

Preface

Since time began, people have always wanted to expand the boundaries of their knowledge. The knowledge they possessed was exploited for scientific and technological advancement, because of the considerable effects of science and technology on the development of any society. The stone wheel, the law of universal gravitation, penicillin, the steam engine, etc., are just some of the greatest achievements of mankind. However, the knowledge that was developed was not always passed down to future generations. History is full of examples where people build artifacts that are useful to their work, but forget about those already built. As in the past, individuals, organizations, and communities are today very busy exploiting acquired knowledge to develop new knowledge, without considering that the latter is not risk free and they may lose track of it over time. Indeed, knowledge that remains in the heads of the employees, rather than being institutionalized within the organization, can represent a severe threat to a firm due to the failure to transfer such knowledge from individual to corporate memory. This problem is of growing concern in knowledge management research, which is striving to identify technologies and infrastructures able to avoid the loss of organizational knowledge. Among these, community of practice has been recognized as one of the most suitable ways to structure and process the various forms of knowledge in organizations.

Communities of practice have always and still do exist everywhere in every aspect of human life. We all belong to a number of them—at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies. They are a natural setting where cultivating practice enables members to develop and share knowledge while also, because it is socially constructed, institutionalizing it within the organizational structure. Practice in a social context, and in a community of practice in particular, comes from and contributes to knowledge, thanks to the interaction that community members have with the world. This assumption leads us to distinguish between “knowledge” (as possession) and “knowing” (as action), so opening an academic debate on the interplay between them and on the effects of this interplay on the preservation of knowledge.

This book links knowledge management literature and Information Systems (IS) research to explore the process of knowledge preservation within a community of practice. It contributes to existing literature in different ways. First, I conceptualize “community knowledge preservation,” i.e., “the process of maintaining knowledge crucial to a community of practice by storing knowledge and activities over time and providing members with the possibility of recall for the future.” In contrast to previous knowledge management research, knowledge preservation is thus viewed as a process in its own right rather than an integral part of knowledge creation and sharing. Furthermore, I also investigate how communities of practice preserve knowledge, by identifying the main mechanisms and tools enabling members to select, store, and actualize the explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge.

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 explores issues of organizational knowledge by stressing its epistemological (explicit and tacit) and ontological (individual and collective) dimensions. It also explains the knowledge management processes by distinguishing between knowledge creation, sharing, and preservation. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on community of practice and addresses some of the challenges identified in studies on knowledge management. Chapter 3 highlights the process of knowledge preservation within a community of practice and identifies the mechanisms and tools that enable members to select, store, and actualize explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge. Finally, Chap. 4 provides evidence drawn from four communities of practice, where different mechanisms and tools allow members to preserve explicit and tacit forms of collective knowledge.

This book, like all others, is not the product of one individual, but arises from a joint effort by many people. The ideas and concepts rooted in this book came from observation of, and discussion with, various colleagues and friends who shared my passion for this amazing topic. I have had the good fortune to interact with many academics and practitioners across the world who have influenced my thinking over the years. Among the most influential, I want to acknowledge Christian Rauscher (Senior Editor of Springer—Business/Economics), who has supported me through all phases of publication. I wish also to express my gratitude to Drs. Isidro Peña García-Pardo and Mario Javier Donate Manzanares, who invited me to the UCLM in Ciudad Real, Spain, as visiting researcher, and to Professors Marco De Marco and Cecilia Rossignoli, Drs. Paolo Spagnoletti, Alessio Maria Braccini, and Stefano Za, and all the ItAIS community members. Each of them has provided indispensable suggestions and valuable advice, which has led me to develop and refine on the theoretical speculations and the empirical case studies in this book.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues at the University of Naples “Parthenope”: Professors Filomena Buonocore and Luisa Varriale and Drs. Mauro Romanelli, Domenico Salvatore, and Paola Briganti, who all helped to teach me and ultimately helped inspire this book. Moreover, special thanks go to Professor Concetta Metallo and Dr. Francesco Schiavone for their engagement and support in planning and developing the contents of this book over the years.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to add a special mention of Professor Marcello Martinez, to whom I am very grateful for having written the book's Foreword, and Professor Maria Ferrara, who has been an important source of suggestions and guidance.

Naples
June 2015

Rocco Agrifoglio

Knowledge Preservation Through Community of Practice

Theoretical Issues and Empirical Evidence

Agrifoglio, R.

2015, XIV, 83 p. 9 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-22233-2