

Social Software and the Establishment of Virtual Communities of Practice in the Tourism Sector

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Summary

The concept of Communities of Practice can be seen as a central model that supports informal learning processes especially in workplace surroundings. Based on the assumption that Social Software tools and models are well suited to support collaboration within virtual networks, this paper aims to present and analyse the experiences made in the process of establishing Virtual Communities of Practice in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of the tourism sector in Europe (involving the application of Social Software tools).

SMEs can be seen as the backbone of regional prosperity and employment in Europe and their employees' professional development is often seen as a precondition to achieve innovations and to compete with other companies. However, small enterprises are often not able to address their employees' learning needs by developing or financing formal learning initiatives individually. Recent ideas on ICT-based learning include a blend of learning and working, resulting in the concept of learning at the workplace. These kinds of informal learning processes in organisations are aimed at learning around concrete problems.

Empirical research carried out in the framework of the LdV project Work&Learn Together (WLT) shows that Social Software can indeed facilitate and support communication processes within Communities of Practice. However, these tools are often rather to be seen as an additional channel of communication. The idea of establishing purely Virtual Communities of Practice in the tourism sector actually proved to be quite difficult. The feeling of competition in the sector was found to be much stronger than the actual need to learn collaboratively.

Nevertheless several fields in which Virtual Communities of Practice could be established to support existing structures of communication and learning as well as meet learners' needs were detected in the tourism sector. One central motivation for the implementation of Virtual Communities of Practice - especially in SMEs - is the fact that there is a need for tools which allow learning during working hours and at the workplace. Thus the attendance of formal training sessions, which often involve impractical traveling to training centres for employees in rural areas, can be avoided.

Keywords

Collaboration, Virtual Communities of Practice, Formal Learning, Informal Learning, SMEs, Tourism, Social Software, Web 2.0

1 Introduction / Rationale

Communities of practice (CoP) have become a very popular concept especially when it comes to learning at the workplace. The awareness that most work-related information is passed on informally at the workplace led to the support and fostering of Communities of Practice. Additionally, the almost ubiquitous availability of the Internet contributed to spread the idea of sharing knowledge and interests with like-minded people online. The establishment of Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP) combines these two principles and allows the sharing of knowledge without the restrictions of time and space, which may be regarded as a key factor for learning on-demand or just-in-time.

The concept of Communities of Practice can be seen as especially promising for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are regarded as the backbone of regional prosperity and employment in Europe (ENSR, 2004). At the same time employees' professional development is often seen as a precondition to achieve innovations and to compete with other companies. However, small enterprises are often not able to address their employees' learning needs by developing or financing formal learning initiatives individually. Additionally, some learning needs are even better addressed by informal learning processes, as they focus on the just-in-time solution of concrete problems in the daily business of SMEs (e.g. the initial training of new staff).

Formal learning	Informal learning
Typically provided by an education or training institution	Resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure
Structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support	Not structured (flexible) in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support
Leads to certification	Typically does not lead to certification
Intentional	May be intentional, but in most cases is non-intentional (incidental/random)

Fig. 1: Formal vs. informal learning (cf. European Commission 2001)

Recent ideas on ICT-based learning include a blend of learning and working, resulting in the concept of learning at the workplace. These kinds of informal learning processes in organisations, which are based on knowledge sharing, can be supported by the establishment of (virtual) Communities of Practice, thus avoiding the need of formal training processes. A basic assumption for this is the observation that Communities of Practice seem to have a positive influence on the learning processes of their members especially when these communities address work-related issues or are rooted in daily-work practices. Furthermore CoPs support the sharing of experiences and knowledge and account for the need of concrete problem solving at the workplace. One central motivation for the implementation of Virtual Communities of Practice is the fact that there is a need for tools which allow the support of informal learning during working hours, and thus avoid the attendance of formal training sessions in external training centres.

Most tourism SMEs involved in the virtual communities established in the framework of the Work&Learn Together (WLT) project are located in rural - often quite dispersed - areas and in fact show a general interest in sharing work-related experiences and good practices. Several fields within the tourism sector were detected in which Virtual Communities of Practice could be established to support existing structures of communication and learning as well as meet learners' needs. One central aim of the project is to facilitate communication and cooperation among the involved SMEs with the help of ICT. For this purpose online platforms were established which offer participants a variety of Social Software tools that are meant to support the establishment of Communities of Practice.

Based on the assumption that Social Software tools and models are well suited to support

collaboration within virtual networks, this paper aims to present and analyse the experiences made in the process of establishing and fostering Virtual Communities of Practice. Research findings of the project underline the assumption that Social Software can indeed facilitate and support communication processes for Communities of Practice. However, these tools are often rather to be seen as a further channel of communication added to the face-to-face interaction. The idea of establishing purely Virtual Communities of Practice in the tourism sector actually proved to be quite difficult. There is much more to Communities of Practice than sharing experiences online.

2 Characteristics of Online Communities

Before telecommunications technology became accessible to a large number of users the term community referred to a group of close-knit people who mainly lived in the same place. With the emergence of online tools that enable people to exchange ideas in a virtual environment, this concept of face-to-face community interaction has been further enriched by virtual interaction. These online communities may involve people from the same area who know each other personally, but at the same time interact on an international level with anonymous participants.

Whittaker & Issacs & O'Day (1997, p. 137) identified the following core characteristics of online communities, which however can also be considered valid in a face-to-face (offline) context:

- Members have a shared goal, interest, need, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community.
- Members engage in repeated, active participation and there are often intense interactions, strong emotional ties and shared activities occurring between participants.
- Members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources.
- Reciprocity of information, support and services between members is important.
- There is a shared context of social conventions, language, and protocols.

Communities in general are seen by their members to serve specific purposes. These purposes may be primarily of private nature, but communities are also a central concept to describe ties between professionals. In order to distinguish communities for professionals and people who share their knowledge and resources from special interest or support communities the term Communities of Practice (CoP) was introduced. Wenger & McDermott & Snyder (2002, p. 4) define CoPs as

"groups 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."

The most prominent definition of a Community of Practice was originally proposed by Wenger (1998) who defines a CoP according to three core dimensions: Joint Enterprise, Shared Repertoire and Mutual Engagement.

The perspective of Joint Enterprise is concerned with the objectives the community members set for themselves or which emerge in the process of community development. The Shared Repertoire involves the communal resources that have developed over time like routines, vocabulary, styles, etc. Mutual Engagement, finally, focuses on the interrelations of community members and the group identity that may be developed along the way.

The term Online Community of Practice thus involves an online platform where people share their knowledge and interests (primarily) on a virtual basis. Communication and knowledge sharing in this case are meant to be supported by software tools, often referred to by the term

“Social Software”. These tools allow cooperation and collaboration without restrictions from time and space. As described above, members of Online Communities of Practice may not even know each other personally but still fit the core dimensions of CoPs proposed by Wenger (1998).

3 Virtual Communities of Practice in the Tourism Sector - the Case of WLT

CoPs are not a new concept in the realm of workplace learning. However, only in the last couple of years did companies realise the importance of informal learning processes. This led to discussions on how knowledge communities could be actively supported in the workplace. In the 1990s CoPs were more and more regarded as the “invisible key to success” in human resources development and gained support in companies such as McDonald’s, Hewlett Packard, Siemens, IBM or Shell (Johanning et al., 2005).

Learning in the workplace is primarily characterised by social interaction and informal ways of learning. This process of learning through interaction can be seen as an integral part of Communities of Practice. Consequently, CoPs may be an effective way of providing information on-demand and support the solution of problems just-in-time. Besides that, ongoing discussions and the exchange of knowledge and resources within the community may also lead to the creation of new knowledge.

Taking into account the aspects mentioned above, the tourism sector provides several fields in which VCoPs could be established to support existing structures of communication and learning as well as meet learners' needs. Due to an often limited amount of resources available for structured training (both time and money) within SMEs in the tourism sector, a more flexible and effective approach towards learning and training is needed. Therefore, VCoPs may provide an opportunity to solve problems and support learning processes at the workplace through the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

The Work&Learn Together project (WLT), supported by the Leonardo-da-Vinci Programme of the European Commission, aims at the development and fostering of more than ten virtual CoPs involving SMEs of the tourist sector in the respective partner countries (Austria, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, The Netherlands). The SMEs targeted involve B&Bs, restaurants, hotels, spas, tourist farms as well as producers of local specialties. The majority of these enterprises are situated in often quite dispersed rural areas. The establishment of a virtual community that enables them to share their knowledge and experiences would thus allow them to improve their businesses and to develop common strategies also for regional development.

The following graphic describes the workflow of the WLT project from the analysis of users' needs to the actual implementation of VCoPs in the respective partner countries:

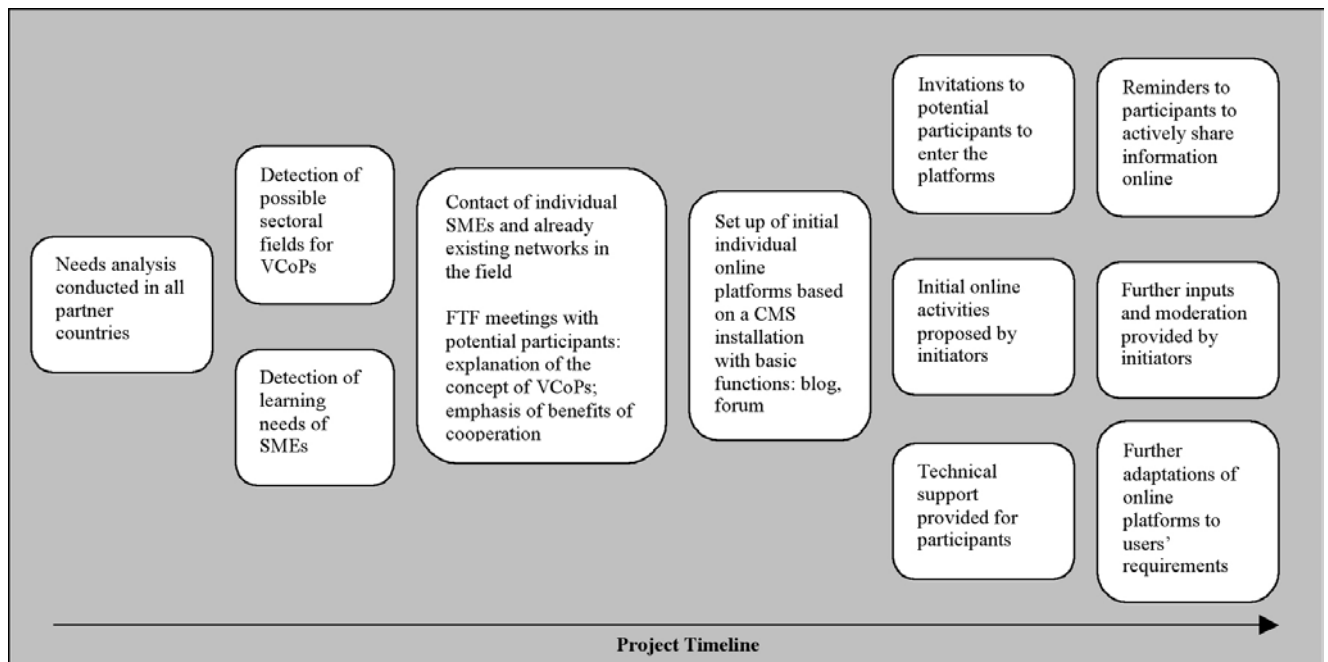


Fig. 2: Workflow of the WLT project

Data collected in the initial WLT survey on the needs and requirements of tourism companies shows that a culture of learning, sharing, problem solving and one in which informal learning takes place often already exists in the SMEs. This culture can serve as a basis for the implementation of a virtual community in a professional environment. Further results, however, also indicated that although people in the tourist industry mainly value being able to try new group-learning methods with other people from the same company, to a lesser extent, they also consider collaborating with other companies and organisations in the sector. This may also be due to the fact that they regard themselves as competitors, and often do not consider the advantages of sharing information and experiences with other organisations in the same sector.

3.1 Evaluation Data - Methodology

Initial data collection in the form of questionnaires focused on the learning needs of managers of SMEs operating in the tourism sector as well as their employees. These data then helped to detect the potentials for the establishment and fostering of Communities of Practice within the targeted SMEs.

For the purpose of evaluating the processes involved in the establishment and fostering of the virtual communities mainly qualitative data from the initiators and moderators of the supported CoPs was collected and analysed. These persons were asked to deliver descriptions of the individual processes and factors with regards to the context (regional, social, technological, etc.) and the activities conducted in the course of establishing the CoPs. Additionally, interviews and focus groups helped to identify key issues and problem areas associated to the process.

3.2 Learning Needs of SMEs involved in VCoPs

The majority of these enterprises are situated in often quite dispersed rural areas. VCoPs therefore can be seen as a reasonable approach to enable the businesses involved to share their knowledge despite their lack of face-to-face interaction.

The main learning need of the SMEs detected by the survey was the sharing of information and knowledge on various topics. Issues to be tackled ranged from marketing to customer

relations as well as the exchange of current information in a field which is subject to constant changes. Other issues of interest involved health and hygiene standards.

Another part of the SMEs - and probably the ones with the largest potential for a working CoP - saw the main purpose of the virtual community to be established in the possibility of sharing information with potential clients or collaborators, which is meant to strengthen tourism offers in remote areas. A successful example for such a community is the collaboration of rural tourist farms and producers of local specialities. Members of the community use the established (virtual) network to jointly work on the marketing of the whole rural region.

The establishment of a virtual community that enables SMEs to share their knowledge and experiences would thus allow them to improve their businesses and to develop common strategies also for regional development. The issue of marketing regions can be seen as especially important for SMEs in the tourism sector. More and more emphasis is laid on the branding of whole regions rather than individual businesses (cf. e.g. fusions of local tourist associations in the Tyrol region of Austria). In the light of these developments a Community of Practice model to share knowledge among various related SMEs of a region gains even more importance.

3.3 Support of VCoPs through Social Software Tools

In order to fully develop the potential of the concept of Communities of Practice learners need suitable pedagogical models as well as tools that fit the needs of social learning processes. "Learning on demand" and "just-in-time" need sufficient flexible and individualised learning tools and settings. Within the last couple of years "Web 2.0" and "Social Software" have become buzzwords that characterise the transformation of the Internet from a so called "read-web" to a "read-write-web" (O'Reilly, 2005). Social interaction and collaboration can be regarded as the main features that characterise the Web 2.0 concept. Because of their social and collaborative character, applications associated with Web 2.0 are often called Social Software. This collaborative character of Social Software tools makes them especially promising for the establishment and fostering of CoPs.

The targeted SMEs were initially offered a forum and in most cases an additional blog based on the open source CMS Drupal. These platforms were then also adapted to the respective needs and requirements of the tourism companies involved. The online platforms were meant to foster communication among the target groups and serve as a channel to inform each other on new and relevant developments in the respective field. Additionally, people were asked to share and discuss best practices that could be useful to the tourist companies operating in the same region. In some cases Instant Messaging software (e.g. Skype) proved to be quite helpful as an additional medium to share information in a quick and effective manner.

At an initial stage participants were asked by the respective initiators of the online platforms to complete certain activities online, in order to get acquainted with the tools. These activities ranged from personal introductions in the forum or blog to the discussion of topics found relevant by participants. Furthermore, participants were reminded time and again to actively share information online so that it would be available to the whole group. In some cases this active role of the initiators was not needed anymore after some time when discussions online became more elaborate and participants more actively used the tools provided for the exchange of current information with regards to their businesses.

It is quite important to mention, however, that the software tools offered were rather to be seen as an additional channel of communication within the CoPs. In most cases - probably the more successful ones - "conventional" forms of communication were found to be even more fruitful and important in the formation of the community than the online tools provided. Regular face-to-face meetings of the group as well as reminders on the telephone for people

to get more involved online proved to be necessary and effective in order to establish and foster a working online community.

In terms of digital literacy it turned out that although many employees use the Internet or computers for tasks like hotel reservations and travel bookings, they have a lack of knowledge when it comes to online applications apart from that. Generally speaking, thus, the concept of blogs and forums was quite new to the people and they had to be taught how to use these tools for the purpose of knowledge sharing. This lack of knowledge obviously resulted in resistance towards the usage of such technology and potential participants were not able to see the actual advantage it could bring them. Besides, the concept of online interaction was perceived as somehow cold and distanced by some and therefore also less suited for knowledge sharing than face-to-face interaction. Consequently, a great amount of (technical) support had to be given to these people in addition to explanations why the usage of this technology would be particularly helpful to them.

Besides the technical problems encountered by individuals, one should not neglect the restrictions or lack of adequate technical infrastructure especially in rural areas. One major drawback concerning online communication in rural areas can be found in the very limited broadband penetration. This does not necessarily have to be an issue for the use of forums and blogs, but e.g. synchronous communication via VoIP is almost impossible in these areas. The same applies to the sharing of documents with a certain file size.

The process of getting people involved in the online communities to be developed and fostered, generally speaking, proved to be quite difficult apart from the lack of technical knowledge already mentioned above. Although the initial survey conducted among tourism enterprises detected a need of a flexible approach towards learning, which incorporates informal learning and problem solving, they did not really see learning as a collaborative process that involves their peers. Other tourism companies in the same region were rather seen as competitors with whom knowledge sharing was not found to be sensible. Therefore, potential participants often did not see a need for an online Community of Practice. Although informal learning possibilities are generally regarded valuable to learn within the businesses, nevertheless the fear of giving away one's knowledge seems to be stronger than the prospect of gaining additional knowledge through collaboration with businesses in the same field.

4 Conclusions and Implications

Communities of practice are meant to support sharing of information and to foster processes of informal learning. Social software tools on the other hand enable participants of Communities of Practice to expand their communication processes onto a virtual environment. Virtual Communities of Practice therefore seem to provide an effective way of sharing knowledge and experiences among peers. Research in the framework of the WLT project showed that tourism enterprises are in fact in need of effective informal ways of learning and knowledge sharing. However, the quite ambitious aim to "create" a number of Virtual Communities of Practice from scratch turned out to be even harder than envisaged. Generally speaking, the CoP itself can hardly be created, however, community-building processes can be fostered and supported also by providing virtual communication and collaboration technologies. Social software, though, should rather be seen as an additional tool to facilitate community-building processes besides the often necessary face-to-face interaction among community members.

Although the concept and the advantages of sharing knowledge in Virtual Communities of Practice may be quite clear to the researcher, SMEs in tourism, however, often were not able to see an actual advantage in such a community. The feeling of competition in the sector proved to be much stronger than the actual need to learn collaboratively. Additionally, some people felt quite reluctant to use online tools for sharing and learning, which were unfamiliar

to them, and considered online contributions as extra workload. Therefore, SMEs first of all need to be made aware of the specific benefits for their businesses, which may not be instantly visible. Finding and defining common (learning) needs of SMEs can thus be regarded the most essential step in getting individuals involved in (virtual) CoPs. Furthermore, potential participants need to be convinced of the principle of a CoP, which is the sharing of information in order to be able to gain from each other's experiences, rather than lose by giving away inside knowledge.

The most successful communities were indeed the ones that managed to clearly define the advantages generated by collaboration. They realised that they can learn from each other and gain from a joint marketing of the whole region and its distinctiveness. The complementary nature of businesses - e.g. a collaboration of accommodation facilities with producers of local specialities - proved to be an important factor of success for the community building process. Therefore, using a CoP model to foster regional development through the collaboration and knowledge-sharing of SMEs in the tourism sector can be regarded as a fruitful path to follow, if one succeeds in engaging individual enterprises in the community.

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