CONTEXTUAL TALES: A MIXED METHOD STUDY OF ROLES, RELATIONSHIPS AND ORGANISATION IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (CoPs)

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I also wish to express my appreciation to the members of the nine CoPs who participated in this research and their supporting organisations as without your generosity, this research would not have been possible.

Thank you.
DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this research:

...to my beloved husband, Trevor J. McGuckin, without whose love, caring and holistic support this research would not have been possible.

... to my wonderful sister, Mary M. Day, thanks for all your help and the multiple times you have read and re-read drafts, and for your critical, but always thoughtful, and kind, feedback.

... to my sprightly 90½ year old mother, Doris A. Day, whose colourful spirit has shone brightly all the way through this project. My perseverance, determination and drive owes much to you, my mum, and your inner strength. Sadly, in the months leading up to the research’s completion, your health and wellbeing deteriorated until finally, and with great heartache, I had to recognise that I was unable to continue caring for you at home due to your need for increased levels of medical care. Fittingly though, I want to now take this opportunity to publically honour you, a courageous woman of many talents, wise and kind, bold and imaginative, strong and practical, both zesty and calm, chic and graceful, versatile and helpful while also open, direct and sincere and most of all, a wonderful and loving mother.

... and finally, I also wish to dedicate this work to the memory of my late father, John J. Day, although he died over 30 years ago, his curiosity about wanting to understand why things are the way they are, continues to live on, and be expressed, through my own inquiring nature.
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In this two-stage mixed method study, Communities of Practice (CoP) are explored through the everyday practices of their members. From my initial review of the literature, I developed the following working definition of a CoP: a community of individuals who voluntarily choose to come together to help each other develop their knowledge of a common work-related practice.

An emerging viewpoint is that opportunities exist for organisations to cultivate these previously informal communities in order to more formally harness their potential knowledge sharing contributions. Thus, the research aimed to better understand what actually goes on in CoPs, in terms of their everyday practices. Based on a grounded, ethnographic approach, two specific areas of interest emerged: the leadership role as played out within the community and the connections between the CoP and their host organisation.

Nine Communities were recruited across both private and public industry sectors to participate in the research. The fieldwork was designed around two phases, with Stage 1 being an online survey to explore basic elements of the nine CoPs. Both quantitative and qualitative material was generated, and three CoPs were identified to progress into Stage 2 for more in-depth study. During the qualitative Stage 2, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted as well as brief periods of participant and non-participant observation.

The empirical work generated material which has been integrated at multiple points, including a model of CoPs’ characteristics which I synthesized from the relevant literature. This Synthesised Model was then further developed to take other aspects of the CoP literature, and insights derived from the empirical work, into account. A new model has been constructed which I have termed the ‘CoP’s Key Practices Model’. It draws together both the internal and external elements of CoP life, and their connection through the CoP/host organisation relationship; all of which are grounded in the community’s communication processes. The CoP Practices Model comprises simplicities and complexities interwoven through multiple layers, mirroring the real-life experiences of CoPs. It can be utilized in the future to further understand the inner workings of these communities.