Degenerative structures which inhibit the emergence of Communities of Practice: A Case Study of Knowledge Management in the British Council.

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A version of this paper was published in the

Abstract

This paper presents the British Council’s knowledge management strategy. It outlines how, as part of this strategy, the organisation attempted to engender communities of practice among a strategically significant group spread across the 110 countries in which the organisation operates. Using a case study of this group, the paper explores “degenerative structures” which impact on the ability to engender communities of practice and, through consideration of issues of individualisation and risk, highlights a series of paradoxes which inhibited this organisation’s attempt to move from a “hub-and-spoke” structure to become a networked organisation in which communities of practice flourish.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Communities of Practice, Cultural Relations, Risk, Individualisation

Introduction

This paper describes how the implementation of a knowledge management system within the British Council faltered. It examines reasons for this failure given that the implementers had a good understanding of the common pitfalls of such projects and worked hard to avoid them. The implementers had attempted to develop the conditions by which a “community of practice” might emerge among a strategically significant group of employees, something argued to be beneficial for knowledge creation and sharing within the literature (Wenger, 1998, Lave and Wenger, 1991, Brown and Duguid, 1991). The paper explores degenerative structures that
might have undermined this implementation, and describes such degenerative structures in order that Information Systems scholars and practitioners might consider such factors in the future.

The paper does not consider communities of practice as capable of management in any rationalistic manner since they are self-selecting fluid social relationships, and so perhaps unmanageable (Swan et al., 2002, Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Instead we ascribe to Thompson’s assertion that organisations can “sponsor the creation of certain loose organizational structures around which it is hoped that communities of practice may then interact” (Thompson, 2005) and we employ the term engender to describe this process. Our research question might hence be described as ‘In the context of a global not-for-profit organisation, what factors enable or inhibit the emergence of communities of practice when new communications mechanisms (in the form of discussion group technologies) are provided?’

The British Council provides a unique and relevant organisational context within which to explore this research question. It is, according to its “brand statement”, the UK’s cultural relations organisation with a purpose to “win recognition abroad for the UK’s values, ideas and achievements, and to nurture lasting, mutually beneficial relationships with other countries”. As a not-for-profit organisation it is against this purpose that the organisation is judged and receives its major funding from the UK government (Lee, 1995). It has headquarters in London and Manchester, administering a network of 257 overseas offices in 110 countries. As a truly global organisation that aims to connect overseas individuals with the knowledge, learning, culture and expertise of the UK, the British Council could conventionally be described as a knowledge organisation (Newell et al., 2002). Its not-for-profit status also increases its value for research since such organisations have been less researched within knowledge management (Capozzi et al., 2003). The British Council’s global presence meant that Internet technology formed the most significant communications infrastructure within the organisation. The organisation specialises in knowledge related activities such as individual networking, teaching, organising conferences and promoting the arts and sciences.

This paper describes the introduction of an Internet based knowledge management system with the aim of engendering the emergence of a community of practice among a strategically significant group within the British Council. Through this case study the paper contributes to the ongoing debate concerning the use of ICT in supporting the emergence of communities of practice. Such literature has usually presented a positive view of communities of practice (Swan et al., 2002) and our ability to use ICT to engender them (Ackerman and Halverson, 2004, Wenger, 2001), and yet there is an increasing literature which challenges this optimism (Huysman and Wulf, 2005) arguing that it somewhat ignores the affect of power, control and wider social conditions (Fox, 2000, Blackler and McDonald, 2000, Swan et al., 2002, Thompson, 2005, Wenger et al., 2002, Alavi et al., 2006, Roberts, 2006). We highlight a tension between the desire to bring about communities of practice; the ambitions and goals of individuals; and the wider organisation’s strategic vision for Knowledge Management (Swanson and Ramiller, 1997): an area of research called for by a range of authors (Butler, 2002, Bacon and Fitzgerald, 1996, Alavi and Leidner, 2001, Scarbrough, 1999, Wickramasinghe, 2002).

The next section of the paper reviews the literature relevant to this study, after which we describe the methodology employed. This is followed by the case study and its analysis using a relevant framework. The paper then presents tentative conclusions.
Literature Review

Literature suggests that learning is a social participatory activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in which communities of practice spontaneously emerge (Lesser and Everest, 2001) as contexts within which knowledge is created and shared (Brown and Duguid, 1991, Wenger, 1998). This learning is achieved through the active relationships individuals have with others, and is closely associated with work practices (Brown and Duguid, 2001a). Organisations thus consist of collection of heterogeneous communities of practice alongside formal organisational structures, acknowledging that some communities may span organisations (Brown and Duguid, 2001a).

Communities of practice are the context within which learning and innovation occurs and is shared. Their existence is thus argued to be a desirable aspiration for global organisations (Orr, 1996); as Wenger suggests: “Companies have found that the most used, and useful, knowledge bases were integrated into the work of one or more communities… [they are] the ideal social structure for “stewarding” knowledge” (Wenger et al., 2002). Since “communities of practice” are linked to learning, and learning is an emergent process, so it is argued that “communities of practice” are themselves emergent and evolutionary in nature (Wenger, 1998). It is therefore unsurprising that supporting communities of practice through the use of knowledge management systems has received considerable interest (Venters, 2006a, Wenger et al., 2002, Sambamurthy and Subramani, 2005, Bergquist and Ljungberg, 2001, Brown and Duguid., 1998), and indeed Etienne Wenger has produced a review of technology which he considers appropriate to this task (Wenger, 2001). Yet there is no intrinsic characteristic to define knowledge management system (Hendriks, 2001), rather they are defined by their use. The use of technology to engender communities suggests a focus on personalisation (Hansen et al., 1999), to “recognise the tacit basis of all sense-reading and sense-giving activities, and to try to make these activities more meaningful and valuable to all parties” (Walsham, 2001) in order to “reconcile the informational features of computer technology with the social needs of individuals engaged in knowledge work” (Venters, 2006b). For a community of practice to exist a repertoire of communications possibilities must be in place (perhaps through ICT), alongside an effective social structure (Wenger, 1998).

In order to engender communities of practice Wenger suggests seven principles (Wenger et al., 2002) which should be cultivated, broadly: events, leadership, connectivity, membership, rhythm, projects and artefacts (see also (Lesser and Everest, 2001, Brown and Duguid, 2001b)), which in turn suggest seven potential uses of knowledge management systems (Venters, 2006b); to allow users to dictate the content and use of the system; to allow an open dialogue between members and the wider organisation; to allow different amounts of participation; to provide private and public spaces; to be familiar to the users and exciting; to have an ongoing rhythm or tempo such as milestones and events; and to support debates.

Engendering a community of practice does not simply concern technical issues, it is also necessary to consider the way in which knowledge is created within such a social setting (Newell et al., 2000). In this research we draw upon a social constructivist perspective in our analysis in order to avoid the usual dichotomy between overtly subjectivist perspectives on knowledge management and more conventional objectivist stances (Schultze and Leidner, 2002). The study is thus placed within the interpretive research tradition, presenting its analysis through the views of participants. The paper recognizes a continuum of intersubjective social consciousness (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, Schultze, 2000) as being necessary for a coherent reflection on
knowledge management practice (Hansen et al., 1999). Social reality is understood to be an ongoing dialectical process in which individuals both externalize their being into the social world, and simultaneously internalize the social world as objective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Individuals act on the basis of their interpretation of the world, so enacting social realities and endowing them with meaning. Within the context of their ongoing social interactions communities emerge. These communities of practice are hence fundamentally interactive (Yanow, 2000) and are founded upon the identity of individuals within the community. According to Wenger (1998) “building an identity consists of a negotiation of meaning of our experience of membership in social communities.” He goes further to suggest that “it is a mistaken dichotomy to wonder whether the unit of analysis of identity should be the community or the person” and further highlights the importance of the wider business context on the sense of identity of the community. This suggests that the lived experience of an organisational employee is strongly influenced by their understanding of the organisational context within which they reside.

As human activity (and thus knowledge) consists of a constant negotiation of meaning, participation and reification within a range of communities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, Wenger, 1998) and communities of practice are socially constructed labels for emergent configurations of individuals (Wenger, 1998), so events and perturbations can either stabilise or destabilise a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Indeed a community cannot achieve complete stability since change is an on-going part of practice and cannot be forced (Wenger, 1998). A community of practice is therefore a highly unstable social configuration which is influenced by the context within which it resides and the power relations within that community. This criticism is noted by Fox (2000) who states that a community “is seen as an outcome of a process of local struggle and that struggle is many-faceted involving the self acting upon itself, as well as upon others and upon the material world”. Communities of practice cannot be divorced from the social and political structures within which they reside and any consideration of the engendering of communities of practice should consider such a wider context. It is this so called “ethical entailments of practice” which distinguish the “can/can’t” from the “will/won’t” of knowledge flow within such a global organisational context (Duguid, 2005). Roberts (2006) has argued that research is required which considers the broad socio-cultural environment’s impact on communities of practice (Roberts, 2006), including the relative weight given to the individual versus the community. Further she asks “how do communities of practice interact with the formal structure of an organisation?” Through its interpretive case study this paper seeks to respond to her call.

**Research Methodology**

As part of the implementation of the British Council’s knowledge management strategy a participative action research project was carried out by the researcher to develop knowledge management applications. Drawing on this research project an interpretive case study (Walsham, 2000) is reported here on the failure of one particular knowledge management system (titled CD:net). This aimed to engender a community of practice among a strategically significant group of Country Directors (introduced in detail in the next section). The researcher was given excellent access to this group, to the wider knowledge management programme, and to the decision making processes. Over fifty semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were conducted and the vast majority transcribed verbatim. Interviews were between thirty minutes and three hours, the majority being around one hour. They were conducted with UK staff involved in knowledge management, senior staff in the UK involved
in IT policy, senior staff in the UK involved in managing overseas operations (so-called policy directors), with overseas Country Directors, and with many of the their immediate staff. Interviews were undertaken in British Council offices in the UK, Slovenia, South Korea, Hungary, France and Spain. In addition the researcher attended a large number of meetings, shadowed key staff, participated in the knowledge management team and was provided access to the organisation’s Intranet and key documents.

The research focused upon the way in which the social actions of individuals are internalized, expressed and inscribed as products of human action within a community of practice. While others have appreciated the need to consider the wider cultural context within which knowledge management occurs (Alavi et al., 2006, Schultze and Boland, 2000), such studies have generally imposed external theoretical constructs upon their analysis. In contrast this study explored the wider environmental influences on individuals within the organisation through a methodology (Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981, Checkland and Scholes, 1990)) which aims to “bring rigour to the subjective” (Checkland, 2002) and sought to identify how the multiple perspectives of the various stakeholders were both surfaced and then used to construct the different interpretations of the organisation’s knowledge management initiative. This enabled reflection upon the case study in light of such interpretations, and so effectively explore the external influences on the CD:net initiative. Analysis of the interview material was explorative, and intended to generate insights into the activity undertaken by the staff and to understand the role KM technology might play in this. In order to analyse the material SSM was used to construct models of the context as tools “of an epistemological kind which can be used in a process of exploration within social reality” (Checkland, 1981). These resultant conceptual models were employed to identify themes within the empirical material, which were then revisited in order to construct the interpretive analysis presented here. Soft Systems methodology was considered particularly relevant to this study because of its interpretive nature, and its focus on the various interpretive perspectives of relevant parties.

The case study is presented by first describing the wider organisational context, then describing the organisation’s knowledge management strategy, and finally describing an interpretive framework, based on the strategy, which was developed through the analysis and is used here to structure our analysis.

**Case study**

Faced with a diverse range of activities and distributed across 110 countries it is not surprising that the British Council perceived the sharing and development of knowledge to be of paramount importance to its future success. Further, at the time of this study, the organisation faced pressure to changes its practices in response to a Government spending review. The review dictated that the Council must shift from a primary focus on influencing strategic decision makers overseas through close relationships with individuals, to an approach that embraced new technologies and techniques in reaching a “wider public”. In achieving this goal the senior management of the organisation appreciated the need “to design and implement measures which will encourage people working in the Council to generate and share information and knowledge in ways which advance [the organisation’s] purpose and strategic objectives and will become a permanent feature of the way we work” (internal memo 1999). In particular, it was felt that there were many knowledgeable individuals working within the organisation, particularly in overseas offices, whose expertise was not being used beyond their local country.
A significant influence on this view was the belief that the organisation was structured as a “hub-and-spoke”. This phrase was widely used to describe the organisation’s communications and control structure where overseas offices would generally communicate with the headquarters operation in the UK, rather than having significant contact with other overseas offices. The organisation’s knowledge management strategy was thus focused upon enhancing communication to enable more direct contact between overseas offices based on the belief that the knowledge necessary to respond to the strategic change resided overseas, and that the current structure was an inhibitor to the Council becoming a learning-organisation. It is clear that knowledge management was not being approached by the organisation simply as a “fad”, and contrasts with the suggestion that many organisations embrace the subject in this way (Davenport and Grover, 2001, Galliers and Newell, 2001, Swan et al., 1999).

The Knowledge Management Strategy

The organisation’s knowledge management strategy was based around a number of themes: making the most of the technology; building teams; access to information; improving quality; putting your ideas into practice; values and behaviours which support knowledge sharing. The strategy was an organised and planned response to the problems outlined in the previous section. It outlined a three-stage change programme:

- **Stage 1:** making the most of a new technology infrastructure.
- **Stage 2:** a knowledge sharing programme to support the current organisational goals of the organisation.
- **Stage 3:** a knowledge and learning strategy with the aim of transforming the organisation such that knowledge management practices are core to the organisation’s principles.

The first stage aimed to exploit a recently upgraded and standardised global IT infrastructure. It focused on training individuals to make use of this new infrastructure, in particular, Microsoft Outlook as an e-mail client and global address book, and developing a new Intranet site (including the addition of intranet-groupware tools). It was assumed that once such an infrastructure had been put in place, so breaking down the communications barriers between areas of the organisation, then new forms of communication could emerge (Wenger, 2001, Huysman and Wulf, 2005).

The second stage, running concurrently with the first, was perhaps the most recognisable as a knowledge management initiative. Its aim was to exploit existing cross-departmental, inter-regional collaboration and to extend this behaviour across the Council in order to create a “comprehensively networked organisation”. A knowledge management team was established with the aim of “finding the best ways of supporting group activity…analysing the groups’ knowledge needs and encouraging access by others to their skills and knowledge” in particular using both the Internet and the Intranet since “the main feature of the immediate future will be the growth in the use of the intranet and e-mail” (Khalid and Marsden, 1999).

The third stage provided a longer term strategic vision for knowledge management, building on the lessons from the first two stages and essentially arguing that expanding the boundaries of its activities would require the organisation to generate capacity for effectively innovating and learning a core capability of the organisation (Khalid and Marsden, 1999). “This strand supports planning to equip the Council with the knowledge, expertise
and processes required to support an increased customer base and the capacity to maintain contact with a large number of people over time” (Khalid and Marsden, 1999).

As part of the second stage of this strategy the organisation attempted to engender a community of practice among a group identified by the Chief Knowledge Officer as the most strategically significant – the Country Directors. Country Directors are responsible for managing all British Council activity within a country. Their work is highly varied and includes liaising with governments, entertaining VIPs, organising high-level events, and general planning and management (Lee, 1995).

The intervention for this group was based on a belief that communities of practice would be desirable in improving the organisation by moving it beyond its “hub and-spoke” structure, and therefore that it was worthwhile attempting to bring them about among Country Directors. Initial research within the organisation (through a questionnaire by the Chief Knowledge Officer) suggested strong support among Country Directors for improved communications among them, and it was hoped that this indicated a potential for communities of practice to emerge if such a need was met (as suggested by (Hackett, 2002) and discussed in the literature review). The knowledge sharing team drew on literature asserting that organisations need to “cultivate communities of practice actively and systematically” (Wenger et al., 2002), and that this is achieved through “structuring spontaneity” (Brown and Duguid, 2001b). This essentially advocated sponsorship rather than control (Thompson, 2005) by which organisations can create an environment in which communities of practice can prosper. To do this the knowledge management team drew on Wenger’s (2002, , 2000) seven principles for cultivating communities (introduced in the literature review). Connectivity and membership were provided in the form of an easy to access and use group discussion technology (CD:net) exclusively for Country Directors and tailored to their needs. A recently retired Country Director was hired as a consultant to act in a leadership role among the community, and to initiate discussions, projects and to produce shared artefacts with the group using CD:net. Many ‘events’ already existed for Country Directors in the form of annual conferences and various training events which brought them together.

It should be noted that the knowledge management team who introduced the groupware tools did not have the authority to dictate the involvement of Country Directors; indeed knowledge is associated with cognition and thus individuals have a choice, so it may not be possible to acquire such authority. Whilst people may comply with a knowledge management strategy such compliance does not necessarily mean that knowledge is being shared (Snowden, 2002, Snowden, 2001). The knowledge management team thus attempted to encourage, rather than mandate, the development of communities from amongst the groups of individuals based on the assumption that existing institutional structures prevented direct communication between them. It was assumed that a lack of communications technology was inhibiting the evolution of “communities of practice” and that its introduction might thus lead to the emergence of such communities (Pan and Leidner, 2003, Von-Krogh et al., 2000, Wenger and Snyder, 2000, Wenger et al., 2002, Thompson, 2005). It was however acknowledged that other institutional factors might be inhibiting the evolution of such a community of practice and would therefore influence the outcome of the intervention.

Prior to its launch CD:net had been strongly supported by the Country Directors but after its launch it was only used for a couple of months and then participation dropped until the system was forgotten. The development of CD:net formed part of the implementation of the organisation’s knowledge management strategy, and we take
CD:net’s failure as the unit of analysis, and turn to the strategic aspirations (as expressed in the knowledge management strategy) in framing our reflections on CD:net. In this way we identify degenerative structures which potentially inhibited the success of the CD:net technology, and of the attempt to engender a community of practice. The paper critically evaluates the steps suggested by Wenger in “cultivating communities of practice” (Wenger et al., 2002); evaluates the broader knowledge-sharing programme of the British Council; and explores how existing institutional arrangements may significantly inhibit attempts to engender communities of practice.

In undertaking such an analysis we reflect back upon the organisational strategy in order to structure the case study, as its three themes were dominant areas within our SSM analysis. Since this strategy represented the knowledge management team’s appreciation of the deficiencies in the organisation’s knowledge practices and its aim to improve these deficiencies, so employing its structure to frame our case study allows us to reflect upon these deficiencies in light of the CD:net intervention. In particular we categorise the reflections in terms of those which concern individuals’ engagement with technology as a communication medium, those which concern the desire to engender a community of practice, and finally those which concern the desire to transform the organisation through knowledge management.

We present the analysis as three interrelated ‘levels’ reflecting these three stages of the strategy. The term ‘level’ is employed as recursive and embedded behaviour identified within the strategic whole, rather than hierarchical orderings with an implied superior-inferior relationship. They are conceptual devices reflecting our use of SSM in post hoc analysis, rather than ontological statements of reality.

Structuring the reflections in this way also reflects ongoing debates in the social constructionist discourses on knowledge management, in which knowledge is inseparable from the individual knower and their inscription in technological systems (Boland et al., 1994, Tsoukas, 1996), knowledge is created and shared within “communities/groups for learning” (Kogut and Zander, 1996, Wenger, 1998), and finally knowledge is influenced by “organisational transformation” (Schultze and Leidner, 2002) and the sense of identity and boundary to the group (Wenger, 2000).

The first level of analysis briefly reflects on the role knowledge management technology has in shaping individual practice and in engendering a sense of community. It considers whether globally distributed communities of practice can indeed be supported with groupware technologies.

The second level focuses on individuals’ involvement in communities of practice, exploring the factors that may inhibit their emergence within the British Council (so reflecting the organisation’s desire to engender communities of practice). This level of analysis explores degenerative factors which inhibit (and contrast with) the view that communities engender trust and a commitment to the organisation (Lesser and Everest, 2001), so drawing upon, and contributing to more negative views of conflict and negotiation within communities (Contu and Willmot, 2003).

The final level focuses on the organisational desire to become a “learning organisation” through engendering communities of practice, and individuals’ influence on these strategic aims. This analysis explores the factors that influenced the British Council to have this desire, and to translate this into a need to engender communities of practice. By contrasting this desire with the changing reality of individual working practices the paper
reintroduces the often-lacking situatedness of individuals within their wider organisational context (Contu and Willmot, 2003).

**Level 1: Individuals’ engagement with Knowledge Management technology.**

Within the British Council there had been significant investment in new IT technology in the period prior to CD:net. Much of this centred around standardisation of the desktop computer infrastructure, partly in response to the Y2K problems, but also as a means of improving the organisations knowledge sharing and reducing costs. Under the title of a “Global Technology Initiative”, it provided a “global platform” of Microsoft applications and allowed access to Intranet websites and discussion boards (such as CD:net).

Within the knowledge management team it was understood that individuals have choice over whether to use such discussion boards (Wasko et al., 2000, Ciborra, 1996), and that in order to bring about ongoing involvement with online communities it would be necessary for them to become a habitual, comfortable and standard part of employees work practice (Winograd and Flores, 1986, Wenger, 2001). The failure of CD:net to become an established part of Country Directors practices could therefore certainly be cited as inhibiting the emergence of the desired communities of practice. It is also true that CD:net’s technology was considered by some as inappropriate and difficult to use with Country Directors complaining that CD:net required them to click on a desktop-shortcut in order to access the system. One Country Director said that his “first impression [was] that it was something separate… I won’t use CD:net if it is something separate from the e-mail system”.

Within the knowledge management strategy it was acknowledged that there is a “general absence of a systematic culture of knowledge sharing” and “low levels of exploitation of the potential of our ICT system”, and CD:net was one of the responses to this problem. Were such discussion group technologies a habitual part of Country Directors’ practices then the CD:net initiative would be redundant. The technology’s failure was not simply a result of a poorly designed knowledge management system (Galliers and Swan, 2000). Indeed the IT department considered themselves quite innovative and “fairly receptive to new ideas” and in its design it was intended that CD:net should integrate with the E-mail system, unfortunately this was not technically possible as it would not conform with the organisation’s Intranet standards. Indeed these standards restricted the form the technology could take such that some Country Directors perceived CD:net simply as a website, and hence an information providing service, rather than as a discussion or communication space.

The CD:net services were further constrained because at the time of this study the British Council did not have a global private network since the cost of covering 110 countries would have been prohibitive. Instead it was forced to rely on the internet as its global communications backbone. This created problems with bandwidth and performance as some countries internet bandwidth was severely limited. For CD:net this led to complaints about the speed of the service “it’s only a few clicks, but yesterday it wouldn’t open, the speed was so slow that the technology got in the way of opening it, and I haven’t got time to sit around for five minutes waiting for a web page to be timed out”. While CD:net aimed to provide the “connectivity” deemed necessary for the emergence of communities of practice these problems were argued by Country Directors to be inhibiting its use and creating breakdown (Ciborra, 2002, Winograd and Flores, 1986).

This appears to confirm the general held belief that engendering communities of practice often fails because of inappropriate technology, and that knowledge management systems cannot support communities, but only information sharing (Galliers and Newell, 2001, Swan et al., 1999). Yet history shows that employees within
the British Council have overcome such breakdown in the past, employing far less ready-to-hand technologies such as the telex, posted memos and the fax-machine extensively in developing a sense of community. For the British Council ICT including the Intranet formed the central facility for cross-organisational communication, and even though such communications infrastructures were rarely ideal, they were extensively used. While some Country Directors found the technology difficult (relying on secretaries to print e-mail and web pages for reading), many Country Directors admitted being happy to read English newspapers, use Hotmail, and participate in other difficult to use discussion groups on similarly slow and difficult internet connections. One Country Director even stated “I have to drag myself back because I really want to play with these gee-whiz toys”.

Precedence for such technology providing such a shift in the social practices of the Council’s employees had also been demonstrated by the successful introduction of the fax machine and e-mail. One interviewee in South Korea recounted how the arrival of the fax machine suddenly meant that they could send questions and post memos to London for immediate response. This facility enabled them to participate in a dialogue about planning rather than simply awaiting “orders” sent slowly via the diplomatic bag. They recalled how “when I first entered this office I couldn’t dream of an intranet or the internet or e-mail. At the time the fax was marvellous, we were quite satisfied with just using the fax machine”. In contrast to this view a senior director based in London complained that the fax machine had made his job far worse because he had less time to think and was at the “beck and call” of the overseas offices. He described how since the introduction of the fax machine he was in less control of his time and needed to respond to overseas offices more. Similarly, the development of local country websites had meant that the organisation’s headquarters were forced to consult overseas offices about changes to the corporate website.

We cannot simply dismiss the failure of CD:net because of its somewhat difficult technology, rather perhaps, its failure is symptomatic of the knowledge management concern CD:net intended to improve. If individuals feel motivated to participate in a community they will overcome difficult technology. This leads us to consider individuals’ engagement with each other in our analysis, and hence to explore the lack of Country Directors’ interaction as a community.

**Level 2: Individuals’ involvement in communities of practice.**

It is perhaps significant that Country Directors did not appear to exhibit the natural characteristics of a community of practice. The knowledge management strategy highlighted this, stating that across the organisation there were “Inadequate habits of and systems for knowledge sharing within communities of practice”. Wenger suggests that such natural characteristics include mutual engagement in similar practices, undertaking joint enterprises and a shared repertoire of knowledge (Wenger, 1998, Wenger, 2000).

Reflecting upon the intervention, it would appear that the lack of engagement by the Country Directors with CD:net was perhaps not surprising since their purposeful activity was focused primarily on the operations of the British Council within their particular country and this was not collectively undertaken with other Country Directors – they acted as “spokes”. They did not appear to have a shared repertoire of skills since they often took different approaches to their work. They did not collectively develop or use artefacts associated with being a Country Director. This is not to say however that they wished to operate in this manner. A questionnaire of Country Directors received a great amount of support for creating a sense of community. One Country Director
suggested “anything which can help counter the sense of isolation that Country Director’s sometimes (often?) experience… would be beneficial” while many others wrote highly supportive messages of CD:net such as “this is an excellent and most welcome facility”.

One is thus led to ask how it is that such senior individuals, undertaking broadly similar activities and generally very supportive of the initiative, did not possess a far greater propensity to become a community of practice and to challenge their own isolationist practices? The CD:net interventions were undertaken in a controlled, thoughtful manner by a team who were fully aware of the lessons from the literature on knowledge management. It appeared that the development of the interventions had not been limited by budget or by the availability of communications technology but by the institutional factors that influenced and inhibited the development of “communities of practice” – including the existing work practices of Country Directors.

During the interventions, it appeared that Country Directors, and the knowledge management team, were strongly influenced by the latent features of the organisation, in particular by its perceived “hub-and-spoke” nature; the very features that the move towards communities of practice aimed to reduce. The perceived “hub-and-spoke” structure was however argued to be central to the organisation’s functioning, indeed Lee argues “the critical feature of the Council is that it is a head-quarters administering a network of offices overseas” (Lee, 1995). It is unsurprising then that Country Directors did not share practices, seldom communicated together, and did not produce shared artefacts. We should also acknowledge that the CD:net initiative itself reflected this latent social structure as it consisted of the “hub” of developers constructing technology for the “spokes”. Given the British Council’s long history and its success over many years whilst structured in such a way, why then did the senior management within the British Council consider knowledge sharing, the engendering of communities of practice, and the conversion of the “hub and spoke” structure into a more networked structure, to be effective means of addressing its external pressures? Why did they wish to change the organisation’s structure in this way? Why and how was this desire to change translated into a desire to develop a community of practice among Country Directors? Answers to these questions perhaps lie within the changing nature of both the social world and the world of cultural diplomacy which influenced the British Council at this time.

The British Council’s history has been strongly influenced by its historical role in providing propaganda and of imposing influence from the UK (Cull, 2003, Donaldson, 1984). This role required an organisation to be structured around a strong central hub providing information, propaganda and comment to overseas offices. The modern world however has shifted in such a way that the west now influences culture in foreign countries through trans-global corporations, the media, language and the Internet more than through institutions such as the British Council (Giddens, 1999). The senior management within the British Council however strongly argued that it was these very influences that meant that the world still needed the British Council, since they argued that globalisation and cultural imperialism required a body to provide balance to opinions of people across the world towards the UK (Taylor, 2003). It was this change of role that was the basis for the organisation’s strategic change and the knowledge management strategy (Taylor, 2003).

The British Council’s strategic change initiative argued that modern cultural diplomacy must concern itself with the development of mutual understanding (British-Council, 2000, Taylor, 2003); “mutuality is central to the work of the British Council, our belief in internationalism stems from an appreciation of the interdependence of today’s world” (British-Council, 2002). Indeed the Council states that its modus operandi is one of dialogue
based on mutuality and shared benefit (Green, 2002). According to a speech by the Director General, “a sense of community, and the mutual respect this brings, grows out of shared experience and memories. By creating opportunities for shared experience between peoples of different cultures, the foundations are laid for bridging cultural gaps and expanding cross-cultural understanding” (Green, 2002). Such a focus on mutuality requires a more networked, interacting organisation where the outlying offices lead communication, rather than the traditional “hub-and-spoke” structure of the British Council.

Both the knowledge sharing strategy and the wider organisational strategy thus represented an attempt to refocus the structure of the organisation away from its historical roots in order to face such challenges. For the British Council it was insufficient for the proponents of knowledge management to argue that knowledge creation could only occur within a community, when such a community did not exist across this “hub-and-spoke” organisation. The organisation needed a way of changing its existing practices and felt that the formation of communities of practice represented the route to achieve this. The Knowledge Team thus needed to try to encourage the development of “communities of practice” even if this proved to be problematic in practice. Indeed, the latent organisational structure and the interpretive frameworks (Polanyi, 1962) did not simply constrain attempts to develop communities of practice they also highlighted its perceived necessity and compelled the organisation to change no matter how difficult.

Moving away from a focus on the pressures on the organisational structure, one is also able to identify individual actions which inhibited the changes sought by the knowledge sharing strategy. For individuals also made sense of this intervention on the basis of their historical interpretation of the organisation (Weick, 1995), and their social construction of meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

At the same time that the British Council was placing pressure on Country Directors and other employees to change their work, and to engender communities of practice, the organisation had increased their personal insecurity as part of its wider strategic change programme. The British Council had been through a period of significant downsizing in the early nineties, and in particular a 1995 review which restructured the organisation with a 25 per cent reduction of staff in the United Kingdom (Lee, 1995) leading to a significant reduction in the capacity of headquarters to support overseas offices. This downsizing left the headquarters far smaller and less able to cope with the demands placed on it by its reliant “spokes”. Such changes led to a decline in the loyalty felt towards the organisation (something Hallier and James (1997) noted in response to downsizing), an increasing individualisation (Beck, 1992) where people concentrated on their own, rather than collective, problems, and an increasing concern with the risk to their jobs. As a Country Director stated: “the organisation is spread across the globe, but local directors must focus on local issues”.

In response to such problems the organisation turned to knowledge management to reintroduce a sense of community with the aspiration of developing a culture of knowledge sharing, peer support and openness in a safe enclave (Hayes and Walsham, 2000). And yet in such circumstances individuals can exhibit the potential to subvert organisational initiatives (Miles et al., 1998) and to create conflict within the organisation. As a Country Director commented about CD:net “there is a danger of creating an underground movement…you might get conflict” while another noted their lack of trust in such internal systems “I would not trust any electronic medium, ever time you send an e-mail you have in your mind that the message may get out to other peoples’ hands”. It seemed clear that the employees within the British Council had, at the time of this research, lost the
assurances and the protective functions previously evident within the organisation (Scott and Walsham, 1999). Country Directors may well have been in confusion as to whether they should adopt an “I am I” attitude (Beck, 1992) of individualisation, or support the development of a community of practice through CD:net.

The “excessive individualism” (Beck, 1992) evident within the British Council during the period covered by this research is also a theme in modern life. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue, “we live in a world in which the social order of the national state, class, ethnicity and traditional family is in decline. The ethics of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). They further argue that attempts at creating social cohesion must start from recognition of individualism, diversity and scepticism. Knowledge management attempts to recreate the lost (and appealing (Williams, 1976)) sense of community, and so communities of practice were seen as beneficial even though the employees of the organisation lived multiple disconnected lives in which they were not always members of such social groupings.

The British Council is an organisation of the global age in which life is nomadic (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), spent in cars, on aeroplanes, on the telephone and the Internet and involved with activities in many countries and organisations. Even the influence of national cultures was problematic, with one consultant who worked within the organisation describing Country Directors as being “cultureless”, suggesting that they wore the clothes that were in fashion on the day they left the UK assimilating aspects of the culture in each of their postings. One Country Director overseas highlighted his isolation “What I do find I miss here, being a soft of expatriate, is knowledge of what’s happening in the UK. You see its very easy to simply freeze my knowledge of when I was last in the UK and live quite happily as an expatriate here”. In contrast to this, however, the organisation also imposed a form of life influenced by the neo-colonial “hub-and-spoke” structures represented by headquarters. Headquarters was seen to act as a shared cultural object (Brown and Duguid, 2000) around which the nomadic workforce aligned to share a sense of belonging; indeed knowledge of “London” (as the headquarters were called) enabled people across the organisation to gossip, share stories and catch up. While Country Directors may not talk among themselves, they constantly shared knowledge with staff in “London”.

For the British Council’s “hub and spoke” structure, “London” acted as a shared cultural object around which the knowledge sharing activity (and hence the communities of practice) could coalesce, and hence the headquarters’ dominance and perceived autocracy acted ambivalently both hampering the creation of communities and networks (by dominating dialogue), and enabling it (by ensuring the shared vocabulary, stories and forms of life). By aspiring to convert the individualised, hub and spoke structure of Country Directors into a global community CD:net would have challenged the centrality of the one shared cultural object their sense of community coalesced around.

The organisation was not however isolated from external pressures which would challenge such a hub and spoke structure. Indeed the third stage of the knowledge management strategy reflected a belief that the organisation needed to develop a culture of knowledge sharing in order to respond to this external pressure. When considering CD:net’s failure, we must therefore turn to consider the changes taking place in the organisation, and CD:net’s role in responding to such change.
Level 3: Communities of Practice and the organisation’s strategic aims for Knowledge Management

The attempt to engender a community of practice among Country Directors within the British Council cannot be isolated from pressures on the organisation itself. Indeed the section above highlights how past strategies and change initiatives strongly influenced the CD:net intervention. The impact of such downsizing on the British Council’s knowledge management programme is unlikely to be unusual, as knowledge management has been seen by many as an antidote to the knowledge loss caused by downsizing and business process re-engineering (BPR) (Galliers, 1999, Newell et al., 2002). Our case study however suggests a more complicated and interrelated relationship.

The downsizing of the headquarters had a significant impact as “London” was less able to cope with its central role in knowledge sharing within the organisation. As a senior manager in headquarters outlined, “In a five year period in headquarters we have lost something like three to four hundred jobs in downsizing. So headquarters is much smaller than it used to be, and a number of people overseas fail to understand this...not so very long ago my job was done by three people. And there are people [overseas] who still treat me like I am three people”. This led to overseas staff circumventing the headquarters in order to acquire information, because of the lack of resources in headquarters, as one Country Director stated “We do not depend very much on the tiny [UK specialist advisors] team... I think I can say with confidence that on [one area of operations], the expertise is more in Western European [offices] than in [UK Headquarters]”.

Such influence might have provided impetus for CD:net to succeed as Country Directors increasingly relied on each other to support the failings of the Headquarters. But instead both the intranet and internal discussion boards were not heavily used. Interviews with overseas staff provided a possible reason for this. Staff were increasingly seeking answers from outside the organisations boundary, and in particular placing a greater reliance on the Internet: “I use the web, [it’s] typically, my first response if I get an enquiry from somebody, the first thing I do is... I go straight into [Alta-vista] and... so the web is probably now the most important source”. As another person in Headquarters highlighted “overseas colleagues often have every information tool we have”; indeed the researcher observed many staff in the UK relying on the Internet to find information for overseas offices. One overseas member of staff also highlighted this stating “I think that I probably got the same information as [the UK specialist] did off the internet anyway...With the internet now, there is so much information, we don’t tend to use [the UK specialists] a huge amount”. While much of the headquarters activity focused on providing information for the overseas offices, overseas staff’s use of the internet clearly reduced reliance on this information. Indeed a UK specialist admitted that they promote this: “increasingly people ask for information and you can just send them a web-site address and suggest they look there for information”. The internet has been suggested as a disintermediating force reducing reliance on intermediaries as customers could access services directly - for example travel-agents and insurance brokers being sidelined (Tapscott et al., 1998, Tapscott, 1996). Within the British Council it appeared that the headquarters was increasingly disintermediated by staff.

In addition to relying on the internet for information traditionally provided by Headquarters, the lack of support at the centre and the organisation’s focus on building relationships meant that overseas members of staff had developed very wide and sophisticated external networks upon which they relied in their work. Many overseas staff worked more closely with other agencies, local universities, embassies and cultural relations organisations in their local country than with the UK headquarters, and relied on external bodies for ideas, innovation and
knowledge. Many appeared to be members of a wide range of communities of practice which supported their work, mediated by technology such as e-mail, discussion boards and websites, and not limited by the organisational boundary. Such disintermediation and circumvention was also illustrated when Council staff in the UK complained that they were no longer consulted over planning activities. One employee stated, “we never truly know what people overseas are doing”.

It also appeared that organisation itself was being disintermediated. Customers of the council could increasingly use the Internet to communicate directly with educational institutions in the UK, to gain an understanding of UK culture, and to access other services it traditionally provided. It appeared that the British Council was facing pressure from both the “outside” and from “within” to change its approach to cultural relations.

Within this context CD:net was seen as a means of engendering innovation and knowledge sharing within the organisational boundary and away from headquarters. Indeed one consultant, working within the headquarters, suggested that headquarters might become a “knowledge management system” for the overseas offices. That headquarters simply provided infrastructure, resources and information for overseas offices, rather than directing the activity undertaken. One can argue, therefore, that a future British Council which succeeded in breaking free of its “hub and spoke” mentality by engendering communities of practice might be able to operate as a truly networked organisation (Hedlund, 1994), without a focal point centred in the UK (apart from perhaps for administration and policy). Were CD:net (and other similar initiatives) to succeed then the role of headquarters would become further diminished. Since these communities of practice might naturally expand beyond the organisational boundary this might also challenge the very nature of the organisation itself.

We therefore identify an inherent tension within the desire to engender communities of practice within this hub-and-spoke organisation. This would increasingly reduce the need for a headquarters and yet without a dominant headquarters as a shared cultural anchor (Yoo and Torrey, 2002) to provide a sense of belonging (Brown and Duguid, 2000) such a community of practice is unlikely to remain bound by the organisation, and the organisation itself might fragment and individualise.

Conclusions

This paper has presented a case study based on the implementation of an explicit knowledge management strategy on behalf of the British Council. The research study describes the introduction of a Knowledge Management tool entitled CD:net which sought to engender the emergence of a community of practice among a strategically significant group of people (Country Directors) as part of this strategy. The case study shows that the implementation of CD:net faltered because of a series of what we describe as “degenerative structures” which acted as paradoxes to inhibit the Council’s need to move away from a “hub-and-spoke” structure to become the kind of networked organisation in which communities of practice flourish.

Analysis of the case study demonstrated that: (i) the intention that the knowledge management strategy would reduce the Country Directors' reliance on "Headquarters" by engendering a community of practice led in turn to the diminishing of the "Headquarters" role in providing the social cohesion and shared cultural objects that are argued for as being necessary for such communities to emerge in the first place; (ii) the downsizing which created the impetus for communities of practice led to an increasing individualisation and a loss of trust, which
turned the potential communities into "underground movements", thus inhibiting their emergence; (iii) the increasing availability of the internet and associated discussion groups, although seeming to underpin the attempt to engender a community of practice amongst the Country Directors, also enabled the disintermediation of "Headquarters" and its knowledge management initiatives. All of these factors contributed to the Country Directors participating in other communities of practice that lay beyond the existing organisational boundary of the British Council and thus posed a threat to the very nature of the organisation itself.

These conclusions contribute to existing studies on the engendering of communities of practice. Existing studies have focused on the need for a particular environment (Wenger et al., 2002); the need for conditions or communication infrastructure among potential community members (Brown and Duguid, 2001a); highlighted that communities of practice require a supportive management approach (Swan et al., 2002); and that communities of practice should engage with the wider epistemic context within which they reside (Thompson, 2005). This study suggests that the technical, historical, and cultural context is also significant, and that consideration should be made of the desire to engender communities of practice, and the potential impact of successfully engendering communities of practice. While “community” is a “warmly persuasive term” (Williams, 1976) this study suggests that success in engendering communities of practice might have the potential to fundamentally reshape an organisation.

**Biography**

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Bob Wood has been Professor of Information Systems and Head of School of Informatics at the University of Manchester since 2003. Before that he had spent ten years at the University of Salford as a Professor and Associate Dean for Research within the Faculty of Business and Informatics. During his time at Salford, Bob was Academic Director for the GEMISIS project and managed a group of over thirty doctoral research students looking at different aspects of the impact of broadband telecommunications on the economic and social regeneration of the North West of England. His research interests cover the areas of the management of large scale technology-based projects and the human and organizational factors involved in applying advanced information technologies to the support of purposeful human activity in all areas of modern life. Together with Profs Richard Vidgen, David Avison and Trevor Wood-Harper he is the co-author of the text “Developing Web Information Systems”.

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