again, we have found that several important organisational phenomena are embedded in such exchanges, including implied and explicit areas of confusion, opportunities for clarification or decision, suggestions of tension or other organisational blockages that are impeding goal achievement, and nuggets of knowledge critical to achieving immediate and overall organisational goals. The digital paper trail creates an opportunity to identify and address such issues rapidly. This resource is the single most important contribution that virtual communities make to accelerating the pace of organisational work. The third component of knowledge stewardship is capturing Sustainable Knowledge for the community, the organisation and potentially for the field. Resources, records and summaries of discussions, process descriptions and the like all accumulate in the course of a virtual community doing its work. However, as these accrue over time they are available to be searched and retrieved and reapplied and repurposed as new members join the community, for unrelated

organisational purposes, and to share with others focused on similar issues. Good software and good technology support make this rich trove available with no additional burden on practitioners. Employing computer technology generates these resources; thus we consider virtual COPs to be organisational structures made possible by the digital age. But the organisation must be primed to respond. Working online can immediately enable faster – and possibly better – decision-making, particularly if the technology is used to widen the participatory circle to those who would have been excluded without it. But only when the messy inputs of the work are analysed, synthesised and organised do we create organisational knowledge, fulfilling the long promise of Knowledge Management to transform work.

2. A great success and a failure in virtual communities of practice – what can we learn?

2.1 Success: Enlightened leadership and compelling work

Client A: State of Virginia Department of Education Outcome: Adult Education Accelerated model development and roll out at scale, with wholesale change in strategic focus and culture

2.1.1 The context

In the fall of 2003, Virginia Governor Mark Warner established the goal of doubling the number of recipients of the General Equivalency Diploma (the equivalent of a high school degree in the U.S. educational system) from an average of 10,000 to 20,000 Virginians annually within 18 months. Dr. Yvonne Thayer, Virginia's Director of Adult Education and Literacy, saw this daunting mandate as an opportunity. She recognised that this "crisis" could facilitate implementation of a radically new model of General Equivalency Diploma (GED) programming incorporating active student recruitment and new teaching techniques that could propel a cultural shift away from the traditional adult education worldview of "literacy as empowerment" to one providing "practical skills for workplace advancement." Dr. Thayer realised that if she could successfully develop and implement this new GED model with a small pilot group, she would have leverage to transform the programmatic approach and mindset of every adult education director in Virginia.

2.1.2 From 0 to 100: Statewide rollout in 12 months

November 2003

Dr. Thayer convenes a small team within the Department of Education to set out the key dimensions of the new program. Together they establish initial criteria and milestones, mandating a six-week program and suggesting eligibility criteria for prospective students.

January 2004

Dr. Thayer convenes five program managers from sites across Virginia, selected for population diversity (urban/rural), receptivity to change, and willingness to work collaboratively. The group begins to develop a "Fast Track" program built around the parameters established by the state. At Dr. Thayer's urging they rapidly prepare pilot programs in order to learn by doing. The first Fast Track class begins in February 2004.

March 2004

Dr. Thayer invites Knowledge in the Public Interest (KPI) to meet in person with the five pilot program managers, whom she asks to form a virtual community of practice, or Polilogue, to share their implementation experiences and accelerate the adoption of emerging "better practices." A three-hour strategy meeting with KPI leads to the establishment of the Fast Track Virtual Community. Its focus reflects the interests and needs of the program managers: marketing and recruitment, curriculum and staff development, budgeting, funding and partnerships with state workforce organisations and the business sector, and reporting.

April to July 2004

Pilot program managers participate in several "Jams" – asynchronous discussions in the Polilogue during which experiences and ideas are exchanged and materials are shared. These early Jams are facilitated by KPI. Dr. Thayer follows the discussions closely, leading off each one with a posting on her ambitions for the work. At the outset of the program, the managers focused intensely on marketing the new program in order to fill classes, using radio ads, bus posters and the like. An important first Jam on marketing addresses the principle of market segmentation. The staff's experience in the field informs initial profiles of people most likely to be interested in the accelerated GED program *and* capable of passing the tests after only six weeks of preparation. Discussion enables the community to link these findings to basic marketing concepts of message and medium, and each director is able to rapidly adapt her/his "pitch" and refine expenditures to target best prospects more effectively. KPI organises, summarises and analyses the work of each Jam in three ways: as an easy reference for the participants, a source of knowledge for the future, and an input for Dr.

Thayer as she guided the pilots. Market segmentation became an important insight for the Dept. of Education as it prepares to expand the programs beyond the pilot phase.

August 2004

The five pilot sites establish the efficacy of the program model. At the annual statewide GED conference Dr. Thayer asks pilot program managers to share their experiences with the full group. Each manager speaks to a different dimension of the pilot program – basically each of the Polilogue topic areas – as opposed to speaking only to her/his own program experience. Dr. Thayer then invites 10 additional program managers to join “Fast Track” and the Polilogue. She sees advantages in relying on the virtual COP to facilitate the program's expansion: the new managers can learn from the pilot staff on an as-needed basis, and learn effectively, without leaving their sites. And the peer-to-peer collaborative nature of the community helps the new managers to see themselves as fellow program builders and adapters, rather than as recipients of a fixed model. This averts the resistance so common when a leader establishes a challenging goal. The result is rapid build-up to launch. One Jam concerns relationships with local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), which are constructive and supportive in some regions and antagonistic and unproductive in others. Managers share tactics, presentations, and data. In analysing the exchange, KPI highlights the apparent confusion among program managers over the WIB's funding obligation for adult education. Dr. Thayer acknowledges the confusion and enlists the Virginia Department of Labour in clarifying its mandate in this regard, securing an expression of support from the Department that paves the way for WIB/Adult Education cooperation. She models the approach for the program managers, who begin to emulate it in the field.

October 2004

Dr. Thayer feels the model has been sufficiently developed and vetted and is indeed producing strong GED pass rates in the six-week timeframe. She expands the program to scale, bringing in all 50 adult education GED sites across Virginia. The entire program rollout takes place over two days via the *Polilogue* with a succession of Jams held on each major program element, moderated by the 15 experienced program managers. The Polilogue provides a twofold benefit. The first is in cost- and timesavings, as new managers are introduced to the program elements without having to leave their work sites. The second could be characterised as psychological: a peer-to-peer inculcation with the explicit message that new

program managers are being offered the benefit of the experience of predecessors, which they can consider and adapt to their own environments.

2.1.3 What has happened since? 2006 status update

In the virtual community of practice:

- The overall Virginia GED community of practice has grown to exceed 200 members in five discrete sub-communities. At the suggestion of program managers, a community of instructors has been formed in the Polilogue. This group has collaborated on issues including summer school planning and technology-based self-instructional aids for GED preparation. This included bringing various vendors into the Jams to answer questions and offer advice.
- GED Examiners are now collaborating on best practices in the sphere of testing.
- A community has been created for newly appointed Program Managers to aide the adjustment of these new players in the system. The State Department of Education uses the virtual community to orient new leaders and to respond with support for specifically expressed needs. The State anticipates that the analysis of the orientation discussions in this community will enable it to codify an approach to launching new Program Managers that will enable them to be more effective earlier in their roles.
- At Dr. Thayer's initial instigation a parallel project to develop Content Standards for both GED and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) was undertaken via an virtual community. Virtual and face-to-face work was combined to rapidly accelerate the development of draft standards by and for the field. The process mirrored the Fast Track development process; beginning with a relatively small planning group, expanding to a larger development team, and rippling further out to involve all leaders and instructors of GED and ESOL in the adoption and adaptation of new Content Standards to their instructional and testing work.

In adult education in Virginia:

- 90 percent of those enrolled in a GED “Fast Track” preparation program received GED certification. Gov. Warner's goal of 20,000 recipients by July 2005 was achieved.
- All GED preparation courses in Virginia are adopting and adapting “Fast Track” pedagogical and motivational techniques, including the establishment of relationships with local employers to create a tight link

between training and better employment opportunities.

- Virginia placed itself among the ranks of those State leaders who have developed and actively applied Content Standards to their instruction in GED and ESOL.

2.1.4 *What can we learn?*

In almost any sector, whether public, private or non-profit, it is admirable to create an effective programmatic response to a challenging and arbitrary mandate, such as doubling the number of GED recipients in 18 months. To take this program to scale in this timeframe – that is, to expand it state-wide – is unheard of. While the virtual COP was only one element in this process, it was a critical one for two reasons. First, the virtual COP facilitated and indeed encouraged the development of a robust and ultimately successful program model by supporting rapid learning and adaptation – allowing many to benefit from that which a smaller group had found effective, and abandon that found unproductive. Inhibitors to progress that would otherwise not have been explicitly apparent were quickly identified, facilitating their speedy resolution.—The virtual COP also maximised the practicality of the program elements by having the field staff drive the details, and it minimised the inevitable resistance to change that is perceived as being imposed from outside (i.e., the Department of Education, or “headquarters” in private sector parlance). Governor Warner’s mandate was the non-negotiable impetus for change, and the hand of the Department of Education was an ever-present guide as well as a source of pressure. But the field staff determined the nature of the response and owned the program’s success. There was an intangible benefit to engaging the field in a virtual COP that may actually prove to be its greatest advantage. For a group of relatively technophobic people, the very act of working virtually opened their minds to new ideas and approaches. Many went where they had never expected to venture. The experience built confidence and countered the resistance to change so well embedded in human nature. While Dr. Thayer has moved on from the department, and indeed Governor Warner’s term came to an end, it is a credit to the process and to the perceived value afforded by the virtual community that it continues and expands in support of GED preparation in the State of Virginia.

2.2 **Failure: Strategic focus but a void in leadership**

Client B: A public policy organisation focused on democracy reform and economic equity in the United States: Outcome: A virtual COP failed to

facilitate collaboration among activists working on voting rights issues in advance of the 2004 U.S. election.

2.2.1 *The context*

Client B, which describes itself as “up and coming” because it is a relatively new player in the public policy arena, wished to coordinate the community of attorneys working on and writing about state-by-state implementation of voting rights legislation during the 2004 U.S. election season. In the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election – with its ballot confusion and allegations of unfair denial of access to the voting booth – Congress had passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). HAVA enforcement depended largely on the relevant state official’s interpretation of the law. Public policy groups such as Client B worried that citizens would not know their voting rights and that this would lead to illegal denials or wasted votes on Election Day. Client B was working hard to address relevant issues of public policy, and was both supporting and contributing to available materials on state interpretations of HAVA.

2.2.2 *Two months until election day*

Client B observed in September – less than two months before Election Day – that there was little communication among the lawyers and organisations writing on HAVA, risking duplication of work on some states while missing others completely. Client B decided to create an virtual COP for attorneys preparing state-by-state HAVA information. Unable (or perceiving itself to be unable) to get the attention of key people in relevant organisations, Client B decided to form a stealth community and load on a multitude of documents, hoping that the relevant actors would see the value of this virtual resource and join in. This approach inevitably put the technology cart before the HAVA-coverage-for-every-state horse. When Client B sponsored a conference call to present the possibilities offered by the virtual COP, few attended; those who did perceived the new technology as a daunting and time-consuming distraction from their important work. Ultimately the HAVA activists never addressed the issues of overlaps and gaps fully.. They were not inspired to recognise that their individual yearnings for public recognition of their efforts were secondary to the civic value of getting voting rights information to citizens in every state.

2.2.3 *What went wrong?*

The critical missing ingredient was leadership, but perhaps not in the traditional sense of the word. Client B accurately diagnosed a problem: there were too many independent practitioners

potentially working at cross-purposes. It selected an effective means to solve the problem: a virtual COP. However, Client B perceived that it lacked the stature within the public policy arena to lead others in the sector. Consequently, it could not scale the imperative of gaining consensus on the problem first. Technology alone rarely compels a change in behaviour. Only a shared challenge or goal stimulates collaboration. Technology that serves this end, if both supported and in some sense enforced, may then be embraced.

2.2.4 What can we learn?

We cannot emphasise strongly enough that technology comes last in launching a virtual community of practice for social innovation. Many organisations succumb to the wonder and practicality of enabling many people to save and share documents. But people do not return regularly to a community because there is “stuff” there. They come because they need to accomplish work. The promise of the HAVA virtual COP was to allow those working on state-by-state analyses to critique one another’s work, to capitalise on completed work to accelerate adaptation for uncovered states where feasible, to highlight inconsistencies, and to increase overall visibility and accountability for state legal conduct in the build up to the election. Over and over again we see that the challenge and opportunity today is for a leader to set the community objective and to harness the technology that will facilitate achieving the goal.

3. The work comes first – but technology matters

That said, there are important factors to consider in choosing virtual COP technology that can contribute substantially to a community’s eventual success.

3.1 Critical features of virtual COP software

As we have noted, the most important benefits to emerge from virtual communities result from virtual discussion. Consequently we would look first for the technology features supporting discussion. For example, the ease with which a discussion can be featured so participants know where to go, the simplicity with which they can add a post, and perhaps a relevant resource, to the exchange, the automatic connection of a participant’s picture and post, options for rethreading a discussion by person or subject, etc. In addition, however, underlying effective COP technology overall are three distinct capabilities: security and the integrity of membership, self-

governance and community management, and robust site search.

3.1.1 Security and the integrity of membership – creating spaces for opportunity

Virtual COP systems should enable the spaces of opportunity that help an organisation realise the potential to work differently (and better) and do new work, some of which may result in new ways to extract greater value from organisational intelligence. There are three such spaces:

- Private Space: participants must be community members; activities defined by and for members.
- Privileged Space: Accessible by a subset of members, under conditions and terms defined by the community.
- Public Space: content available to all, potentially activities open to the public.

There are two ideas at play here. The first is that the security of the software must easily and reliably allow the assignment and identification of group members. Participants will often be members of multiple groups. Confidence in the process of working virtual rests on feeling that everyone knows who does and does not have access to a group’s deliberations. The second idea is that an actively managed community will generate data/information/knowledge that is easily subject to multiple applications. Thus there is a benefit to being able to offer “the public” access to some resources with little technological effort.

3.1.2 Self-governance and community management - enabling the community to govern itself

Communities need to be able to self-govern. Virtual COP technology should give them the power to:

- Assign leadership roles such as editor, facilitator, moderator, and community manager.
- Create communities and sub-communities.
- Control member privileges to read, write, delete, edit, post, etc., as well as add and delete members and provide access to guests.
- Organise and reorganise content, including attributing one resource to several communities.
- Create contextual ontologies
- Here we are speaking of the ease of use of the technology for non-technologists. We advocate that those leading and participating in the community’s work, who will generally be

policy and program professionals, be easily able to use the software to initiate, conduct and organise work.

3.1.3 Robust site search - supporting diverse knowledge objects and finding resources easily

The technology should allow knowledge object diversity:

- Support multimedia knowledge objects (e.g. text, pictures, audio, video and graphics) in any variety of combinations.
- Enable knowledge objects to be in many places at the same time without having to put them in each place manually.
- Provide means to both "push" information out to the community via email groups, announcements, or similar, and for members to "pull" information in via "subscription."
- Not require burdensome registration/keyword tasks to enable search
- The arc of productive virtual communities, in our experience, is to begin small with a narrow focus and to expand in both tasks and membership. Over time inevitably the sheer volume of discussions, analyses, knowledge objects etc becomes overwhelming, while participant expectations for locating information easily rise. The better the software is at helping participants find things in multiple ways the more valuable it is.

4. Sustainable knowledge

Organisations deploy virtual communities for varied reasons. For KPI clients, they include among others: program development and "replication" or roll out, policy development, professional development and distance learning, technical assistance, program support, and capacity building. We approach our work assuming that these efforts are not only about achieving a specific objective but are also about knowledge sustainability: stewarding knowledge and accelerating learning.

4.1 Community engagement

Knowledge is created as a function of doing work in an virtual community. The old days of KM required people to put knowledge into a system after work was done, an added-on, time-eating task which people resisted, and which ultimately failed. Knowledge creation for social innovation occurs when knowledge is created through the very process of accomplishing work. In order to generate actionable knowledge through an virtual work experience a group of people must be induced to engage and their attention captured.

Virtual engagement techniques mirror offline team building and are well documented by Nancy White, for example.

4.2 Community facilitation

Once engagement is accomplished, our experience is that only facilitated communities remain productive. Community facilitation is a skilled task that takes time and energy, and its centrality to success should not be underestimated. People engaged in virtual communities for social innovation want to participate in the work that is occurring virtual, not be distracted by managing the COP as an organisational structure. We draw a distinction between community moderation and community facilitation. Both are critical. The moderator is the individual from within the community who has legitimate authority to push and prod the community to set its priorities and conduct its work. The facilitator supports the moderator and the community's agenda by assuring that all of the technical and support functions are in order.

4.3 Analysis and codification

Once the community is engaged and well facilitated, it organically produces vast and varied data. No one really wants to read all the discussions, or hunt around for particular knowledge objects. So the work must be analysed and codified in such a way that it can be easily used for decision-making and problem solving – the reasons that people engage in virtual COPs. Analysis and codification creates the actionable knowledge that we view as the goal of social innovation. Until analysis and codification occurs, the community may have a lot of information, but not necessarily much knowledge. As the UK Advanced Knowledge Technologies Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration points out (EPSRC Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration)

"...whilst accessing and storing data and information is technically cheap and relatively straightforward, interpreting it requires intellectual investment: attention, time, expertise and experience are now the commodities in highest demand and shortest supply. Veterans and other experts are so valued because they make sense of information, seeing patterns, implications and connotations that others miss...."

KPI has developed a unique approach to interpreting virtual community work in a way that converts information into actionable knowledge. We begin analysis and codification within a week of community activity, and report three views of the data: verbatim quotes selected to represent key points as well as the tone and texture of

activity; a summary of the activity, using en vivo categories and including a list of the knowledge objects posted, with data instantaneously “triangulated” by posting the “reports” in the community to create the opportunity for any member to challenge the “findings” and/or verify their veracity; and, periodic online surveys to ascertain if and how community members benefited from their participation. These surveys also probe for actions taken as a result of the learning that occurred.

5. Why COPs produce results

Much has been made of the concept of the Learning Organisation, popularised by Peter Senge (1995) in *The 5th Discipline*. It is defined by Watkins et al. (1993) as an organisation that “...learns continually and transforms itself, “one in which “[L]earning is a continuous, strategically used process” that is integrated with work and augments the organisation’s “capacity for innovation and growth.” In an analysis of the learning organisation literature at the time, Woolis and Ziegler (1992) found that they called for “a complete rethinking of the concept of organisations, the function of management, the meaning of work, and the role of the individual in the workplace.” The relationships between organisational learning, innovation and adaptive capacity to organisational survival and growth have been well documented. Learning we hold as “the organisation’s ability to cause: data to be transformed into knowledge, knowledge to be translated into action; and action encoded and decoded into patterns which in turn create data. Our thesis is that only now, with the advent and ubiquity of networked systems, can the potential be realised for creating mature learning organisations. Virtual COPs produce results because they are the optimal structure for a world

characterised by a networked, knowledge driven economy and populated by “microworkers”—distributed individuals or communities who group, regroup, and repurpose as the context demands. What makes virtual COPs an optimal organisational structure? They are Organised for Learning: like the best learning environments, they feature diverse content and have many points of entry. They are interactive, democratic, contextualised, and self-paced, and permit working on one’s own or in groups of infinite combinations. And for the most part, all without requiring the worker to move from the comfort of their own best thinking space. Most importantly, virtual COPs are Poised for Action: at a click, community members can know who is, who can, who has, who knows, and who will. Supporting documentation, weblinks, newsfeeds, and more are available, and members can deploy powerful communication tools to distribute intelligence and leadership where and when knowledge is needed, as well as readily reframe it as necessary – a kind of knowledge recycling. Such efficient and waste-free use of irreplaceable resources is a hallmark of places Planned for Sustainability – making COPs vital to a Learning Organisation. The government of the United Kingdom defines a sustainable community as

“...Places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.”(UK Government, 2005)

The same can be said of virtual COPs for social innovation.

References

- Thomas, R., Campbell, A., Clemens, W., Barcus, M. (2005) “Beyond Buy In: Integrating Knowledge Sharing Into Organisational Culture”, [online], KnowledgeWorks Foundation for Grantmakers for Effective Organisations, Knowledge Management Conference
- Norris, D., Mason, J., Robson, R., Lefrere, P., and Collier, G. (September/October 2003) A “Revolution In Knowledge Sharing” *EDUCAUSE r e v i e w* , 14
- World Bank Institute (undated) “Capacity for Knowledge Management in Organisations”, [online] <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/CKMObrief.pdf>
- Advanced Knowledge Technologies, EPSRC Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration (undated) “Manifesto” p.1
- Senge, P. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation*, Doubleday, New York.
- Watkins, K. and Marsick, V. (1993) *Sculpting the Learning Organisation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, p. 8.
- Woolis, D, Ziegler M. (1992) “The Learning Organisation: Toward Building a Shared Vision”, Paper presentation AAACE, Anaheim, October 5 1992.
- United Kingdom Government, Department for Communities and Local Government. (2005) “What is a sustainable community?”, [online], <http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1139866>