Chapter 31: Professional Development & Knowledge Management via Virtual Spaces*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the U.S., the mid and late 1990s was a boom period in many ways that included an expanding economy, a growing emphasis upon the value of people’s working knowledge, and a range of new Information Technology (IT) applications and information services that depended upon computer networking—often the internet. These themes were represented in professional discourse by a special emphasis upon “knowledge work”, “knowledge workers”, and new practices, such as “knowledge management”. While genuine referents for the “knowledge categories” are often elusive, at best they refer to serious efforts of managers to improve their staff’s abilities to become more knowledgeable by sharing information and insights within organizations and to leverage their enhanced knowledge for organizational value.

For example, in Microsoft Secrets, Cusumano and Selby (1995: 330–339) report the ways in which Microsoft’s managers and software developers reviewed major software development projects through extensive and relatively open “project post-mortems” with the aim of improving future software developments. In Working Knowledge, Davenport and Prusak (1998: 6) mention the efforts of managers at Chrysler to develop “Engineering Books of Knowledge” for each new car platform to help to better inform designers of future platforms about more effective design strategies. While Microsoft’s post-mortems were based primarily upon written reports and intensive face-to-face meetings, Chrysler’s “Engineering Books of Knowledge” represent a 1990s move to use electronic environments as integral elements for helping professionals to share their information and knowledge with others in their organizations.

They also illustrate important forms of professional development. The elastic term “professional development” can refer to almost any way that working professionals are supported in efforts to increase their capabilities and competencies including courses, mentoring, workshops with experts, discussions with peers, and (in some cases) onsite observation, etc. In this chapter, we

will focus on forms of professional development that overlap with knowledge management strategies—especially discussions with peers.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, new terms, such as knowledge management, professional development, and virtual spaces are introduced. The second section addresses discourses about professional development and knowledge management including e-learning—primarily because e-learning is a means to support professional development with IT and currently receiving intensive attention. For the third section, four case examples are described in order to depict possibilities and problems with professional development in virtual spaces. The fourth section discusses these cases and the implications they have for professional development in virtual spaces. Finally, we conclude the chapter by pointing out the hype surrounding knowledge management and noting that knowledge management is not just an IT system.

In the 1990s, the development of varied IT applications that enabled professionals to share ideas and information at work flourished. These ranged from new forms of groupware (Kirkpatrick, 1993), such as Lotus Notes, which consist of online documentary repositories that enabled web-conferencing systems. In educational communities, these were often called Virtual Learning Environments, while in corporate settings these knowledge management systems were often referred to as groupware. In this chapter, we use the term Virtual Spaces to refer to this diverse collection of artifacts. We view learning and sharing professional knowledge as accomplishments that can (sometimes) be facilitated by Virtual Spaces. For example, there were a number of projects that supported professional development via peer conferencing for K-12 teachers, such as LabNet (Ruopp et al., 1993; Spitzer & Wedding, 1995), “Tapped In” (Schlager et al., 1998), and the Internet Learning Forum (Barab et al., 2000).

Many of these projects were IT-driven; they tended to focus the majority of their resources on developing the supporting information technologies. However, as we shall show below, the research has found that learning and knowledge sharing are not automatic consequences of the development and deployment of Virtual Spaces. The more successful projects are based on an integrated socio-technical intervention in which supporting social processes are given as much attention as the technological design of the Virtual Space.

2. DISCOURSES ABOUT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL SPACES

There are several discourses about innovative organizational practices. One set of discourses is very public and appears in mainstream business and professional publications. In the 1990s, much of the professional and popular writing about internet support activities, including e-commerce, e-learning,