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

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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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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ABSTRACT

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.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But, in practice, there is...
...Jan L.A. van de Snepscheut

Foreword

In this thesis, I tell a story of my research into the everyday practices of members of selected Communities of Practice (CoPs). This first chapter defines the project and the research plan, including my methodological positioning. Next, I outline the significance of the research and identify its limitations, followed by an outline of the structure of the remaining eight chapters. Finally, the nine CoPs participating in the research are introduced.

Project definition

This project started in 2005 and is broadly situated within the field of Knowledge Management (KM), a term so widely used across many different contexts that no single definition seems possible, due in part to the difficulties associated with defining just what knowledge is. In regard to business activities, KM is concerned with the process of constructing, collecting, organising, increasing, sharing and utilising what the organisation knows in order to generate the maximum benefits possible for the organisation. Orlikowski (2002) challenged what she perceived as the privileging of ‘knowledge-as-object’ within contemporary organisational thinking over ‘knowledge-as-doing’ (p. 271). She reiterated Cook and Brown’s (1999) view that knowledge emerged through an intersubjective process informed by the doing of everyday practices within a sophisticated and socially embedded context. She highlighted the tension between the concept of knowledge as ‘a noun connoting things, elements, facts, processes, dispositions’ and knowing as a verb signifying ‘action, doing, practice’ (p. 251). My approach has been consistent with her emphasising that the action of knowing is socially constructed and enacted through practice rather than knowledge being something out there. Orlikowski (2002) suggested an alternative perspective where ‘knowing is not a static embedded capability or stable disposition of actors, but rather an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as actors engage the world in practice’ (p. 249).
This research has been heavily influenced by her ideas on organisational knowing and it has as its antecedents: my prior career as a professional business communicator in a large company, my Masters by Research and my academic work. In my Masters, I developed the concept of an organisational message web to encapsulate ‘the social interaction and human sense-making activities around email in association with its technical capabilities as daily life is being played out within organisational cultures’ (Day 2005, p. 26). The message web construct focused on the communicative interactions among people in organisations against a background of the technological machinery that maintains electronic messages in motion. Having used the message web construct solely in relation to intraorganisational email in my previous research, it also proved valuable as an exploratory lens in this current project. Thus, this research emerged from my earlier intellectual curiosity about communication processes and people’s interpersonal interactions as elements of organisational life with this curiosity morphing into the broader realm of Knowledge Management with a specific interest in Communities of Practice (CoPs).

One of the branches within the Knowledge Management domain concerns itself with knowledge processes situated within loose and informally structured groups in organisations. Such groups can form as individuals voluntarily group themselves together to help, support and learn from each other in developing their knowledge of a shared practice. In their 1991 publication on learning, Lave and Wenger were the first to use the term, Community of Practice (CoP), to describe such groups although Brown and Duguid (1991) were also early theorists developing their ideas about organisational learning. In 2002, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder finetuned the concept of CoPs as being “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” (p.7). For this research, I developed the following working definition of a CoP: a community of individuals who voluntarily choose to come together regularly to help each other develop their knowledge of a common work-related practice. Since Lave and Wenger (1991) first created the CoP construct in 1991, it has become increasingly popular, both within scholarly circles and also as a Knowledge Management strategy in the contemporary manager’s toolkit. The concept itself has significantly evolved since then with its trajectory shifting rather dramatically.

Kimble (2006) highlighted that Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid (1991) originally differentiated CoPs from other similar social groups because they were autonomous and self-generating, i.e. CoPs were outside any formalised organisational structure, they were somehow unfettered, creatively wild and free. With the enthusiastic take-up of the CoP concept over the years, Wenger himself, and with others, continued to advocate the value and usefulness of CoPs. By 1998, Wenger revised the original notion about these voluntarily-generated communities being informal centres of learning and created a link with organisations by
claiming that management could nurture and guide them. As Kimble (2006) put it, ‘a dislocation [emerged] between the theory developed in the early work and that which is applied later ... [CoPs have] now become manageable and unambiguously of benefit to the organization [and] given the right degree of insight, skill and leadership, Communities of Practice can be made to deliver’ (p. 230). Thus, the perception gradually emerged that opportunities exist for organisations to cultivate these previously informal communities to more formally harness their potential knowledge sharing contributions and in doing so, maximise their contributions toward improved organisational performance. Such a stance was in sharp contrast to the original theorising about CoPs. However, this current trend of increased management intervention and control of these types of informal communities has become so accepted that some CoPs are now being completely set up by management with formal objectives for the community to achieve. Management cultivation of CoPs appears to have become so taken for granted that the question of whether they can be different from self-managed work teams is pertinent.

**Research Plan**

The research objective was to understand the nuances of the everyday practices of CoPs, as experienced by the community’s members. While the original emphasis was firmly focussed on the CoP members’ communicative practices, this research has been informed by grounded theory principles right from the start and the design was constructed with inbuilt flexibility to facilitate the emergence of new ideas and further questions. And this is exactly what occurred. Communication practices became less central as additional areas of interest opened up to do with broader aspects of the practices of CoPs. While communication continued as an important internal characteristic of CoPs throughout the research, specific roles, such as leadership, emerged as pivotal in terms of understanding the community’s activities from an internal perspective (the term ‘CoP leader’ has been used although the actual terminology of each community was variable).

In addition, it became apparent that the relationship between the CoP and its host organisation was a significant influence on the CoP’s practices. Thus, the varying roles of CoP members in combination with the CoP/host connection emerged as two primary themes. In addition to being flexible, the plan was to obtain as much information as I could from the participating CoPs, leading to a multiplicity of means and methods within the design parameters. A two-staged approach was used to gather both qualitative and quantitative information while the final aspect of the research plan was to continually engage with the emerging literature as I proceeded with the empirical work resulting in an extensive review of the literature which informs, and is informed by, this research.
Aims of the research

Taking into account the changing nature of the research question, it crystallised into the following: ‘What goes on within CoPs, in terms of the day-to-day practices of their members?’ Supplementary questions which were derived through the empirical work included:

- What knowledge practices (including those communicatively based) occur through the interactions of members for a variety of CoPs across different industry sectors in Australia?
- How do different roles within CoP’s, in particular that of the community’s leader, play out?
- In what ways does the CoP/host organisation relationship unfold as an element within the community, particularly in the currently changing environment of increased levels of management intervention, or cultivation, of CoPs?

With these research questions, I have sought to challenge conventional, and sometimes limited, thinking about the practices of CoPs and to offer insights on the everyday practices of members of these types of communities.

Methodological overview

Crotty’s (1998) approach to research design was influential as a way to seek answers to the research questions and provided a useful structure with its inclusion of both philosophical and practical aspects of social research. His four-part framework (epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and method) became the initial foundation of the research, identifying what was to be done and the reasons why. Equally important, his framework provided other advantages as it highlighted the need for clarity regarding my own underlying philosophical stance and worldview. According to Crotty (1998), the typical starting point of research is a real-life issue, problem or question, consideration of which then flows into choices about appropriate methods and the specific methodology to be used (p. 13). However, in discussing these four aspects, he started with the researcher’s philosophies and moved through to methodology and method. Similarly, I have begun this brief methodological overview of my work with the underlying philosophical aspects, i.e. my epistemology and theoretical perspective. The more practical features of the methodology and the methods used are then introduced in summary form with more detailed and in-depth discussion of the research methodology in Chapter 3.

My epistemological orientation is toward a social constructionist viewpoint where reality is a continuously-enacted and dynamic process that is constructed from human actions, thus recognising many subjective realities. My theoretical perspective is interpretive, based on the
belief that individuals negotiate, interpret and re-interpret meanings within the context of their everyday social worlds. In terms of the methodology used, I integrated both ethnographic and grounded theory principles: ethnographic, in that I sought to develop detailed, in-depth and rich descriptions and stories about the everyday practices of CoP members. The research has been also informed by Charmaz’s (2008) constructivist grounded theory ideas. New lines of enquiry emerged through the research as the original emphasis on CoP communication processes evolved into a more generalised consideration of the everyday practices of community members. Additionally, a multi-site case study strategy was applied, both as a methodological tactic as well as a method. Overall, this approach was appropriate to gain an appreciation of the perspectives, culture, and worldviews of the people concerned, i.e. members of CoPs. Through their stories, both individual and shared, a window opened into the taken for granted aspects of their practices and the ways that these practices interweave through their knowledge activities within the CoP. Thus, as a social researcher, I am drawn to social constructionist and interpretative traditions. In line with White, Drew and Hay’s (2009) call for researchers to consider assembling a combination of different approaches, the methodological frame blended together a mixture of ethnographic, case study and grounded research principles. This has become known as the third research paradigm or third methodology. For, while the research was predominantly qualitative, I also mixed both qualitative and quantitative strategies. Even though mixed method research has its supporters and detractors (whose positions are considered in detail in Chapter 3), the point made by Creswell et al (2003) regarding methodological choices was pivotal: ‘In most cases, the decision probably rests on the comfort level of the researcher with one approach as opposed to the other’ (p. 219). Taking everything into consideration, it made sense to use mixed method techniques in this research while being careful to ensure that it remained philosophically and methodologically sound.

Methods used

Although carefully planned, the research design was fluid due to the emergent nature of this type of social inquiry. An organisational ethnography, incorporating grounded techniques, emerged as an appropriate strategy, due in part to my previous research experience. In broad terms, research material was generated from empirical fieldwork that progressed in a two-stage process. All of the nine CoPs recruited were participants in Stage 1 while three of these communities progressed into Stage 2. Initially, there were many recruitment challenges but eventually sufficient CoPs associated with different Australian organisations accepted the invitation to participate. The organisations were from a range of public and private sectors and quite diverse industry groups. Stage 1 was an exploratory mixed-mode survey. One aim was to gain detailed information from each of the nine CoPs about their day-to-day operations and the possibilities within the sampled groups for comparison. It also acted as a filtering mechanism to
aid in selecting three of the nine CoPs to be invited to move into Stage 2. While the survey included open and closed questions, there was also space for respondents to give some detail about their views on certain aspects of their community, e.g. how they saw the future of their community and the support the CoP’s host organisation provided.

The second stage was primarily qualitative and employed ethnographic interviews of several members of the three CoPs selected for further, in-depth study. Lindlof (1995) described ethnographic interviews as ‘the most informal, conversational, and spontaneous form of interview’ (p. 170). There were 20 semi-structured interviews conducted as well as brief periods of participant and non-participant observation of the communities’ activities. The aim was to tease out rich, contextual descriptions about the participants’ practices and their individual stories about knowledge and knowing in the community. The stories added significant depth to the material gathered through the Stage 1 survey, allowing a rich picture to be constructed of the practices of CoP members as they went about their everyday knowledge activities. Analysis of the material generated through the two-stage empirical work was an iterative process with integration occurring at multiple levels. Discoveries made during this process facilitated the development of a new explanatory model, which I have called the ‘CoP’s Key Practices Model’. This model makes visible the complexities associated with being a CoP member and provides a new perspective on the use of the message web construct to explore the everyday practices of organisational life.

Research significance and limitations

While KM generally, and CoPs more specifically, appear to be at the forefront of interest to organisational researchers, practice-focused investigations have received less scholarly attention, particularly as the contemporary trend is toward more management intervention. This rich, ethnographic investigation contributes to filling this gap through concentrating on the everyday happenings of CoP members as they synthesise, shape, sustain and share their knowledge. As noted earlier, two areas of interest emerged: the importance of leadership and the CoP/host organisation relationship. Further, the analysis in the penultimate chapter illustrates a mechanism useful for other organisational researchers. The development of the CoP’s Key Practices Model in the final chapter gives a detailed, yet succinct, lens for further studies to be made and it is likely to be of interest to both researchers and management practitioners. The research is limited in scope to the nine CoPs recruited across both private and public industry sectors. All the communities are aligned with Australian organisations although one had some international members. While the qualitative research findings have limits to their generalisability to other countries, to other organisations and even to other communities, broad implications emerged about what it means to be involved with CoPs.
Thesis structure

This first chapter introduces both the research and the researcher, followed by an introduction to the nine CoPs participating in the research. Chapter 2 is the literature review and it starts with a theoretical grounding of the beginnings of the Communities of Practice construct with a timeline of the scholarly thinking on CoPs as it has twisted and turned since 1991. The literature regarding the key characteristics of CoPs has been rigorously reviewed and then combined into a Synthesised Model of CoP Characteristics. Chapter 3 addresses methodological concerns and provides a comprehensive discussion of my choices regarding the research design. I explore my underlying reasons and personal values for the methodology used, with a detailed description of the methods that formed the empirical foundation. The following four chapters present a detailed report of the material from the two-stage empirical fieldwork. Chapter 4 encapsulates the analytical results of the Stage 1 survey of the nine participating CoPs and concludes with the selection of the Catering, Training and Research CoPs invited to participate in Stage 2. The next three chapters contain a detailed scrutiny of the interviewee material: Chapter 5 reports on the Catering CoP analysis, the Training CoP is covered in Chapter 6, with the Research CoP the focus of Chapter 7. Chapter 8 brings this exploration of CoPs into its final phase as it pulls together the empirical findings regarding their everyday practices while the final chapter integrates the research findings and concludes with the development of a new model, the CoP’s Key Practices Model.

Research participants: introducing nine CoPs

Nine Communities of Practice were the units of study of this research and they are now introduced. The diverse practices they individually focus on represent a fascinating mix: catering services, ceremonial band performances, facilitation, leadership, policy, project management, research, supporting women, and training. For the purposes of this research and to ensure anonymity, the name of each CoP simply reflects their practice. The vignettes have been constructed from extensive notes of meetings held during recruitment discussions and an examination of CoP-related documents, in the cases where such secondary material was provided. Each vignette introduces one of the nine communities and in doing so, the scene is set for their participation in the research — they may also be helpful as a reference source when reading the research outcomes. Contextual information describing how each CoP works is included in the vignettes, with a little background detail about their beginnings, their communication processes and the prevailing organisational culture. The vignettes appear in alphabetical order and the three communities going on to participate in Stage 2 were the Catering, Training and Research CoPs.
The Catering CoP is made up of chefs working in a single government department who are responsible for catering services across 13 different geographical locations. They first came together as a group in June 2003. At this initial meeting, they decided to collaborate more directly to share their catering knowledge within a Community of Practice framework. There are 12 to 15 members, including an elected leader who has been in that role since the CoP's inception. All members work at one of 13 different geographical locations within the Department. It is clear that the internal environment within the Department has always been supportive of their efforts and the CoP has always aligned itself with the Department's KM strategy.

The members of the CoP communicate with each other regularly by phone (generally on a one to one basis) and sometimes send emails (both individual and group). They hold regular one-day meetings every three months and around 10–12 members attend. Although the CoP leader generally oversees these meetings to some degree, they are primarily arranged and hosted by members at the different sites on a rotating basis. A brief agenda is used but the discussions are open, informal and free flowing. There is also an electronic forum for online collaboration but it is seldom used, primarily as it is perceived as not very user-friendly.

The community has developed a high profile and their success story is beginning to reach other audiences. They are seen as a good example of an effective CoP, having achieved many positive outcomes since 2003. Through their collaborative efforts, the Department has made significant financial savings from economies of scale with bulk food purchasing policies. Also their catering for specific cultural dietary requirements has improved, with many other procedural changes implemented ranging from major cost savers through to such simple gains as the sharing of favoured recipes. Another major achievement of the community was to organise and host a two-day Professional Hospitality Association Conference early in 2005. One of the key objectives of this conference was to forge links with Department caterers from other States and overseas so that knowledge could be shared and collaborative efforts more successfully harnessed. The conference itself was a huge success, although the hoped-for CoP of Department caterers, at a national level, had not yet been achieved.

The Catering CoP seems very healthy with high levels of member participation. Nonetheless, the leader has been a major facilitator of the community's successes right from its earliest days and reliance on one individual to drive the community could impact on its long-term viability, particularly if that person should leave the organisation.
Ceremonial Band CoP

This community comprises a group of men within an Australian public service organisation who join together to form a small ceremonial band. The specific practice drawing them into a CoP centres on musical activities as they share their skills, knowledge and expertise while both practicing and performing together as they present musical performances at community events. This band has a long history and many turbulent changes have occurred over the years. Still, the band continues to successfully operate although they exist on a slightly ad hoc arrangement with their senior staff. Membership levels are relatively stable as participation is linked to the individual's employment although attendance can occur intermittently over a 12 month period.

With a regular weekly get-together, they meet to develop their own individual abilities as well as their collective talents and musical repertoire. Around 12 members usually attend these weekly practice sessions, with some trying to not miss a session while others attend more irregularly. The more experienced musicians generally undertake some teaching/mentoring/coaching, both about music in general and also in regard to the intricacies of performing in a ceremonial band. In addition to these weekly sessions, there is also an email group list, used predominantly by the CoP leader to co-ordinate practice sessions and performances.

Through the recruitment discussions I had with this community's leader, he seemed extremely passionate about the community and its continuing viability. A question about future sustainability could emerge though if the others rely completely on him to drive their continuation as a community.
Facilitation CoP

The Facilitation CoP emerged within the public sector and it was one of two participating CoPs sponsored by the same Department. The organisational culture of this Department was supportive of the view that CoPs bring organisational benefits and they had a well defined process to nurture new communities starting, after which each CoP was encouraged to go off and do their own thing. The Facilitation CoP began during 2005 and is a good example of the many paths that can lead to a CoP emerging. A one-day public facilitation course attended by professionals from both the private and public sector (including two colleagues from the Department) was the catalyst for the formation of this CoP. In the review session at the end of the day, several attendees discussed meeting again to keep these connections going so they could continue honing their facilitation skills. And thus, the seed for this community was sown.

As the CoP concept was being actively promoted by the Department, it became a logical sponsor and regular meetings were soon established. The arrangements were quite simple: a date was set and the Department Coordinator (who became the CoP leader) used a group email list to inform the members about the meeting details. The meetings are similarly quite simple: members meet up on a regular monthly basis at lunchtime. They sit, eat their lunch and talk together about their own facilitation experiences, sharing their knowledge with each other and both asking for, and giving, advice. An email group list has been created and is maintained by the CoP Coordinator who uses it to distribute details of the meetings.

Although the community has a formal membership of 25, many are peripheral members and attendance at the monthly meetings (which continue to be hosted by the Department) have dropped away to between four to eight people over the first two years of its operation. As a result, they decided at the start of 2007 to change to bi-monthly meetings. The reason was two-fold: to address the issue of irregular meeting attendance and to try to encourage other members to take a more active role in both hosting and organising them. An underlying objective seemed to be the desire to move the community into being more self supporting, rather than relying on the CoP leader to continually drive the process. It did not seem members were becoming more active in supporting the community and quite possibly engagement in the CoP was declining as members move on to new jobs, new roles and new interests. The community may be at the transformation stage as there had only been one meeting during the first half of 2007. On the other hand, two new members joined since the change to bimonthly meetings. Time will tell if the Facilitation CoP can revive itself or if whether it is coming to the end of its life cycle.
Leadership CoP

A small group of senior managers involved in the Human Resources function within a global organisation decided to form this community in 2005. The practice joining the members of the Leadership CoP together relates very directly to their job responsibilities and industry-specific human resources issues within the international sphere of their business. The members are Regional HR Managers or more senior, working in different geographical locations (primarily in Australia but also in Europe and New Zealand). Their dispersed nature affects their communication practices and they decided to meet face-to-face every three months, on a voluntarily basis. Thus, a two-day meeting is held offsite at one of the three locations where they keep in contact and discuss common HR issues while actively developing and sharing what they know. They also get together virtually more often with a monthly teleconference/phone meeting, while individual members intermittently talk to each other on the phone. Each year, a new chairperson is agreed upon and they rotate this role between the community members.

The decision to classify this group of managers as a Community of Practice could be challenged, particularly as the connections between them are role-based, meaning they could equally be considered a formally structured team of senior managers, i.e. a traditional management team. But they regard themselves as a CoP and their group operates somewhat like a CoP. Their activities have some formality, e.g. they have documented what the community is, including an operating model and an overall agenda and refer to themselves as a global leadership team. Conversely though, this document contains information about effective communities and the benefits to the organisation.

In the end, I resolved the dilemma around defining this group as a CoP by recognizing they seem to be situated in a grey area, between the concept of a formal team and a Community of Practice. This is certainly not a unique situation and it illustrates the fluidity and the ambiguity associated with the concept of CoPs. Such a position of being in between brought potential opportunities to consider what such a position means for communities and their communication practices.
**Policy CoP**

The Policy CoP is a collective of public servants whose practices centre on government policy and their activities encompass the development, implementation, review and analysis of public policies within a single Department. The community started in March 2004, primarily through the efforts of a senior policy practitioner who saw benefits in connecting with others involved with policy matters throughout the different areas within the Department. His original objective was two-fold. Firstly, he sought a way to distribute policy-related information to those in the Department to whom it was relevant. Secondly, he also saw valuable possibilities in having access to a mechanism that he could use to seek out, and then harness, informed comment on specific policy matters within his sphere of work interests. It is clear that although his efforts were partly driven by self-interest, a CoP emerged which was led by him for some time.

An email group distribution list was the CoPs original method of communicating with a Lotus Notes TeamRoom established later. However, the shared, collaborative space of the TeamRoom application (the Notes groupware ‘sharing’ platform) was not widely used although the current CoP leader had loaded some documents to give other members access. Early users of the TeamRoom apparently found it confusing and it was not popular as a communication medium. There were 70 members on the CoPs group email list and while they have never had regular face-to-face meetings, they do occur on an ad hoc basis, usually related to a popular topic. At one stage, there were meetings every couple of months on average and although attendance varied depending on the meeting topic, numbers attending ranged from six to 30 members.

For varying reasons, the Policy CoP was in an indeterminate state and no meetings have been held for many months. While it began in 2004, by 2007 it was in a state of flux in the midst of a significant organisational change initiative that involved a restructure of all the Divisions in the Department, with strategic and operational roles and responsibilities being reviewed at all levels. Staff redundancies had occurred and the CoP was essentially put on hold until the change program was completed and the current turmoil settled down.
Project Management (Mgmt) CoP

The Project Mgmt CoP is hosted within the same Department as the Facilitation CoP although it was different in many ways. For instance, there were almost 60 members, both from within the host Department as well as people from other government agencies. The practice of project management was what ties these people together and membership was open to anyone in the public sector involved in this type of work. Members come from a range of different Departments and have been regularly meeting on a monthly basis. Since beginning in 2004, they have been conducting formal monthly meetings at lunchtime which usually last between 60 and 90 minutes with different member’s organisations hosting the meetings.

The meetings were generally discussions based on a defined topic and sometimes a guest presenter or speaker was invited to participate. Guests could be CoP members who share their own experiences with others in the community or other government specialists, invited to present as subject matter experts. In the past, private sector professionals have also sometimes been invited to the community’s meetings. On average, between eight to ten members attend, depending on their individual level of interest in the scheduled topic. The actual topics covered are quite broad ranging within the central theme of managing projects, for instance, issues about governance, the use of specific project software, stakeholder engagement in the project and project closure activities are just some of the many topics covered to date. In addition, members might also share what is happening on their own projects in relation to the discussion topic as well as the challenges faced and solutions found along the way. In addition to the community meeting once each month, the CoP leader also maintains an email list of all CoP members which she used to tell everyone the details about the upcoming meetings. The community also had an electronic forum (Quickplace) for online collaboration but it was seldom used, mainly because it was perceived as not very user-friendly.

While the future of this community seems quite robust when compared to the other one in the same Department, i.e. the Facilitation CoP, the CoP leader expressed the desire for the CoP to become more self sustaining and less reliant on her driving the process. She was currently seeking other members to become more involved in the running of the community. Her search continues and so this CoP was also facing future viability challenges in terms of growing and developing into a more healthy and sustainable community.
Research CoP

The Research CoP comprises a group of social scientists who conduct research within an Australian public organisation. Over the past ten years, the research area instigated several electronic forums, each concentrating on a specific research domain. In 1998, a new forum (known as the Portal) began with a focus on integrating people and technology to boost operational effectiveness. In 2004, a small group of scientists and social researchers came together under the Portal's umbrella, becoming the Research CoP. The group formed partly in response to the prevailing hard science research environment but also in conjunction with a previous initiative encouraging knowledge transfer among staff. At the time, they did not use the word CoP, or even community, but they were certainly drawn together around a specific practice, i.e. research into the social aspects of organisational systems. By 2007, the organisation was in the midst of a change program which included a Departmental review into the operation and management of all the forums and their associated collaborative processes. One outcome was that the Research CoP members decided to move closer to the CoP concept to the extent that they included the word community in their name. In discussions about a name change, there was some ambiguity about this and the compromise reached at that time was to limit the name change to community rather than CoP. However, for the purposes of this research, they have been treated as a CoP while acknowledging they exist within a grey area. The CoP's original objective was stated as being to facilitate both the exchange of ideas and to keep lines of communication open for staff by challenging the distancing effect of multiple geographical locations across different States.

The CoP had around 65 internal members as well as another 11 to 14 members external to the Department, giving an estimated membership of 80. By 2007 though, less than ten members were active. They communicate with each other in several different ways: by phone or email on a one-to-one basis and there is also a group email list but it is predominantly used for administration purposes by the CoP's leader. Every two to three months, they also have a three-way video teleconference so members in the three States can meet virtually. In addition, the community also has access to an electronic collaborative tool. Again though, this is mostly used by the CoP leader to store and share documents. Members could also use their forum's intranet website as a shared space but currently they seem to have little interest in doing so. How to maximise the connections between members dispersed over different States has been one of the major challenges for this community. One initiative was to hold an annual workshop with the location and hosting rotated to allow community members to get together over a two-day meeting. Although the Research CoP appeared to be viable in 2007, member activity was slow and the CoP leader was actively seeking ways to boost participation. As is the case in many organisations, he was restrained by the minimal time available to devote to the CoP. Overall, it did not appear this community was self-sustaining as they were heavily reliant on him as their current leader (and founder) and he was rather disillusioned that most, if not all, of the responsibility for the community's continued existence rested with him. Also, the management changes occurring within the organisational environment introduced uncertainties. On the other hand, I sensed an undercurrent of optimism about the potential of new opportunities opening up.
Supporting Women CoP

Early in 2006, several senior women managers within the people management area of a private organisation decided to get together to discuss ways women could be more actively supported. One of these women was my contact into this organisation and it was clear that she and others were all originally very enthusiastic. Thus, the idea of the ‘Supporting Women’ initiative emerged.

An inaugural meeting was set up for April 2006 to progress the idea with six women attending who became the foundations of a working group to nurture and guide the new initiative. The working group was, in essence, the start of this Community of Practice.

These founders were very eager and there was a lot of passion expressed at the first meeting, particularly when it became clear the organisation was prepared to provide a little funding to support the initiative. Broad-ranging discussions ensued with lots of brainstorming as ideas were tossed around about how to better support and mentor the 160 women in the corporate centre of the organisation. Some of the ideas discussed centred on organising activities to draw the women together, such as a quarterly gathering. Events external to the organisation’s direct operations were also considered, such as Women on Boards (WOB) Meetings.

Minutes of their first meeting showed a detailed charter with 12 aims listed was considered – the first aim defined the framework for the ‘Supporting Women’ initiative, i.e. it will be keep informal and organic. Several meetings were held in the next year with the majority of communication between members by phone and email. Although framing this group of women as a Community of Practice could be challenged, there was no doubt that they shared a common practice so for the purposes of this research, they were included.
Training CoP

The Training CoP emerged in 2002 within a large Australian corporation as a result of a major change initiative to decentralise the training function. These turbulence changes disrupted the extensive synergies built up among the centralised training staff and some forward-thinking trainers sought ways to maintain connections as training staff were being dispersed throughout the organisation, sometimes to isolated pockets. To that end, they convinced several other trainers to form a small voluntary group with the aim of developing a Training Network and so maintain some links.

By 2007, this Training Network was still being successfully organised by the original small group of volunteers. This organising group participated in the research even though identifying them as a CoP, while also considering them as distinct from the Training Network, was somewhat problematic. Defining the practice of this community was correspondingly complex as the CoP members were involved in different layers of learning about the training function. While the community members were part of knowledge flows moving between the CoP, the Training Network and other trainers, the community members were certainly also learning from each other. It was this second form of learning about the practice of training that sustained the members of the organising group. For the purposes of the research, the organising group of the Training Network participated as the Training CoP.

The community had 12 members in 2007 with most working at head office although some members were located outside the central business district. Even after several years in operation, the core members remained very enthusiastic about the community’s activities and they met regularly (particularly those located in head office) as well as used a group email and kept in contact by telephone. They had also upgraded the web resources they provide to the Training Network and were keen to maximise use of web communication resources. Over the years, the Training CoP has had a complex and strained relationship with their host organisation.
The greater our knowledge increases,
the greater our ignorance unfolds.
...John F. Kennedy 1917–1963

Foreword

There are two very different, broad epistemological perspectives that underpin current thinking about the concept of knowledge. The first is more traditionally based and sees knowledge as an object or a resource which can be created, possessed and transferred (epistemology of possession). The alternative view portrays knowledge as emerging through the practice of knowing and doing (epistemology of practice). It was the second perspective of knowing as practice that was extremely influential through the research.

Knowledge and knowing

Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) SECI model, based on four differing types of social interactions in the workplace, i.e. Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination and Internalisation, remains influential in the practice epistemology. The foundation of this model rests on a spiral process where new knowledge is created as tacit knowledge and then converted into explicit knowledge. Socialisation occurs when tacit knowledge is shared through social interaction. This knowledge is then externalised as it is conceptualised and made explicit. The resulting knowledge can be combined or integrated with other sources of explicit knowledge, producing new knowledge to be internalised as tacit knowledge, and the spiral continues. Mittendorff et al. (2006) explained, ‘externalization is of particular importance when researching collective learning. In this process, people learn explicitly from each other. Making tacit knowledge explicit generates group learning, because it leads to new insights and new knowledge in the group’ (p. 301).

On the other hand, other models, e.g. Cook and Brown in 1999 and Orlikowski in 2002 also provided rich alternative views about knowledge as an element of organisational life, about practice and also about knowing. As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, Orlikowski (2002) challenged what she perceived as the privileging of ‘knowledge-as-object’ and
‘knowledge-as-disposition’ within contemporary organisational thinking over ‘knowledge-as-doing’ (p. 271).

I have argued that paying attention to organizational knowing might complement our understanding of organizational effectiveness by highlighting the essential role of situated action in constituting knowing in practice. In particular, we might learn some useful insights about capabilities if we also focus on what people do, and how they do it, rather then focusing primarily on infrastructure, objects, skills or dispositions’ (Orlikowski 2002, p. 271).

Orlikowski’s conceptual argument was informed by Ryle (1949) and Polanyi (1967) who both emphasised the act of knowing as distinct from knowledge while Schön (1983, p. 49) argued ‘it seems right to say that our knowing is in our action (italics in original) (Orlikowski 2002, p. 251). In studying product development work at a successful high-tech, and globally dispersed, organisation, Orlikowski identified a repertoire of five practices around knowing (2002, p. 256). The first two are (1) sharing identity and (2) interacting face-to-face which together ‘generate a knowing how to be coherent, committed, and cooperative across a variety of spatial, temporal and political boundaries’ (p. 256). Her three remaining practices associated with organisational knowing are (3) aligning effort, (4) learning by doing and (5) supporting participation. These practices, she contended, generated ‘a knowing how to be consistent, competent, and creative across a variety of technical, geographic, historical and cultural boundaries’ (p. 256).

As Orlikowski explained though, while the knowing that emerges from these practices generates and sustains a collective competence, there are negative consequences. ‘Sharing identity becomes organizational groupthink, interacting face to face leads to burnout, aligning effort discourages improvisation, learning by doing is lost through turnover, and supporting participating is immobilizing because of conflicts and time delays’ (2002, p. 257).

Thus, the paradoxical nature resulting from the many complex and sometimes contradictory forces at work within specific practices challenges organisations in complicated and dynamic environments. These challenges are further compounded as meaning is continuously and socially negotiated, constructed and reproduced within the context of the processes and everyday behaviour of those in organisations. Orlikowski introduced knowledge transfer into her argument when she wrote that ‘because knowing is inseparable from its constituting practice, it cannot be “transferred” or moved’ rather it is ‘ongoingly achieved’ (2002, p. 271). And in doing so, she questioned the concept that knowledge is embedded in or stuck to particular situated practices.
Sharing ‘knowing-how’ cannot be seen as a problem of knowledge transfer or a process of disembedding ‘sticky’ knowledge from one community of practice and embedding it in another... [instead it] can be seen as a process of enabling others to learn the practice that entails the ‘knowing how’. It is a process of helping others develop the ability to enact—in a variety of contexts and conditions—the knowing in practice (2002, p. 271).

Tell (2004) claimed that ‘research in organizational practice and knowledge has shown that what members of the organization know seems highly interrelated with what they do; that is, the practising of their skills in social contexts’ (p. 443–444). Criticising this stream of thought, he wrote, ‘if the suggestion is that knowing is equated to doing, knowing seems to provide little additional insight. Anything an organization does, accordingly, it knows’ (p. 444). Kuhn and Jackson (2008) highlighted specific challenges that a range of scholars had made to the practice-based view of knowledge (p. 456). They claimed that most criticisms centre on methodological issues such as: difficulties associated with defining knowledge and knowing, (e.g. Schreyögg & Geiger 2007), lack of sufficient complexity or too much conceptual development resulting in problems when comparing studies (e.g. Patriotta 2004) and simplistic assumptions about power relations (e.g. Handley et al. 2006). In considering conceptualisations of knowledge, Patriotta raised an intriguing point: ‘we need to redefine the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge in terms of a dichotomy between background and foreground’ (2004, p. 6).

Exploring the link between knowing and organizing implies looking at how knowledge is inscribed, internalized, encoded, distributed, and diffused in organizational structures of signification ... Studying knowledge in organizations is like seeing silence in a world of noise. It essentially amounts to understanding the subtle interaction between background and foreground, absence and presence, order and disorder with an organized setting (Patriotta 2004, p. 5).

Cook and Brown (1999) bridged the two domains of possession/practice and viewed knowledge as emerging through an intersubjective process informed by the doing of everyday practices within a sophisticated and socially embedded context. Or, as Patriotta (2004) might possibly have put it, the middle ground is the process of the foreground intersecting with the background. It is within this middle ground of practice as a process that this research is epistemologically and methodologically situated. Thus, the aim is to focus on the junction of foreground and background in the empirical stages of this work. Yanow’s (2006) retrospective scrutiny of Julian Orr’s (1996) famous ethnographic study of copier technicians critically reflected on Orr’s practice-based theorising. Yarrow (2006) commented that one of the central themes of Orr’s book was the need for organisational studies to ‘move to (re-)ground research in what it is that people in organizations actually do’ (p. 1744). Orr’s 1996 study of photocopy technicians drew upon his ideas about ‘communities of practitioners’ and Yanow claimed that this ‘is what is lost in the “communities of practice” discourse, the language of which excises
the human actor from those practices, disembodying the activities and distancing them from those who perform them but gained through the ‘communities of practitioners’ discourse’ (p. 1753). One of the benefits of ethnographic studies is the emphasis on who is doing the doing. So, while this focus on practice is not something new and Bou, Sauquet and Bonet (2008) claimed that a common definition of practice does not exist, it ‘is generally associated with terms or characteristics like: situatedness, reflection, knowledge, knowing and learning’ (p. 3).

Communities of Practice (CoPs)

The concept of Communities of Practice has been of interest within scholarly circles concerned with knowledge in organisations since its first appearance in the literature in the early 1990s. Since then, its popularity with management practitioners as a tool has also grown substantially. ‘There are many reasons why the concept of CoPs has been taken up so widely ... It presents a theory of learning which acknowledges networks and groups which are informal and not the same as formal structures. It allows for groups which are distributed in some way and not in face-to-face contact’ (Barton & Tusting 2005, p. 3).

Over time, other forms of knowledge communities have emerged, i.e. virtual CoPs (VCoPs) which refers to geographically dispersed communities operating online. Gherardi (2006) proposed the concept of community of practitioners to redirect the emphasis towards practice rather than community, Coakes and Smith (2007) referred to communities of innovation (CoInv) while the notion of Networks of Practice (NoPs) arose from Brown and Duguid (2001). Debate about CoPs and their place within organisational thinking has become somewhat polarised. Many scholars, such as Cox (2005); Handley et al. (2006); Kimble (2006); Li et al. (2009) and Roberts (2006) have critically charted ebbs and flows within what they perceived as the most highly acclaimed and influential approaches in the CoP literature. It is quite evident that the notion of CoPs, and how it has been applied, has changed over time with definitions and uses varying in quite diverse ways. As Roberts put it, ‘one of the strengths of the communities of practice approach is that it can be applied in a wide range of organizational settings. However, this can also be viewed as a weakness, since it may encourage its inappropriate application’ (2006, pp. 634–635). As CoPs are the fundamental unit of study within this research project, I believe it is helpful to briefly chronicle an overview of CoPs as a theoretical construct, starting with its emergence in the early 1990s through to its multiple positions within organisation theory today.

Studying CoPs from a broad perspective, four collaborative works have emerged as significant in the development of the CoP concept. The authors of these four texts are: Lave and Wenger (1991); Brown and Duguid (1991); Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott and Synder

While it is generally acknowledged that the original CoP concept was seeded via interdisciplinary research carried out by researchers of the Institute for Research for Learning (IRL) at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre (PARC) in the late 1980s (Kimble 2006 p. 220), many of the authors of these four texts were also associated with IRL around that time. Cox (2005) claimed that the ideas in all of these four texts built ‘on a body of common influences in ethnographic studies of work by Suchman and Lave’ (p. 528), again both of whom were at IRL. So, while Lave and Wenger are publicly credited with coining the term, Community of Practice (CoP) in their 1991 work, they, and other prominent researchers including Brown and Duguid (1991), were linked with constructivist research on learning being conducted at IRL during the late 1980s. Ideas that challenged current orthodoxies about how people learn were being explored and many of the pioneering works on CoPs drew on these ideas. Lave and Wenger (1991) believed that learning involved more than the simple transfer of abstract facts from one person to another. Instead, they perceived it to be a complex and mutually co-constructed process, grounded in both the social and the physical environment. Such learning was based on participation as a form of apprenticeship, in combination with the actual practice or work of the group; hence their use of the term ‘situated learning’. Novices, or newcomers, as they defined them, became knowledgeable about a specific practice by being socialised through their participation with others in the group who had more experience and expertise, individuals they labelled ‘oldtimers’. Initially, newcomers participate on the edges of the social community (the periphery) and with guidance from the oldtimers; they gradually learn more, allowing them to participate more extensively until they become full members of the community. This apprenticeship learning process was described as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) and Lave and Wenger (1991) claimed it occurred in what they called ‘communities of practice’ or CoPs. They defined CoPs as ‘a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’ (1991, p. 98). Kimble contended they used the term, Communities of Practice ‘primarily as a heuristic device that could highlight issues that had previously been overlooked’ (2006, p. 221). In a twist of fate, the concept of CoPs generated significant and widespread interest even though it was not a major thrust in Lave and Wenger’s 1991 work as it was actually directed towards situated learning.

Two other IRL associates, Brown and Duguid (1991), were also exploring learning in organisations and CoPs but their focus was different to Lave and Wenger’s as their attention was on the gap between what they called ‘canonical’ accounts of work, i.e. the organisation’s official teaching and ‘non-canonical’ accounts. Non-canonical learning emerged from doing the work and the social interplay with others doing similar work, i.e. within a CoP. As highlighted by Kimble in his 2006 review of CoPs, both Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid (1991) saw CoPs as autonomous, and somehow self-generating, groups. Neither text put much
attention on issues of power or conflict in these communities even though Lave and Wenger (1991) touched on these issues in regard to different levels of participation between newcomers and oldtimers in their theorising around legitimate peripheral participation. Cox (2005) claimed that Lave and Wenger did ‘not consider the potential for conflict among old timers themselves or indeed among newcomers’ nor did they include potential use of power and associated conflict between the community and its external environment (p. 529). Both these 1991 texts situate CoPs as being outside the formal organisation, ‘being “wild” or “untamed” in the sense that one might view a wild animal: they exist independently of the formalised world of organisations and are driven by their own internal needs’ (Kimble, 2006, p. 224).

By 1998 though, Wenger had revised the notion that CoPs were these wild, spontaneous and free-floating communities. By then, he was specifically tying the CoP concept to organisations and writing that management could ‘nurture’ and guide them (Kimble 2006, p. 227). This, with other changes, indicated Wenger had substantially shifted direction away from his earlier 1991 work with Lave where CoPs were positioned as providing an integral and self-directed framework for learning through the social practices of the CoP’s members. As Kimble wrote, ‘while informal learning in social groups is still an important feature [of Wenger’s 1998 book], it is now only considered in the context of formal organizational settings’ (2006, p. 227).

Wenger (1998) wrote that ‘communities of practice are important to the functioning of any organisation, but they become critical to those that recognise knowledge as a key asset’ (p. 5). He also provided a much more narrow account of CoPs, defining them as existing among people whose interaction effects resulted in ‘mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise, and a repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time’ (p. 126). His characterisation comprised three features: mutual engagement to describe the linking together of people who have a sense of a common activity or practice (a negotiated enterprise) and who together gradually create a shared repertoire of actions, techniques, language, symbols, tools, stories and mental models. It was through the idea of shared repertoire that Wenger established a connection into the field of knowledge management.

By shifting the CoP concept away from increased understanding of a specific practice, he moved it towards the notion of CoPs playing a role in improving the relevant practice in the workplace and thereby providing, at least, some benefits to the organisation. At this point, Wenger also appeared to have abandoned the notion of LPP as a central focus of CoPs. Another shift in direction concerned the external environment of the CoP, an issue not addressed at all in his 1991 work with Lave. The tension resulting from members belonging to different CoPs, the boundaries between these overlapping communities, the larger system of the organisation itself and even boundaries and relations across different organisations were considered. Wenger (1998) introduced the term, ‘constellations of interrelated communities of practice’ (p. 229) to
describe such an organisation which seemed to hark back to what Brown and Duguid had called a collective of communities in 1991. Wenger may also have been creating possibilities to explore co-located or virtual communities, as scholarly interest was certainly on the rise about internet-based collaborations by 1998. This text has been extensively taken up as a reference source for both CoP scholars and practitioners, with his three aspects of CoPs, i.e. mutual engagement, negotiated enterprise and shared repertoire, forming the basis of much of the CoP literature.

On the other hand, by 2008, Storberg-Walker was critically measuring Wenger’s 1998 theoretical CoP framework ‘against what she considers to be applied theory-building research and criteria [claiming a] number of Wenger's analytical elements of his theory neither have definitional clarity nor meet the required level of analysis with regards to a theory-building research critique’ (2008, p. 555).

For example, membership is an analytical category of [both] the meaning aspect and the identity aspect of CoPs. For theory-building research, only one unique definition of membership is possible for applied theories ... how would researchers justifiably code something as participation rather than code it as mutual engagement? (Storberg-Walker 2008, p. 568, 572).

Continuing with this theme and building on Storberg-Walker’s theoretical work, Bozarth (2008) maintained that ‘while much extant literature deals with the means of creating and controlling CoPs virtually none has sought to understand how they “work,” and there is thus not yet an operationalized theory of CoPs’ (p. 4). She continued, ‘while Wenger has a large presence in the literature, his ideas for conceptual analysis of CoPs remain largely ignored: they are not used as a theoretical or conceptual framework or interpretive tool’ (Bozarth 2008, p. 14). Bozarth (2008) undertook a major study of Wenger’s CoP construct with the objective of testing his framework ‘for analysing the internal dynamics of a community of practice’ (p. 4). She focussed on a group of trainers forming a CoP in 1985 (known as TRAIN) which had ‘grown to a mailing list of 250 trainers’ (p. 5). The heart of Bozarth’s study was Wenger’s 1998 CoP framework, not the TRAIN CoP itself.

Essentially, her aim was to empirically examine Wenger’s theoretical framework in response to Storberg-Walker’s claim that his framework has never been put to the test (p. 6). While Bozarth confirmed a generic adequacy of Wenger’s framework, she went on to suggest some enhancements. Of relevance here, she argued that ‘Wenger (1998) often blurs the distinction between “participation” and “engagement,” … (engagement includes meaningful interaction with other members; participation may not)’ (p. 226). In recommending changes to Wenger’s original framework, she defined participation ‘as individual actions and individual’s ways of making meaning’ (p. 254) while engagement ‘requires being involved with others in meaningful
ways’ (Bozarth 2008, p. 252). In considering the future implications of her study, Bozarth suggested that instead of viewing ‘the CoP simply as an ecosystem that may produce knowledge of use to the organization, organizations might consider the CoP as a motivational “space” for high performers – including both novices and experts – to find peer support, validation, encouragement, and energy (p. 258). Perhaps she was echoing Nonaka’s ba construct and linking into the SECI model. For Nonaka, von Krogh and Voelpel (2006), ‘Ba is a shared space for emerging relationships. It can be a physical, virtual or mental space, but all three have knowledge embedded in ba in common, where it is acquired through individual experiences, or reflections on others’ experience’ (p. 1185).

First, while a community of practice constitutes a place where individuals learn (existing) knowledge embedded in this community, ba is a living place for knowledge creation. Second, while learning is likely to occur in any community, the ba needs resources and energy to become an active place where knowledge is created. Third, while the boundaries of communities of practice can be drawn around ‘participation’, membership, task, culture or history, the boundaries of ba may be fluid and arbitrary, participation is driven by opportunities to share and create knowledge, and can change quickly (p. 1200, footnote 2).

Regarding potential questions emerging from her research, Bozarth (2008) noted that ‘those most engaged in TRAIN indicated that they were among those described as “high performers.” This may indicate the usefulness of a study seeking to assess whether there is in fact a certain type of performer, or perhaps personality characteristics, that correlate with higher engagement in the CoP’ (p. 261). The ‘high performers’ were ‘also those the most articulate about their own practices. Does engagement in the CoP lead to increased mindfulness about practice? Or is the mindful practitioner the one more likely to be engaged in the CoP?’ (Bozarth 2008, p. 261). Interestingly, the leadership of a CoP emerged as a significant theme in this research. In concluding, Bozarth wrote that ‘while his resulting framework may be too complex and sometimes clumsy, with gaps here and there, Wenger appears to have developed a framework that may be viewed as a work-in-progress to those working toward a theory of communities of practice (2008, p. 266). After his 1998 text, Wenger developed his CoP ideas further and with McDermott and Snyder wrote another book in 2002: a practical guide for CoP practitioners. It was not a theoretical treatise, instead it was a handbook about cultivating CoPs and included ways to assess the benefits they bring an organisation. Klein, Connell and Meyer claimed the book was ‘directed towards fostering within organisations the sense of aliveness which they regard as crucial to the emergence of successful communities of practice’ (2005, p. 107).

But, are CoPs just a fad? Kimble (2006) cited Ponzi and Koenig’s 2002 article on management fads and knowledge management, clearly portraying Wenger’s work, at this point, to be moving from a scholarly discourse towards a guru-type management framework (pp. 227–228). In fact, Ponzi and Koenig (2002) wrote that ‘despite its popularity, the jury is still out as to whether
knowledge management will become a significant and permanent component of management, or just another management fad’ (Ponzi & Koenig 2002, Introduction Section, Paragraph 1). By 2004, Koenig felt it was ‘useful to point out and reconfirm that Knowledge Management (KM) is not just another business fad’ (p. 37). He further confirmed this in 2006 after having access to four years of additional data to the original work he did with Ponzi in 2002. He claimed that ‘KM is now in the domain of stable mature growth with no indication of decline, a very different profile in comparison to other business fads’ (Koenig 2006, p. 11). In Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s 2002 text (and other similar published work), a changed perspective on CoPs emerged. They are defined as being ‘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’ (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002, p. 7). Kimble (2006) claimed the literature on CoPs in the 2000 to 2003 period represented ‘a profound move away from earlier notions of Communities of Practice’ (p. 229). There was ‘a dislocation between the theory developed in the early work and that which is applied later’ (p. 230).

Cox also identified the same type of viewpoint shift, in that CoPs were now perceived as a management tool, what he claimed was a ‘reinvention of communities of practice as a managerialist conception’ (2005, p. 534) or as Kimble put it, CoPs have ‘now become manageable and unambiguously of benefit to the organization [and] given the right degree of insight, skill and leadership, Communities of Practice can be made to deliver’ (2006, p. 230). Wenger continued writing about CoPs and with Snyder, co-authored an influential article in the Harvard Business Review’s first issue of the year 2000 targeted toward the practitioner audience. Seeking to engage business leaders’ interest in CoPs, they wrote glowingly about the benefits. ‘Communities of practice can drive strategy, generate new lines of business, solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, develop people’s professional skills, and help companies recruit and retain talent’ (p. 140). But they can not be mandated; instead managers can nurture them ‘like gardens, they respond to attention that respects their nature’ (Wenger & Snyder 2000, p. 143). Certainly, this notion of management intervention in CoPs to gain organisational advantage seems to have gained significant sway in the burgeoning CoP practitioner literature as well as within the framework of academic research. Kimble (2006) claimed that ‘CoPs are now not only ‘cultivated’ but have also been tamed’ (p. 230). By 2008, Kimble and Bourdon were claiming that ‘CoPs become organizational structures that drive individuals, through their common interest, to share their knowledge and expertise’ (p. 463) while Garavan, Carbery and Murphy (2007) argued that ‘the concept of a CoP is contested and somewhat problematic’ (p. 46).

By 2010, it seemed generally accepted that management can intentionally create CoPs with the aim of improving organisational performance. Although, as stated by Koliba and Gajda (2009),
‘the extent to which a CoP is viewed as an informal structure, latently produced, or as a formal structure, somehow officially recognised by those external to it, is a matter of contestation within the literature’ (p. 109). Bishop et al. (2008) wrote, ‘there is an ongoing debate over their manageability and the impact this has on their ability to support organizational performance’ (p. 162). Reporting in 2007, Meeuwesen and Hans examined four technical CoPs within the Manufacturing Engineering group at Rolls-Royce whose members were nominated by their managers to participate, i.e. the CoPs were intentionally created by management. They concluded that it was ‘possible to purposefully create CoPs that contribute to organisational performance in a technology-intensive organisation’ (p. 344).

Stages of CoP development

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) ‘observed five stages of community development: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation’ (p. 69). This model indicates that ‘a CoP moves through several phases of energy and visibility, going from Potential (less visibility) to Stewardship (peak of visibility) until it reaches the Transformation phase (end of life cycle)’ (Ribeiro, Kimble & Cairns 2009, Section 3.3). They highlighted that complex challenges face CoPs in all stages, e.g. ‘when a community closes its boundaries, it risks suffocating itself’ (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002, p. 109). Refer to Figure 1.

Gongla and Rizzuto’s (2001) work over several years with more than 60 communities in IBM Global Services also resulted in a five-stage model of the CoP development process. ‘There is a pattern to how the communities evolved and the pattern is influenced by a dynamic balance of
people, process, and technology elements. We observed this pattern across the range of communities regardless of the strategy and approaches to knowledge management of the sponsoring organizations. The overall evolution pattern was summarized into five stages: potential, building, engaged, active, and adaptive' (Gongla & Rizzuto 2001, p. 845). But, they also pointed out that every community was unique and that one size did not fit all (Gongla & Rizzuto 2001, p. 859). Their model was framed as an evolutionary process which they claimed was similar to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2002) five stages of CoP development but it ‘is not a life-cycle approach ... [instead] a community can mature and dissolve at any one of these stages beyond the initial formation level. The model describes instead how communities transform themselves, becoming more capable at each stage, while at the same time maintaining a distinct, coherent identity throughout’ (Gongla & Rizzuto 2001, p. 846). They continued to study IBM communities and in 2004, reported on further developments of their work. The focus this time was on factors involved in the ending of individual CoPs, i.e. communities that become hidden or disappear altogether during the adaptive stage (or as defined by Wenger, McDermott and Synder (2002), the transformation stage). Gongla and Rizzuto explained that ‘Communities, even those with strong beginnings and of much value to a sponsoring organization, do not exist forever’ (2004, p. 296).

During the six year study period, 25 of the more than 60 IBM CoPs involved disappeared. Making use of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2002) work on the transformation stage, Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) recognised four generalised patterns in how that occurred. The pathways to disappearance were either (1) drifting into non-existence, (2) redefining themselves, (3) merging with other communities or (4) by becoming organizational units (p. 298). The first pattern was CoPs slowly drifting towards non-existence as participation in community activities fades away. ‘Connections and interaction among members may continue, but they cease to be about community matters or the body of knowledge that was the focus of the community. As participation decreases, members stop identifying with the community. Less and less knowledge is shared and developed by the community’ (p. 298).

CoPs on the second path (those redefining themselves) usually follow one of two directions: the members face an identity crisis, usually from something significant changing in their environment, resulting in a re-examination of their original reasons for existing, i.e. who are we? If agreement is reached, a new community may form. The other possibility concerns the CoP’s relationship with the host organisation as the community may change ‘its external identity vis-à-vis the larger organization ... [as a] response to the organization valuing the community either too much or too little’ (p. 299). Too much could cause the CoP to pretend to disappear so as to avoid the spotlight while too little could result in the CoP being dispersed by moving underground. ‘In either case, from the outside perspective, the original community has
disappeared ... The community, in effect, has redefined itself in relationship to the larger environment even though it is the same community internally’ (Gongla & Rizzuto 2004, p. 299). The remaining two patterns (merging with another CoP or into the formal structure of the host organisation) are self-explanatory.

It is important to emphasise that endings are difficult on multiple levels no matter what the reason. Most of us feel regret about things such as the loss of ‘opportunities we could have taken, contributions we should have made, relationships we wanted to develop more deeply’ (Wenger, McDermott & Synder 2002, p. 110). Through exploring the IBM CoPs’ disappearances, Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) noticed that ‘certain factors emerged as frequent precipitants to disappearance. These are not “explanations” for the disappearance, but rather they are major changes that occurred which seemed to be prime motivators or catalysts for the community’s eventual disappearance’. Three factors were identified as triggering disappearance, i.e. organisational change, knowledge domain change and changes in community leadership (p. 301). They developed a four step process (Investigate, Decide, Plan and Implement) to help communities facing potential disappearance.

*Sometimes [these steps] are surprising when applied to communities. There is a tendency to simply ignore the issue of transitioning communities out of existence both on the organization’s part and on the part of the community members themselves. A similar effect is seen when the transitioning has some degree of recognition, but virtually no time or resources are devoted to it; somehow, things should just take care of themselves (Gongla & Rizzuto 2004, p. 304).*

What is also perhaps surprising is that although Gongla and Rizzuto’s 2001 work on CoP evolution is often referred to by other authors, their 2004 research into the final stages of communities has not generally been taken up within the CoP literature. Although Ribeiro, Kimble and Cairns cited an unpublished 2008 PhD by Cappe associated with the Universite Pierre Mendes, Grenoble, France who ‘discussed in detail the stage of hidden collocated CoPs’ (2009, Section 3.3). Unfortunately, an English translation of Cappe’s research was unavailable.

**CoP theories grounding this research**

Significant shifts in fundamental thinking about CoPs have occurred since Lave and Wenger first coined the term in 1991. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) argued that while Lave and Wenger’s 1991 work ‘remains fundamentally important to our understanding of learning, there is a need to build on and move beyond it, in order to deal with some enduring challenges ... [there were] gaps and weaknesses ... which have become apparent over the years and are not, in our view, adequately dealt with in Wenger’s (1998, Wenger et al., 2002) subsequent work’ (p. 1). Through their call ‘to build on and move beyond’ Wenger’s work, Hodkinson and
Hodkinson’s (2004) focus was specifically on learning. Similarly, this ethnographic exploration of CoPs also builds on and moves beyond these original ideas.

For the purposes of this organisationally-focussed research, a CoP is defined as a community of individuals who voluntarily choose to come together to help each other develop their knowledge of a common, work-related practice. I agree with Smith’s (2006) view that ‘Communities of practice (CoPs), when suitably grounded, provide a practical framework for assisting in the development of appropriate “people-factors” and the nurturing of collaborative relationships’ (Smith 2006, p. 400). I also agree with Ardichvili, Page and Wentling (2003) that CoPs ‘exist in the minds of their members’ (p. 65) while Wenger’s more recent writing (in conjunction with Eckert) claimed that ‘practice is a way of doing things, as grounded in and shared by a community’ (italics in original) (2005, p. 583).

The CoP concept itself has been enthusiastically adopted as useful in conceptualising how knowledge is shared, shaped and synthesised to build new understandings which sometimes results in new knowledge. But, when first considering CoPs, a useful starting point is to consider the underlying, and sometimes, taken for granted elements of the concept. For, as Iverson and McPhee put it, CoPs ‘are treated as black boxes, as if a CoP is a CoP is a CoP without differences of processual intensity, mix, or enactment’ (2008, p. 177). Other scholars also highlighted this issue. Andriessen (2005) argued that the field of CoP research had become confused as ‘some authors do not differentiate between various forms and discuss Communities of Practice as if they are all basically the same. Moreover, they provide principles and guidelines as if success conditions for all communities are more or less identical’ (p. 192). Klein, Connell and Meyer also highlighted the haziness of the concept when they said, ‘although communities of practice are fairly ubiquitous – wherever people are engaged in activities, recognisable communities of practice are likely to be found – not all groups engaged in activities are communities of practice’ (2005, p. 107).

At first glance, CoPs may seem similar to teams but there are considerable differences. While the concept of a team as a formal group of employees who work together has a long history within organisational frameworks, CoPs have emerged much more recently, i.e. they were first mentioned by Lave and Wenger in 1991. Commonly used definitions of a team usually begin with a small group of people working together and comprising the following elements: interdependence, complementary skills, common goals, with each member mutually accountable for the team’s performance. Even though there are significant differences between CoPs and teams, for instance, their motivating force, Peltonen and Lämsä (2004) explained that ‘Communities of practice are not a new kind of organizational unit; rather, they are a different cut on the organization’s structure ... A community of practice is different from a team in that

the shared learning and interest of its members are what keep it together. It is defined by knowledge rather than by task, and exists because participation has value to its members’ (pp. 254, 255).

Another point of difference relates to the legitimisation process. For teams, this occurs mainly through formal roles and relationships between team members while ‘members of a community of practice establish their legitimacy through interaction about their practice’ (Lesser & Storck 2001, p. 832). Of course, other types of working relationships and subsequent structural arrangements exist in organisations. Denning (2005) presented the following four-part taxonomy: workgroup, teams, community and network (Ch. 7) and it is Denning’s third type (communities) that forms the fundamental unit of interest in this research. He has drawn on the work of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) to synthesise the differences between teams and CoPs, in a way that provided a very appropriate basis for this research. See Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Community</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has a time-bound, predefined operational objective, with commitments to produce some product or service</td>
<td>A community often has no such agreed objective, the essence of a community is the members’ personal investment in an area of shared interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is focused on accomplishing a task</td>
<td>Is generally focused on learning more about the subject of common interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of a team are connected by interdependent tasks</td>
<td>Members of a community in an organizational setting are usually connected by interdependent knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership in a team tends to be a matter of appointment by the organization</td>
<td>Membership in a community tends to be voluntary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Differences between a team and a CoP (Denning 2005, p. 152)

So, in concluding this brief history of the evolution of the CoP construct, it has been extremely beneficial to map the progress of scholarly thinking as a way to construct a backdrop for this research. It is now time to move more directly into a review of what actually constitutes a CoP.

**Key Characteristics**

From 2005 onwards, scholars have sought to isolate common CoP characteristics, resulting in the development of many different classification schemes such as Amin and Roberts (2008); Andriessen (2005); Archer (2006); CEFRIO Research Centre, specifically Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2006); de Vries and Pieters (2007); Ruuska (2005); Scarso and Bolisani (2008); Stein (2005, 2007); Verburg and Andriessen (2006); Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez (2006).
Considering all ten research projects and their associated findings brought into view the ways that theoretical ideas about the key commonalities of CoPs have developed over the past few years. A consolidated picture has been constructed about what CoPs actually do and how they do it. Interestingly though, there seemed to be little continuity amongst the ten classification schemes, with several authors making statements about a lack of research into CoP characteristics. While these projects all fall within the scope of this research, four were particularly relevant, with the remainder being more auxiliary. The four primary studies are Andriessen, 2005 (and Verburg and Andriessen, 2006); Ruuska, 2005; Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob, 2006; Scarso and Bolisani, 2008. While they are critiqued in detail, relevant elements from the other auxiliary studies are briefly reviewed first.

Auxiliary studies

Even though the studies undertaken by Amin and Roberts (2008); Archer (2006); de Vries and Pieters (2007); Stein (2005, 2007); Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez (2006) were considered less central and thus, more auxiliary to this project, each provided important insights. Firstly, de Vries and Pieters (2007) focused on the following four perspectives of CoPs: ‘heterogeneity, informality, interactivity and effectiveness’ (p. 382) relating this framework directly with Wenger’s (1998) three aspects of practice: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire (pp. 384–385). Incidentally, they were of the opinion that little research was being done in these areas while claiming current research concentrated on ‘describing more or less successful cases. At present, it is rather difficult to gain an overview of when and how communities exist, and if they are successful. There is a need for a large-scale explorative study that sheds some light on this’ (p. 384). While adding little of consequence in terms of this review of key CoP characteristics, their findings did stress that ‘formal support and an informal atmosphere invites people to collaborate’ while also suggesting the ‘four perspectives of functionality that we present can be used to evaluate types of communities in light of specific goals’ (de Vries & Pieters 2007, p. 389). They have linked the CoP’s characteristics with its performance in achieving defined goals. Alternatively, Stein’s (2005, 2007) CoP research concluded there were four success factors, i.e. individual, content, meeting and organisational (2005, p. 16). He drew attention to the meeting component and hence to the key role communication processes play in CoP success and in highlighting the importance of routines, wrote that ‘having a regular and consistent timeslot for the meeting as well as an established structure was helpful to allow CoPs to grow and develop’ (Stein 2005, p. 19).

Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez (2006) came to the issue of CoP characteristics from a different position. They explored formal self-managed work teams, hypothesising that such teams should have the characteristics of CoPs for knowledge management processes to occur.
‘We think that organizations could develop communities of practices from their work teams by encouraging in them those characteristics that favor the creation of organizational knowledge’ (p. 64). These characteristics were ‘self-management, leadership, individual autonomy, climate of trust, common understanding and the members’ heterogeneous and complementary skills’ (p. 69). Their work tracked the trend Wenger (1998) had initiated with his change of direction to institutionalising CoPs: a view where management can, and should, cultivate these types of communities and then harness them for organisational benefits. In concluding, Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez (2006) claimed their work ‘makes a practical contribution, insofar as it provides evidence that will help companies to understand the value of knowledge to their success and to obtain maximum performance through the organization of their human resources into teams with the appropriate characteristics to become communities of practices’ (p. 72). The remaining two auxiliary studies form somewhat of a different group in that as well as defining CoP’s characteristics, they also linked them to specific types of communities. Archer (2006) saw CoPs as fitting one of four types of communities, based on the nature of their host organisations: ‘internal communities of practice, communities of practice in network organizations, formal networks of practice, and self-organizing networks of practice’ (2006). While Archer showed the 13 characteristic in his classification scheme varied significantly across these four types of communities, the relevance of his work was limited because the focus of this research is solely on his first type of CoP, i.e. internal CoPs. Still, he highlighted that the benefits and problems (as listed in Table 2) were common across all four types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common characteristics</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
<td>Developing and sharing formal best practices, learning and sharing tacit and explicit knowledge, benchmarking, innovations in management, operations, and processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problems</strong></td>
<td>Unpredictable payback, initiating and maintaining interest, building and maintaining trust, encouraging steady flow of information and knowledge among participants, divergence of objectives, lack of common participant language (natural and/or professional), ensuring payback to all participants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Common characteristics of CoPs (extract of Table 1, Archer 2006)

Amin and Roberts’ (2008) research extended the characteristics discussion with a focus on situated learning and knowing as the underlying basis of CoPs. Their aim was to ‘reveal how variety matters’ (p. 358) by challenging what they saw as generic CoPs. They claimed there were ‘many different kinds of situated practice with quite varied processes and outcomes, gathered around distinct forms of social interaction’ (Amin & Roberts 2008, p. 354) or, as put more simply, one size does not fit all, in terms of CoPs. Accordingly, they developed a ‘typology of knowing in action based on observations of differences in organisation, social engagement, spatial dynamic, and mode of innovation or knowledge formation in different
clusters of working environment’ (p. 354). From this, they were able to make distinctions between the following four different types of CoPs: ‘task/craft-based, professional, epistemic/highly creative, and virtual’ communities (p. 356). Their work served as an important reminder of the difficulties inherent with the ever-expanding definitional range of the CoP construct as its use as a label continues to expand. A comparison of the major elements of these five auxiliary CoP characteristics’ studies is shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Community type</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez (2006)</td>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>Characteristics of CoPs: self-management, leadership, individual autonomy, climate of trust, common understanding and the members’ heterogeneous and complementary skills’ (p. 69).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Comparison of the auxiliary characteristics' studies

Primary studies

Although the preceding studies have shown some of the different pathways to considering just what a CoP is and what they do, the following researchers have been influential in constructing the theoretical framework for this current project. Accordingly, the research of Andriessen, 2005 (then Verburg and Andriessen, 2006); Ruuska, 2005; Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob, 2006; Scarso and Bolisani, 2008 is now comprehensively, and individually, reviewed.

Andriessen (2005)

Andriessen (2005) sought to develop basic forms (what he termed ‘archetypes’) of
Communities of Practice by teasing out, and then summarising, key characteristics in existing CoP literature (p. 200). Working with these characteristics, he (and later with Verburg in 2006) applied them to nine case studies through which he identified two basic, and underlying, clusters of characteristics. He called these two clusters or dimensions: Institutionalization and Connectivity (2005, pp. 205-206). Institutionalization draws together his first five characteristics (contract value, purpose, formalization, composition and boundary) thus allowing patterns to be determined in the role of the supporting organisation and the relative openness of the community. This dimension of Andriessen’s model of archetypes is significant in regard to the connections between CoPs and their host organisations: an area of specific importance to this research. His Institutionalizational aspect, which features the CoP/host relationship, will be considered more extensively in a later section in this chapter. Andriessen’s other dimension, Connectivity referred to his next two CoP characteristics, reciprocity and identity. He found this cluster was influenced by the CoP’s size, ‘the smaller the communities, the higher the connectivity’ (2005, p. 206). Again, while this would seem to be self-explanatory, he was surprised to find that, in the case studies considered, dispersion did not seem to be related to electronic communication.

The three last aspects, i.e. being intra- or inter- organizational, geographical dispersion and mode of interaction, were also expected to form a cluster ... organizational dispersion would imply geographical dispersion, and that dispersed group members would communicate by electronic means. However, neither substantial relations amongst these three aspects, nor with the other aspects were found (Andriessen 2005, p. 206).

He continued, ‘some highly dispersed communities … are not communicating more in mediated ways than less dispersed communities. This raised the likelihood that face-to-face meetings are deemed to be of high importance, even for community members working at a great distance from each other’ (p. 206). Another outcome Andriessen (2005) did not mention was the possibility that members of CoPs physically located apart from each other communicate less because they actually have fewer opportunities to interact face-to-face. Drawing his analysis together, Andriessen suggested ‘that knowledge communities cluster in four, or perhaps five types’ of basic forms/archetypes (2005, p. 195), i.e. informal communities, informal networks, interest groups and strategic communities. Calling his fifth archetype, ‘Delphi communities’, he claimed they were theoretically possible but were not ‘found yet in community research’ (pp. 206–209). Andriessen’s following description of the informal type of community seemed to be the closest fit with the CoPs being studied in this research.

Groups of employees with a common area of interest, often closely related to their work (practice), with substantial interaction, a common history and ‘culture’ (shared concepts, ideas, stories etc) ... Two success conditions are probably found in a very active coordinator or core group and adequate ICT support (pp. 206-207).
Interestingly, Andriessen (2005) saw adequate technological support as one of the two success factors for informal communities. The question of the host organisation nurturing the CoP more generally (e.g. time to participate) was not specifically included in his analysis.

**Ruuska (2005)**

On the other hand, Ruuska (2005) did target organisational support as a key characteristic of CoPs. Her work was also significant as she did a major empirical study of the social structures of CoPs, specifically those in project-based organisations. She explained that the communities she studied were usually temporary, with projects generally having a defined life. Such CoPs face two challenges: how to share knowledge from one project to the next and how to communicate with peers ‘working in dispersed projects, as relationships in project organizations are maintained cross-functionally’ (2005, p. 374). It was the third phase of Ruuska’s (2005) empirical work that specifically focussed on CoP characteristics, as enacted in project-based communities. She surveyed eleven communities in six organisations using an online questionnaire and also interviewed the coordinator in each of the eleven CoPs. The survey instrument she used was the Community Assessment Tool (CAT) questionnaire (developed by Andriessen and Verburg 2004). Thus, part of Ruuska’s organising framework was based on the CoP characteristics that Andriessen (2005) synthesised in developing the CoP archetypes just discussed. Ruuska explained that she considered six characteristics in analysing the eight communities in her study (Ruuska & Vartiainen 2005, pp. 375–376), see Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Informal, semi-formal or formal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and goals</td>
<td>Formed from knowledge needs, members are bound together by the shared interest in a domain, learning is intrinsic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint activities</td>
<td>Conversations and experience sharing are important, both ‘talking about’ (exchanging information) and ‘talking within’ their practice (stories).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination</td>
<td>Some is required and can be divided or concentrated on a sub-group or individual leader. Helps focus on the domain, maintain relationships, and develop its practice. Facilitators promote and advance the discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational support</td>
<td>Need intentional cultivation and people should have time and encouragement to participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Can occur at organisational, group and individual levels. Individual work processes can be improved and professional development fostered but group and organisational outcomes are harder to define and measure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: CoP characteristics in project org. (Ruuska & Vartiainen 2005, pp. 375–376)*

Several of these characteristics are central elements of this research. Coordination links to CoP
leadership while structure and organisational support relate very specifically to the connections between a CoP and its host organisation. Then again, it is important to note that Ruuska (2005) limited her research to CoPs in project organisations and, as Lindkvist (2005) put it, ‘Such temporary organizations or project groups within firms consist of people, most of whom have not met before, who have to engage in swift socialization and carry out a pre-specified task within set limits as to time and costs. Moreover, they comprise a mix of individuals with highly specialized competences, making it difficult to establish shared understandings or a common knowledge base’ (p. 1190). Thus, Lindkvist posited that such transient communities were different to CoPs, labelling them instead, a ‘collectivity-of-practice’ (CIP) (2005, p. 1190). As Amin and Roberts (2008) put it, CIPs are a way of ‘capturing variety’ (p. 355). Relevant insights can still be revealed though by examining Ruuska’s work in more detail. In summary, the analysis of her online questionnaire covering the six characteristics (n=95 and response rate of 71%) revealed the following insights. In terms of their structure, ‘seven of the eight communities were semi-formal ... [all] were focused on knowledge sharing’. Regarding their activities, 91% [86 of 97 respondents] found face-to-face interactions were useful, but only 6% were active/core members and 21% were peripheral members. Most members (84%) spend up to eight hours per month and the most valued activity was sharing their experiences with each other. Only 40% felt there was much encouragement to participate. In a practical sense, 68% indicated participation time was available but only 38% deemed the time allowed to be sufficient while 36% participated on their own time (Ruuska & Vartiainen 2005, pp. 377–378).

Communities were supported by their organizations by allocating time for participation, yet this time was considered too little, and less than half of the members felt generally encouraged to participate ... Organizational support includes, besides recognition, allocation of time and legitimation of participation ... Results indicate that encouragement on behalf of the host organization is significant (Ruuska 2005, p. 147).

Ruuska concluded that the ‘practical implications of managing communities include the following recommendations’: CoPs required a ‘certain degree of formality’ in terms of their structure which could be internal formality, coming from within the community (roles) or it maybe external, ‘coming from the organization, such as the degree of management intervention and integration of the organization’ (p. 183). Another of her recommendations referred to co-ordination, i.e. ‘practicing two roles: organizer and contact maker ... [the last was] more critical, as the main task is to advance relationships, connect members with each other and with other communities and the host organization. It also involves promoting the community towards management. She also highlighted the importance of organisational support, writing they ‘require recognition and legitimation of participation. Allocation of time must be realistic thus members should not have to justify their participation’ (Ruuska 2005, p. 184).
A little before Ruuska (2005) finished her doctorate, a large research project was also coming to an end, under the responsibility of a Canadian Research Centre, (Centre francophone d’informatisation des organisations - CEFRIO). The project was titled ‘Ways of working and collaboration in the Internet era’ and the aim ‘was to study the establishment, operation and evolution of a set of virtual communities of practice, as well as analyze the results that these communities have achieved’ (CEFRIO 2008). The project concentrated on virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs), and specifically, those intentionally created, rather than CoPs more generally. ICT is commonly the foundation of VCoPs as they are usually geographically dispersed, e.g. global companies have communities with members located across the world. Nevertheless, some of the CEFRIO project was pertinent to this research. From 2003 onwards, several members of the multidisciplinary team reported on results. ‘The literature ... is packed with “one-size-fits-all” advice for organizations interested in forming, developing and sustaining CoPs ... [with CoPs] being seen as a one-dimensional construct. However, a closer look at what organizations do clearly reveals that, while CoPs share some common characteristics, they are also structurally very different’ (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2005, p. 147).

Thus, a small group of researchers, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob, together authored several publications around this theme. Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2005, 2006), addressed the notion of a VCoP classification scheme while Bourhis, Dubé and Jacob (2005) explored VCoP leadership. Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2004) looked at management practices associated with VCoPs. Tremblay (2005) was also part of this project team. Although they started publishing in 2004, the CEFRIO researchers were still reporting their results at around the same time as Andriessen (2005) wrote about his archetypes and Ruuska (2005) completed her PhD research, hence their work was not considered. The CEFRIO claim that the literature generally considers CoPs and VCoPs ‘as one-dimensional constructs, with undistinguishing features and undifferentiated identities’ (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2006, p. 71) reveals an understandable gap in their argument. On the other hand, Andriessen (2005) and Ruuska (2005) addressed CoPs in a more general sense, rather than specifically focussing on VCoP as CEFRIO did.

Notwithstanding, these different classification schemes all help to understand CoPs so the CEFRIO research is also considered here. The project began with an extensive review of the current state of the CoP and VCoP literature which they distilled into a range of characteristics. The typology that Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2005, 2006) devised consisted of 21 characteristics which they then classified into the following four categories: demographics, organisational context, membership characteristics and technological environment. See Table 5.
Table 5: VCoP typology (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2005, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>Orientation, life span, level of maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational context</td>
<td>Creation process, boundary crossing, environment, organisational slack, degree of institutionalised formalism, leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership characteristics</td>
<td>Size, geographic dispersion, members’ selection process, members’ enrolment, members’ prior community experience, membership stability, members’ ICT literacy, cultural diversity, topic’s relevance to members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological environment</td>
<td>Degree of reliance on ICT, ICT availability</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Careful scrutiny of Table 5 will reveal that only 20 characteristics are listed as the age and level of maturity characteristics have been treated as closely aligned. Clearly, these two concepts are not identical but they can be framed as being similar. This typology augments the discussion concerning the different theoretical frameworks already presented. The other CEFRIO project publications mentioned above are reviewed in sections later in this chapter, i.e. the Leadership and Organisational Connection Sections. The typology that Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2006) developed included the following characteristics which had not previously been specifically identified in the earlier classification schemes.

- Demographic details about the community, e.g. CoP size and stage of development.
- Organisational slack which relates to the CoP’s possible access to additional organisational resources, should they be required.
- The strength of the social ties between members that existed before the community formed.

This last characteristic would be more critical for VCoPs where members have little opportunity for face-to-face interaction. They concluded, ‘our investigation clearly shows that, in order to ensure success, management decisions and actions have to be fine-tuned towards the unique personalities of their VCoPs’ (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2006, p. 89).

Scarso and Bolisani (2008)

Scarso and Bolisani (2008) also sought to construct a CoP classification scheme. While their research was not exclusively directed towards VCoPs like the CEFRIO research, their focus was on CoPs intentionally created by management. They aimed to ‘identify the main elements influencing the development and management of CoPs’ and to then develop ‘an integrated framework depicting the relationships among these factors and the characteristics of the business environment where CoPs are created’ (Scarso & Bolisani 2008, p. 375). There were some doubtful claims in their research introduction and their problem definition. ‘Until now, the
literature has been dominated by anecdotes and case studies focused on specific aspects. Fewer efforts have been made to generalise such findings, and to build a more systematic view of the factors affecting the performance of a CoP’ (Scarso & Bolisani 2008, p. 375). In critiquing previous efforts directed towards CoP classification schemes, they claimed that the list of aspects that Verburg and Andriessen’s (2006) drew into their Community Assessment Toolkit (CAT) ‘were relevant but their integration into a comprehensive model, capable of explaining the factors affecting a CoP’s success, is not clearly developed’. In continuing to critique these earlier attempts, they perceived the typology developed by Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2006) as being ‘a further step toward a connection between the different features that a CoP can assume’ (p. 377). They continued, ‘These analyses are valuable, but an “organic” view of the whole issue still lacks. The various authors tend to treat similar aspects from distinct viewpoints, using different terms, ascribing different importance to them, or deriving contrasting managerial implications’ (Scarso & Bolisani 2008, p. 378). Their solution was to derive another scheme where they have ‘tried to summarise the four major dimensions that shape the existence and functioning of a CoP’, i.e. organisational, cognitive, economic and technological (Scarso & Bolisani 2008, p. 378). See Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Details</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisational dimension</td>
<td>‘Transverseness’ across organisation:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- size</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- geographic dispersion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relationship with existing org. structure: integration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Formal acknowledgement: participation mechanism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Governance mechanisms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Local v centralised mgmt: host organisation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Members’ roles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kind of leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive dimension</td>
<td>Nature of shared knowledge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Members’ cultural proximity</td>
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<td>Members’ knowledge gaps</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge domain</td>
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<td></td>
<td>KM processes &amp; flows: contributing versus using</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Level of trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic dimension</td>
<td>Metrics to evaluate:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- costs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- benefits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Resources allocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incentive/rewards systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological dimension</td>
<td>KMS application</td>
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<td></td>
<td>KM processes underpinned by technology:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- re-use knowledge (databases)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- communicating</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Relationships with social/org context</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intensity of use across CoP</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Familiarity with ICT</td>
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</table>

Table 6: Four main dimensions of CoPs (Scarso & Bolisani 2008)
Summary of key characteristics

In drawing this review of the different CoP classification schemes together, it is important to highlight that the unit of analysis was not consistent across the four sets of primary studies as it was only Andriessen (2005) whose work focussed on generic CoPs, the other three sets of authors studied a specific type of CoP, as identified in square brackets: Ruuska and Vartiainen (2005) [CoPs in project organisations]; Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2006) [Intentionally-created VCoPs] and Scarso and Bolisani (2008) [Intentionally-created CoPs]. A summary picture of these four primary classification schemes, supported by the auxiliary studies briefly reviewed earlier, has been developed to provide both a descriptive representation of these types of knowledge communities as well as a comparative theoretical framework. See Table 7.

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ORGANISATIONAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT</strong></td>
<td><strong>STRUCTURE</strong></td>
<td><strong>INSTITUTIONALIZATION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships and roles</td>
<td>Creation process;</td>
<td>Informal; semi-formal</td>
<td>Purpose; defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>within the CoP and between the rest of the organisation.</td>
<td>boundary crossing;</td>
<td>or formal</td>
<td>membership;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of the CoP (number of members); geographical dispersion; “transverseness” across the distinct units of the company; mechanism of participation (e.g. voluntary rather than imposed; open or closed); degree of formalisation; integration with the existing firm’s structure; roles of members and power distribution; and conformity with a fixed global model</td>
<td>environment; organisational stack; degree of institutionalised formalism; leadership</td>
<td>Intentional cultivation</td>
<td>degree of formalization; composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEMOGRAPHICS</strong></td>
<td><strong>COORDINATION</strong></td>
<td><strong>DISPERSION AND</strong></td>
<td><strong>INTERACTON MODE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEMBERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS</strong></td>
<td>Coordinators and/or facilitators</td>
<td><strong>AND</strong></td>
<td>Intra- or inter-organizational; geographical dispersion; size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size; geographic dispersion; members’ selection process; members’ enrolment; membership stability</td>
<td><strong>PURPOSE/GOALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>MODE</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONNECTIVITY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COGNITIVE</strong></td>
<td><strong>JOINT ACTIVITIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
<td>Reciprocity (connectivity); identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge domain; nature and features of knowledge treated; KM processes performed; relevance of topics to participants; members’ cognitive homogeneity; level of trust among members and related mechanisms; members’ prior experience and knowledge base.</td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEMBERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS</strong></td>
<td>Members’ prior community experience; cultural diversity; topic’s relevant to members</td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PURPOSE/GOALS</strong></td>
<td>The domain or knowledge needs</td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONNECTIVITY</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONVERSATIONS AND STORIES</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Summary of classification schemes of CoP characteristics

While there are many fundamental similarities between the elements of these primary schemes, it is possible to see a progression of thinking starting with the work of Ruuska and Vartiainen (2005) and Andriessen (2005) continuing through to Scarso and Bolisani (2008). Being the more recent work, Scarso and Bolisani (2008) incorporated many of the elements of the earlier schemes so there were fundamental similarities across the four classifications. Still, as Table 7 shows, there are also differences, particularly in Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) framework, e.g. their increased emphasis on economic performance. Previously, this facet of knowledge communities was only touched on briefly by Ruuska and Vartiainen (2005) and Andriessen (2005) and it was absent from Dubé; Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) typology altogether (refer to the grey area in the table). There is little doubt that this reflects the ever-increasing push from management to harness these types of communities to improve their organisation’s bottom line.

This comparative summary table revealed another interesting difference around CoP communication in that Ruuska and Vartiainen’s (2005) abbreviated list of characteristics did not include technology as a major influence on communities (the second area greyed out in the table). Andriessen, who also published his list of archetypes in 2005, did briefly mention the type of interaction, i.e. face-to-face versus technologically mediated, was influential. Conversely, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) included both the community’s technological

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ECONOMIC</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Metrics to measure benefits and costs; sources of funds and their allocation; mechanisms of incentive and reward to CoP members.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OUTCOMES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>At organisational; group and individual levels</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TECHNOLOGICAL</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of technology that influence and are influenced by the other pillars previously analysed; and namely: nature of the KMS application; KM processes specifically supported by electronic systems; overall degree of reliance on KMS by the CoP; and relations with the social context and members interactions</td>
<td>Degree of reliance on ICT; ICT availability</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TECHNOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Degree of reliance on ICT; ICT availability</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MEMBERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Members’ ICT literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DISPERSION AND INTERACTION MODE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of interaction: face-to-face and/or via ICT</td>
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42
environment and the degree of member’s literacy around using the technology but did not mention other forms of communication, e.g. face-to-face. By 2008, technology had become a much more influential element in community life. Although Scarso and Bolisani (2008) claimed that ‘KMS do not guarantee, automatically, people interaction’ (p. 383), their focus was firmly on technological aspects in their framework with the social elements of communication only considered in terms of media choice. Equally, it is important to reiterate that it was only Andriessen’s (2005) work that focussed on characteristics associated with more traditionally-viewed CoPs. Ruuska and Vartiainen, (2005) looked at CoPs in project organisations while Dubé; Bourhis and Jacob (2006) explored VCoPs and Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) attention was directed towards CoPs deliberately created by management. As pointed out before, even though these different authors have focussed on different facets of CoPs, all were useful in understanding what underpins these types of communities.

The Synthesised Model of CoP Characteristics

All the elements critiqued in the preceding discussion of both the auxiliary and primary studies of CoP characteristics were next drawn together into a single synthesised model to enable the development of a more complete picture of CoPs. In beginning the process of blending these different schemes together, Scarso and Bolisani’s 2008 framework became the starting point because it was the most recent research, and also the most comprehensive. Another ten elements, related to demographics, organisational context and membership, were added from Dubé; Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) typology.

The characteristics schemes proposed by the remaining sets of primary authors, i.e. Andriessen (2005) and Ruuska and Vartiainen’s (2005), could be subsumed into these two more recent schemes. Interestingly, Ruuska and Vartiainen’s (2005) brief list was the closest match to Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) later work, although the emphasis on some elements changed in the intervening three years. So, while her work does not specifically appear, it was pioneering in opening up the CoP characteristics concept to more attention. Another change concerned Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) local versus centralised management in their Organisational Dimension which has been removed as its current relevance was considered questionable. Even so, as a future unfolds where intentionally-created CoPs expand their boundaries more broadly, and more emphasis is placed on economic return, the source of management support will become more significant.

Taking these adjustments into account, I have constructed an amalgam of CoP characteristics, called the Synthesised Model of CoP Characteristics and referred to simply as the Synthesised Model from now on. Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) organic view of the four dimensions of CoPs
provided the framework with additional elements from Dubé; Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) topology listed on the right. The inner workings of this synthesis are shown in Table 8.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Transverseness’ across org:</td>
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<td>- size</td>
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<td>- geographic dispersion</td>
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<td>Relationship with existing org. structure:</td>
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<td>Formal acknowledgement</td>
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<td>Mechanism for participation</td>
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<td>Governance mechanisms:</td>
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<td>Members’ roles</td>
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<td>Kind of leadership</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
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<td>Life span</td>
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<td>Environment</td>
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<td>Organisational stack</td>
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<td>Members’ enrolment</td>
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<td>Membership stability</td>
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<td>Nature of shared knowledge</td>
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<td>Members’ cultural proximity</td>
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<td>Members’ knowledge gaps</td>
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<td>Knowledge domain</td>
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<td>KM processes &amp; flows:</td>
<td>Contributing versus using</td>
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<td>Level of trust</td>
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<td>Members’ community experience</td>
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<td>Topic’s relevant to members</td>
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<td></td>
<td>benefits</td>
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<td>Resources allocation</td>
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<td>Incentive/rewards systems</td>
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<td>KMS application</td>
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<td>KM processes supported by tech:</td>
<td>re-use knowledge (databases)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>communicating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships with social/org context</td>
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<td>Intensity of use across CoP</td>
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<td>Familiarity with ICT</td>
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</table>

Table 8: Inner workings of the Synthesised Model
In constructing the Synthesised Model, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) ‘membership stability’ characteristic was problematic. It referred to the member turnover in a CoP, i.e. the number of new members joining and oldtimers retiring. As it had a strong connection to the ‘Member Roles’ variable within Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) Organisational Dimension, these two elements were combined in the Synthesised Model to reduce complexity. The final form of the Synthesised Model became the central focus of this research and is presented as Table 9.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key CoP characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisational dimension</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Transverseness’ across org:</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ size</td>
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<td>➢ geographic dispersion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship with existing org. structure: integration</td>
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<td>Formal acknowledgement</td>
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<td>Mechanism of participation</td>
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<td>Governance mechanisms:</td>
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<td>Members’ roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kind of leadership</td>
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<td>Orientation</td>
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<td>Creation process</td>
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<td>Organisational slack</td>
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<td>KM processes &amp; flows: Contributing versus using</td>
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<td>Members’ community experience</td>
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<td>Topic’s relevant to members</td>
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<td>Metrics to evaluate:</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ benefits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources allocation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incentive/rewards systems</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Economic dimension</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Technoecology</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>KMS application</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tech supports KM processes:</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ re-use knowledge (databases)</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ communicating</td>
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Key CoP characteristics

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<th>Relationships with social/org context</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intensity of use across CoP</td>
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<td>Familiarity with ICT</td>
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Table 9: Final form of the Synthesised Model

Postscript

In the final stages of this project, Koliba and Gajda (2009) published their work looking at CoPs as an analytical construct with the objective of bringing to the ‘surface tensions and [to] highlight unanswered questions regarding CoP theory’ (p. 97). From their review of CoP-related literature, they claimed their investigation ‘reveals the ways in which the community of practice has come to be used descriptively, as an analytical framework, and prescriptively, as an organization intervention’ (p. 98). Koliba and Gajda’s (2009) extensive list indicated the reach of CoP theory and included the following: anthropology, business management, computer science, formal education in its many forms, engineering, gender studies, health care, political science, public administration, social psychology and social work (pp. 99–100). Work by Andrew, Tolson and Ferguson (2008) is indicative of the ever-broadening interest in the CoP concept. They debated ‘its potential application in nursing as a gateway to enhanced professional and educational networking’ (p. 247). In defining the current thinking on CoP characteristics, Koliba and Gajda (2009) mentioned Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob’s (2005, 2006) typology of VCoP characteristics. Difficulties arise, however, as they did not consider the other four sets of authors’ work on CoP characteristics that have just been reviewed. In fact, they maintained that while there had been ‘repeated calls for the development of more empirical research ... there have been few attempts, aside from Dube et al.’s recent efforts (2006) to systematically isolate and operationalize variables that give shape and meaning to CoPs’ (Koliba & Gajda 2009, p. 103).

Excluding those other CoP characteristics’ investigations from their review raised questions about the completeness of their own work. They indicated they hoped to ‘stimulate and focus the further development and investigation of communities of practice as a unit of analysis’ by encouraging future research into the following three areas: CoP characteristics, CoP development and CoP evaluation (pp. 111–118). It is noteworthy that all three areas fall within the scope of this work. They concluded that ‘CoPs is a high-stakes construct that warrants further empirical development’ (Koliba & Gajda 2009, p. 119).

A second postscript was added to this discussion about CoP characteristics via a recently published conference paper, co-authored by Ribeiro, Kimble and Cairns (2009). They
advocated ‘a new way to view how Communities of Practice (CoPs) form in environments that make heavy use of information systems’ based on a simplified CoP taxonomy (Abstract). While acknowledging the inherent difficulties of trying to categorise CoPs in terms of commonalities, they claimed there was one common aspect which linked all the CoPs studied to date: they were all ‘quite constant. They exist all the time and one can detect them at any specific time’ and they contemplated if there might be a different type of CoP with ‘the same characteristics that define CoPs as described before (Domain, Community and Practice), but with one profound difference: they appear and disappear with time’ (Ribeiro, Kimble & Cairns 2009, Section 4.0). They called these new virtual communities, Quantum-CoPs and this line of research is clearly very new and speculative. Still, their work illuminates the ways categories shape both how and what it is that is being defined: an important point challenging what we take for granted. So, in drawing this discussion of CoP characteristics to a close, it became clear that many consistencies exist in classifying communities but there are also many different ways to do so.

**Leadership**

When researching the ways that CoPs actually operate, questions about how they are managed soon emerged. Many descriptive terms are used, such as CoP leadership, facilitation and co-ordination. Wenger said that ‘the role of [a] “Community Coordinator” who takes care of the day-to-day work is crucial, but a community needs multiple forms of leadership: thought leaders, networkers, people who document the practice, pioneers etc’ (2000, p. 231). In quoting Wenger, Printy (2008) said, ‘The character of a community of practice reflects the social relations of its members, particularly the value or legitimacy individuals extend to others (Wenger, 1998). On the basis of these relations, individuals function as informal leaders who keep the community’s purpose at the center of activity and who help shape social relations among members to facilitate learning (Wenger, 2000)’ (Printy 2008, p. 193). Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) analysed design and technology initiatives associated with CoP facilitation: ‘the role of the facilitator in COPs is still under-researched, in contrast to research on facilitation in other fields ... it may be that COP members look to a facilitator to exercise leadership to a greater extent than in other kinds of virtual entities because COPs typically do not have an assigned leader’ (p. 19). Even though their research focussed specifically on the use of technologically-mediated communicative technologies by VCoPs, it provided useful insights, particularly as the dividing line between VCoPs and more generic CoPs are becoming more blurred as the use of social technologies increases.

Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) reported that potential community members needed to meet (either offline or online) in the initial stages to discuss roles in the CoP (p. 22). They continued, ‘Therefore, the facilitator in this process should: (i) listen to, clarify, and integrate
information from those participants, (ii) develop and ask the right questions that could help participants in this process, and (iii) encourage multiple perspectives during this process in order to achieve the best outcomes’ (Tarmizi, de Vreede & Zigurs 2007, p. 22). Introducing new members into the CoP was given as an example of a facilitator’s task to ensure the newcomer was comfortable with the communication technology in use. They further specified tasks that were involved; ‘presenting important information to new members, encouraging new members to participate, presenting new members to community members, and answering new members’ concerns’ (Tarmizi, de Vreede & Zigurs 2007, p. 22).

Through their work, they developed a CoP facilitation task taxonomy based on 33 facilitation tasks. Firstly, two broad categories of tasks were defined, those involved with the internal functioning of the CoP compared to those directed outwards in terms of the relationships between the community and its external environment. The internal categories were: Information Source, Inspirator and Guide while they defined the three external one as: Information Source, Public Relations Manager and Investigator. These six roles were then distilled down to 33 specific tasks necessary to actually do these different roles. Next, they did a web survey of internet CoPs to gauge the level of difficulty and degree of importance of these tasks. It was completed by 44 respondents (19 female (43%) and 25 male (57%) from ‘18 different countries, with the majority in the US (17 respondents), followed by Canada (7 respondents). The other 20 respondents were from a range of other countries, including Australia. They were ‘asked to choose up to 10 of the most difficult facilitation tasks as well as the ten most important tasks from a list of 33 facilitation tasks’ (Tarmizi, de Vreede & Zigurs 2007, p. 22–25).

Their results showed that tasks associated with participation were perceived to be the most challenging for facilitators, e.g. encouraging new members (70%), ‘promoting ownership and encouraging group responsibility’ (61%), ‘creating and maintaining an open, positive and participative environment’ (56%) while 45% said building up a community where members are cooperative (p. 25–26). Participation tasks were also perceived to be the most important, e.g. 55% of the respondents stated that their most important activity was to ensure the community provided an ‘open, positive and participative environment’ while encouraging new members and ‘listening clarifying and integrating information’ were each seen by 52% as being significant. Ensuring the community remained focused on its purpose was seen by half the respondents as an important task. (p. 26–28). Thus, Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) found there were many tasks associated with participation considered to be both very important and also very hard to do (p. 29). They also found that many of the 33 ‘tasks were considered by respondents to be low in terms of difficulty and importance’ which they believed could indicate potential areas to be automated as a way to reduce the facilitator’s responsibilities. They continued, ‘[tasks such as] presenting new members to the community,’ ‘presenting information
to the community,’ and ‘answering new members’ concerns’ could possibly be automated, or at least, partially (p. 28). By reducing these more administrative-type tasks, the facilitator can concentrate on tasks more important to the CoP, particularly as they found that ‘some of those highly important tasks are relatively low in terms of difficulty, so that facilitators can accomplish those tasks without much problem’ (Tarmizi, de Vreede & Zigurs 2007, p. 27).

Garavan, Carbery and Murphy (2007) also investigated processes associated with CoP leadership (which they called CoP management) although their focus was on intentionally-created CoPs compared to CoPs self-generated on a voluntary basis. They claimed that such a top-down CoP could become a ‘playful community’ based on a strong knowledge sharing work ethic which is mutually challenging with ongoing learning resulting (p. 37). Their view of the CoP manager/leadership tasks, and corresponding skills, echoed those already discussed.

_They must possess strong interpersonal, team building, conflict management and consensus seeking skills. They must adopt the role of facilitator and coach. This requires understandings of context, process and content. Exploring these issues is central and requires the CoP manager to structure the conversation, create an open atmosphere that enables members to feel free to contribute and to propose models or courses of action when necessary (Garavan, Carbery & Murphy 2007, p. 47)._

So, it seems that, irrespective of the origin of a community, the ongoing leadership requirements are similar, even though the names of this role vary. Then again, the connections with the external environment are different in the management-established CoPs even though Garavan, Carbery and Murphy (2007) also concluded that ‘as sense maker CoP managers must have a detailed understanding of the cultural and political context of the CoP’ (p. 47). While the current trend towards management established CoPs appears to be growing, Cargill explained that as no formal hierarchical structure exists in CoPs, there cannot be a formalised leader position (2006). However, she pointed out that a leaderless group was unlikely and that the informal dynamics of communities meant that informal leadership behaviours usually emerge.

**Leaders and followers**

Cargill (2006) focussed on the relationship between leaders and followers within the dynamics of CoPs, claiming that leaders ‘need to be prepared to renegotiate their leadership status frequently ... always recognising that they have no power other than that which the CoP members voluntarily surrender upwards to them’. She continued, ‘This kind of power base does not suit individuals who like clear positional authority, but favours those with high tolerance for ambiguity and strong “people” skills. These are most likely to be able to draw a CoP together and hold it so for a sufficient period of time for it to operate as a sharing community’ (Cargill 2006, p. 321). Not surprisingly, CoP leadership has much in common with leadership associated
with more formally authorised work teams, especially self-managing or self-leading teams which are becoming more prevalent in new generation organisations. Mathieu et al. (2008) examined shared leadership in teams claiming the view that leadership can emerge from within the team itself is becoming more accepted. Such leadership ‘emerges from members’ collective knowledge, skills, and abilities’ (p. 450).

It would seem that this would apply equally to CoPs as well as to more formal teams. Team leadership per se is an extremely complex construct and researchers have approached it from multiple angles, levels and viewpoints for more than half a century. One enduring line of research relevant to this research project is the behavioural perspective which presents a high level dichotomy categorising leader behaviours as either task- or people-focused. But, it seemed both types were ‘almost equally important in team effectiveness’ (Burke et al. 2006, p. 303). Mathieu et al. also cited work done by Taggar, Hackett and Saha (1999) who ‘found that the effect of emergent leadership was greatest when other team members also demonstrated high levels of leadership influence’ (2008, p. 451). In considering future directions around ‘member-based leadership’, Mathieu et al. (2008) posed the question, ‘who is best positioned to fulfil which types of leadership tasks?’ (p. 453). This question has particular relevance to the current CoP-based research, particularly in terms of leadership functions being shared between two or more members.

Cargill (2006) claimed CoP leadership encompassed a range of functions which could potentially be shared among more than one person with her work revealing the most important leadership functions were: balancing members’ interests and articulating agenda items, attending to inclusiveness of the CoP, actively working to draw member contributions, facilitating interactions and articulating difficult issues and encouraging a culture of egalitarianism (p. 321). Garavan, Carbery and Murphy (2007) agreed an important part of the leadership role involved ‘unearting and challenging assumptions ... by unveiling sources of misunderstandings and refiguring [them] if necessary’ (p. 42). In terms of Cargill’s point about the need for the leader to actively seek to draw contributions in from all members, Endsley, Kirkegaard and Linares (2005) wrote that lurkers were those ‘who are members but not regular contributors’ and they ‘often constitute two-thirds or more of the community, they serve as important knowledge resources despite their limited participation’ (p. 29). Nicholls and Cargill (2008) also warned that such individuals ‘must be included in order for the Community to genuinely share the learning tasks and resources’ (p. 23). In summary, they highlighted the link between CoPs and the host organisation’s culture and values, saying that ‘low key, facilitative, minimal leadership is best’ (p. 24). Seeking to identify best practices for managing CoPs, Bishop et al. (2008) drew the notion of leadership into their work. In doing so, they touched on something that was relatively absent from current literature on CoP leadership. The issue
concerns the host organisation formally allocating resources to legitimise CoP activities, e.g. time spent participating in the community.

The members of staff involved in CoPs will ultimately determine success. Key roles including KM champions, CoP leaders and CoP members therefore need to be filled with the best-suited people. Each of these roles should become a recognized aspect of people’s jobs and should contribute to professional development and career progression. This emphasizes their importance and recognizes the skills required (Bishop et al. 2008, p. 174).

It would seem though that the degree of formal organisational support ranges from no support (i.e. CoP participation is not endorsed) or, if available, the support could be restricted to CoP members undertaking specific roles (i.e. leadership activities). Alternatively, support could be provided more broadly, to all CoP members. By officially including CoP activities within individual formal job responsibilities, the community’s contributions to the organisation are recognised and seen to be valued. It is important to remember though that CoPs do not exist within a vacuum, instead their members interact internally with each other and externally with those in their outside environment and these contextual relationships are in continual motion. There can be little doubt that the CoP/host organisation relationship influences what goes on.

Organisational connections

The economic need for today’s organisations to leverage innovations with the aim of more competitive advantage and growth is expressed in the high priority that professionals (and researchers) place on better managing their knowledge assets. Narrowing the focus specifically to CoPs, major shifts have occurred concerning the dynamics between CoPs and organisations. It is quite clear that these relationships are fluid, complex and multifaceted and it is equally clear that, in a world underpinned by rapid changes, there is always an organisational agenda.

Either formal or informal or both

Early KM writers emphasised that CoPs needed to form spontaneously from within the grassroots level of organisational life, as individuals voluntarily joined together to interweave their common interests with like-minded others on an informal basis. Typically, such communities were unauthorised on a formal level. Wenger’s change of direction in 2000 suggested they could be manipulated by organisations and if supported, they could contribute to performance improvements (Wenger 2000, Wenger & Snyder 2000). Tension developed, with some critics arguing it was at odds with the idea of self-regulating CoPs (Fox 2000, Contu & Willmott 2000). Later work focussed on a midway position. Organisations were seen to be able to support CoPs by creating and promoting the right conditions, time and space. The cultivation
metaphor allowed the CoPs’ contributions to be harnessed, providing the potential to improve overall performance levels but organisations still could not control them (Wenger 2002).

The distinctions between CoPs and other structural organisational entities, such as teams have become increasingly blurred as examples of communities created intentionally by management in a top-down fashion abound. In some instances, the organisation even controls who can participate and what they are to do, with obligatory participation. Such CoPs are similar to formal groups in an organisation’s structure, i.e. self-managed project teams. Of course, with increasing external management of CoPs, issues of control, direction and power come to the fore. As suggested by Ardichvili et al. (2006), it is assumed that, regardless of the degree of institutionalism, there has always been some level of support flowing from the organisation to the CoP, e.g. access to infrastructure such as communication technology (email) and rooms in which to meet. From a theoretical perspective, Wenger and colleagues’ stance framing organisations as providing support to CoPs in the form of nurturing and cultivating them, without attempting to control them, still seems to be the prevailing view. In spite of that, the balance appears to be shifting toward a more institutionalisation position regarding the context and the relationship between CoPs and the organisation, although the extent of this connection remains contested. Of course, this shift is continually driven by attempts to harness such communities to improve organisational performance. Thus, the management of all CoPs, and not simply those that have been intentionally created, remains a ‘hot topic’.

Kranendonk and Kersten (2007) occupy the middle ground. ‘In our experience, a management-driven creation of a new CoP as an act of governance can start an operational CoP, and the CoP’s members soon take over the steering of the process and content of operational practices. As a result, the CoP becomes based on internal alignment, and the initial management merely facilitates the proceedings’ (p. 946). It appeared logical that the source of the drive to create a CoP could be best represented by a continuum, with management-generated at one end (formal) and self-generated CoPs at the other. Thus, the degree of management involvement becomes clear. As part of the previously discussed CEFRIIO research project concentrating on management-generated VCoPs, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2004) examined the CoP/organisation relationship in such communities, seeking to identify the best practices for managing CoPs. The project’s aim was to explore ways that organisations might nurture these types of communities so that more relevant management practices could be developed. They studied eight communities whose membership varied between compulsory and voluntary and proposed five categories of practices associated with the top level management of these communities. See Table 10.
Management practices | Details
--- | ---
Resource allocation | Financial (secure funding), technological tools (virtual space and training), face-to-face opportunities (rhythmic communication episodes), time to participate.
Leadership structure management | Selecting the leader based on these critical elements: 1) ‘his/her personality, enthusiasm, and skills; 2) the amount of time the leader can devote to the community; and 3) monitoring the performance of the leadership structure’.
Hands-on management | Top management needs to be very actively involved, e.g. ‘using their formal authority to remove obstacles and exercising political pressure and negotiation to foster collaboration’ and ‘leaders need to be supported by the project sponsors and the whole management team’.
Symbolic actions | Directed internally to influence the community, e.g. senior staff attending the initial meeting even if only for a short time. Directed towards the whole organisation ‘as an external and public sign of support’.
Organizational practice | Include active participation in the community as a part of performance evaluation criteria – this also provides legitimacy. Top management’s vision of what the community should be.

Table 10: Five management practices (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2004, pp. 17–23)

In concluding, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob 2004 wrote that ‘management intervention after the initial start-up is a delicate and complex balance between restraints and actions’ (p. 28). Overall, they found that management decisions about the community’s operational leadership were the most critical, i.e. monitoring the leadership structure and intervening if it became necessary (p. 25). They also found having ‘a leader who has the time to fruitfully play his/her role seems to be a key success factor’ (p. 19) and stressed that ‘organizational support must be thought of as a whole, with decisions regarding the operational leadership, taking precedence over other managerial practices’ (p. 27).

Still, they also wrote that ‘relying on the leader alone to ensure a VCoP’s success may be risky’ especially if they are inexperienced. In such instances, they recommended a coach while identifying that ‘more research is needed to study this coach-leader team that seems to contribute very highly to the success of some VCoPs’ (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2004, p. 27). The authors made the point that managing these types of communities (i.e. management-generated VCoPs) was no different to managing any other type of organisational change initiative (p. 27). More recently, Probst and Borzillo (2008) made the same point when they observed that ‘some of the issues discussed as being important for successful COPs are very similar to those mentioned in change management literature’ (p. 344).

But, even though both studies explored management/governance mechanisms associated with CoPs, their unit of analysis was different. Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2004) concentrated very
specifically on organisational practices in regard to management-generated VCoPs while Probst and Borzillo (2008) focussed on leaders’ perceptions of CoPs at a more generic level. Investigating ‘57 CoPs in major European and US companies’, Probst and Borzillo (2008) sought to determine why some CoPs succeed and others fail. They considered specific governance mechanisms and developed ‘ten “commandments” that lead to the successful development and sharing of best practices as well as five main reasons for failure’ (p. 335). See Table 11.

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<th>Key factors</th>
<th>Details</th>
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| Success factors — 10 commandments | Stick to strategic objectives  
Divide objectives into sub topics  
Form governance committees with sponsors and CoP leaders  
Have a sponsor and CoP leader who are ‘best practice control agents’  
Regularly feed the CoP with external expertise  
Promote access to other intra- and inter-organisation networks  
The CoP leader must have a driver and promoter role  
Overcome hierarchy-related pressures  
Provide the sponsor with measurable performance  
Illustrate results for CoP members |
| Factors of failure | Lack of a core group  
Low level of one to one interaction between members  
Rigidity of competencies  
Lack of identification with the CoP  
Practice intangibility |


Interestingly, a drift (or perhaps more accurately, a surge) towards increased institutionalisation was clearly evident in their ‘commandments’, e.g. their emphasis on the CoP achieving strategic objectives.

Our results show that the COPs’ objectives indicate a clear mission to develop and share practices that will contribute to lower costs/increase revenues for the organization once they have been deployed and multiplied across the organization. We found evidence that setting clear and measurable objectives provides COP members with a concrete direction to follow. Such quantifiable objectives limit COP members to specific metrics (% of cost reduction, % of revenue increase, % of time reduction, increase in customer satisfaction, etc.) that must be respected when they participate in the process of developing and sharing best practices with other members ... setting objectives explicitly linked to cost reduction and/or an increase in organizational revenue clearly points to COPs’ strategic relevance for their members (Probst & Borzillo 2008, p. 339).

What is perhaps not so evident on first reading their work concerns underlying assumptions that a comparison with Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2004) revealed. Probst and Borzillo (2008) do not identify that they are researching management-generated CoPs; rather it is simply assumed they
are. Another, although perhaps less significant, point relates to their simply referring to the CoPs they have studied as being ‘a specific form of intra-organizational network’ (p. 335) rather than specifying that they are virtual or VCoPs as in the research report from Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2004).

From the examples of these two studies, one published in 2004 and the other in 2008, it became clear that a shift in the CoP/organisation relationship towards higher levels of institutionalism or management control is continuing to take place. Thompson (2005) also sought to understand what was actually going on in regard to the CoP/organisation relationship as tensions were emerging in the literature around these support versus control issues. He examined both the structural aspects of this relationship and the CoP members’ epistemic activities by studying a highly successful community. Their early success led to a large increase in staff which meant that two sub-groups formed, with levels of participation in the CoP subsequently declining. Seeking to intervene and correct the CoP’s deterioration, management introduced control structures, with the ultimate outcome being that the CoP disintegrated completely. He posed an intriguing theoretical position in terms of the CoP/organisation relationship that presented timing as an influential success factor for different types of structural interventions by management. Such interventions can be defined as being either seeding or controlling. The first are ‘those than make no attempt to directly control people’s actions, but merely seek to influence future interactions’ (p. 162), i.e. providing or seeding a fertile environment whereas ‘it appears that structural interventions that directly seek to control action within the same time generation ignore the fundamental mechanics of CoPs and are destined to fail’ (p. 163).

One of Thompson’s contributions to CoP research was to propose that there were these two very different types of management interventions in CoPs, which range between ‘lower and upper parameters’ (2005, p. 151). His research about a highly successful CoP and its eventual demise due to management intervention provided a cautionary story and highlighted ‘the fragile interrelationship between CoPs and the wider organizational structure within which CoPs must always interact’ (p. 161). In addition, he also explored epistemic parameters associated with CoP life about which he concluded that too much inward communication posed a risk to the continued viability of the CoP.

*CoPs should ensure that they generate appropriate vehicles and practices to encourage and support epistemic interaction not only within the community, but between the community and the context of the organization and wider market ... The implication for organizations seeking to encourage CoPs whose concerns continue to articulate with, and remain relevant to, wider organizational and social discourse is that such communities should be encouraged to package their ideas for, and engage with, a wider social context on a continuing basis* (Thompson 2005, pp. 163, 164).
In his conclusion, Thompson (2005) emphasised the dual nature of the CoP/organisation relationship, i.e. ‘what each party can do to encourage the development and ongoing success of CoPs ... [while warning that] neither organizational management nor CoP leaders are able to do more than nurture a fragile dynamic that consists of continued voluntary participation but resists forms of control’ (p. 164). Borzillo’s (2009) research in this area challenged Thompson (2005) contention that too much management control could cause a CoP’s demise. He claimed that his ‘study's findings conversely argue that in order for top management to decide whether it is worth feeding a CoP with resources, sponsors should use proactive mechanisms that enable them to assess on an ongoing basis whether a CoP is delivering value to the organization’ (p. 69). He proposed the following three control mechanisms.

➢ The sponsor controls the CoPs activities, in ‘some extreme cases, the sponsor even determines a minimum number of best practices that have to be developed’ (pp. 64–65).

➢ Forming a governance committee which ‘discusses and assesses the overall activity of the various CoPs in a specific functional area of the organization. The raison d’être of such a committee is to regularly assess whether the activity of each CoP makes strategic sense for the organization’ (p. 66).

➢ ‘The ‘sponsor can play the role of a multiplication agent of best practices throughout a CoP and the organization’ (p. 67).

Coming full circle, what Thompson (2005) portrayed as a fragile dynamic has now been represented by Borzillo (2009) as high levels of management control. Does this mean the situation can be bounded by the formal/informal typology? As a general point, all typologies present a homogeneous view which can be limiting. Thus in this case, the complex, intricate, fluid and multidimensional relationships that connect a CoP with its supporting organisation can appear to be smoothed out. Still, as an investigative construct, the formal/informal typology can be helpful to explore the dynamics of CoPs and their external connections. Another component of the CEFRIÓ Research Centre’s project on VCoPs illustrates the ever-increasing complexities associated with the formal/informal dichotomy, particularly as the CoP/organisation relationship shifts. Tremblay, another researcher affiliated with this project, studied two contrasting VCoPs, describing both as being ‘structured by an organization and were thus quite formal’ (2005, p. 370). Members of one CoP (identified as H for Health care sector) had volunteered while participants in the other community (F for Forestry Finance) had been appointed i.e. membership was compulsory. And while this was only one of several points of difference between the two CoPs, her study findings indicated that the CoP whose members volunteered (CoP H) was deemed to be quite a success while the other was not (Tremblay 2005). So, even though both CoPs had a formal relationship with their organisations, the context of the relationship was quite dissimilar — a good example of the inherent difficulties of using such a two-element typology.
Countering the simplistic view that management can, and should, ‘cultivate’ CoPs, Peltonen and Lämsä (2004) discussed eight different domains in an organisation with the potential to support CoPs and so contribute to their success, i.e. they observed that support can come from line managers as well as more specialised areas such as training, strategy, accounting, KM, organisational change, facility and/or change managers or even work process designers (p. 256). Yet, there was one omission that stood out starkly in Peltonen and Lämsä’s (2004) analysis. The importance of valuing, recognising and rewarding contributions made by CoPs and their members was missing. There was only an oblique mention of rewards, in reference to accountants and the need to recognise capital generated work. On the other hand, they did call attention to the increased relevance of technology to CoPs, particularly as communities become more dispersed and members ‘must rely on some kind of technology for keeping in touch’ (p. 256). They claimed that ‘all technologies to some extent influence behavior by placing emphasis on or facilitating certain processes’ (Peltonen & Lämsä 2004, p. 257).

As well as the type of organisation/CoP connection being influential, challenges have also emerged regarding how that relationship is worked through. Although specifically researching ICT-enhanced CoPs, Postma (2003) addressed the tensions manifesting themselves, as organisations began to see such communities as an important resource in terms of competitive advantage and hence, sought to formalise, manage and control them. He claimed that ‘the inherent tensions between practices [associated with CoPs] and the organisations within which they function’ were not being adequately acknowledged (Postma 2003, p. 1). Such tensions can surface as a result of rogue CoPs defining their own practices which may, or may not, align with the organisation’s objectives.

An ethnographic study by Raz (2007) provided another example of tension between management and their employees’ activities while it also provided a telling illustration of the definitional blurring of what is considered to be a CoP compared to a work team or workgroup. She studied three call centre CoPs within large Israeli companies operating cellular communication through a lens of the legitimate/illegitimate activities of their members and concluded that the CoPs that emerge seem ‘to have certain benefits for its [their] members but not for the organisation as a whole’ (p. 385). As Raz explained, call centres involve front-line service work that is done by customer service representatives (CSRs).

*The human resource practices that characterize front-line service work have been described as routinisation, control, and a strong emphasis on emotion management as well as scientific management (Beirne et al., 2004; Burgess and Connell, 2004). These attributes of CSRs’ work are accentuated in call centres ... [and] can be further described as fraught with contradictions. CSRs are told ... that they are “the face of the organisation”, and that their performance influences the company’s image and profits; at the same time, their pay, status and career prospects are usually low (Raz 2007, p. 376).*
Through interviews with CSRs, stories were revealed that showed the basic functions of the CoPs were ‘to absorb the contradictions inherent in simultaneously exercising service quality, efficiency and professionalism’ (Raz 2007, p. 381). She found that three themes emerged regarding the development of CoPs: (1) learning the contradictions, (2) realising the organisational limits and (3) working the system (2007, p. 381). While the first two were mainly individual, the third related to collective resistance whereby ‘CSRs (mainly veterans, but also novices) channelled their growing frustration and criticism into acts of subversion, which were learned and exercised through peer-group informal socialisation’ (pp. 382–383). ‘The CoP that developed was therefore, in the case of veteran CSRs, a substitute for formal organizational roles and expectations’ (p. 384). In citing Korczynski’s (2003) ‘community of coping’, Raz (2007) said that the call centres communities that were studied ‘took shape in the backstage and combined consent to procedures with subversion of goals ... this study illustrates how managers in the call centres did not see the important implications of the CoPs that have developed covertly and, therefore, were hampered in their attempts to instil formal workplace behaviours (p. 384).

Andriessen (2005) also touched on these contradictions between the organisation’s goal of developing knowledge which ‘goes together with having strong accessibility rules and institutionalized coordination, in short: high formality. On the other hand, a focus on individual learning and problem solving is found in communities, which are open for new members and have relatively low formalization’ (Andriessen 2005, pp. 205–206).

Organisational environment

Social aspects of the use of technologies, particularly collaborative technologies, have become increasingly significant in CoP research, especially in regard to those communities operating predominantly in a virtual domain. Thus, it becomes clear that both the host organisation’s technological infrastructure and the ways CoP members use it, come together and merge into the organisation’s overall cultural landscape. In 2006, Roberts sought to ‘critically explore the communities of practice approach to managing knowledge and its use among management academics and practitioners in recent years’ (p. 623). In her analysis, she emphasised that ‘the context within which a community of practice is embedded is a major factor determining its success as a means of creating and transferring knowledge’ (p. 634). Her work confirmed that the CoP’s external environment, including the dominant organisational culture in the host organisation, was highly influential in both the operation and success of CoPs. She also elaborated on further challenges to CoPs, highlighting questions around the CoP/host organisation connection as areas needing further research. ‘How do communities of practice interact with the formal structure of an organization? In which organizational contexts is the
communities of practice approach the most appropriate knowledge management tool? ... an appreciation of the interaction between formal organizations and extra-organizational communities of practice is required’ (Roberts 2006, p. 636).

Ardichvili (2008) sought to understand why some CoPs were more successful than others and while his work specifically focussed on VCoPs, several points he made apply equally to the types of CoPs studied in this research. He highlighted the need for those charged with supporting these communities to:

... treat both designers/supporters of the community and users as cocreators of this ever-evolving experience. Furthermore, the challenge in enabling VCoPs is not so much that of creating them by administrative decree, but that of removing barriers for individuals’ participation, supporting and enriching the development of each individual’s uniqueness within the context of the community, and linking that uniqueness with the community purpose (Ardichvili 2008, p. 549).

Considering the community’s members and organisational supporters as ‘co-creators’ stressed the two-way nature of this relationship in the community’s early days but Ardichvili (2008) also brought the relationship’s continuing nature into view. More explicitly, he claimed a supportive organisational culture could be a ‘community enabler’ charged with ‘promoting conditions for an open, uninhibited exchange of ideas and information’ and creating ‘time and space for exchanging stories and expertise’ (Ardichvili 2008, p. 550). The two-way nature of the CoP/host connection was also highlighted by Grisham and Walker (2006) who wrote, ‘for CoPs to form there must first be a knowledge environment — consider CoPs as seeds, and the knowledge environment as fertile ground ... The key theme highlighted in this paper is that CoPs deliver real value (through improved knowledge flows) to an organization, beyond immediate profit, from more effectively shared knowledge and expertise. However, CoPs cannot thrive without being nurtured by their host organizational bodies’ (p. 229). This notion of a dual dynamic with both the CoP and host organisation playing equal, though different, roles in a CoP’s success was also present in Thompson’s (2005) research, and emerged from his evidence that the timing of who does what, and when, is an important determinant of success.

Success

The question of CoP success can be approached by investigating the benefits which flow from these communities and attempts to measure them. While they focussed on KM in a general sense and not specifically on CoPs, Chen and Chen’s (2006) ten year literature review (1995 to 2004) provided some background to the topic of measurement as they sought to ‘examine the research trend in KM performance evaluation changes’ (p. 32). They highlighted that ‘KM suffers from the same challenges as many other management issues: it assumes that knowledge
is a “thing”, which is amenable to being “managed” by a “manager” (p. 31). One of their findings was that while ‘traditionally most scholars have suggested financial indicators to display the value of KM; now, more and more scholars are insisting on evaluating KM performance using non-financial indicators, in a social and behavioral sciences approach’ (p. 32).

Research from Holsapple and Wu (2008) provide an example of the former. Based on three different accounting measures, they developed ‘a theoretical link between KM performance and business performance’ (p. 32). In concluding, they developed ‘three hypotheses about this link and situate[d] them within a contextual framework for understanding how KM may be appropriately viewed as a key driver of firm performance ... future research will undertake a testing of the hypotheses’ (p. 38). So, the search for appropriate, and quantifiable, financial indicators of KM’s, including CoP’s, contributions to organisational performance continues.

Dupouët and Yildizoğlu (2006) claimed that studies about how CoPs impact on the performance of organisations were rare and that the potential benefits remain largely invisible in case studies. To address this gap, they attempted to formalise these dynamics based on ‘a mathematical apparatus’ to compare two organisational forms, i.e. hierarchical structures and CoPs (p. 669).

It became clear they saw little value in the descriptive power of narratives, instead ‘by resorting to computer simulations based on the multi-agent system paradigm, this contribution explores the performance of various organizational settings and, in particular, the role of communities in the performance of a firm’ (Dupouët & Yildizoğlu 2006, p. 670). They concluded that ‘community structures are efficient for competence building, particularly if one considers learning in the long term’ (p. 688). If the relevant individuals or agents were highly specialised and they communicated well with each other, Dupouët and Yildizoğlu (2006) found that CoPs performed better than hierarchies while highlighting the importance of the communicative ‘environment in which communities exist (e.g. the efforts made by the management to ease communication, the existence of an intranet etc.)’ (p. 688). In addition, they also identified a limitation of their work they saw as widespread in current CoP thinking. ‘Concerning the incentives and motivations of agents to enter in a community, we have assumed that the agents are always willing to enhance their individual competencies by resorting to communities’ (Dupouët & Yildizoğlu 2006, p. 688).

Once again, the concept of members’ motivation to participate is drawn into the development of this emerging picture of our understanding of CoPs. In regard to organisational benefits from CoPs in an Australian context, Mitchell (2002) provided a brief summary. Introducing an
evaluation study of CoPs within the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia, he identified the following four possible outcomes: informal dissemination of valuable information, improvements in productivity, the fostering of innovation, the reinforcement of strategic direction (p. 15). Many organisational outcomes were tested by Tremblay (2005) via questionnaires in her previously mentioned study of two virtual CoPs in association with the CEFRIOM Research Centre project. To recap, the two CoPs studied had formal connections to their supporting organisations with members of CoP H volunteering while the members of CoP F were assigned to participate in it although there were other significant differences as well. She found that while both virtual CoPs were successful with the informal dissemination of valuable information, CoP H (whose members had volunteered) achieved more in these areas. In the less successful community (CoP F),

... learning and knowledge sharing were clearly less developed ... highlighting the fact that knowledge sharing cannot be imposed, nor can it be automatically produced. Participants have to attach importance and meaning to the tasks undertaken with the CoP to develop significant involvement in the project, and this may be more difficult to attain when participants are appointed to the CoP, rather than being fully voluntary (Tremblay 2005, p. 380).

It was clear that overall members of CoP H (the volunteers) rated their community’s achievements higher even though Tremblay wrote, ‘it is interesting to note that the sharing of information and knowledge came first in both CoPs’ objectives’ (2005, p. 372), perhaps indicating the CoP with compulsory membership fared the worse. In spite of this, it appeared that time (or the lack thereof) was a drawback for both of her two CoPs, in terms of their community participation. A little less than 20% of the members of CoP H and almost 45% of CoP F members cited lack of time as a cause of dissatisfaction (pp. 377–378). In CoP F, these 45% of members ‘spent an average of 42 minutes a week’ while the remaining 55% ‘devoted 60 minutes a week to CoP activities’ (p. 378). The actual time that members of CoP H were involved in community activities was not provided because they ‘all participated outside of working hours’ with 62% doing so in the evening and the remainder on weekends (p. 377, 378). She concluded that ‘not much time was specifically allocated to either project [CoP]’. In CoP H, ‘it appears that this did not cause difficulties, due to the strong personal motivation and commitment of the participants ... [while in CoP F] ‘motivation and commitment were not sufficient to overcome dissatisfaction that the project had to be developed in addition to regular work responsibilities’ (Tremblay 2005, p. 381).

In critiquing this research, it seemed that Tremblay’s reporting was somewhat contradictory in her treatment of the results concerning time in that almost half of the CoP F members (45%) and 20% of CoP H complained the CoP took up too much time while both communities indicated the CoP maximised working time. A possible conclusion that can be drawn here was
that while some individual CoP members said participation took up too much time, they still generally acknowledged the communities provided some time-saving efficiencies overall. Tremblay touched on these issues: the CoP F case ‘indicated that the CoP was not a success, although they agreed that it was somewhat useful to the employer’ (2005, p. 372). Wenger et al.’s argument about management providing CoP members time to participate was for leaders to support organisational and individual learning by setting aside time for people to participate in CoPs, reflect upon their work, trade stories and ideas with co-workers, or catch up on professional theory and practice (2002).

Increased emphasis is being placed on investigating motivational drivers regarding the use of Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) and codification of tacit knowledge into repositories. Interestingly, much less interest has been specifically directed towards understanding more about the people-centred motivational aspects of CoP participation and how the community’s host organisation can support such processes, e.g. by recognising achievements. Milne (2007) sought ‘to provide the context for a discussion on the use of rewards and recognition programmes in knowledge aware organisations’ (p. 28). While her focus was directed towards KM per se and not specifically CoPs, Milne’s argument that ‘such [reward and recognition] programmes do send a message to employees that knowledge sharing is valued’ (p. 29) is equally relevant to CoPs. As Wenger put it, we should ‘value the work of community building’ (Wenger 1998, p. 10). Milne (2007) wrote that ‘incentives such as rewards and recognition programmes are used in the belief that they will reinforce an organisation’s values, promote outstanding performance and foster continuous learning by openly acknowledging role model behaviour and ongoing achievement’. She stressed that such programmes rely on managers recognising achievements irrespective of whether they are individual or team related.

[Recognition] is a non-financial award given to employees selectively, in appreciation of a high level of behaviour or accomplishment that is not dependent on achievement against a given target ... recognition can be as simple as giving someone feedback on what they have done right, or just saying “thank-you”’. It is about acknowledging effort, commitment and learning, even if the outcomes were not as planned and it is also about, most importantly, celebrating successes (Milne 2007, p. 30).

In concluding, she wrote that ‘people want to feel that the recognition they receive is sincere, genuine and personal. They need to understand clearly why they are being recognised, they prefer the reward or recognition to be given by someone who means something to them and they want it to be timely’ (Milne 2007, pp. 36–37).

Intrinsic rewards, such as the satisfaction gained from helping others, can also come into play in terms of why individuals are motivated to share what they know. Whittom and Roy (2009)
sought to explore the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate individuals to participate in KM projects. They explained that ‘rewards can either be extrinsic or intrinsic, material (financial and non-financial) or moral’ with extrinsic rewards being either monetary or non-monetary. ‘Financial rewards can be directly included into the pay system’ and are perhaps the easiest to control. ‘However, they have the downside of being easily forgotten’. They also pointed out that ‘extrinsic rewards may also be non-financial, such as gift certificates, a variety of desired objects or trips’ (Whittom & Roy 2009, Section 2.2.1). The recommendations stated there was not a single universal reward system that worked in all situations. Instead, in their findings associated with tacit knowledge, they took sources of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation into account.

**Intrinsic motivation is necessary for tacit knowledge sharing. The manager’s role is to support the participants in their objectives of sharing and learning, rather than try to influence their behavior or use rewards. For instance, the manager can encourage and support the emergence of a community of practice, by providing all the tools necessary for knowledge transfer (electronic forums, meeting rooms, learning tools, etc) (Whittom & Roy 2009, Section 3.2).**

Cho, Li and Su (2007) studied the impact that individual factors, including extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, had on knowledge sharing. Several psychological work-related factors were considered, one of which was self-efficacy, i.e. an individual’s belief that they can actually do a task. They revealed that ‘self-efficacy was consistently found to be the most important variable in sharing tacit knowledge’ (p. 11) and that ‘when people are confident in their ability to provide useful knowledge to the betterment of the organization, they are highly motivated to do so’ (p. 12). In teasing out the management implications of their work, Cho, Li and Su (2007) suggested that ‘management should provide useful feedback to improve the individual’s self-efficacy perception. Improving self-efficacy is more important than emphasizing a reward system’ (p. 12). Coming specifically from the viewpoint of extrinsic motivation and knowledge sharing behaviour, Bock et al. (2005) also considered social-psychological forces and organisational climate in their work.

*Those leading knowledge-management initiatives ... [should] actively support the formation and maturation of robust referent communities within the workplace. In particular, be sure to provide appropriate feedback to employees engaged in (or not engaged in) knowledge sharing. Such actions follow the importance of exerted pressure from one's referent groups (e.g., peers, supervisors, senior managers, etc.) to engage in knowledge-sharing behaviors as well as the importance of enhancing the individual's sense of self-worth (p. 101).*

Thus, it appears that recognition and feedback have a key role to play in terms of non-monetary extrinsic rewards to motivate knowledge sharing (Bock et al. 2005; Cho, Li & Su 2007; Milne, 2007; Whittom & Roy 2009). Continuing with this theme though, Harder’s (2008) study of a Danish company in the IT consultancy sector (40 employees), introduced some doubt although
her research was not specifically directed towards CoPs. Her research aim was ‘to explore what type of motivation predicts knowledge sharing behavior and how this type of motivation is affected by reward structures and management styles in organizations’ (p. 2). Considering acknowledgement in particular, defined as ‘verbal rewards, positive feedback, recognition and praise’ (p. 11), she suggested that such acknowledgement could be perceived ‘as controlling rather than informative’ (p. 23) and so, not always a motivator. Harder’s work brings into view more of the complexities associated with attempts to pin down reasons to explain human motivation. The meanings that individuals construct through sharing knowledge (and its subsequent impact on their behaviour) are influenced by their interpretation of the ‘acknowledgement’, itself. In other words, not all feedback, even if it is positive, is motivational as it could be seen as controlling or manipulative. In singling out the implications of her findings, Harder (2008) claimed that ‘individual motivation mediates the relationship between contextual variables and knowledge sharing behavior. As such, there were no direct correlations between the independent variables (rewards and management styles) and knowledge sharing’ (p. 23).

This study suggests that management style is a significant predictor of individuals’ motivation to share knowledge. In fact, an autonomy supportive management style is the most important contextual variable predicting autonomous motivation for knowledge sharing in this sample. These findings are important considering the relatively under emphasized role of management styles in the knowledge management literature. In other words, it seems that the interpersonal approach adopted by managers merits more attention than it has previously received (Harder 2008, p. 24)

Furthermore, she found ‘that tangible rewards may have a negative influence on employees’ autonomous motivation to share knowledge and, ultimately, on their knowledge sharing behavior’ (Harder 2008, p. 23). Similarly, Cho, Li and Su (2007) and Whittom and Roy (2009) cast doubt on the effectiveness of reward systems in general. Conversely, Grisham and Walker (2006), in looking at the global construction industry, focussed specifically on CoPs and in doing so, they highlighted the important of motivation, claiming that ‘providing rewards and recognition is critical to success’ (p. 228). They gave several practical examples of potential non-monetary extrinsic rewards such as recognition, ‘best information of the month, best knowledge transfer of the month, best contributor of the month ... These celebrations can be no-cost options [such as] added time off during the week, parking close to the office ... [or] tangible rewards for sharing knowledge ... [including] such items as lunches paid for the contributor(s) for a week, paid training that has been requested, a week of time off’ (Grisham & Walker 2006, p. 229). As a final note, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2004) made an important observation through their work on the previously mentioned CEFRIO project which specifically looked at the CoP/organisation relationship of VCoPs.
We believe extrinsic incentives and intrinsic motivation are not mutually exclusive. For example, the decision to include community participation or knowledge sharing among an individual’s performance evaluation criteria acts both as an external incentive to participate, and as a symbolic gesture to convey the importance of the community for the organization and thus encourage intrinsic motivation. Similarly, formally recognizing an individual’s contribution to the VCoP is a form of extrinsic motivation, but it also emphasizes the value attached by the organization to the community’s work (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2004, p.8).

Fahey, Vasconcelos and Ellis (2007) posed an interesting question when they asked, ‘who deserves the reward when many people played a role in the outcome?’ (p. 188). Although, they were referring specifically to VCoPs, the question is relevant for all communities. To summarise, most research indicates that various types of motivational factors including intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are an important aspect of the management of organisational units, including CoPs. Then again, there is some evidence to suggest that an individual’s response to rewards is complex and it should not be assumed that rewards themselves are valued.

In a recent study focusing on ways to foster the emergence of CoPs in an academic environment, Watland, Hallenbeck and Kresse (2008) wondered if the benefits that are ‘realized by families through participation in shared meals would have a similar effect in an organization if its employees shared meals’ (p. 167) specifically within CoPs. They found that sharing food together may strengthen bonds between CoP members as opportunities are created ‘to interact, share knowledge, convey valuable experiences, and build relationships across organizational lines ... we believe when employees break bread they also, more importantly, break organizational boundaries’ (p. 183). Schenkel and Teigland (2008) also briefly touched on this idea that benefits flowed from CoP members socialising together. They studied four CoPs in a large construction company to explore potential links between CoPs and performance and provided an example of the ongoing institutionalisation of CoPs. Their work linked to Lesser and Storck’s (2001) early work on social capital and CoPs where they claimed CoPs could positively impact on performance levels and so create value for their sponsoring organisation (Lesser & Storck).

Research by Schenkel and Teigland (2008) identified performance gains in three of the four construction-based communities studied. The physical location of the fourth CoP changed, meaning they were less able to informally communicate face-to-face. They found that ‘the difference between what was considered work and what was social became blurred in [the three CoPs with improved performance]. Individuals ate lunch and took breaks together, narrating for each other what they had experienced during the day as well as helping each other with ongoing tasks’ (Schenkel &Teigland 2008, pp. 114-115). The importance of CoP members being able to socialise together (perhaps by sharing meals) was emphasised. The host organisation can play
an encouraging role in supporting CoPs by creating spaces for such social interactions. Because of the informal nature of these interactions, it is equally important to understand that the host organisation can possibly create such opportunities, attempting to control or prescribe them would, most likely, backfire. Conversely, the host organisation could initiate something special as a social occasion for the CoP as a way to recognise, celebrate and perhaps even honour the contributions of the community. Possibilities could undoubtedly include sharing a meal together as suggested by Watland, Hallenbeck and Kresse (2008). In undertaking a study of communities and education, de Vries and Pieters (2007) surveyed 187 workers in the Dutch educational field based on four perspectives: ‘their heterogeneity, informality, interactivity and effectiveness’ (p. 382). Of relevance here was that they found ‘formal support and an informal atmosphere invites people to collaborate (p. 389)’. There can be no doubt that CoP members socialising together can bring many benefits and such socialising could even be appreciated as a form of peer support.

Organisational communication

It seemed somewhat surprising that there has been little scholarly emphasis on researching the connections between knowing in practice and communication processes within CoPs. Clearly, using a communicative lens to view what actually happens in such communities has the potential to provide insights regarding knowledge processes in action. As noted in the previous chapter, the message web concept emerged as a theoretical framework through my Masters’ research on intraorganisational email use (Day 2000, 2005). Message webs bring together ‘the social interaction and human sense-making activities around email in association with its technical capabilities as daily life is being played out within organisational cultures’ (Day 2005, p. 26). This construct is equally useful within the broader realm of CoPs members and their knowledge activities as a way to contextualise their social interaction and their everyday communication processes.

![Organisational Message Web](image)
Thus, the idea of message webs has been drawn upon as one of the overall organising principles of this research. For, as Schreyögg and Geiger (2007) suggested, ‘the most fundamental universal requirement is that knowledge builds on some kind of statement or assertion … knowledge is communicative in nature; it cannot exist outside of language. Knowledge is linguistically constructed in a community of communication. There is no knowledge without communication’ (pp. 86–87).

While little research was identified that tightly bundled the knowing associated with the practice of CoPs explicitly with communication, several scholars have addressed factors falling in this domain. Iverson, in collaboration with McPhee (2002) had an interest in exploring knowledge, specifically CoPs, from a communicative angle. Iverson utilised Wenger’s (1998) theoretical ideas quite specifically in locating his own work and as outlined previously, Wenger’s theoretical ideas about CoPs and their relationship to the organisation have undergone significant change over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger 1998, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002).

Originally, CoPs were portrayed as being free and outside the organisation but this was not the case in Wenger’s later works. By 2002, Wenger (with associated colleagues) contented that CoPs could be formally linked to their host organisation meaning such communities could be harnessed to contribute to the organisation’s success. Even though management should not try to control CoPs, they could be ‘cultivated’ for the benefit of the organisation, Wenger (2002) claimed. Iverson and McPhee extended the metaphor of management cultivating CoPs with a focus on communication practices and noted such cultivation ’can occur through three communicative actions: celebration, articulation, and collaboration’ (2002, p. 263).

Celebration is [needed] to recognise knowledge accomplishments and problems solved, rather than to direct or claim credit for such accomplishments … in the process of articulation, ideas and directions for activities are put into words, given persuasive expression, and opened to creative discussion … and collaboration allows the manager to contribute to knowledge growth in sensitive and appropriate ways (Iverson & McPhee 2002, pp. 263–264).

Continuing on, they advised that managing these ‘knowledge processes works best from within the community … [and that] knowledge managers must achieve dual loyalty, to the community and to their organization’ (Iverson & McPhee 2002, p. 264). While the concept of dual loyalty is an issue for all CoP members, Iverson and McPhee’s (2002) argument presented a dilemma as it appeared to skim over the inherent complexities involved in the management/CoP relationship. Wenger’s use of the concept that managers can, and should, cultivate CoPs clearly presented such managers as being external to the community. However, in the intervening years since 2002, the increase in institutionalism has meant that many CoPs today are externally...
managed. Despite their ambiguity at that time, Iverson & McPhee (2002) effectively brought communication into the picture of CoPs and they concluded that ‘COP theory offers a complex conceptual structure that illuminates connections and processes of knowledge based on a model that centers communication in KM’ (p. 264).

By 2008, Iverson and McPhee had published a more considered and detailed analysis of Iverson’s original research by reporting specifically on their exploration of CoPs and communication, based on Wenger’s three CoP elements of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (1998). Strengthening the connection between CoPs and communication processes, they referred to Zorn and Taylor (2003) who recognised that ‘CoPs are enacted communicatively by participants’ as well as Vaast (2004) who looked more specifically at how ‘CoPs are constituted through communication processes that could include technological mediation’ (Iverson & McPhee 2008, p. 178).

While their specific use of Wenger’s mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire framework link these generally well-recognised ideas to communication, other elements of the organisational black box of CoP life are hidden. Different windows into this ‘black box’, such as the message web construct (Day 2000, 2005) underpinning the current research, have the potential to make other facets visible. Kuhn’s PhD research (2000) explored planned organisational change and knowledge from a communicative perspective (Kuhn 2000, 2002; Kuhn & Jackson 2008). Kuhn sought to develop ‘an analytical framework that can guide examinations of knowing, defined as situated problem solving’ (italics in original) (Kuhn & Jackson 2008, p. 457). All the same, on an intrinsic level, using problem solving as a definitional window to explore knowing seemed restrictive and while his work was of interest as an alternative perspective, its application to this research project was limited.

Conversely, Schenkel and Teigland’s (2008) research did shed some light on communication practices through their previously mentioned exploration of performance improvements in four CoPs in the construction industry. Overall, they found the performance of the three CoPs operating in a stable environment improved. However, the other community experienced significant changes due to a physical relocation which ‘affected the CoP’s communication patterns in such a way that the CoP’s cognitive processes and structural dimensions were negatively affected’ (p. 114). Their changed circumstances meant that opportunities to communicate face-to-face were severely restricted. Because of this, the CoP was ‘never able to regain its previous ability to continuously improve, indicating a strong relationship between communication channels and performance’ (p. 106). They concluded that ‘if management desires to support the development of a community of practice, then it should supply the appropriate communication media, and they should pay serious attention to organizational
changes that may affect the use of these media’ (Schenkel & Teigland 2008, p. 116). Earlier Schenkel (2004) had published results from this research focussing on media richness, equivocality and CoP communication processes. He concluded that ‘if there is a mismatch between the level of equivocality of the situation and the richness of the media used for communication, learning in CoPs will be impeded’ (p. 55) through decreases in the effectiveness of the decision making process. Overall, it seemed that the communicative aspects of CoPs have not received much attention within the scholarly community and further research into the intricacies of communication practices within CoPs is warranted.

Communicative choices

While communication choices have been examined from many different perspectives, there can be no doubt that how members of CoPs communicate can significantly influence the community’s processes. Kratzer, Zboralski and Leender (2009) explored the use of the following types of communicative media in 22 CoPs.

- Face-to-face
- Synchronous (virtual) communication, e.g. the telephone and telephone conferencing
- Asynchronous (virtual) communication, e.g. email, the internet and intranets

Their focus was to explore the impact the different media have on the quality of the interaction within CoPs (p. 201) claiming their work was ‘one of the first studies which thoroughly examine the effect of different communication media on the communication quality within CoPs’ (p. 202). In establishing the foundation of their research, they challenged the dichotomy between traditional/face-to-face and virtual communication and claimed ‘the term “virtual group” becomes misleading, since it implies a distinction between groups that are virtual and groups that are not ... recent definitions stress the omnipresence of virtual interactions, pointing out that a purely face-to-face group that does not use any communication technology is rare’ (pp. 203–204). They found newer CoPs have higher levels of face-to-face communication compared to more mature communities. As communities mature, the quality of their interactions increase and members use more virtual forms of communication because face-to-face becomes less important. They also found that increasing CoP size negatively affects the quality of the members’ interactions (p. 216) because ‘face-to-face communication loses its contribution to interaction quality over time, and subsequently, the managerial support of CoPs can gradually be shifted from focusing on many face-to-face contacts towards less and less of these contacts’ (p. 217).
This reduced emphasis on face-to-face communication was critiqued by Mengis and Eppler (2008) who took the opposite view, albeit in a more generalised framework concerned with knowledge management rather than CoPs specifically. ‘The question pursued is how conversations can be managed to foster developments in organizational knowing’ (p. 1287) ... [and] in our view, an analysis of conversation management in organizations is of value at this point to establish interpersonal, face-to-face conversations in organizations as a relevant research topic within the realm of knowledge management’ (Mengis & Eppler 2008, p. 1290). They undertook a review seeking to develop ‘a more systematic view of this form of conversation management and offer a synthetic management framework for knowledge-intensive (i.e. complex, nonroutine) conversations in organizations’ (p. 1289). Their framework comprises ‘six dimensions that define the conversational context in which conversation partners try to make sense and co-construct knowledge when interacting’ (p. 1297). Although analysing CoP conversations based on Mengis and Eppler’s (2008) framework, was well beyond the scope of this current work, it pointed towards exciting new possibilities for communication-oriented approaches in the future of CoP research.

Pascoe and More (2008) have also highlighted the potential of a stronger communicative focus within knowledge studies. They claimed that ‘the perception of communication relationships is still inadequately explored in detail in KM literature and research, and it does not form a core part of management, let alone knowledge management’ (p. 70). Liebowitz (2008) has also reinforced the key role that communication plays as organisations ‘try to weave KM into their organizational fabric’ (p. 239). There is ongoing debate about the degree of importance of face-to-face communication within CoPs within the context of knowledge activities, particularly as some communities are relying more and more heavily on communication processes that are mediated by technology.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs)

The worldwide trend toward geographical-dispersed workplaces and the corresponding advancements in ICTs continues to contribute to the burgeoning emergence of VCoPs. As such, there is increasing scholarly interest in these virtual communities although the importance of specifying the role of technology in the CoPs being studied emerged as a critical issue through this literature review. Some researchers clearly identify their unit of analysis as a virtual community (the CEFRIIO research) while others are less precise in their descriptors. There can be little doubt that communication processes in virtual communities, i.e. those with the potential to be spread across the globe, are different to those communities who generally meet face-to-face in the same geographical location.
As noted in the previous section, Kratzer, Zboralski and Leender (2009) added another piece to the puzzle in their work by challenging the virtuality dichotomy that frames communication as either face-to-face or technologically-mediated. As they put it, ‘there are neither entirely traditional nor virtual groups or CoPs and there is a continuum of interaction from more face-to-face driven (traditional) to more asynchronous communication (virtual)’ (p. 216). Yet, ICTs are interwoven into the communication processes of most, if not all, CoPs, to some degree.

‘Increased use of information and communication technology (ICT) in various contexts is assumed to have an impact on contemporary societies ... [while] a main reason for ICT implementation in organizations is the improvement of knowledge sharing’ (Nelissen, Wenneker & van Selm 2008, pp. 91, 92). They undertook an extensive theoretical review seeking to connect the two different discipline areas of ICT use and knowledge sharing and in doing so, they reduced the complexity by developing ideal types of two different views of ICT performance (pp. 92–93):

- ICT is seen as a guide where it moulds how knowledge is shared in organisations, i.e. ‘sophisticated electronic repositories and powerful search engines that connect people to documents and give people new means to store and retrieve knowledge’.

- ICT acts as a facilitator where it helps knowledge sharing processes, i.e. ‘e-mail and videoconferencing that connect people to people, in order to exchange or create knowledge’.

Nelissen, Wenneker and van Selm (2008) issued a call to researchers to empirically examine ‘ICT performance as guide versus as facilitator in processes of knowledge sharing ... in order to develop detailed understanding of how ICT contributes to the sharing of knowledge’ (p. 104).

Hanisch and Churchman (2008) took another approach as they specifically looked at ICT in VCoPs and the ways that knowledge is communicated across cultural boundaries. While this research does not extend to matters of cultural differences, their work provided insights by identifying barriers resulting from the virtual context of these types of communities. In addition, they also highlighted ‘the issues which exist when organisations intentionally create these communities for specific organisational purposes’ (p. 418). The ICT-related barriers they encountered in their empirical studies included: ‘fewer opportunities for chance or informal meetings in VCoP compared to traditional CoP who meet face-to-face ... an “enforced formality” on team members because they must document communications in writing ... which may inhibit the social aspects of communication’ (Hanisch & Churchman 2008, p. 427). They cited Archichvili et al. (2003) suggesting ‘face-to-face meetings may even be counterproductive for VCoP ... [but claimed their] findings indicate that members of the community were keen to meet face-to-face’ (p. 429). Additionally, they also drew attention to the following key points:
‘Knowledge communication depends on more than appropriate communication structures; it depends on the readiness of organisational members to share’ (pp. 419–420).

‘ICT are not media which easily facilitate rich discourse and negotiation of meaning’ (p. 427).

Regarding the ability of management to initiate CoPs, and specifically VCoPs, in a top-down manner, Hanisch and Churchman (2008) were rather scathing about success levels, even going so far as to suggest it might be simply a ‘management fad’. They wrote that ‘it appears well accepted that organisations may purposefully create, or at least cultivate, VCoP with the aim of encouraging knowledge communication previously not possible in a networked environment’ (p. 429). In reflecting on Wenger’s turnaround on CoPs where they were originally defined as being ‘free’ to viewing ‘knowledge as a strategic asset to be commodified ... he has condoned management construction of CoP and in doing so ignores some of the complexities and nuances which can make them crucial to knowledge communication’ (p. 430).

Thus, it is not only technical capabilities which are important in terms of rich communication processes with CoPs. The social, interpersonal aspects of people successfully interacting with others as CoP members are equally critical. The duality of this interplay is made visible within the message web construct (Day 2000, 2005) previously mentioned.

**Communication challenges**

Other challenges can develop regarding effective communication practices, e.g. the CoPs’ dynamics as highly cohesive groups can face the danger of groupthink. In citing Zorn and Taylor (2004), Koliba and Gajda (2009) wrote ‘[CoPs can] become resistant to other interpretations [of knowledge] that they have not themselves validated by trial and error. This resistance, given the inevitable solidarity that comes to characterize well-established communities of practice, becomes a barrier to innovation’ (p. 107). Thus, ‘collective knowledge has the drawback of hindering communication among individuals who belong to different groups. It also discourages unique processing and responses to events beyond and above how the group typically react’ (Ringberg & Reihlen 2008, p. 925).

In her critical review of CoPs, Roberts (2006) also highlighted the danger of these types of predispositions. She referred to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, defining it as consisting ‘of modes of thought that are unconsciously acquired, resistant to change’ (p. 629).
The existence of habitus ... suggest that communities of practice may well be predisposed to the absorption and creation of certain knowledge and the negotiation of particular types of meaning to the detriment to other possible interpretations ... over time communities develop preferences and predispositions that will influence their ability to create and absorb new knowledge ...

Communities of practice may become static in terms of their knowledge base and resistant to change (Roberts 2006, p. 629).

In this literature review, I have drawn together a range of theoretical studies about CoPs that reach across diverse disciplines and areas of study, starting with the early research of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid, (1991) that depicted CoPs as being informal, self-constituting and free to follow their own paths. By 1998, Wenger and associates were changing direction in terms of their thinking about CoPs and by 2002; such communities were being seen as of potential benefit for an organisation’s overall performance. Fox, 2000; Contu and Willmott (2000, 2003); Handley et al. (2006); Kimble (2006); Roberts (2006); Bozarth (2008); Storberg-Walker (2008) and Koliba and Gajda (2009) have all undertaken thoughtful, and thorough critiques of these theoretical ideas. Changes over time are tracked through this review as Wenger’s writing exhibited a definite shift towards institutionalisation with management-instigated CoPs being portrayed more explicitly within the literature, as mainstream communities. However, his early viewpoint that the CoP/host organisation connection must be a light form of control, based on cultivating them and providing support without stifling their potential still appears prominent. Another influential move relates to societal changes around technology use. The globalisation trend means that many CoPs now operate in a virtual mode with subsequent shifts in the ways their members communicate.

This review is multi-dimensional in that it encompasses a wide patchwork of different theoretical, conceptual and empirical literature. It is also multi-dimensional in that it encompasses several contrasting objectives. In a very general sense, literature reviews, like this one, aim to map out the scholarly field to provide a backdrop for the research findings, to authorise their validity. In their deconstruction of literature reviews, Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) cited Merriam and Simpson’s (2000) five functions of the literature as being ‘(a) to build a foundation, (b) to demonstrate how a study advances knowledge, (c) to conceptualize the study, (d) to assess research design and instrumentation, and (e) to provide a reference point for interpretation of findings’ (p. 122). However, in Massey’s (1996) writing from more than a decade earlier, he had posited that there were other possible uses of the literature. He agreed that literature could be seen as the ‘the foundation stone on which one’s own work is built’ (Massey 1996) but he also argued that it could also be considered as currency. Literature reviews are ‘expected to be up-to-date (i.e., ‘current’)’ and ‘currency has built into it the notion of value … A good literature review can help buy the researcher’s credibility’.
Several of Massey’s analogies illuminated this review of the literature review. In Massey’s (1996) terms, I have used the literature as a form of scaffolding by providing a ‘narrative of what has been done so far’ and what still needs to be dealt with. It has also been used as a mirror ‘… as a way of seeing where one’s own ideas, assumptions etc. are similar to, consistent with, or different from previous research’. Literature as lens is another Massey (1996) analogy where the literature assists in directing the research and so it has been in this project.

While the review comprehensively draws on available literature in the international arena, there are inevitable restrictions. One was that the studies utilised have been de-contextualised as the diverse cultural mores at a societal level were outside the scope of this study. Exploring gender or ethnicity influences within the various studies reviewed was also beyond the scope of this study. At an organisational level, the review points to a major gap in the extant literature concerning the connection between the CoP and its host organisation. It is clear that the organisational context within which CoPs operate is changing. Originally, CoPs were perceived as being freely driven by their own needs but increasingly they are becoming more formalised as it is more widely accepted that CoPs can be controlled or at least managed by their host organisation. For this reason, the relationship of CoPs with their organisation, in conjunction with internal leadership of CoPs and their communication processes was the focus of this research. Since the CoP construct emerged two decades ago, many scholars have sought to understand how CoPs operate, resulting in several differing classification schemes. However, there has been little attempt to rigorously draw them together and consolidate them into a unified picture. This gap is addressed in the following research through the development of the Synthesised Model of CoP Characteristics. The need for a synthesis of the differing schemes influenced both the design of the research and the subsequent empirical investigation of the detailed, everyday practices of CoPs.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. ... Geertz 1973, p. 9

Foreword

The focus of this research is directed towards Communities of Practice and their members’ interactions within a social world. The research aim is not a grand theory but rather the goal is more modest, albeit challenging and it is to add to our understanding of the actual practices of CoPs and how they unfold in the everyday activities of the members. The research design used has been strongly influenced by Crotty’s (1998) social research approach where he combined the philosophical aspects of doing research with the hands-on, practical aspects. In doing so, he constructed a framework of four elements: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods which he then wrote about as being on a string with arrows denoting how one leads into the next. Although he showed the string starting with epistemology, in practice it is effectively the method that is the beginning. To a large extent, it is the last two elements that are easier to make visible, i.e. the methods used are generally well-defined with the researcher’s underlying methodological stance relatively straightforward to classify and discuss. However, the justification for the choice of specific methodologies and methods can sometimes be less explicit resulting in a lack of clarity about both the theoretical framework and the researcher’s epistemological and ontological standpoint. As Crotty (1998) explained, these four elements ‘can help to ensure the soundness of our research and make its outcomes convincing ... setting forth our research process in terms of these four elements enables us to do this, for it constitutes a penetrating analysis of the process and points up the theoretical assumptions than underpin it and determine the status of its findings’ (p. 6).

Research design

With Crotty’s (1998) framework standing the test of time, it was useful in designing this research. He cautioned, through, that it should be treated as ‘scaffolding, not an edifice. Its aim is to provide researchers with a sense of stability and direction as they go on to do their own
building; that is, as they move towards understanding and expounding the research process after their own fashion in forms that suit their particular research process’ (p. 2). Instead of applying his framework as a structure containing the design, in the way that his ‘scaffolding’ metaphor implied, I harnessed Crotty’s framework in a slightly different way. As an alternative, his four design components became the bedrock upon which the building blocks of this research rest and which formed a firm foundation for all parts of this research. Continuing the building metaphor, the emergent nature of this project meant that as well as requiring a solid base, the design needed to be flexible and able to shift, almost like a tall building swaying in the wind (and the design did do quite a bit of swaying over the life of the project). Commencing this methodological discussion, I wish to be clear about the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the research as well as the overall methodology and methods of data gathering. Table 12 details the research design used, as articulated through the four elements of Crotty’s social research framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design elements</th>
<th>Framework underpinning this research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>Constructionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical perspective</td>
<td>Interpretivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Ethnographic; grounded theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Survey (predominantly online); interview (semi-structured); participant and non-participant observation; case study; theme identification; comparative analysis; interpretative methods; document analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 12: Research design based on Crotty’s (1998) social research framework

**Epistemology: constructionism**

The starting point of every social research program is the ontological and epistemological perspective of the researcher as it dictates the research methodology to be utilised. So, whether or not the choice is consciously made, the researcher’s approach to social inquiry is crucial because it defines the object of study as well as the kinds of things that can be said about it. Regarding this research, I have made these choices quite consciously and wish to be quite explicit in positioning myself within a constructionist standpoint. ‘Methodologies and methods are not constructed or chosen in isolation from ontological and epistemological positions. Rather, the manner in which we gain access to knowledge and our choice of the techniques for collecting evidence are directly related to our image of reality and the way we think we can know it’ (Minichiello et al. 1995, p.180). While Crotty (1998) did not specifically refer to the researcher’s ontological perspective, he justified its absence from his framework as follows: ‘Ontology ... is concerned with ‘what is’, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such. Were we to introduce it into our framework, it would sit alongside epistemology...’
informing the theoretical perspective, for each theoretical perspective embodies a certain way of understanding what is (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding what it means to know (epistemology)’ (p. 10).

To reiterate, constructionism encapsulates my philosophical standpoint and Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) text about the social construction of reality influenced my early thinking. Although published more than 40 years ago, it is still seen as a classic text and is generally credited with opening up constructionism to a broad audience within the social sciences. Stripped back to its essence, Berger and Luckmann’s social construction of reality theory is the view that the world we live in, that is, ‘reality’, is continually being enacted or realised or constructed. Our realities are our lived experiences; reality is not an object out there. People create their own reality through an interactive process and are both product and producer at the same time. ‘That is, man [sic] (not, of course, in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other. The product acts back upon the producer’ (Berger & Luckmann 1966, p.78). As Best (2008) put it, ‘Berger and Luckmann were fundamentally interested in ways that knowledge was shaped by social processes ... and how meanings are created through social interaction’ (p. 42). The following points about constructionism influenced the research.

Constructionist research typically deals with practical workings of what is constructed and how the construction process unfolds (Holstein & Gubrium 2008, p. 5).

People constantly make choices based on how they understand their alternatives, they must account for the choices they have made, and those choices and accounts then constrain what they will do next. Many of these choices are soon lost from sight, and an edifice of taken-for-granted assumptions about the world emerges and evolves (Best 2008, p. 57).

Thus, substantial opportunities to study social processes in meaningful ways are opened up for researchers with a constructionist stance. Social interactions can be teased apart to allow consideration of that which has become taken for granted through these assumptions. In applying this approach which emphasises meaning construction, the aim is to seek information about the ways that people make sense of their realities on CoP membership, and the ways that such shared understandings subsequently influence behaviour. Constructionism does away with the idea that there is one fixed truth, instead arguing that different viewpoints on situations or behaviour can be constructed with the potential for multiple subjective realities to arise. In seeking a path through ontological and epistemological writings, it became evident that two forms of the word are used in the methodological literature, i.e. constructionism as well as constructivism. Ackermann’s (2004) reflection on Papert’s (1991, p. 1) framework clarified the differences. ‘In [Papert’s] words, “Constructionism—the N word as opposed to the V word—shares constructivism’s view of learning as “building knowledge structures” through
progressive internalisation of actions ... It then adds the idea that this happens especially felicitously in a context where the learner is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it’s a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe” (Ackermann 2004, p. 20).

As Best (2008) explained it, ‘social construction has been taken to mean different things, not only in different disciplines but also within particular disciplines and even within specific specializations’ (pp. 60–61). He was one of three contributors to Holstein and Gubrium’s (2008) ‘Handbook on Constructionist Research’ who thought it worthwhile to specifically mention that the two terms are often used interchangeably. Additionally, in their chapter of the same text, Gergen and Gergen (2008) also wrote that ‘unlike social construction, early scholars tended to define constructivism in terms of cognitive processes within the individual mind’ (p. 173). Restivo and Croissant (2008) made the observation that ‘one could perhaps argue that someone who advocates constructionism is a constructivist’ (p. 225). Accordingly, as the philosophical base of this research is constructionism in principle, I am more than content to be seen as a constructivist as well. But, for reasons of brevity, the terms constructionism will be used consistently from now on in terms of my stance although my work has been informed by authors who have used either word. In considering the doing of constructivist research, Larochelle and Désautels (2007) maintained that it ‘prompts the researcher to examine the “making and doing” of actors ... it also militates in favour of research designs of investigation that have more in common, to borrow from the image contained in a recent article by Cyrulnik (2003), with a goat path (that is, a winding, rocky trail cut into the side of a steep hillside)’ (p. 92). It is clear that a research design that included ‘goat paths’ or ‘rocky trails’ encourages more nuanced and richer insights to emerge as surprises and challenges come into view along the path. Thus, I have embraced the many twists and turns that I encountered in travelling along the ‘goat path’ of this research and as a reflexive researcher, such episodes have become part of the interpretive story of this research, and of this researcher.

**Theoretical perspective: interpretivism**

In terms of Crotty’s (1998) second element on his research design framework, the epistemological position of constructionism flows through into an interpretivist approach which he defined as looking ‘for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world’ (p. 67). From a subjective, interpretative point of view, the world is not simply given as an objective reality. ‘Rather, it is subjectively constituted and socially pre-interpreted ... Constructivism is squarely opposed to a positivist view of the world and related methods. Conversely, an interpretative perspective and qualitative methods fit well with such a view of the world’ (Mayrhofer 2009, p. 167, 168). Such an approach also brings together the researcher and what is being researched in an intimate relationship. ‘The situational constraints
shaping this process [are recognised] ... [and the approach] is consistent and compatible with the epistemological and ontological assumptions that the world and reality are interpreted by people in the context of historical and social practices. That is, experience of the world is subjective and best understood in terms of individuals' subjective meanings rather than the researcher’s objective definitions’ (Rowlands 2005, pp. 81, 83). Geertz (1973) challenged positivist/objectivist thinkers and advocated an interpretive approach based on multiple perspectives and very detailed or thick descriptions. The following quote from him introduced this chapter: ‘what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to’ (p. 9). Reflecting on these words, it quickly became clear that his insights resonated through this work. As an interpretive researcher, my aim has been to understand the practices of CoP members through insights developed from my interpretations of the meanings they have co-constructed and shared with me about their activities. It is important to be clear though that the data co-constructed by the research participants with me, as the researcher, emerged from their interpretations of their own and other members’ activities and the social context within which these activities occurred. Although Geertz’s (1973) writings were originally located within the field of anthropology, his ideas have been taken up widely throughout social science generally, particularly his notion of thick description within qualitative research. Ponterotto (2006) developed the following working definition of thick descriptions.

Thick description refers to the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context ... [It] describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher’s understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place ... Thick meaning of findings leads readers to a sense of versimilitude [sic], wherein they can cognitively and emotively “place” themselves within the research context (pp. 542–543).

In drawing together his review of thick descriptions as a theoretical construct, Ponterotto (2006) described the following four areas where these types of thick descriptions can be presented within the reporting of research (pp. 546–547).

- **PARTICIPANTS** provide sufficient detail to allow the reader to visualise them as individuals while being careful not to compromise their anonymity.
- **SETTINGS AND PROCEDURES** include adequate detail about the context of the study and the results to promote ‘a sense of versimilitude to the reader’.
- **RESULTS** present ample evidence of the participants’ voices, i.e. ‘long quotes from the participants or excerpts of interviewer-interview dialogue’.
- **DISCUSSION** merges ‘the participants’ lived experiences with the researcher’s interpretations of these experiences’.
To summarise this discussion covering the first two facets of Crotty’s (1998) research design, constructionism is the epistemological and ontological standpoint that informed this research project, and me, in combination with an interpretive theoretical perspective.

**Methodology**

Methodology is the third element of Crotty’s (1998) framework. He explained that it encompasses the research strategy and plan of action lying behind the techniques and procedures ‘used to gather and analyse data’, i.e. the methods used (p. 3). So, the differences between the remaining two concepts in his framework could be expressed in quite a simple way. For me, methodology covers *why I did the things I did* while method refers to *what I actually did*. In exploring the key issues for qualitative methods in the social sciences, Breuer and Schreier (2007) state there is an assumption that ‘putting on specific “knowledge-production goggles” by choosing a specific (thematically selective and focused) methodology entails a number of a priori epistemological decisions’ (Paragraph 3). This research is grounded in methodological techniques and practices that are interpretative in nature. Thus, this interpretive spirit flows through the questions driving the research as it is concerned with the ways in which the social worlds of CoPs members are interpreted, understood, experienced, produced and reproduced. There can be no doubt that my beliefs, biases, values, strengths and weaknesses all combine with my working assumptions about these worlds as they weave throughout the research informing, constructing, limiting and creating both insights and observations. In his introduction to the second edition of his influential 1998 text, Creswell (2007) wrote, ‘the interpretive qualitative research approach, focusing on the self-reflective nature of how qualitative research is conducted, read, and advanced, has become much more dominant in the qualitative discourse, and has, in many ways, been integrated into the core of qualitative inquiry’ (p. 3).

Although this interpretivist perspective informs the methodology, it is useful to reflect on Crotty’s framework again, not as scaffolding but rather as the foundation or bedrock upon which this research project is built. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, a previous research project I undertook forms another of the building blocks of this research. It was a qualitative postgraduate study of email use in organisations, based on ethnographic and grounded theory principles through which the message web construct emerged as a useful theoretical concept (Day 2000, 2004, 2005). In some ways, this current work extends my early research with a similar methodology and methods although the questions driving this research have necessitated an expansion into the realm of mixed methods. For, as Ridder and Hoon (2009) wrote, ‘qualitative research is what Punch (2005, 134) calls an “umbrella term” which encompasses not a single entity, but is multidimensional and pluralistic’ (p. 93) while Creswell
(2007) claimed that fragmentation and diversity was increasing in qualitative research (p. 4) although ‘qualitative research has become more accepted as a legitimate mode of inquiry in the social behavioral and health sciences than it was 10 years ago’ (p. 2). Mayrhofer (2009) agreed: ‘there is now a solid body of insight into the methodological and method related foundations of qualitative research that is not solely confined to some methodological or sociological geeks where it used to rest for a long time’ (p. 179) although he also claimed that qualitative research still held a minority position in management research (p. 169). In their review of the first ten years of the Organizational Research Methods journal (1998 to 2007), Aguinis et al. asserted that ‘the adoption of novel methodological practices is very slow’ (2009, p. 75). In concluding their review, Aguinis et al. maintained that ‘researchers in the organizational sciences also find that change is difficult and they have their own methodological comfort zones’ (2009, p. 109), which creates tension for qualitative researchers.

As one of several prominent scholars, Carolyn Ellis (2008) published a journal article distilled from a 2006 conference panel discussion about qualitative research. ‘Panelists included Arthur Bochner (communication), Norman Denzin (sociology/communication/critical studies), Yvonna Lincoln (education), Janice Morse (nursing/anthropology), Ronald Pelias (performance studies/communication), and Laurel Richardson (sociology/gender studies). Carolyn Ellis (communication/sociology) served as organizer and moderator’ (Ellis et al. 2008, p. 254). Lincoln described her view of qualitative research during the discussion and it struck a chord with me. She said, ‘I think there are a lot of varieties, brands, subspecies, whatever, drifting around ... My notion is a metaphoric Gordian knot, and I’m always trying to keep the knot very loose. I rather resist having people wanting to tie down the knot and focus into one model, one paradigm, one set of this, one outline for that’ (Ellis et al. 2008, p. 277). Lincoln’s idea of a Gordian knot as a metaphor to represent the intricacy and complexity of qualitative research resonated with me. On the other hand, even if such a knot is kept loose as she prefers, there is still regularity and consistency within the pattern. The knot can be seen as a counter play between structure and flexibility and so it has been with my research, in that I have integrated both ethnographic and grounded principles within the methodology used.

Grounded theory

Techniques inspired by grounded theory were drawn upon to develop understandings from the analysis and interpretation of the data collected through the two fieldwork stages of this research. Grounded theory was originally devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a method of building theory derived ‘directly from the data rather than from a priori assumptions, other research, or existing theoretical frameworks’ (Taylor & Bogdan 1998, p. 137). The intent ‘is to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory’ (Creswell 2007, pp. 62–63).
Theory developed in this way is said to be ‘grounded’ in the data or to emerge from it. Glaser and Strauss (1967) cautioned grounded researchers about the need to be open-minded and ‘theoretically sensitive so that he [sic] can conceptualise and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data’ (p. 46). ‘The methodology of grounded theory is iterative, requiring a steady movement between concept and data, as well as comparative, requiring a constant comparison across types of evidence to control the conceptual level and scope of the emerging theory’ (Rowlands 2005, p. 87). Grounded theory principles have been broadly taken up since Glaser and Strauss published their very influential text over 40 years ago.

The approaches they followed have moved in different directions. Considerable disagreements about the grounded theory approach have played out in the public arena with both defending their viewpoints (Glaser 1992, Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1994, 1998). Other scholars, such as Atkinson and Delamont (2006) have also been critical. ‘Vague appeals to “grounded” theory do not substitute for theoretical development in the wider sense—as if “grounded theory” were a theoretical or epistemological approach in its own right rather than a general strategy for the development of theoretical ideas’ (p. 751). For Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory methodology ‘provides a sense of vision, where it is that the analyst wants to go with the research. The techniques and procedures (methods), on the other hand, furnish the means for bringing that vision into reality’ (p. 8). Grounded research should be more verifiable, thus they proposed detailed step-by-step procedures to be followed. Glaser (1992) censured the nature of this very prescribed approach charging that data should not be ‘forced’. More recently, Charmaz (2006) has advanced another perspective to grounded theory utilising a constructivist approach and in doing so, she challenged the positivism evident in previous grounded theorising. ‘Grounded theory guidelines describe the steps of a research process and provide a path through it. Researchers can adopt and adapt them to conduct diverse studies ... I view grounded theory methods as a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages ... [and] they can complement other approaches ... rather than stand in opposition to them’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 9).

Seaman (2008) claimed that constructivists, such as Charmaz, have controversially ‘transformed grounded theory from a methodology with objectivist underpinnings to an approach that can be used in projects with different methodological assumptions’ (p. 2). Charmaz’s perspective includes the multiplicity of all constructionism research, ‘diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions’ (Creswell 2007, p. 65). He continued, ‘Constructivist grounded theory, according to Charmaz (2006), lies squarely within the interpretive approach to qualitative research with flexible guidelines, a focus on theory developed that depends on the researcher’s view, learning about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships, and making visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity’ (p. 65). Fendt and Sachs (2008)
highlighted the difficulties associated with the concepts of ‘grounded’, ‘discovery’ and even the notion that theory emerges, as such words all ‘imply that there is an objective truth grounded in the data, an objective theory waiting to be discovered, that GTM (Grounded Theory Methods) will bring to the surface’. They ask, ‘Does GTM really yield theory or does it offer interpretation? And if it is theory, then of what kind is it?’ (p. 445).

*Grounded theory, especially Charmaz’s constructionist interpretation is genuinely engaged with the world and helps ... to come skin close to the lived experience and incidents of the management world and make sense of them ... it includes provisional conceptual relationships presented in discursive form, and it outlines patterns of action and interaction between and among social entities and/or actors, developed from complex and constant iterative interplay among the data and between data, memos, and the literature (Fendt & Sachs 2008, p. 448).*

They also focussed on the importance of the researcher/research design fit, specifically with the methodology and methods being used (pp. 448–449). In conclusion, they argued ‘that in the midst of the reigning confusion and controversy of genres, it may be helpful to remember that the first requirement of qualitative research is faithfulness to the phenomena under study and not to any set of methodological tools and rules’ (Fendt & Sachs 2008, p. 450). Charmaz (2003a) herself pointed out that ‘grounded theory methods specify analytic strategies, not data collection methods’ (p. 257). By 2006, she claimed that ‘grounded theory methods foster creating an analytic edge to your work. Evidence abounds that these methods can inform compelling description and telling tales’ (p. xii) as well as bringing surprises and sparking ideas (p. 2).

In considering how the concept of ‘emergence’ fitted, Charmaz (2008) explained that it ‘is a fundamental property of grounded theory—both in its products and, although perhaps unrecognised and sometimes contested, in its methodological strategies (see Bryant & Charmaz 2007c; Charmaz 2007b) ... Emergence is fundamentally a temporal concept; it presupposes a past, assumes the immediacy of the present, and implies a future’ (p. 157). The past for many qualitative researchers is that there was an area of interest, of inquiry, that they sought to explore. Charmaz (2008) said that ‘new ideas, questions and refinements of earlier conceptions’ can emerge throughout the research process (p. 162). The notion of ‘emergence’ means that each step, or decision point, of the research process has a consideration of the past as an input to the present and an indicator of future decisions. This reflective/projective process informed not only my understandings throughout the research but lead my analysis into substantial depth as will become more obvious in the final chapter. New lines of inquiry emerged during this research, meaning that while the early emphasis on communication processes and technologies used in CoPs is quite evident in the framing of the Stage 1 survey questions, the research direction evolved and changed over the course of the research, as discussed previously.
Thus, the overall research questions driving the research were under ongoing review and reformulation, as facets other than a CoP’s communication processes emerged as significant in the everyday practices of these types of communities. As an example, while the Stage 1 survey included three questions towards the end that related to the connection between the CoP and their host organisation, this relationship moved more sharply into focus during the Stage 2 interviews to the extent that it became one of the two major themes of the work. Similarly, the analytic edge of this work, as presented in the final chapter, is an example of the iterative processes involved in the use of grounded theory within my research.

For Charmaz (2008), four strategies encapsulate grounded theory: coding, memo writing, theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation but ‘how and when researchers employ these strategies emerges during the course of the enquiry’ (p. 167). I have utilised all four strategies to some degree and as a general statement about this research, grounded theory principles informed by Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory are incorporated as well as Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) point about research findings emerging from the data. On the other hand, I have not followed Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) treatment of verification issues. ‘Grounded theorists share their conviction that the usual canons of “good science” should be retained, but require redefinition in order to fit the realities of qualitative research and the complexities of social phenomena that we seek to understand. The usual scientific canons include: significance, theory-observation compatibility, generalizability, consistency, reproducibility, precision, and verification’ (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 249–250). These scientific canons of ensuring ‘good science’ do not align with my interpretative stance; rather they are reminiscent of positivistic notions of objective realities and single truths. Issues around the research quality are explored later in this chapter.

**Ethnography**

*Although a grounded theory researcher develops a theory from examining many individuals who share in the same process, action, or interaction, the study participants are not likely to be located in the same place or interacting on so frequent a basis that they develop shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language. An ethnographer is interested in examining these shared patterns (Creswell 2007, p. 68).*

As an ethnographic approach aims to develop a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice, it was also particularly relevant as a way to understand what goes on within the cultural and social context of CoPs. As Schwartzman (1993) explained, ‘Ethnography also requires researchers to examine the taken for granted, but very important, ideas and practices that influence the way lives are lived, and constructed, in organizational contexts’ (p. 4). My interest explicitly focused on the informal practices of CoPs within organisational settings. In
seeking to explore these types of communities, I was particularly interested in the taken for
granted elements about the ways people constructed what it meant to be a member of a
community, as an element of their everyday organisational life. Schwartzman’s (1993) desire to
make the implicit explicit through organisational ethnography (p. 53) influenced my choice of
methodology. She attempted to sound an alert over 15 years ago that ‘organizational researchers
have been slow to realize the value of examining the “everyday routines” that make up
organizational life because, for the most part, these routines have been either taken for granted
(like meetings) or dismissed as unimportant’ (p. 38).

During the course of this research though, it was necessary to adapt to changes at several
different points, as discussed previously. For instance, some of the recruitment requirements
had to be redefined as access difficulties were experienced in setting up the interviews as well
as the need to use a variety of interview techniques. Themes emerging from the analysis
indicated unexpected areas of interest, e.g. the importance of different roles played by members.
Still, Robinson (2008) made a pertinent point: ‘using ethnographic methods for research is a
process which attempts to fast freeze, like a photographic, something which is ever changing’
(p. 251). The emergent nature of this research meant changes within changes as I, as the
researcher, shifted focus and/or methods while the CoPs and their members were also
continually moving and changing over the time of the study.

In comparing different traditions of qualitative inquiry, Creswell (1998) claimed that an
ethnography focused attention on a ‘cultural or social group or system … the meanings of
behaviour, language, and interactions of the culture-sharing group are studied’ (p. 58). He
continued, ‘an apparent overlap exists between an ethnography and a case study … In case study
research, one works with a smaller unit such as a program, an event, an activity’ (p. 66).
Although Creswell considered the traditional foundations of ethnographies and case studies to
be distinct and separate approaches to research, he acknowledged that ‘authors may integrate
them within a single study’ (p. 8) as I have done. Crotty (1998), whose research framework
provided the foundation of this project’s design, also considered ethnographies and case studies
to be different. He defined case studies as being a research method while ethnographies were
seen as a methodology (Crotty 1998, p. 5). Creswell (1998) was not quite so precise in
differentiating the two constructs, although by 2007, he chose ‘to view it [case study research]
as a methodology’ (p. 73).

Such variations between these two key qualitative researchers provided a telling illustration of
the many contrasting, and even conflicting, views about designing social research in a
qualitative manner. Such debates on methodological classification schemes continue across the
broad spectrum of social research. Lillis (2008) cited a methodological review of academic
writing research by Juzwick et al. (2006) in which ethnography was listed ‘as a method, alongside categories such as interviews, observation, and case studies, rather than a methodology constituted by multiple methods’ (p. 355).

Case studies

Is such a debate important in terms of this research? Yes, in that I have used a multi-site case study approach even though it meant a departure from Crotty’s (1998) design framework of classifying case studies as a method. In this instance, case study is not simply one of a range of methods, i.e. survey, interviews, observations and document analysis methods, drawn upon in the doing of the research. Thus, in terms of methodology and method associated with this research, the underpinnings of the case study approach have been considered as partly methodology and partly method.

White, Drew and Hay (2009) similarly explored difficult methodological issues (ethnographic versus case study) as part of a large and complex collaborative research project (p. 18). Their account of case studies, during which they cited Willis (2007) who suggested case studies were inductive and ‘about real people and real situations (White, Drew & Hay 2009, p. 21) matched my perspective to the degree that I was comfortable using it to describe my approach to case studies. White, Drew and Hay (2009) wrote that their inclination was ‘to move on from a dichotomous consideration of case study versus ethnography and consider instead the possibilities of assembling a combination of ethnographic and case study approaches’ (p. 25). In a similar way, the methodology guiding this project can be described as bringing together case study and ethnographic thinking with an additional refinement as grounded theory ideas are also drawn upon and inform the research. Geertz’s (1973) thick descriptions are also factored into this interpretative case study and contribute to a fuller understanding of the everyday practices of CoPs. Ethnographic principles have contributed to the research via my exploration of how people constructed their viewpoints and behaviour within the communities to which they belonged. Use of grounded theory principles has encouraged an iterative relationship between the material generated as data and the insights that have emerged during analysis.

Mixed Methods (MM)

At this point, I hope it is clear that the traditional dichotomy of quantitative versus qualitative approaches seeded through positivist and naturalist (interpretative) forms of inquiry does not fit with my approach. Indications that such a conventional view was seen as outdated began to appear in the 1960s. To overcome the limitations resulting from this philosophical and methodological chasm in terms of social research, a third research paradigm emerged and
became known as mixed method (or simply MM) research. The aim was to create a bridge by blending together the two very different strategies of qualitative and quantitative research.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) claimed researchers now use the method appropriate for their studies (p. 5) and this was the pathway I followed. There have been debates, e.g. the paradigms wars, about combining the inherent philosophical incompatibilities of positivist/interpretative theory through methodological (i.e. qualitative and quantitative) approaches and these debates continue. Social scholars across multiple disciplines have expressed views that range from affirming this third paradigm of mixed methods, to challenging, and even rejecting it completely. ‘Others, (for example, Brannen, 1992; Creswell, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003) argue that the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the positivist and interpretivist perspectives lie at separate ends of a continuum rather than simply a dichotomy and that the practical application of both perspectives is possible’ (Nudzor 2009, p. 119).

Giddings and Grant (2007) had critically examined the notion of mixed methods in their journal article titled: ‘A Trojan Horse for Positivism? A Critique of Mixed Methods Research’. They expressed their ‘shared concern at its [MM] contemporary positioning as the “third methodological movement” [Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003]. Such a positioning is fraught with theoretical and political complexities: in particular, it shores up the argument that research is value neutral rather than grappling with its painful politics’ (p. 52).

Followers of MM have become more numerous (and widespread) resulting in the emergence of a multitude of methodological approaches to doing research. Correspondingly, many of the leading names associated with MM research, including Creswell, Greene, Onwuegbuzie, Tashakkori and Teddlie all responded to this popular groundswell in demand. While their publications over the past ten years, with each other and with other scholars, are too numerous to individually consider, the works significant for this research are now discussed in more detail. It was bewildering though, to seek a path through the maze of approaches to methods, on both a how to and why to level.

It was work associated with Tashakkori and Teddlie in the first instance, followed by Creswell that most influenced this research. Contributions from Greene, Onwuegbuzie and others, have also been drawn into the discussion, as appropriate. Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (1998) MM typology was valuable in anchoring this research’s design. The concept that the mixing could, and should, occur at different stages was evident in their differentiation of two fundamental designs: the MIXED MODEL and the MIXED METHOD. Four years after their 1998 publication, a new MM handbook (2002) was produced where they reflected on their 1998 thinking about MM. ‘Mixed method designs are those that combine the qualitative and quantitative approaches into the research methodology ... mixed model studies are considerably
different ... [as they] combine the qualitative and quantitative approaches within different (stages) of the research process’ (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2002, p. 29). They also pointed out that ‘the actual diversity in MM studies is far greater than any typology can adequately encompass’ (p. 244).

Back in 1998 though, Tashakkori and Teddlie had explained that ‘the term mixed methods typically refers to data collection techniques and analyses given that the type of data collected is so intertwined with the type of analysis that is used’ (p. 43). Conversely, their MM concept disconnected data collection from analysis as they saw the mixing happening within different stages, as well as between, the research stages. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) portrayed three research stages: type of project and associated research question, data collection and data analysis/conclusions (p. 56) from which they developed a taxonomy: ‘A 2 x 2 x 2 cross-classification of these [three] dimensions leads to eight types of models for conducting research, which is similar to the Patton (1990) classification scheme for research designs’ (Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998, p. 56).

The two final types (Types VII and VIII) concern more complex MM and it was Type VII (the parallel MM) that contributed to the design of this research project, as mixing occurred both within, and between, the different stages. Like Tashakkori and Teddlie, Onwuegbuzie is another key figure, very experienced in MM and another prolific author. In 2004, Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie claimed that ‘mixed methods research offers great promise for practicing researchers who would like to see methodologists describe and develop techniques that are closer to what researchers actually use in practice’ (p. 15). Furthermore, in what they called a Parsimonious Typology, ‘the majority of mixed methods research designs can be developed from the two major types of mixed methods research: mixed-model (mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches within or across the stages of the research process) and mixed method (the inclusion of a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase in an overall research study)’ (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 20). They wrote, ‘an example of a within-stage mixed-model design would be the use of a questionnaire that includes a summated rating scale (quantitative data collection) and one or more open-ended questions (qualitative data collection)’ (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004, p. 20) which is exactly what I did in Stage 1 of this research.

Thus, the design of this research reflects both Tashakkori and Teddlie’s Type VII and Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie’s ‘within-stage mixed-model design’ in that both types of data were simultaneously collected, and then mixed in the analysis and interpretation of the Stage 1 data. The following Stage 2 interviews were qualitative which was a complication in terms of modelling my research design within Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (1998, 2002) typologies. More
recently, Creswell (another highly experienced MM scholar) and Plano Clark (2007) co-authored a MM text. Their aim was to introduce MM research and explain the processes involved through a focus on four design types. They explained that this ‘builds on our earlier work (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003)’ (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007, p. 2). ‘We feel that a parsimonious and functional classification can be created. Thus we advance four major mixed methods designs, with variants within each type ... the Triangulation Design, the Embedded Design, the Explanatory Design, and the Exploratory Design’ (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007, p. 59).

It was the Explanatory Design (sometimes referred to as the Explanatory Sequential Design) which emerged as useful for the purposes of this two-stage research. In defining the principle behind this technique, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) quoted their earlier work (Creswell et al. 2003): ‘the overall purpose of this design is that qualitative data helps explain or build upon initial quantitative results’ (pp. 71–72). In my research design, I followed a sequential development process as quantitative data was collected and analysed in the first instance (Stage 1 survey). ‘The second, qualitative phase of the study is designed so that it follows from (or connects to) the results of the first quantitative phase’ (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007, p. 72).

In my case, the survey informed the selection of the three CoPs to move into Stage 2. Although the purpose of Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design sounds similar to their Exploratory Design, they are not the same. The Exploratory Design is used when there is a need for an initial exploration, i.e. ‘measures or instruments are not available, the variables are unknown, or there is no guiding framework or theory’ (p. 75). Such a design is more in tune with earlier thinking concerning two-phase mixed methods following a sequential path. It is not uncommon for a predominantly quantitative research project to commence with a qualitative pilot study which is used to develop and test the final survey instrument before it is applied during the final quantitative stage. This is the reverse of the Explanatory Design. The Explanatory Design has been employed in this research as the major phase (Stage 2) was qualitative. Stage 1 was predominantly a quantitative survey which, as discussed previously, drew on Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (1998, 2002) early ideas about mixing, i.e. that mixing can occur both within, and between, the different parts of the research. In describing their Explanatory Design, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) advised it can be used in two different forms: ‘the follow-up explanations model and the participant selection model ... Although both models have an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase, they differ in the connection of the two phases, with one focusing on results to be examined in more detail and the other on the appropriate participants to be selected’ (p. 72).

Another distinction between the two Explanatory Design models is that they also differ in the
relative emphasis often placed on the two phases (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007, p. 72). The participant selection model was used in this research as a survey of the nine participating CoPs was undertaken in Stage 1 to construct a picture of a range of different, detailed aspects of each of these, quite diverse, communities. The survey results were used to inform and facilitate the identification and selection of the three CoPs to be invited to participate in Stage 2 which was the major data gathering component — an in-depth ethnographically-grounded, qualitative study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) claimed that the benefits of this design rested with its simplicity: ‘the researcher conducts the two methods in separate phases and collects only one type of data at a time’ and also ‘the final report can be written in two phases, making it straightforward to write and providing a clear delineation for readers’ (p. 74). They warned the sequential nature of two separate phases meant this design was very time-consuming for the researcher. They also pointed out the importance of specifying the criteria for selection into the qualitative phase.

In drawing this discussion concerning the rationale for my MM design decisions into a close, I have shown how this research developed from a foundation combining two different MM methodological approaches. I have built on Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (1998, 2002) mixed model design in combination with the participant selection model associated with Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design. The current arguments and debates about quantitative versus qualitative research and associated methodological controversies and their integration in contemporary social research approaches will undoubtedly continue. As Bazeley (2009) stated, ‘all mixed methods studies, by definition, attempt some form of integration ... the primary issue is to determine what data and analyses are needed to meet the goals of the research and answer the questions at hand’ (p. 203). An additional point made by Creswell et al. (2003) regarding these methodological choices was also noteworthy. ‘In most cases, the [MM] decision probably rests on the comfort level of the researcher with one approach as opposed to the other’ (p. 219). Brannen (2008) saw MM methodologies as providing opportunities while she remained cautious. ‘[MM] research strategies offer creative possibilities but these possibilities should not take the place of creative thinking’ (p. 56). In reflecting on the current trend toward increased development of MM within social research, she later claimed these changes were being driven by researchers early in their careers (Brannen 2009, p. 9).

Tashakkori and Creswell (2008b) wrote that the need for new scholars to be ‘comfortable with both approaches of research’ was urgent (p. 292). Perhaps, this is an indication of a generational change that will stimulate MM acceptability as a bona fide social research methodology. Greene (2008) reviewed MM’s current status, categorising design characteristics into primary and secondary dimensions. She wrote that ‘the primary dimensions are featured in nearly all mixed method design frameworks, typologies, or discussions. The secondary dimensions are featured
in some of them’ (p. 13). Greene’s (2008) three primary dimensions were all relevant to this study and are detailed in Table 13.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary dimensions</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independence/interaction</td>
<td>The degree to which the different methods are conceptualized, designed, and implemented independently or interactively. When the mixing happens — primarily at the end (drawing of inferences) or throughout the enquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status (parity, dominance)</td>
<td>The priority or dominance given to one methodology or another versus the equality of methodologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>Whether the different methods are implemented concurrently or sequentially</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Primary dimensions of mixed methods designs (Greene 2008, p. 14)

These three dimensions open another perspective into design issues in MM research. In considering the design of this research, the two stages were independent, with some mixing undertaken as appropriate in the final analysis. The dominant methodology was qualitative and was designed through the participant selection model of Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design while the timing was sequential. In his research, the mixing was judged to be an effective method of development with the Stage 1 survey informing the selection of participants to move into the Stage 2 interviews.

As can be seen, theoretical ideas about MM abound, with Hall and Howard (2008) endorsing yet another perspective: ‘Mixed methods research—using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explain and explore social phenomena—is gaining momentum as the third methodology (Bryman, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Greene, 2008; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2008; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003)’ (p. 248). They claimed that ‘a synergistic approach to MM research uses the inherent strengths of both types of approaches’ (p. 248) which are mixed through the following four core principles: (1) synergy, (2) equal value (3) ideology of difference and (4) the relationship between the researcher(s) and the study design ‘and they serve to inform and influence one another as well as the greater research process’ (Hall & Howard 2008, p. 250).

Regarding synergy, Hall and Howard (2008) cited Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) argument ‘that mixed methods research facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem than either approach acting alone allows’ (p. 251). With equal value as Hall and Howard’s (2008) second core principle, they highlighted the complexities with defining or measuring such equality, asking ‘is a 50–50 split [between qualitative and quantitative paradigms] more accurately measured in the time it takes to implement the various methods, the
volume of data they generate, or their relative importance in the reporting of the research?’ (p. 251). Their position was that ‘neither approach inherently overrides the other because researchers value the contributing epistemologies, theories, and methodologies equally all the time despite necessary fluctuations in the use of either quantitative or qualitative methods throughout the research process’ (p. 252). The third core principle of Hall and Howard’s (2008) synergistic approach to MM research concerned an ideology of difference where the foci are ‘methods that inherently contribute multiple points of view on the topic of interest’ (p. 252). The last of Hall and Howard’s core principles related to the researcher/research design relationship, ‘particularly in light of the more quantitatively based position of objectivity and the more qualitatively based position of subjectivity (see Smith & Hodkinson, 2005)’ (2008, p. 252).

Regarding Hall and Howard’s (2008) first point about synergy, there is no doubt that significant synergy was developed through different stages of my research. Even though, as Piekkari, Welch and Paavilainen (2009) explained, ‘only a very few mixed designs used case study as a follow-up stage to a survey, rather than forming an exploratory phase, to verify and expand on the quantitative results’ (p. 580). Equal value between the qualitative and quantitative strategies was Hall and Howard’s (2008) second aspect of MM. While it could be said that my work was primarily qualitative, in their terms, the contributions from both were equally valued throughout the research process. Ideology of difference was next in that Hall and Howard (2008) explained that their synergistic approach was ‘less interested in highlighting the similarities ... but more interested in using methods that inherently contribute multiple points of view’ (252). Some such differences were made visible by surveying nine different CoPs in Stage 1 and these multiple views were deepened through the in-depth interviews of Stage 2. Hall and Howard’s (2008) final core principle concerned the relationship between the research context and the researcher. Being a sole researcher, there is a sense of balance throughout the research process.

Like this research, Hall and Howard (2008) were guided by Crotty’s (1998) four-step research framework (epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, method). They developed a fifth dimension (analysis and results) to encapsulate the mixing within the analysis which leads to the research outcomes. ‘When mixing occurs, however, the qualitative and quantitative frameworks are drawn together, and each dimension “communicates” with other dimensions of the framework through the core principles’ (Hall & Howard 2008, p. 255). In considering my position regarding Hall and Howard’s (2008) extra category, I wish to highlight the role of writing within these processes. Although specifically directed towards ethnographic research, Van Maanen (2009) reflected on ‘textual practices of the kind [he] explored in ‘Tales of the Field’ some 20 or so years ago ... [seeking to] look at what kind of choices we have today at our fingertips’ (p. 3). Of interest was what he termed ‘textwork’ as being counterpoint to fieldwork.
‘Textwork is a suturing together of two words [text and work] meant to convey that writing is a labor-intensive craft’ (p. 3) and although textwork is an iterative process, I believe it fits well within Hall and Howard’s (2008) analysis/results category of the research framework.

Accordingly in this research, I have taken the opportunity to refine Hall and Howard’s (2008) development of Crotty’s (1998) work, by attaching Van Maanen’s (2009) textwork frame to their analysis/results category. In doing so, I stress the importance of the writing processes within interpretative research design. This emphasis on textual research constructions is a development of my earlier work because ‘in moving away from dispassionate descriptions, the tension between the researcher, the researched and the research audience is being disturbed as ethnographic texts become more engaging’ (Day 2002, Section 3, Paragraph 23). The issue of writing ethnographically-informed reports is considered later in the chapter.

Method

This account of the pathway I followed in actually doing this research is divided into the following four areas which follow interpretative and qualitative design principles: (1) preparing the overall plan, (2) recruiting participants, (3) collecting data and (4) analysing-integrating-writing. Having defined the methods I used in this way, it could be construed that the process was straight-forward, clearly-structured and precise, but it was not. There was no linear pathway; rather the emergent and iterative nature of this type of social inquiry meant a lot of moving forward, backwards and sideways, sometimes sequentially, sometimes simultaneously with much to-ing and fro-ing between the material, analysis, thinking and writing. Whatmore’s (2003) work surfaced another research-related metaphor about data, squirrels and nuts. ‘Standard accounts of the research process suggest that all you have to do now is go out and ‘collect’ some of it [data] ... almost like ‘the activity of squirrels in the autumn, gathering up acorns and hoarding them as treasured stores of winter food’ ... data collection mimics this squirrel-acorn relationship as you scurry about after nuggets of “evidence” just waiting to be picked up, brought home and feasted on at a later date’ (Whatmore 2003, p. 89). In challenging this notion, she changed the perspective on fieldwork: she wrote about ‘generating materials’ suggesting ‘that data, like questions, are produced, not found, and that the activity of producing them is not all vested in the researcher’ (p. 90).

The squirrel/nut metaphor resonated with me so I have used her ‘generating material’ terminology rather than the more traditional phrase of ‘collecting data’, from now on. And as Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) noted, ‘fieldwork must certainly rank with the more disagreeable activities that humanity has fashioned for itself. It is usually inconvenient, to say the least, sometimes physically uncomfortable, frequently embarrassing, and, to a degree, always tense’
PREPARING the overall plan

The research project commenced early in 2006 with the focus initially on elementary questions of ontological position, epistemological assumptions and the actual intellectual puzzle to be investigated, combined with the method of engagement. Investigation of the literature (ranging across many disciplinary boundaries) commenced concurrently with the development of the research design and continued throughout the project. Exploring the most appropriate techniques and potential sources from which to generate and interpret material about the socially constructed social world of CoP members flowed through this early phase of research framework development.

The process of designing the project culminated in the fundamental blueprint of the research, with the overall strategies being well shaped by the second half of 2006. Intellectually, qualitative ethnographic research is conceptualised on an emergent basis rather than from a rigidly structured plan for it cannot be fixed, predicted or predetermined. Nevertheless, creating a research plan forces attention on intellectual and ethical issues as well as the more practical questions of what is to be done and how it is to be done. From the earliest stages of designing and planning the project, an organisational ethnography seemed appropriate both in terms of the research question and my interest and experience of this method of inquiry (Day 2000, 2002, 2005).

As Geertz (1973) wrote though, ‘what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to’ (p. 9). Or, as Wolcott (1995) put it, data does not speak to anyone, ‘not even the most intuitive of researchers. Whatever sense is to be made is made because some human observer attempts to make that sense’ (p.98). So, the research design focussed on the taken for granted (and constructed) worlds of the members of the CoPs being studied as explored through their practices in their individual organisational environments. The challenge was to unearth and interpret the many cultural layers of these worlds. As an ethnographic researcher, it was clear that asking questions and listening to the stories (both individual and shared) of members of several communities from different organisations was an appropriate strategy to seek insights. But first, such organisations had to be found and their interest in the project kindled to gain their support, followed by recruitment of actual CoPs and their members.
RECRUITING participants

The research design for the fieldwork consisted of the following recruitment strategy: locate two organisations, each with two CoPs who might be interested in participating in the research. The first step was to contact as many organisations as possible, introduce the research, ascertain the level of interest and if there might be two CoPs in their organisation they could introduce me to. Once successful, my second step was to contact members of these communities with the aim of gaining their participation.

The organisational search was not targeted towards specific industry sectors or CoPs conforming to a defined profile. Instead, a broad brush approach was used. Originally, the criteria were for one of the two organisations to operate within the public sector with the other having a private industry base. To smooth the progress of these first contacts with potential organisations, I drew on the list of CoP characteristics that had been developed to underpin the research as a working definition (Figure 3). These five characteristics had been distilled from, and informed by, definitions from the literature (e.g. Wenger and others).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of a Community Of Practice (CoP) for the purposes of this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A CoP is a group (a community) of people who share a common work-related activity (a practice) e.g. accounting, engineering, HR, IT, logistics, marketing, researchers, sales, staff development/learning, catering, technicians etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The usual size of such communities is around 5 to 15 regularly active individuals (usually long-term, core members) although a larger number of members may come and go for a range of different reasons. People generally stay members for as long as it suits them and they personally gain benefits from participating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The community exists so that members can share their knowledge/experience to learn from (and help) each other. They do this by getting together as a group and communicating informally on a semi-regular basis (can be virtual) about their common practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Such communities tend to form on a voluntary basis (i.e. they are not part of the formal structure of the company like a team).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members see themselves as a community and develop some shared values over time — this does not mean however, that there is an absence of conflict.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: List of CoP characteristics underpinning this research

This list became the starting point for discussions with potential organisations to determine if there were any of these communities in their organisation. Ethnographic research can have many unexpected twists and turns and the list precipitated one of these startling and unanticipated occurrences. The surprise arose about the number of members I had specified regarding the community’s size. In one organisation, the person I had contacted defined CoPs as being much larger than the numbers I was using, i.e. between five to 15 core members. In
effect, they saw these types of communities as having literally hundreds and even thousands of members. The organisation was a multinational, originally wholly-Australian owned, but now a global company whose Australian operations comprised just one facet of their globalised commercial infrastructure. Certainly, my contact was quite comfortable with the notion of a community of people whose connection was grounded in a specific practice. Through further discussions though, it became clearer that what my contact was describing fitted more within the concept of a Network of Practice rather than my working definition of CoPs. A similar situation occurred with the last organisation that I contacted regarding recruitment into the project. This organisation was again a large multinational, albeit with its roots in the United States, but having been a major player on the world stage for a long time. My contact there also spoke about CoPs as communities connecting large numbers of people. And again, it seemed as though what was really being described was a Network of Practice rather than a CoP.

These experiences illustrated the general ambiguity around what might be meant by the term, Community of Practice. It highlighted the importance of making visible the things we take for granted, particularly around the descriptive words we use. These definitional differences turned out to be irrelevant to my research as in the end; neither organisation was prepared to support the project. The reasons given by the first one related to their concerns about what would be required of their staff. Discussions with the second organisation became bogged down primarily as a result of the long and complicated list of requirements received from their legal people. In consultation with my academic advisor, we decided not to negotiate through this legal maze primarily because the time I had allocated for recruitment activities had passed and I had already successfully recruited sufficient communities into the project.

In the latter part of 2006, I began to make general enquiries looking for the two organisations I needed to support the project. I spoke with colleagues, academics, students, fellow professionals, business associates, friends and extended family members seeking leads into organisations. My plan was to focus my search activities entirely on personal introductions, instead of combining this method with cold-calling arbitrarily chosen organisations. Why? In my previous ethnographic work, I had encountered significant complications around access as a direct result of cold-calling to make initial contact with organisations. So, I was determined to do that again only as a last resort in my search for access in this project. Instead, I combined the strategy of using personal introductions with the snowballing technique, e.g. if the initial lead was unavailable or unwilling to talk in detail or even not the ‘right’ person, I asked them to recommend who they thought I should talk to. Having such an admittedly tenuous connection into an organisation did make it a little easier to initially start a conversation with people I did not know and who did not know me. Another challenge concerned the informal and often hidden nature of the types of communities I was interested in exploring. My entry point into
each organisation was based solely on the personal introduction process. As a consequence, the roles and responsibilities of these first contacts were quite variable across the many different organisations within which I initiated discussions in my search for recruits. Some were quite senior people in their organisation, although many were not. In one instance, the lead turned into a dead end, primarily because the person I was liaising with was not sufficiently senior in the organisation to progress the idea of their involvement in the project even though they were keen to participate.

By September 2006, I had developed a few potential leads into organisations with discussions in progress but recruitment was turning into a more lengthy process that I had expected. A breakthrough occurred in late October, 2006. A fellow postgraduate student facilitated a personal introduction to a woman he knew who was a senior manager in a major Australian corporation. I had several meetings with her and she enthusiastically supported the idea of her organisation becoming involved in the project. She initiated contact with two communities she belonged to, to gauge their interest in participating. After some negotiation about what participation meant, both CoPs agreed to participate, with their organisation’s backing. Thus, the members of the Connecting Women CoP and the Leadership CoP were the first recruits. Successfully negotiating access to these two communities was extremely encouraging at this point as access was becoming more problematic. While those I spoke to about the project were usually very interested and anticipated significant benefits flowing from the research, translating this interest into actual support and access consumed much of my time and energy for many months. I followed many leads which ultimately were unproductive. Complications arose in furthering the recruitment discussions, ranging from problems getting access to managers at appropriate levels of authority to authorise the organisation’s involvement (as mentioned previously), through to confusion as to what a CoP actually was and whether there were any in their organisation. A rejection response that I received quite often concerned the universal commercial dictates of needing to focus on ‘core’ activities and associated time pressures. It was becoming increasingly evident towards the end of 2006 that some of the design elements of my original recruitment strategy were not working, as I had only managed to finalise access to two CoPs after several months of searching.

Within the climate of the more fundamental difficulties I was experiencing associated with organisational gatekeepers and access generally, it gradually became evident that the research design requirement for each of two organisations to have two of their CoPs participate in the project was a recruitment barrier. This issue was brought into stark relief through my dealings with members of a Training CoP in a large corporation. They were all very keen to participate in the project but even with extensive use of the snowballing technique, I could not locate another CoP in the organisation. Through talking to many different people in many different
sections in the organisation, I concluded an undercurrent of self-preservation was being exhibited by those I spoke with, resulting in some reluctance to participate in the research. Once I became aware of these issues, I realised I needed to move away from the design requirement to have two communities from each of two organisations. So, in the spirit of emergent research, I adapted the research design to suit the practicalities of the situation and moved to recruiting single CoPs from multiple organisations. The Training CoP welcomed the design modification as it meant they met the research requirements.

Expanding the number of potential organisations in the project like this opened up new, exciting and rich possibilities for insights around knowledge and knowing across different settings. An example of one of the recruitment strategies used was a short article about the research in the local newsletter of an international business communicators association (December 2006 issue). See Appendix 1. A professional communicator within the public sector responded and this, in combination with the snowballing approach, facilitated several meetings and subsequent negotiations with people from different government departments. Four public sector CoPs from three different departments ultimately agreed to participate. In some cases, the person I initially spoke with in each organisation or Department turned out to be the CoP liaison but this was not the case for all nine communities. The snowballing effect came into play with three of the nine CoPs in that the CoP liaison was not my original contact into the relevant organisation. The recruitment drive ran for nine months, commencing with initial discussions in August 2006 where I sought leads into organisations. From then until April 2007, I worked solidly and consistently to engage organisational backing and to subsequently recruit CoPs into the project.

Early in the process (September 2006), I also applied for formal ethics approval for the research from the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee with final ethics approval granted on 4 December 2006. Prior to submitting the application though, my methodology was formally peer reviewed to ensure it was sound and the protocol was likely to lead to valid and useful data, as required by the policy of the Business and Law Faculty. Another approval process became necessary through the recruitment of a CoP working within the public sector. This involved applying to the relevant Government Department’s Human Research Ethics Committee for the proposed research methodology to be examined. This was successfully completed on 21 March 2007 when the committee formally approved the relevant CoP’s participation in the research.

In compliance with accepted ethical human research processes, the following formal invitations and information sheets about the research were provided to the organisational and CoP liaisons after the initial discussions. Copies of these documents are included as appendices.
Generating interest in research projects and persuading individuals and organisations to freely give their time and energy can range from quite a challenge through to being almost mind numbing and soul-destroying, particularly for those highly passionate about their research endeavours. For me, the recruitment process meant I was on a rollercoaster ride along a continuum from joy to gloom and back again, many times over. By the end of April 2007 though, I had successfully recruited seven organisations into the project and between them, these organisations had approved my inviting nine different CoPs to participate. And although this was significantly more than the four communities proposed in the original research design, I was elated about the number of those agreeing to take part in the research.

Having a larger number of communities participating meant there was much greater diversity in the practices drawing the members of the communities together. Their individual practices include some of the conventional and traditional organisational activities such as leading others, training and project management. Then again, the practice of some of the communities in the project was more atypical, i.e. musical performances, organisational catering and research. Table 14 provides a summary of the basic details about each, including the CoP’s name, the practice that draws them together, their size and their relative industry base. Note that while pseudonyms are used for each of the nine CoP’s names in the reporting of the project to ensure they are not easily identifiable, the other details describing each of the communities are accurate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP name</th>
<th>Practice drawing the members together</th>
<th>Industry sector</th>
<th>No. of members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>Catering services at different geographic sites within one Department</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceremonial Band</td>
<td>Musical performances associated with a public sector unit</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>The facilitation process within different organisations</td>
<td>Public &amp; Private</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Senior level leadership in the human relations function of a single global organisation</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Developing, implementing and reviewing policy in one Department</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The industry base of the different communities is a composite of public and private sectors with one CoP having members from both public and private organisations. The sizes of the nine communities are also quite diverse with the membership numbers provided by the CoP liaisons ranging from eight to 70. It was clear though that the larger communities included more peripheral members than the smaller ones. The recruitment rationale and the associated strategies used in gathering material for this research project are reported on pages 93 to 98. In summary, initial contact with potential participants was made through networking with professional contacts, cold calling and the snowball technique. Further leads were generated over the nine month recruitment phase, resulting in nine CoPs participating in the research.

**GENERATING material (collecting data)**

Obviously, every organisation is different and there were degrees of willingness shown by each organisation in terms of supporting the research and the subsequent decision making processes around that choice. My impression was that the public organisations seemed to be more in tune with the concept of CoPs to the extent that such communities appeared to be a taken for granted part of their organisational reality. Only one of the four Departments did not have specific management strategies in place regarding such communities and that was the Department of the Policy CoP. The situation was significantly different for the CoPs in the two private enterprises. Originally the Training CoP had strongly pursued a self-sustaining strategy as they actively sought to remain out of sight of their management except for managers with whom the members had personal and supportive connections. But, because this is a very large corporation which seems to enact one change initiative after another, it was difficult for me to accurately comment on an organisation-wide position in regard to policies or strategies regarding CoPs. The other private organisation supporting the study also seemed less aware of these types of communities per se. Again, there is the proviso that I was dealing with only one person and hence my perception of the situation may not accurately reflect the big picture of the organisation’s position on CoPs. Once a CoP had agreed to participate in the project, I started to construct a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP name</th>
<th>Practice drawing the members together</th>
<th>Industry sector</th>
<th>No. of members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Mgmt</td>
<td>Managing projects in different Departments</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Researching social aspects of organisational systems across different Departments</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Women</td>
<td>Advancing opportunities available to women at all levels within the human relations area in one organisation</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Training and development across multiple Departments in one organisation</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Details of the nine CoPs participating in the research
loose picture describing what I knew about each community at that point in time (i.e. in the early days of the fieldwork). Memoing these notes became very useful as they allowed me to reflect on my early perceptions as I grew to know more about each community. Later, I developed these memos into a brief vignette for each of the nine CoPs, drawing on my written notes of each meeting with those who were my initial contacts into the organisation (and the subsequent CoP liaison if they were different people). I also made use of the published material I sometimes received as part of these initial discussions, e.g. Annual Reports. At the same time, I also carried out online searches for any pertinent information about each organisation. I targeted these searches on general information about the organisation as well as specifically looking for publicly accessible material on the actual CoPs themselves and the organisation’s knowledge management strategies and capabilities.

As discussed in the previous section on methodology, mixed methods based on a two-phase sequential approach was utilised in the research design. The participant selection model (a variation of Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design) was followed. Material was gathered first through a survey and its analysis informed the decision-making process concerning the CoPs to be selected to move into Stage 2. Members of the selected communities were then invited to participate in individual interviews. Mixing the methods through these two stages added another dimension in terms of the insights and increased understanding that emerged from the research on CoPs and the everyday practices of their members.

**Stage 1: Survey**

The first stage of the research methods employed comprised an exploratory mixed-mode survey to gather preliminary material about the nine communities recruited. The aim was to construct a more detailed, and composite, picture of each of the communities participating in the research and to better understand the everyday activities of their members, i.e. their customary practices. Being a descriptive process, the survey was not developed to test any hypotheses, though comparisons within each CoP from survey information could be revealing. In the second half of 2006, I began crafting the questions which would ultimately comprise the Stage 1 survey.

Still, it is important to reiterate that new lines of inquiry were continuously being opened through the emergent nature of grounded research. As Creswell (2003) put it, the thinking process cycles ‘back and forth from data collection and analysis to problem reformulation and back’ (p. 183). This meant that while the early emphasis on communication processes and technologies used in CoPs remains evident in the framing of the questions, the research direction evolved over the course of the research, as discussed previously. These increasing understandings of CoP practices were grounded in, and emerged from, the survey analysis. As
an example, a few questions were included towards the end relating specifically to the connection between the CoP and their host organisation. When the survey instrument was being developed, my interest in this area centred on the reciprocal aspects of the relationship. The aim was to understand the respondents’ actual practices as CoP members and the benefits they received, in conjunction with the support their host organisation provided and then what benefits the respondents subsequently saw flowing back to the organisation from the CoP. It emerged that the CoP/host organisation relationship played a significant role within the everyday practices of the CoPs, thus it received more emphasis during the Stage 2 interviews. Overall, the survey instrument was designed to discover more details about the following aspects.

- The survey respondents’ basic demographics as a member of one of the nine participating CoPs, e.g. experience in the organisation and in their current role, their age and their sex.

- The background setting of the specific CoP that the respondent was a member of, e.g. the community’s size, the year it was created, how long the respondent has been a member, was the respondent a founding member and whether they were currently active.

- What the respondents said they actually did as members of the CoP and also what others did in the same CoP, particularly in relation to communication processes and their organisational message webs.

- Basic details about the membership body of the respondent’s CoP, e.g. the number of oldtimers/newcomers and also how many members were active.

- The relationship between the CoP and their supporting organisation and how the respondent saw the form of this connection impacted on the CoP itself.

- The ways in which the respondent perceived future possibilities for their community.

The survey questions emerged from a careful and detailed consideration of current published research articles on CoPs, in combination with scholarly input from other professionals and academics in the fields of communication and management, as well as my own experience and expertise. While designing these questions, I returned constantly to the reasons underpinning the survey, in addition to the overall research objective. To recap, I sought to develop a better understanding of the ways that members of each CoP constructed their realities around their community with the following research question: What goes on within CoPs in terms of the day-to-day practices of their members? The design process was highly iterative as I continually modified both the questions and their groupings within the survey structure. As with all material generating strategies, compromises were necessary through the tension between desiring to collect as much material as possible while at the same time reducing the inconvenience to the respondent to encourage the highest response rate possible. A copy of the final survey instrument is provided at Appendix 7.
Both open-ended and closed questions were used as I sought to ensure meanings were clear at all times. Additionally, I took considerable effort so that the language and phrasing of all the questions was natural and straightforward, i.e. ‘Plain English’ principles. The survey structure flowed in an uncomplicated and logical manner, i.e. there were no filter-type questions. Particular care was taken with the closed questions to ensure the range of prepared responses offered were appropriate and easy for respondents to understand. To encourage as many responses as possible, several different types of closed questions including categorical, numerical and rating scale (Likert) as well as multiple choice and matrix questions were in the survey. I also included several open-ended questions where I collected behavioural and opinion-based responses as well as ideas and suggestions. The survey questions were comprehensive, especially when considering the survey was primarily for exploratory purposes with the following qualitative stage taking priority in the research design.

I made the most of the opportunities the survey phase presented to maximise the material collected (both quantitative and qualitative) which, in turn, enriched the research. The final question was optional and presented a hypothetical situation for respondents to consider. And while it is recognised that questions about beliefs (i.e. a hypothetical scenario) can be problematic when seeking to investigate behaviour, I was quite keen to include at least one such question. I originally crafted three hypothetical questions which I discussed extensively, and subsequently pre-tested, with academic colleagues as well as business professionals and communication practitioners.

The feedback received helped fine-tune the concepts I was interested in exploring and allowed me to merge the three questions into this: Would you please imagine yourself in the following situation. Your organization has recently been reorganized. The effective operation of the community is now formally part of your manager’s key deliverables. A generous budget has been allocated to maximise the community benefits that flow to the organisation. How can the money be best used to support the community? The question set up an opportunity for respondents to consider their community within the framework of the support currently received from their host organisation while also identifying changes they might like to see in the future. In one sense, the question asked about the type of future they wanted for their community but in a very roundabout way. I weighed up the question’s benefits in light of the likelihood of variations in how respondents interpreted it and their subsequent responses. In the end, I judged the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. The survey was quite detailed so the material gathered and its subsequent analysis followed Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design with the aim of facilitating the selection and recruitment of participants to progress into the next stage of the research.
The final form of the survey contained 22 compulsory and six optional questions, structured into three parts: Part A sought basic demographic details about the respondent, Part B moved into more detail about the respondents and their CoP membership while the community itself was the focus of Part C. It was designed to be a simple, straight-forward and professional-looking document and quite easy for respondents to complete. As noted previously, a sample of the final version of the survey is included at Appendix 7. The survey itself was offered in two delivery modes: web based and also in a paper version. Respondents could choose the option with which they were most comfortable. The design and layout of both were the same except my return postal address was included on the paper one. Being a web-based survey meant that there were significant advantages with cost, speed and flexibility. Then again, this delivery mode had some limitations, e.g. familiarity with the internet was needed even when appropriate computer technology was available. Bias in the sample population has emerged as a problem with others’ use of web surveys. In this instance though, such sampling issues were not of concern as the targeted respondents were sought from very specific populations, i.e. members of the nine CoPs recruited into the study, rather than a sample. As discussed in the previous section, Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design for MM research, and more specifically their participant selection model, provided the theoretical basis of the survey.

Each of the communities participating had a defined membership, as delineated by the CoP leader, who distributed the survey forms, either online or on paper. Although the actual survey was the same for all nine CoPs, the results were separately tabulated because the focus was on understanding more about each of these distinctive populations rather than seeking comparative insights.

Unfortunately, the convenience of the internet to deliver the survey brought with it additional compromises due to a lack of functionality in the online survey software used. As an example, traditionally ‘other’ can be included as the final item in matrix questions followed by space for respondents to include an explanation, if they choose to do so. The software used did not allow any space in the matrix for additional information to be provided. After experimenting with different ways to achieve the same result within the constraints of the software, I included a follow-up question. It was an open and optional question for those selecting the ‘other’ response, allowing them to add further details which several CoP members did. On the other hand, it increased the number of questions on the survey from 25 to 28 so while this variation was a little clumsy, on balance, the benefits balanced the disadvantages. There were three matrix questions included in the survey: two generated material on specific behaviours about community participation and also communication processes while the third sought an appreciation of respondents’ overall perceptions about members of their community and their actions.
I also experienced other adverse software-generated issues associated with the matrix questions. A software limitation meant it could not be set to compel respondents to select an answer category for each item listed in the matrix. If the response was nil, the respondent could choose to indicate that by selecting the last response category (‘never’ in one instance and ‘not currently possible’ for another question) or they could just skip that item in the matrix entirely. This meant that the responses in the three matrix questions could be somewhat distorted. Again, I accepted the compromise as I believed the overall effect of such distortion on the material was minimal given the primary aim was to inform the recruitment decision about which of the nine CoPs would be invited to move into Stage 2.

It was a huge disappointment the specific web survey software used was the only option supported by the University at the time. And even though I did briefly explore the many ‘free’ web survey packages available online, my final decision was to continue struggling with the University’s software because of both privacy and reliability concerns. As time passed though, this was a decision I came to regret more and more — a situation I discuss more fully later.

The final draft of the web survey was piloted by several of my professional colleagues. Each individually completed the entire survey online and discussed their feedback with me. They considered such things as the clarity of the questions, whether the structure flowed logically and also how easy it was to complete it online. Their feedback was generally positive and in a couple of cases, they had suggestions about editing and reformatting some of the questions which I incorporated into the design. Regarding the operation of the web-based survey software, they all reported it went smoothly. Doing this pilot test was extremely valuable, particularly with fine-tuning the questions.

However, their positive comments about the web survey software gave me, what turned out to be, somewhat of a false sense of security. Thus, I had little warning about the significant software problems I would need to address when the survey went live. On receiving approval from each organisation, in the form of an appropriately signed Organisational Consent Form (see Appendix 3), I quickly moved to invite the relevant CoPs to participate in the research by completing the survey. Again, the propensity for ethnographic work to require flexibility in terms of design became evident. The original research design for Stage 1 was to open the web survey to all the participating CoPs at the same time but, with the recruitment process taking much longer than expected, I administrated the survey to each CoP on a staggered basis as I received their organisation’s consent.

The surveying period commenced in February 2007 when I invited members of the first two communities to complete the survey. See Appendix 4 for a copy of the CoP member’s
Invitation and Participation Information Letter. The wording of the invitation letter clearly set up the expectation that the web mode was favoured although the print mail survey was also mentioned as an alternative, if the potential respondents preferred. As the act of filling out a survey implies informed consent, a separate consent form was not required from those who participated in Stage 1. The invitation letter provided details of the research as well as the URL link to the web survey. Over the following months, members of the remaining seven communities were similarly invited to participate. The survey was generally open to each community for a two week period with the final community’s access closing late in May 2007. As approval was received for each community, I forwarded an electronic version of the CoP members’ invitation letter direct to the CoP liaison. They distributed a covering email to all of their community’s members, including my invitation letter as an attachment.

Generally, the initial response from CoP members to the invitation was quite prompt and once they began to complete the survey, their responses were automatically stored and available to me online. Part of functionality of the web survey software was to allow respondents to return to an incomplete survey if they had previously failed to answer all the questions, e.g. if they were interrupted. It quickly became evident there was a problem as large numbers of surveys began to appear in the data set that had been started but not completed.

Several attempts were made to work with the University’s Information Technology staff to track this problem but it could not be resolved during the time the survey was open. It emerged the web survey software package was a new addition to the University’s computer resources and this was the first time it was being used in a live online environment. The problem originated in the way the software handled multiple pages — seemingly data entered on previous pages was not saved until the final page was completed and closed. Thus, unless it was completed in one session, some of the data was lost which meant the survey was incomplete. This, in turn, meant that none of the data entered was usable. Once the extent of the technical issues became evident, I contacted each CoP liaison about the problem, asking if a second email could be sent to their members with the survey attached as a pdf file (as an alternative to doing it online). The idea being that potential respondents could print it out themselves and complete it in the old-fashioned way, i.e. by filling it out by hand and posting it back to me.

As a recovery strategy, this was successful to a certain extent in that a few more completed surveys were eventually received but certainly much angst ensued as respondent goodwill was lost due to this technical hiccup. Because of these technical problems, more flexibility was allowed regarding the time allocated for each community to complete the survey and in some cases, the completion date was extended well beyond the two-week period. At this point, I was seeking advice and trying to ensure that the maximum number of surveys could be completed.
by each community. In this, I was only partially successful, particularly with the two communities who completed the survey first — I received only two surveys from the Leadership CoP (with seven members) and three surveys were successfully completed from the Supporting Women CoP (from a membership body of eight members) which was disappointing.

From the nine CoPs, 92 respondents commenced filling out the survey online but 29 people failed to complete it, presumably from technical issues. Thus, this software problem resulted in a failure rate in excess of 30%. Nonetheless, the material that was generated was sufficient to fulfil the Stage 1 aim of building up a more detailed profile of each community to provide basic information and also to enable an informed Stage 2 selection process.

**Stage 2: Interviews**

In this two-staged process, I followed one of the defining strategies associated with mixed method and research based on grounded theory. I integrated ‘data specifically through analysis, rather than as a conclusion to analysis ... [and used] the results from analysis of one form of data in approaching the analysis of another form of data’ (Bazeley 2009, p. 205). Being an emergent, mixed method study, the Stage 1 survey (quantitative/qualitative) was an exploration to better understand each of the nine CoPs participating in the research. Detailed analysis of the survey material informed the transition into Stage 2 which is an example of Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design (see earlier discussion in this chapter). The analysis provided further insights into the character and behaviour of each of the nine CoPs and their message web activities, as reported by members themselves. This, in turn, facilitated the choice of the three CoPs to be invited to progress into Stage 2. The criteria I used to progress from Stage 1 into Stage 2 covered several aspects. The research aim was not to compare and generalise across CoPs which were similar, rather, in selecting the three Stage 2 communities, I sought to accentuate their differences. The selection criteria was broad-ranging and emerged through my analysis and consideration of the survey results, my many conversations with the CoP leaders and any of their secondary documents as well as extant literature I was reading — all of which were supported by my gut instincts.

To be clear though, the following four primary factors were considered in turn about each of the nine CoPs participating in the research: their accessibility and interest/responsiveness regarding potential participation in Stage 2, relative industry base (public/private organisations), diversity in both the CoPs’ practices, its membership body and geographical location and finally distinctive features of interest. The pragmatic issues of access to the research sites came into play and not just in a physical or geographical sense but also in terms of the rapport I had been able to establish with each of the CoPs’ leaders as expressed in their enthusiasm about
participating in the research. Another point, although not of prime importance, was also considered in the decision making process: the relative sizes and apparent success of the nine CoPs.

Stage 2 was based on interviews and while this may seem straightforward, research interviewing is a very value-laden process once the surface is scratched away. Bryant and Lasky (2007) wrote about Bryant’s experiences of ‘examining dilemmas confronted in doing grounded theory, and, simultaneously acknowledging how as researcher, one inevitably becomes part of one’s research, regardless of whether or not this is consciously intended in the research design. One reason for this is that in-depth interviewing always provides potential for the researcher to participate in stories of participants as they are “told, lived and co-composed” in the course of the interview’ (p. 185) (emphasis in original).

I agree with Bryant and Lasky’s (2007) point that interviews can be co-composed or, in Whatmore’s (2003) terms, that the interview material is jointly generated rather than something the researcher finds and then collects from the interviewee. White, Drew and Hay (2009) wrote: ‘according to Kohler Riessman (2006) [narrative interviewing] has the following distinctive features. “The question and answer (stimulus/response) model gives way to viewing the interview as a discursive accomplishment. Participants engage in an evolving conversation; narrator and listener/questioner, collaboratively produce and make meaning of events that the narrator reports … The ‘facilitating’ interviewer and the vessel-like ‘respondent’ are replaced by two active participants who jointly produce meaning’ (White, Drew & Hay, 2009, pp. 21–22). ‘Such interviewing appears effortless [as] the researcher must be able to identify quickly something of interest in what is said or done and develop a line of questioning on the spot. This shift to the researcher’s interest must not be abrupt or intrusive; it should make sense to the other person and should sustain the flow of conversation’ (Lindlof 1995, p. 170).

While it may appear effortless, this is quite challenging and my immediate sense after leaving each interview site was joy in that I had gained increased understanding about the community and its members, relief that the interview was successful but also an overarching sense of bone weariness. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) drew attention to another aspect of interviewing. ‘Sometimes the difficulty of getting access to informants determines who will and who will not be ... Who is interviewed, when, and how, will usually be decided as the research progresses, according to the ethnographer’s assessment of the current state of his or her knowledge, and according to judgements about how it might best be developed further’ (pp. 105, 106).

In most instances, I was able to engage the interest and support of sufficient participants in each of the three CoPs, albeit more difficulties were experienced with the Catering CoP in that
regard. Another point that Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) made was that even the ‘participants’ responses to ethnographers may also be an important source of information’ (p. 177). A situation developed with my attempts to set up interviews with the Catering CoP’s members. The CoP’s leader’s response to my request for the relevant names and contact details of other members of the Catering CoP was unexpected in that he was extremely reluctant about doing so. This situation had the potential to contribute additional information but it could not be followed up due to time restraints. While Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) extolled the virtues of taking advantage of such opportunities, at times, it was not possible as I had to let some of the potentially interesting aspects of the participants’ behaviours go. In total, I individually interviewed 20 people associated with the three CoPs during a three month period (June to August 2008). An Invitation and Participant Information Letter for Stage 2 was provided to each CoP’s leader which they emailed to the community’s members (see Appendix 5 for an example). Table 15 provides more details about the interview process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP name</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Interviewee roles in regard to the CoP</th>
<th>Interview medium</th>
<th>Interview duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 woman</td>
<td>4 CoP members (including the CoP leader) and the CoP/host org. representative</td>
<td>4 face-to-face</td>
<td>From 30 to 70 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 men</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 telephone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4 women</td>
<td>8 CoP members (including the CoP leader, one member was also the CoP/host org. representative, another was an external member)</td>
<td>7 face-to-face</td>
<td>From 50 to 90 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 men</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 telephone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5 women</td>
<td>5 CoP members (including both co-leaders of the CoP, an ex-member) and a CoP/host org. representative</td>
<td>5 face-to-face</td>
<td>From 30 to 90 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 men</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 telephone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10 women</td>
<td>10 men</td>
<td>16 face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 telephone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15: Stage 2 interviews details

The majority of the interviews were face-to-face (16 of the 20) and conducted asynchronously in time and space, even though this involved considerable travel. While I interviewed all the leaders of the three CoPs, I also spoke with several other members of each community, including an ex-member of the Training CoP and an external member of the Research CoP. Furthermore, in each case, I also interviewed a person who represented a connection between the CoP and their host organisation. Gaining access to these more senior managers was more complicated, resulting in two of the three being conducted as telephone interviews. Although
the gender influence on CoP life was not explicitly addressed, a range of demographics including gender was gathered in the survey. An interesting gender-based incident emerged in the Catering CoP (and is briefly explored in Chapter 5) so gender details are provided in Table 15. Although unplanned, the gender balance of the interviewees ended up being equal, i.e. 10 women and 10 men. Eight interviews were undertaken in conjunction with the Research CoP, seven with the Training CoP and five with the Catering CoP, totalling 20 altogether. The research design focussed on face-to-face interviews but four could not be done in this mode so they were telephone interviews.

This emphasis on face-to-face interviews was costly, as significant travel by plane, train, tram, car and even considerable walking was involved. Two of the phone interviews arose because neither the organisational contact person for the Training nor the Catering CoPs were available in person. As I was keen to generate, at least, a little material about each CoP from their host organisation’s perspective, these two interviews were rather brief telephone conversations. With the other two telephone interviews that I did, face-to-face was not possible due to their physical locations, i.e. a member of the Training CoP worked in an outer city suburb that was not easily accessible by public transport while in the other instance, a Research CoP member was overseas during the period I was interstate so we spoke on the phone. As one of my aims was to reduce the disruption the interviews caused for the individual CoP members, I was flexible with the locations of the remaining 16 face-to-face interviews. The specific details of the interview locations are provided in Table 16.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP name</th>
<th>Interviewee details</th>
<th>Travel details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>CoP leader + 3 other members (face-to-face)</td>
<td>Interstate flight to Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 other members (face-to-face)</td>
<td>interstate flight to Site B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Site A member who was overseas during my visit (phone)</td>
<td>No travel needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CoP/host org. representative (face-to-face)</td>
<td>Local in my home city centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>One of the two CoP’s leaders + 2 other members + 1 ex-member (face-to-face)</td>
<td>Local in my home city centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The other CoP leader (face-to-face)</td>
<td>Outer suburb of my home city with reasonable public transport access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Another member (phone)</td>
<td>Outer suburb of my home city with poor public transport access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CoP/host org. representative (phone)</td>
<td>Local in my home city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoP name</td>
<td>Interviewee details</td>
<td>Travel details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>CoP leader + another member (face-to-face)</td>
<td>Two different regional centres within my home State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 other members (face-to-face)</td>
<td>A different regional centre within my home State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CoP/host org. representative (phone)</td>
<td>Local in my home city</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: Details of interview locations

I had defined a very basic framework of set interview topics and during the interviews, I actively encouraged the interviewees to explore and discuss their own experiences and perceptions of what it meant for them to be a CoP member. The Stage 2 Interview Framework for CoP Members and Host Organisation Representatives has been included at Appendix 8 although the content of the interviews themselves was very flexible. My intuition also came into play as I attempted to follow up on any hunches that became apparent during each of the interviews.

The need to integrate the differing frameworks of concepts regarding CoPs required a research design that compared a number of different communities and also studied some in depth. The work of CoPs is not usually conducted in single observable ‘events’ but created over time, through mediated communication and shared common tasks. Interviews were chosen as the central method in the research design to assist participants to recall details of everyday practices of their CoP. This material could then be compared with the recall of others in the same CoP as an internal checking mechanism. An interview process also made it possible to identify emerging themes, such as leadership or the role of the organisation and introduce similar questions with participants in a separate community. The decision to interview a person who was the management link with each CoP but not an actual member contributed a separate set of views about everyday practices that proved to be very valuable in constructing a new model that enlarged some concepts about the organisational context. Undertaking internal checks in this way contributed to the validity of the research findings.

The interview framework was a highly iterative process, continually being built up through my engagement with the literature and the fieldwork material generated through both Stages 1 and 2. My ongoing immersion in all facets of the generated material, including secondary material gathered about the organisation in which each CoP was situated, facilitated the emergence of key issues. Over the course of the 20 interviews undertaken, different emphasises were revealed, e.g. the relationship between the community and their host organisation became more relevant. Thus, in interviewing the person in each of the three CoPs who represented the host
organisation, I used an abbreviated interview framework, also included as part of Appendix 8. Another technique that I drew upon was to incorporate a hypothetical scenario-type query into the interview content as was also done in the survey. An additional area of interest emerged concerning CoP leadership, so to help understand more about how this role was perceived, I constructed a scenario in which the current leader left the CoP and then asked the interviewees to consider what might happen next in their community. A broad assortment of responses ensured with samples provided in Table 17 to show the analysis process in action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP name</th>
<th>Samples of quoted responses to ‘loss of leader’ scenario</th>
<th>Indications of the analysis process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Training | *HELENA: If Simon left, the community would merge more with the management view.  
*SIMON: Well, I suspect it would be more likely to be Helena than anyone else, at the moment, to be honest. | Points to the complexities of their host org. connection.  
A surprise, as Simon was joint leader (with Julie) and Helena was a newcomer. |
| Research | *PETE: I think it would peter out.  
*JUDY: I don't think it would disband but I don't think it would do anything. It's more the momentum that Neil is creating, might. It will need to be started again. | Suggests a CoP in trouble.  
Judy, as an external member, appears doubtful of the CoP’s abilities to maintain itself. |
| Catering | *MAX: I could see it continuing. I honestly could because they’re very strong people, they’re very strong willed people and they enjoy it too much to let it just … … just to let it wane away … there’s enough enthusiasm and that creative juice is there around the table, to let it continue. | As the leader, Max’s beliefs concerning the CoP’s future were very positive: a view affirmed by the other interviewees with 2 of the 3 other members interviewed potentially ‘stepping up’. |

Table 17: Sample responses to the hypothetical interview question on CoP leadership

The interviews themselves varied in duration with the shortest around 30 minutes and the longest 90 minutes. Generally, the FtF interviews occurred in an appropriately private area at the interviewees’ work location, with the day and time nominated by each interviewee. In setting up these interviews, one of my aims was to fit in with their specific work requirements to ensure minimal disruption. Before starting each of the interviews, I sought permission to digitally record the discussion and all of the interviewees agreed. As each recording was to be transcribed in full, I also offered each interviewee the opportunity to later view their completed transcription and to change anything, should they wish to. Some of the interviewees took up this offer with only a few minor changes being required. At the beginning of each interview, I formally asked the interviewee for their consent and each participant signed a consent form to participate in Stage 2 (see Appendix 6 for a sample of the form). I also addressed ethical issues associated with the participants’ identities by explaining that anonymity would be maintained.
through the identity changes in the transcripts with pseudonyms used to disguise the names of the interviewees, the individual names of specific CoPs and their relevant host organisation.

I have masked any other references that might hint at specific identities or locations, meaning it is possible an interviewee’s meaning was altered. While the material generated through the 20 interviews was substantial, supplementary material has also been incorporated, e.g. the field notes I wrote after the completion of each interview. Opportunities arose to briefly observe each of the three CoPs in action for a short period of time and although they were fleeting, I was able to gain some sense of the ways that interactions happened in each community. I attended as many events as possible but most of what was going on within the CoPs was not observable. Instead, the material generated about their joint activities was accessed more indirectly through interviews. However, the meetings that were observed supplemented the primary interview material. The details of these observations are shown in Table 18.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP name</th>
<th>Observational opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>In 2007, meeting was organised by Julie (my original contact and joint leader of the CoP) so that she and Simon (the other leader) could further discuss the research with me. This informal meeting turned into a small get together over coffee with both Julie and Simon and another one of the CoP members, Jennie. While we spoke about the research, the conversation also drifted into more general topics about the community’s activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>I was able to attend one of the CoP’s regular full day meetings in 2008 for approximately an hour during which I presented an overview of my research and sought to recruit participants into Stage 2. I stayed for about 30 minutes after my ‘session’ and simply observed the interactions between the CoP members as the discussion moved on from my research onto other topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>The organisation that hosts this CoP holds an annual two-day conference. I attended the 2007 conference on the second day which was followed by a CoP meeting where Neil (as the CoP’s leader) called a CoP meeting on an ad hoc basis at the close of the conference. The aim was to consider the future of the CoP. Neil invited me to sit in on this meeting as an observer. In 2008, Neil also asked me to do a presentation to the Research CoP about Communities of Practice in general which provided additional opportunities for me to both observe and participate in the interactions between members of the CoP. The presentation itself went for a couple of hours.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 18: Observational opportunities

The Training CoP provided a large quantity of documentation, such as meeting minutes, emails and newsletters. From them, factual material such as specific dates and the details of people involved in the early stages of the CoP was obtained. To some degree, these records also imparted a more detailed appreciation of the relationship between the CoP and the organisation which had been turbulent at times. Background information about each CoP’s host organisation was sourced through internet searches. At the time of the interviews, I also sought to access any
organisational publications such as staff newsletters that might be relevant. All of the material generated, both primary and supplementary, contributed to building up a more composite picture of each of the three CoPs and their practices. Thus, a range of both primary and secondary material was gathered and analysed.

**ANALYSIS—writing—results**

Regarding the analysis of the material generated, it is important to be clear that the interpretation and the meanings that emerged are socially constructed and context specific, in line with the epistemological and ontological nature of the research. In many instances of this form of social research, the fieldwork and the analysis are not distinctly separate phases instead there is a reciprocal relationship where one informs the other. Such is especially the case with research like this which draws on mixed methods (MM). As discussed in the previous section on methodology, the mixing in this research could be defined as Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (1998) Type VII or the model developed by Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) called ‘mixed-model’ because the material was mixed both within, and between, the two different stages. It was the participant selection model of Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design that defined the analysis design. Both quantitative and qualitative material was generated through the Stage 1 survey, the results of which then fed into the Stage 2 interview process. Thus, sequential development occurred over the two stages.

The dimension of analysis and results has been added to Crotty’s (1998) social research framework (epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and method) as a fifth and final category. As a way of including postmodernist thinking about the role that reflexive writing plays in social research, I have incorporated the aspect of writing as an element of this final category, hence analysis—writing—results. Contemporary modes of ethnography offer rich, new opportunities for interdisciplinary experimentation through their exploration of writing genres. These allow the richness of diverse and complex ethnographies to shine through in challenging ways. The three elements of analysis, writing and results do not march in an orderly way across time or space, or even the page. Instead, they are more like a bucketful of worms that thread themselves around each other in tight bundles, making it difficult to tease them apart to perceive individual movement. In such a way, I intertwined the three elements of analysis, writing and results by a process of theorising, conceptualising and studying the literature. As Creswell (2003) put it, thinking moves between ‘data collection and analysis to problem reformulation and back’ (p. 183). While his notion of cycling back and forth was pertinent, I found it more a process of managing, organising, reading, listening, writing, talking, thinking, questioning and puzzling as I dived into, out of, and through the material, seeking patterns or themes, similarities, differences or exceptions or just that *ah ha* moment when a breakthrough
happened. Some threads of CoP life assumed greater significance as I understood more, while others became less significant or merged with other themes. As an example, the early focus on the CoPs’ communication processes became less pivotal over time as it came together with other community activities. Conversely, the CoP/host organisation relationship, and the different roles that members enacted, became more central as the work progressed.

Whereas the Stage 1 survey generated both quantitative and qualitative material, it was primarily web-based, so responses were downloaded and input into a spreadsheet with the workbook containing separate worksheets for each survey question. The details of completed survey received through the post were manually entered. As the survey respondents were asked to nominate the name of their CoP, the material could then be collated into the nine individual CoPs participating in Stage 1. This was quite a complicated process and additional technical assistance was required due to the range of different types of questions. The matrix and the open questions were somewhat tricky to handle in a spreadsheet, especially where respondents provided significant details about their behaviour, their opinions as well as ideas and suggestions. As the survey was for exploratory purposes, detailed descriptive understandings about each community were the result, rather than more sophisticated statistical results. The descriptive survey was designed to maximise information on each CoP rather than being used in a deductive manner, to test hypotheses. Without random selection of participants, I could not generalise to any larger populations. Relatively early in the project, I wrote a short vignette or descriptive profile of each of the nine participating communities.

Ultimately, the survey was a success, despite software breakdowns and low response numbers from two of the nine CoPs. Even though they provided only a small amount of material, basic descriptions could still be constructed. The response rate was more robust in the other seven communities so more perspectives from within the group yielded material that could be analysed and interpreted more meaningfully. A grounded, ethnographic approach allowed opportunities for potentially new areas of interest to emerge through integrating results from the open and closed questions in the survey. This did reveal new lines of inquiry. The final results of the Stage 1 analysis informed the selection of the three CoPs to be invited to progress into Stage 2 in accordance with the participant selection model of Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) Explanatory Design. The Stage 2 material was qualitative and a large amount of text resulted from the 20 interviews. The interview recordings were professionally transcribed and then imported into the Atlas.ti software application (a sophisticated and versatile qualitative analysis tools). Using this software helped to manage and organise the large amount of material available. The transcripts of each of the three communities were separately entered into Atlas.ti and then read over and over to tease out emerging themes. The analysis of these themes developed from the first community’s interview transcripts and enabled an initial code set to be
crafted. The choice of which community would be first was random. The initial code set was further developed through the coding process associated with the second and third CoP’s interview transcripts.

This was highly iterative work as I moved through the material and modifying or revising my ideas. For example, as the interviews progressed and the analysis deepened, an emphasis on member roles and the CoP/host organisation relationship emerged which resulted in the communicative aspects becoming less central for a time. However, the importance of CoP communication again came to the surface in the development of the CoP’s Key Practices Model. To summarise, all the material generated, including the interviews, was thematically analysed. An initial set of descriptive codes began the process which were further consolidated into more interpretative themes and then integrated with relevant literature as the analysis continued.

One of mixed method research’s strengths concerns the integration of the different types of material. This research used Creswell and Plano Clark’s Explanatory Design (2007). In their view, it was ‘the most straightforward of the mixed methods designs ... [as] the researcher conducts the two methods in separate phases and collects only one type of data at a time’ (p. 74). Although their Explanatory Design framework keeps the two sets of material separate, I undertook different levels of integration. The initial mixing concerned material collected from the Stage 1 survey which contained a small number of open-ended questions as well as the usual closed quantitative elements. Some of these additional, exploratory questions pushed the bounds of the kind of information usually sought in a survey but this seemed an appropriate extension for a survey designed as the first step in a major qualitative study. The second level of integration occurred within the final analysis as the survey results have been used to strengthen the increased understandings about CoP practices from the material generated from the interviews, the observations and the secondary material. A further form of integration concerned the participants involved in the Stage 2 interviews. The majority of interviewees were members of one of the three CoPs in Stage 2 but a management representative associated with each CoP was also interviewed. Hence, a little additional mixing of different types of participation occurred. Integrating the different types of material gathered through mixed method research in such a way creates conditions for potentially insightful discoveries to occur, i.e. outcomes can go beyond what their combination might suggest. Clearly though, such integrations are not easy to achieve. ‘Quantitative and qualitative methods provide differing perspectives on a subject and this is why the use of both may be viewed as complementary rather than validatory. The quantitative approach is characteristically indirect and reductive; the qualitative approach is characteristically direct and holistic’ (Woolley 2009, pp. 7, 8).
I have drawn upon a range of writing strategies in conducting this research, with the reasoning for many emanating from my interpretative/constructionist background. I have followed Weick’s (2007) contention about not stripping ‘out most of what matters’ (p. 18) as Geertz’s (1973) richly thick descriptions are present in the highly context-specific quotations from interviewees. Still, it is important to note that while these extracts provide vivid, contextual detail of conversations co-constructed through the Stage 2 interviews, the accepted length of a thesis such as this, acts as a restrain on their ‘thickness’. Even so, what has been included helps to illustrate the everyday world of specific communities and what it means to be a part of that world, i.e. the taken for granted aspects of being a CoP member. These, sometimes rather lengthy textual passages, are identified by the interviewee’s pseudonym. Short, direct quotes are contained in single quotation marks within the text while those longer are shown as block quotations, i.e. set in italics within a separate paragraph. The referencing style used follows the author-date system (the Harvard System) as defined in the 6th Edition of the Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers (formerly known as the Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS) Style Manual), where appropriate. Square brackets are also used intermittently where one or two words have been incorporated into direct quotes to aid the reader’s understanding of the extract.

Specific representation techniques, such as presenting the findings from the Stage 1 survey in several ways, i.e. narrative, tabular and graphic forms have also been utilised. Onwuegbuzie and Dickinson (2008) claimed that graphic exploration and display are underdeveloped by researchers utilising qualitative approaches, including MM research. Responding to their view that ‘the use of visual representations can help researchers take more of a bird’s eye view of research data and findings’ (p. 221), the different stages of this research have been graphically represented throughout this chapter, wherever possible. However, my point is that such representations not only aid the researcher, they also assist the readers of research reports. Similarly, Weick (2007) argued there was a need ‘for detail, for thoroughness, for prototypical narratives, and an argument against formulations that strip out most of what matters’ (p. 18). These are all aims I have aspired to.

My beliefs, biases, values, strengths and weaknesses all combine with my working assumptions about the world as they intertwine throughout the narrative of this research story as it informs, constructs and constricts, limiting and creating both insights and observations. An interest in the positioning of the researcher within the research has flowed through my studies, e.g. my article titled ‘Me, My*self and I’ published online in 2002 provides some reflections of this. Then, as now, I have chosen to write in the first person wherever relevant to acknowledge that I see myself as interwoven through the research, and the story. Although coming from the specific perspective of grounded theory, Charmaz (2003b) wrote ‘I try to pull my readers in so they
might sense and situate the feeling of the speaker in the story’ (p. 280): another literary aim to which I aspire to. Following Greene’s (2008) encouragement, I have used ‘a mixed representational approach’, seeking to ‘intentionally incorporate different forms of writing and displaying inquiry results—including such quantitative forms as graphs, tables, and figures; and such qualitative forms as stories, poems, and performances’ (p. 16).

In concluding this methodological chapter, a discussion of validity, as applied to qualitative research, is important even though reliability, validity and generalisability can be considered notions more aligned to positivist ontological and epistemological research orientations. Interpretative researchers continue to grapple with the question of what is exemplary, or even simply good, qualitative research. In this research, validity deals with the degree that the findings are grounded in the realities constructed by those who participated. Several techniques were drawn upon to promote the research’s validity. Firstly, Geertz’s (1973) thick description was applied in the ways that additional themes emerged from the language and thinking of the participants. For example, as the interviews progressed, it became clear the roles members played were an important element for the research participants. This concern was then reflected in the research. Another validity technique involved internal checks between what was observed and what participants said in the interviews and also between what different participants in the same CoP said. Inconsistencies or surprises were not ignored but instead became part of the analysis.

Bochner framed the issue of validity or truthfulness differently by using the term ‘evaluation’. He replaced the question, ‘How is this ethnography true?’ with ‘How is it useful?’ (Bochner & Ellis 1996, p.22). To me, ‘useful’ seems an appropriate construct to address the issue of whether ethnographic understandings are meaningful and close to the experience of those studied, as well as how such understandings can be critiqued. To gauge the authenticity and usefulness of my work, I have explored the everyday practices of CoPs. Through multiple realities and various voices, I have opened up a window to illuminate these communities as a component of organisational life complete with their inherent social complexity and richness. Contextual detail about these communities, i.e. thick descriptions, allow readers to form their own interpretations and understandings of CoPs for, as explained by Baxter and Jack (2008), enough detail should be included to allow readers to judge how valuable or credible the research is (p. 556). Is my work ‘authentic”? I believe it is. Does it fall within Bochner’s ‘useful’ criteria? Again, I believe so because instead of seeking to provide the one true way of looking at CoPs, or trying to find universally applicable insights about them, the outcomes of this research are suggestive and useful as a means of extending the way we look at these types of communities.
CHAPTER 4: STAGE 1

Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted. ... Albert Einstein 1879-1955

Foreword

In this chapter, the material from the Stage 1 survey is analysed to gain a deeper appreciation of the basic operating environment of each of the nine participating CoPs and their message webs, as seen from their own members’ perspectives. The analysis commences with an outline of the survey’s administration statistics. Next, each CoP is explored in depth through an analysis of their Stage 1 material, in combination with the details of each CoP put together from the recruitment discussions. Finally, the Stage 1 analysis concludes by synthesising these results to build a more detailed picture of what activities or practices the nine CoPs are actually involved in, as well as how, when and why they do these things. Appendix 7 is a copy of the survey.

Preliminary details

The total sample comprised 263 people, i.e. the total members of the nine CoPs as advised by the CoP leaders. Of these, 102 members attempted to respond by completing the survey. Due to a range of complicating factors, only 73 surveys were successfully completed, giving an overall response rate of 27.8% or 73 of 263 people: 63 surveys were web-based while the remaining ten were paper-based. Nine of the ten respondents who used the paper mode were from the Ceremonial Band CoP where the CoP leader administered the survey himself to the members of his CoP members at one of their regular weekly practice sessions. He believed the response rate from the community’s members would be higher if the survey was done in the more traditional paper mode rather than as an online survey. And even though the response rate was quite good from the Ceremonial Band CoP, it is important to acknowledge there may have been some element of coercion because it was introduced and then administered by the CoP leader in comparison to the more neutral online delivery mode. Table 19 shows the details of the nine CoPs and the overall statistical results.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP name</th>
<th>No. of members</th>
<th>No. of completed surveys</th>
<th>Response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceremonial Band</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Mgmt</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Women</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>263</strong></td>
<td><strong>73</strong></td>
<td><strong>27.8%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 19: Preliminary results of the Stage 1 survey

The analysis of the survey material from each of the nine CoPs is presented, followed by a synthesis at the end of the chapter. The Stage 1 survey was constructed on a foundation of mixed methods using what Burke, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, (2004, p. 20) described as a within-stage mixed-model design, i.e. using a survey that included a rating scale (quantitative data collection) and one or more open-ended questions (qualitative data collection). Both the quantitative and qualitative material has been integrated in a descriptive sense within the following analysis. The results were then used to inform the selection of three of the CoPs to move into Stage 2. Thus, a sequential development process was followed in line with Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2007) participant selection model, one of two forms of their Explanatory Design of mixed method social research.

**Catering CoP**

The Catering CoP began in 2003 and by 2008, up to 15 chefs were members. Although these chefs all work within a single government department, they are physically located at a range of different geographical sites across an Australian State. Regular face-to-face meetings are held between three and four times a year when the members get together for the entire day. The CoP is well supported by its sponsor and is seen to be very successful as it has achieved significant budgetary savings for the Department. The survey response rate was a little over 40% with five of the 12 CoP members (all men, aged 40 to 50) successfully completing it. Their relative experience with the practice of catering was established, based on how long they had been in the Department, in their current role and in the CoP. All were quite experienced, averaging more than 18 years in the Department, 11 years in their current jobs and four years as CoP.
members. The respondent with the longest career in the Department commenced work in 1970 while the newest started 30 years later, in 2000. Three had more than ten years experience in their current job and they had all been in the CoP at least three years. Determining the newcomer for the Catering CoP was simple as one man was the newest on all three attributes with seven years in the Department, five in his current role and three in the CoP. Identifying the oldtimer was more difficult as a different person had the most time/experience on each of the three attributes. The man selected as the oldtimer had been a CoP member the longest, in his current job since 1992 and had worked in the Department since 1990. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, the five Catering CoP respondents included an oldtimer (a man in his 50s) and a newcomer (a man in his 40s).

The CoP started in 2003 but the respondents’ estimates varied from 2001 to 2004. Two of the five men (the newcomer and the oldtimer) thought the CoP had been going for longer than it actually had. Respondents also estimated the number of current members, saying there were 12 to 30 members, an average of 20 members. This was two thirds more than the figure of 12 the CoP leader advised. There was not much consistency about the number of new members who joined the community in 2006, with the five responses ranging from one to eight newcomers. All five men identified themselves as being active in the CoP but when asked to estimate the overall proportion of active members, four indicated only 25–50%. Conversely, the newest member claimed that over 75% of members were active.

Considering knowledge-sharing activities, two of the five respondents claimed they developed new ways of doing things every week, while all five said they brainstormed ideas together on a 3–6 monthly basis, which is the frequency of their meetings. Clearly, knowledge sharing activities happened more frequently than just at the regularly scheduled meeting. Two of the men said they share information with others every month including keeping others up-to-date, researching others’ questions and seeking information from others. Four of the five men said they help new members every 3–6 months with the other man saying he helped new members every month. While the apparent lack of new members actually coming into this CoP would impact on how frequently help is provided, it could also indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of community members supporting each other, particularly those less experienced.

Examining why members participate, all respondents itemised benefits that resulted from their participation, e.g. saving money through better purchasing and production practices as well as understanding more about operational issues (and difficulties) and both current and upcoming trends. Visiting different work locations to see what others were doing and also how the catering function fitted into the bigger picture of the Department’s operations were valued but only one man specifically highlighted connecting with others. No patterns emerged around the
newcomer and oldtimer dimension, perhaps due to the small number of responses. Then again, it could indicate a high degree of cohesiveness within the Catering CoP.

In rating the current level of communication within the Catering Community, three of the respondents assessed it as good while the other two rated it as excellent. As the community operates around a regular three monthly meeting process, four of the five (80%) confirmed that the majority of communication occurs within that timeframe. The other person (the oldtimer) said he met others every month. All of the five men said they telephoned each other monthly while three said they send individual emails monthly. In terms of other communication technologies, only the newcomer said he used the group email facility on a monthly basis: others used it far less often. One used instant messaging (IM) every month while two used the Department’s wiki. The oldtimer also used the Department’s intranet to work collaboratively on documents with others. When the amount of time spent communicating with others in the community was considered four said they communicated less than two hours each month on average while the oldtimer spent between two to four hours.

There seemed to be general agreement the health of the community was very good. The five respondents claimed to value being in the community, to respect others’ opinions and to generously share what they knew as well as seeking opportunities to learn from each other. All agreed they benefitted from being a part of the community. While all claimed to welcome new members, only three said that mentoring was undertaken in an enthusiastic manner. Reflecting on the community’s degree of self sustainability, two people indicated the CoP relied on a few to keep it going. It was only the newcomer who said the workload was evenly spread between all members. Although four men said they trusted others in the community, the other man reported some distrust. When asked if they agreed their community was a diverse group of people, three people confirmed it was, but one said no.

Regarding organisational support, the five respondents agreed that the Department provided support. In the optional follow-up question, two provided details of this support, e.g. participation time, use of meeting rooms, catering, travel, accommodation and communications. In return, the Department received benefits, such as reduced expenses, increased efficiency and value for money, higher quality results and satisfied employees. Only one man included the opportunity to network and share information with others as a Departmental benefit. Some optional questions were included at the end of the survey. One which asked what they would like to see changed if more funds suddenly became available attracted comments from two members who wanted more time and resources for standardising operations, e.g. a centralised purchasing and distribution centre to realise economies of scale.
Ceremonial Band CoP

The members of this community are associated with a public organisation and their practice is based on their musical endeavours together. The band itself has a long history (back to 1898) with around 12 members currently in the community. They hold weekly practice meetings and perform together publicly as a band. They are supported by their host organisation through paid participation time. Nine of the 12 men in the Ceremonial Band CoP completed the survey: four were in their 20s or less, three in their 40s and one in both their 50s and 60s or more. The experience levels in this community were quite different to the other eight CoPs as one of the respondents had been involved with the organisation for more than 50 years. On average, each of the nine men had 18 years in the organisation. Because the musical practice that draws them together is situated within a very specific organisational environment and very specific working arrangements, exploring their history in their current role had little bearing on this study. It was useful though to determine the amount of time they had each been members of the CoP for the spread was large. Only two of the nine men had more than four years experience in the community but these two people have been members of the community for a combined 38 years. Thus, they were considered to be the Ceremonial Band CoP’s oldtimers, with one person in his 50s and the other in the 60s and over age bracket. Of the four men with the least CoP experience, two were aged in their 20s or less so they have been considered newcomers.

All nine men claimed to be active although five said there were currently less than seven currently active in the community. Their regular activities included a weekly practice session as well as performing together as a band. The weekly practices involve teaching and mentoring activities with the two oldtimers as well as five others indicating they help newcomers every week. Membership benefits mentioned included being able to develop their own musical skills, pay/equipment, public recognition, new experiences and a sense of enhancing the band. Two of the men also mentioned the social aspects of the CoP: one of the oldtimers listed companionship as a benefit while the other man (one of the two newcomers) said the community provided an opportunity to ‘socialise with good lads’. All agreed that members valued being a part of the CoP, had a sense of belonging while also respecting others’ opinions. New members were welcomed although one man in his 40s, who had only been in the CoP a year, said that members were only somewhat enthusiastic about mentoring new people and also were only somewhat generous with their knowledge. On the other hand, the other eight respondents indicated there was enthusiasm about mentoring other members and that everyone generously shared what they know. Responses varied about the state of the community: four confirmed the community relied on a few to keep it going with six agreeing that conflict was handled constructively. However, only five of the nine respondents indicated it was a diverse community of people with three men (including an oldtimer) identifying some distrust was present. All agreed though that their host organisation supported the community. Seven of the
nine men provided further details listing resources such as equipment, money (pay), training, while others mentioned the opportunities provided to play within a band in a range of public events. In return, they saw the organisation getting many benefits, e.g. a ceremonial band to provide music at designated events which resulted in the continuation of associated traditions and customs. Enhanced recruitment, publicity and favourable community image, increased skills, respect and moral support were also listed as organisational benefits.

Eight of the nine respondents assessed their communication as either good or excellent. They all agreed they met face-to-face every week, but there were variations in how often they telephoned and/or emailed each other. More recent communication technologies were not used, unsurprising in that the nature of their practice was to develop their musical talents by practicing and performing together as a band. In estimating the time they spend communicating with others on a monthly basis, the two oldtimers indicated less than two hours while three others said 15 hours. Three of the respondents had suggestions about improving communication in the future, i.e. regular briefings and a weekly administration period of 10–20 minutes to discuss any desired topics, formal training and also a newsletter/email. One of the newcomers mentioned ‘proper recognition from the bigger community that we belong to’. Five of the nine men also provided ideas in response to the question of how best to spend an increase in funding. Again, additional resources were mentioned, i.e. new uniforms, new instruments, more training, and a more permanent leader with defined positions for members. One oldtimer suggested the other oldtimer (the man in his 60s or over) be rewarded for the voluntarily providing tutoring for over 25 years.

**Facilitation CoP**

This CoP focussed on the practice of facilitation and began in 2005. It was the only community with members from both public and private organisations. At the CoP’s peak, there were approximately 24 members (both men and women) and they originally met over lunch each month. But, two years after it had started, attendance was dropping and activity in the community was slowing down. By 2007, the monthly meetings had been abandoned in favour of meeting bi-monthly. Only a small number of completed surveys were received (4 of 24 members or a 17% response rate). Discussion with the CoP leader revealed that some members had tried to do the online survey but could not complete it, most likely due to the software problems mentioned previously. While this was unfortunate, some material was gathered from four women who successfully completed the survey: one was aged 20 or less, two were in their 40s and one in her 50s. As membership of this community reached across multiple organisations, it was problematic to meaningfully define newcomers and oldtimers based on the responses provided by these four women. There were quite broad differences in the number of
years each had been in their current organisation; the respondent there the longest began in 1990 while the most recent was 2003. The range of time in their current role was between one and six years. Two respondents joined the CoP in 2005 and the other two in 2006. Three of the women had worked in previous roles in the same organisation and these three women identified themselves as founders of the community. The other woman joined the organisation in 2001 and had worked in the same role since then. Estimates of current members and those who joined in 2006 were from 12 to 25 current members and between five to 10 new members.

Three of the four women identified themselves as currently active members, with the youngest member inactive. In estimating the number of currently active members, their responses varied. However, the three active women indicated they shared information every month while also helping new members and researching answers to others’ questions on a 3-6 monthly basis. All four women seek information from others and brainstorm ideas although the frequency ranged between every month and 3–6 monthly, with no weekly activity at all. In describing the benefits, they mentioned sharing and learning from others’ ideas on facilitation practices, their stories, experiences and what works well. Links to research and appropriate references, friendships and helping others were also included as benefits by two respondents. Three of the four women (all founders) rated the CoP’s communication processes as fair, with only one rating them as good. Supporting the majority view that communication was just fair, all four indicated there was not a lot of communication within the CoP, although they agreed they do sometimes get together face-to-face and they also phoned and emailed each other. All four respondents indicated they used the CoP’s group email distribution list, albeit with varying frequency but none used other communication technologies. The three active members said they spent between two and four hours communicating each month while the youngest, and the only inactive, respondent said she spent less than two hours. In reviewing the community and organisational dynamics of this CoP, some insights emerged even though the survey the response rate was low (17%). The four respondents’ perceptions were similar as they reported largely positive indicators on the community’s current state. This was somewhat inconsistent as during the recruitment discussions, the CoP leader had said the community was in a rut.

All four respondents agreed members were generous in sharing their knowledge and sought opportunities to learn while respecting and trusting each other. Responses were more mixed about the benefits of being a member with only one woman agreeing there was a sense of loyalty and belonging. Still, the four respondents said members valued being a part of the community and they were a diverse group of people who welcomed new members. However, it was only the non-founding woman who indicated the CoP was enthusiastic about mentoring these new members. The other three said community members were somewhat enthusiastic about mentoring others. From a personal perspective, the three active women helped new
members only on a 3–6 monthly basis. Interestingly, it was the youngest, and inactive, respondent who agreed that the community tried to find new members while the three older women were less positive, saying it sometimes happened. Two women (including the youngest and inactive respondent) said they received organisational support, such as funds for catering and guest speakers and also a meeting room as well as time to participate. As members potentially belong to different organisations, and even different industry sectors, identifying organisational support for this community was difficult. Sharing information, knowledge and experiences were noted as organisational benefits by all the respondents. Two mentioned being able to take information back to their own organisation so others involved in facilitating could also benefit on a very practical level, i.e. through hints and tips about facilitating. Access to research, interacting with others, skill development and some marketing benefits were also mentioned.

In considering the CoP’s future, two of the women responded to the optional question about ways to improve the CoP’s communication processes. One said while they were happy with the current level of communication, it might be useful to discuss the issue at their next meeting, while the other highlighted the usefulness of the list of member’s phone numbers/emails. The final scenario question asked how the CoP might best spend an unexpected increase in funds. All the women except for the youngest, inactive woman provided ideas. Having a regular venue with whiteboards, space to try out facilitation techniques, ample parking and also lunch were suggested by one of the women. Another mentioned administrative support including a website with an events calendar, meeting notices, member profiles and links to interesting and relevant research articles. Another suggestion was about having a second workshop run by the original facilitators as a way of reflecting on the members’ experiences and practice of facilitating since they began, remembering that the CoP came about through the efforts of a group of people who got together after their participation in such a workshop some years ago. There was another optional space to add anything else they considered was important to know about their community. One woman did so and commented that for communities “to be successful, you need for the right balance between formalising things (e.g. setting meeting times in advance, having interesting things to discuss) and keeping things flexible”. This was an interesting comment in that she was the only non-founder of the four respondents.

**Leadership CoP**

This human resource leadership community formed in 2005 in the same private organisation that sponsored the Supporting Women initiative. Their practice was global leadership issues associated with their multinational organisation. Even though the seven members are scattered across several countries, they have chosen to meet face-to-face every three months for two full
days at one of three primary locations. This CoP was one of the nine participating communities that occupied the middle ground in terms of being defined as a CoP versus a traditional management team.

However, as they saw themselves as a CoP and as they also functioned somewhat like a CoP, they were included within the research. Their community activities were generally self-funded from within their own budgetary responsibilities as a result of their senior roles, but their host organisation provided implicit support. Only two of the seven members successfully completed the survey, a response rate of 29%. So, while the community can be explored a little, the analysis lacks depth. One of the two respondents was a woman in her 40s with the other a man in his 50s. There was quite a large difference in their relative experience with the man starting employment in 1996 and the women more recently in 2005. She had been in her current role since 2005 when she joined the CoP but she not a founder. The man began his current role in 2004 and was a founding member when the community began a year later. The woman was considered to be a newcomer and the man, an oldtimer. When estimating the current members who were founders, they agreed on over 50%. There was a small difference in their estimates of the current number of members: the woman newcomer said seven while the male oldtimer said eight. Differences were also evident when the number of new members in 2006 was considered: the man indicating there were two new members while the woman said that no one new joined in 2006.

They were both active members but did not agree on the overall percentage of active members in the community but they did agreed that community members socialise together every 3–6 months (reflecting their face-to-face meeting pattern) and they also agreed that the only activities done more than every 3–6 months were seeking and sharing information (done monthly by the newcomer but weekly by the oldtimer). Both respondents identified access to information as a benefit of their participation while the woman newcomer also mentioned support as another benefit. Considering the CoP’s communication processes, both respondents rated it ‘good’ and generally agreed about the methods and regularity. Both confirmed they held a videoconference and a face-to-face meeting as well as socialising together every 3–6 months. They also telephone and participate in a phone conference every month. Their use of both individual and group emails varied, with more innovative communication technologies not used at all. Less than two hours a month was spent communicating with others in the community, perhaps indicating that the connections between members of this community are not substantial.

Both respondents agreed on several indicators about the overall wellbeing of the community. Knowledge was generously shared and new members welcomed. Participation was valued and members both trust and respect the opinions of others while the view that the community relied
on a few members to keep it going was contested: the female newcomer said that members were enthusiastic about mentoring new members while the male oldtimer diluted the statement by saying members are somewhat enthusiastic. They agreed the organisation supported the community and mentioned similar organisational benefits. The woman newcomer listed working across geographical barriers, sharing ideas, strengthening future working relationships while the oldtimer also mentioned sharing ideas, avoiding duplication, better communication and he also coupled these aspects to the notion of improving the organisation’s culture. This CoP’s future was also probed in terms of suggestions about improving their communication processes. The newcomer’s idea to increase video and face-to-face communication was the only one offered.

Policy CoP

This community began in 2004. Members work on government policy matters within the same Department although they are spread across different sections. Regular meetings are not the norm as they get together as specific issues emerge. Determining the CoP’s size was difficult but 70 were listed on the community’s email list. The Department was being restructured in 2007 which meant the CoP was effectively on hold. Still, 14 members (six male and eight female, aged in their 30’s to 50’s) completed the survey. In early discussions with the CoP leader, she advised the community was a little ‘top heavy’, with more senior members. The survey confirmed this to some degree, with no respondents in the youngest age bracket (in their 20’s or less) but there was also none in the oldest group (60’s or over). The respondents’ length of employment in the organisation varied but four people identified themselves as CoP founders. Based on their relative experience levels, two were considered oldtimers: a woman in her 40s and a man in his 30s. They were also the only respondents who indicated they were currently still active in the community. Identifying newcomers was more difficult because their comparative experience levels in the Department, their current job and time in the CoP fluctuated. However, three respondents (a woman in her 30s and two men, in their 30s) were newcomers even though, like many of the respondents, they were not currently active.

The survey indicated there was little happening in this community. Eleven of the 14 respondents did not know how many members were active, with many selecting the 3–6 months timeframe regarding their own level of participation. Seven respondents (including both oldtimers and a newcomer) shared information on either a weekly or monthly basis. A few members (including the two oldtimers) were trying to maintain some connections. Considering the benefits the respondents received, there was no lack of ideas which was somewhat paradoxical with such a low level of participation. Perhaps they saw potential benefits but were restrained in realising them. More information and increased discussions resulting in deeper
understandings and stronger connections with others were mentioned as benefits. Three people claimed that time pressures limited their participation in the CoP. Although four people assessed the CoP’s communication levels as good, the remaining ten said it was fair or poor. There was little communication, resulting in minimal interaction between members although one of the oldtimers was the exception in that he phoned and emailed others in the community every week.

The sense that the community was in trouble seemed widespread. Only one person (the younger male newcomer) agreed that members feel a sense of loyalty and belonging although seven (including the two oldtimers) said these interpersonal connections exist somewhat. Conversely, ten indicated they respected others’ opinions with 11 perceiving there was trust in the community although three people (including the female oldtimer) admitted to some distrust. Most (11) said they relied on a few people to keep it going. There were contradictory views expressed about organisational support: six respondents claimed the CoP received no support while eight people indicated the opposite. Of these eight, six provided more details with coordination, funding, time, access to rooms and technology being mentioned. All but one of the 14 respondents stated the CoP did provide benefits to the organisation. Firstly, the community facilitated broader thinking (mentioned by two people including one of the newcomers), increased understanding and different ways of knowing and operating (two people), enhanced sharing of information and collaboration (five people), more committed staff (two people), access to a supportive network (one person) and more professional development (one person). Further organisational benefits included increased capability, closer integration with organisational goals and a more effective organisation. While all these are seen to be positive benefits, one of the oldtimers claimed the benefits to the organisation were variable as participation was near the bottom on the list, in terms of most people’s priorities.

Six of the 14 respondents suggested ways to improve communication in the future: better access to communication technology (including more training) and reinstating regular 4-8 week videoconferences as well as having more opportunities to interact face-to-face. Two people also touched on the drawbacks of trying to participate in the CoP while meeting their work priorities and time commitments. One wrote about a need ‘to legitimise the “space” required to more fully participate. The busyness of activities and urgency of many tasks was often at the expense of time to reflect, share and learn. Organisations need to develop better mechanisms for valuing and supporting CoPs’. The other person wrote, ‘It’s finding the time to participate that’s difficult’. Two respondents took the opportunity to add what they thought was important to know about their community. The oldtimer said that although new technology had been tried, people ‘simply don’t have time to participate ... and that includes taking the time to learn how to use the new technology’. The other comment was made by one of the newcomers, a woman in...
her 30s: ‘membership seems limited probably because there is not broader organisational support or awareness of the CoP’. While these comments are reflections on the past and what they feel has been missing, awareness is the first step in any change initiative in creating a future that is different. The final question about the unexpected availability of additional funds to support the CoP attracted 12 responses: increased participation time with more face-to-face meetings, e.g. forums, functions, conferences and seminars were suggested as well as more training and education, internally and externally. The need to break down barriers between those in different policy roles in the organisation and between head office and regional staff was highlighted with one of the newcomers suggesting all staff involved in policy development (and particularly those remotely located) should be told about the CoP by their managers and encouraged to join. She also emphasised the need for new staff to be approached and for funding/time for mentoring.

**Project Mgmt CoP**

This public sector community was nurtured within the same Department as the Facilitation CoP with almost 60 members involved in project management across a range of different government departments. They have held lunchtime meetings monthly since 2004 when the community first began. Activity seemed robust although the founding, and still current, CoP leader indicated she would like the CoP to move away from its on-going reliance on her. Eight women and two men of this community completed the survey (17% response rate) and most age groups were represented, with 80% aged 40–60 years. Two had been employed for more than 20 years while the other eight people had no more than five years experience. The time they had worked in their current role covered 12 years to less than one year. Most were comparatively new members. Determining newcomers and oldtimers was difficult as the relationships between the three dimensions, i.e. organisation, role and community, were unclear. The longest member of the CoP had been in the organisation for only five years with two years experience in her current role. She was the only respondent who identified herself as a CoP founder, and has been designated as an oldtimer. Another respondent presented as an interesting contradiction around the oldtimer/newcomer notion because although she had 19 years experience in the organisation and 10 years in her current role, she was also the newest member of the community. From 20 to 60 members (average of 37) was the estimated number of CoP members although the CoP leader had said 58.

Eight of the ten respondents identified themselves as currently active but there was little consistency in the respondent’s estimates of the percentage of currently active members. The main activity reported was sharing information and also socialising together, with 60% doing so every month. Six respondents indicated they engaged with others in brainstorming ideas,
generally on the longer time frame of 3–6 months although two people (including the oldtimer) said every month. Seven reported they developed new change initiatives but again, mostly on a 3–6 monthly basis. Only one respondent (the oldtimer) was active on a weekly basis, e.g. researching answers to others’ questions and sharing information around. She also helped newcomers every week. The other nine indicated a different behaviour pattern about mentoring newcomers. Five people disclosed they never helped new members themselves while four did, but only on a 3–6 months basis. However, nine agreed the CoP did welcome newcomers.

So, the general perception was that the community welcomed new members, even though individual respondents said they personally did so only rarely, if at all. Nine respondents also indicated they share what they know while all ten claimed they seek to learn from each other and that there is trust within the CoP. Seven noted that the CoP relied on a few to keep it going and the other three people agreed somewhat with this statement: a situation that could impact on the community’s future sustainability.

Details of the benefits they received from participating in the CoP were provided by nine respondents, with the other person saying there were nil benefits, other than ‘meeting the same lovely faces on a monthly basis’. Personal benefits identified were associated with information exchange (listening and learning from others, sharing information, experiences, thoughts, ideas, developments, lessons) and discussions resulting in increased awareness about similar issues, the latest trends and alternative approaches. Interpersonal connections were mentioned several times, e.g. bringing people together, networking with colleagues, developing relationships, meeting people and making new contacts. The oldtimer also appreciated the opportunity to help people while for another woman, having time out of her day to reflect was beneficial. Benefits to the organisation included knowledge sharing, learning from each other, generating new ideas through to outcomes such as better and wider knowledge, broader ideas, new practices, time and money saved and better alternatives with decision making. Four respondents also focused specifically on social interactions by identifying increased connections, contacts, networking and personal development as organisational benefits.

Seven respondents assessed the CoP’s communication overall as good, one said excellent while two rated it as fair only. Eight said they met face-to-face every month, one person every 3–6 months and the other person said it was not possible to get together with other members. Regarding time spent on CoP activities, it was less than two hours a month for seven people while two others spent between two and four hours. It was likely the CoP leader who disclosed spending between five to nine hours every month. Communication between members using different technologies (ICTs) was quite varied, as shown in Table 20.
Table 20: Communication processes and their use in the Project Mgmt CoP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of ICT</th>
<th>Weekly or monthly</th>
<th>Every 3–6 months</th>
<th>Never or not possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephoning others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending individual emails</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a group email distribution list</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing/editing/sharing documents on the org. intranet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with others via the community's blog/s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing to the community's online discussion forum/s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatting online using the community's chat room/s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrasting views were also expressed regarding organisational support for the CoP. Five of the ten respondents said there was no support while the other five (including the oldtimer) claimed the opposite. However, this contrast could be explained by the fact that the members of this CoP work in different public sector organisations. Some details of support provided included accommodation for meetings, use of technology and time to participate in the community. Sharing knowledge, learning from each other, generating new ideas through to outcomes such as better and wider knowledge, broader ideas, new practices, time and money saved and even better alternatives with decision making were all mentioned as organisational benefits. Four respondents also focused specifically on social interactions by identifying increased connections, contacts, networking and personal development as organisational benefits.

Three people (including the oldtimer) had ideas about improving the CoP’s communication. Two respondents, including the oldtimer, were dissatisfied with the electronic forum currently in use and suggested it should be replaced while another person highlighted the pressure of insufficient time. A teleconference before each monthly meeting was also suggested to generate interest by discussing possible topics and reminding everyone about the meeting. Another idea was to have an email or SMS reminder sent before each meeting. Two respondents also took the opportunity to share what they thought was important to know about the community. One reflected on the CoP’s processes and focussed on how it fitted into the bigger picture. ‘I don’t think it is on any manager’s radar screen. I am not sure whether the organisation recognises the value … if it wasn’t for a core group of advocates, it probably won’t survive’. Another comment came from one of the two men who completed the survey and he said that ‘the CoP seems to be disproportionately represented by females among the active members’ and that he found ‘it a very open and welcoming environment’. The final scenario question opened up a space for respondents to speculate how increased financial support might be best used. Five respondents suggested guest speakers. More administrative support, having an awareness program to promote the CoP, access to better technology, more time to participate and even a mentoring scheme were all suggested.
Research CoP

This community comprises social scientists working in a large public organisation with operations spread across several Australian States and their practice is research into the social aspects of organisational life. They are in the minority of a strong ‘hard science’ research environment, originally getting together as a group in 2004, in part to combat this marginality. The CoP is a subset of a larger discipline-specific research forum, called the Portal. Being geographically dispersed, meeting face-to-face is difficult but they have tried different communication mechanisms to reduce this isolation. They organised an annual two-day workshop in the first couple of years, currently hold three-way video conferences and work collaboratively online using MS SharePoint® (referred to as SharePoint in this text). In the recruitment phase, the CoP leader advised there were about 60–80 members on their email list, including several people external to the organisation. The CoP fluctuates between periods of activity and dormancy although the small core of 10 active members has been dwindling. The CoP leader expressed disillusionment that much of the responsibility for the community’s continued existence rested with him.

The survey was successfully completed by 18 respondents (12 women and six men). Most were in their 30s (eight of the 18 people). Looking at the age and gender mix, there were more women in each of the age groups and there were no men in the youngest age group (in their 20s or less). As with the other CoPs, the respondents’ relative experience levels associated with their practice were determined by analysing time in the organisation, the job and the community. Overall, the 18 respondents had many years of experience within the organisation, with 11 employed before the year 2000 but there were only three who had begun in their current role before 2005. Regarding time participating in the community, there were broad variations which presented a quandary in exploring patterns of relative levels of experience, i.e. newcomers and oldtimers. The youngest recruits into the organisation were two women in their 20s or below and they were considered newcomers for this analysis. Two oldtimers were also determined: one a man in his 30s who identified himself as the CoP leader and a founder on the survey while the other oldtimer was a man in his 50s with significant levels of experience.

There were variations in what the respondents knew about their community, e.g. estimates of the number of members differed while 12 of the 18 respondents were unsure of the percentage of founders in the community. Seven people, including both the oldtimers and one of the newcomers, indicated they were currently active members but there were also 15 people who claimed that less than 25% of the community were active. However, eight respondents reported they were currently active, on either a weekly or monthly basis: sharing and seeking information, researching answers to others’ questions and brainstorming ideas. The CoP
leader/oldtimer helped new members every month, six others claimed to provide assistance on a 3–6 monthly basis while the remaining 11 people said they never helped newcomers. When generating new ideas is considered, five people (including one of the newcomers) indicated they brainstorm together at least every month but when it came to putting these new ideas into practice, no-one said they developed new ways of doing things, on either a weekly or monthly basis. It was not surprising that differences emerged in terms of members socialising together as this CoP covers three different states. The woman newcomer indicated she socialised with other members every week, four others (including the other newcomer) said every month and nine (including the two oldtimers) picked the 3–6 month timeframe. Four respondents did not socialise at all. This is noteworthy in that 11 of the 18 respondents had stated they did not consider themselves to be currently active members.

The membership benefits mentioned included access to information, expertise and others’ research. Opportunities to interact with others was also perceived as beneficial with comments around networks and more generally having access to others, while one person talked of ‘avoidance of isolation in the workplace’. Another person mentioned the phrase ‘fellow travellers’. Advantages such as interpersonal support, assistance, contacts, connectedness, peer review and collaboration were also highlighted. One person mentioned being more of a ‘grazer’ than a ‘seeder’ and it appeared that most of the others were also ‘grazers’. Access to a range of resources was certainly appreciated but there did not seem to be a sense (or any recognition) of the altruistic benefits of giving back to the community, perhaps by helping others. The oldtimer/CoP leader was somewhat of an exception as he said he gained satisfaction from supporting the community while also seeing it as an opportunity to develop his management and leadership skills.

Many respondents (13) claimed the CoP welcomed new members. However, only two people assessed their community as enthusiastically mentoring them with six indicating there was no enthusiasm about mentoring. One person said that members limit sharing their knowledge while another four (including the oldtimer in his 50s) indicated it sometimes happened like that. Thus, 13 of the 18 respondents agreed that community members do share. Another question aimed to check this point by examining how generous members were in sharing what they know and three people believed members were not generous with their knowledge. There were mixed feelings about the strength of the connections between members, particularly for newcomers. There were further issues concerning members’ interpersonal relationships. Although 11 agreed that members respected each others’ opinions overall, one person disagreed and six qualified the statement to ‘somewhat’.

In terms of trust, 15 claimed there was no distrust but again, three said otherwise. Other
negative undercurrents surfaced with only five people believing membership was valued while
12 people agreed ‘somewhat’. Only one person agreed members felt a sense of loyalty and
belonging while four claimed the opposite. Half of the respondents agreed that members seek
opportunities to learn from others. In a less positive result, 15 people also agreed the
community relied on a few to keep it going. Overall, it appeared that some respondents were
disenchanted with the community while the remainder saw both positive and negative aspects.
This picture holds for views about handling conflict. Only three said that members handle
conflict in a constructive way with another 12 (including the oldtimer in his 50s) claiming that
conflict was handled somewhat constructively. The other two disagreed and stated that conflict
was not handled at all well. Perhaps this situation could be linked to the challenges that
diversity brings because 11 people (including both the oldtimers and the two newcomers)
agreed members were a diverse group of people.

The CoP/host organisation relationship looked more positive in that 15 respondents agreed
some resources were provided although the active newcomer was one of three who disagreed,
possibly pointing toward a need for more attention to socialise newcomers. There were 13
respondents who gave details of the support the organisation provided. Nine respondents
mentioned the funding provided through the Portal although six then went on to highlight it was
quite limited. Four people said participation time was provided while five acknowledged the
availability of ICTs. An improved flow of information with knowledge and expertise spread
across the organisation was listed as organisational benefits. Half of the 18 respondents
(including the two oldtimers and the inactive newcomers) framed their comments about the
ways in which the community challenges the isolation imposed by structural barriers, such as
organisational stovepipes/silos. The potential for greater creativity, better decision making and
closer alignment with the organisation’s value of evidence-based excellence was also
mentioned. In the midst of these positive outcomes, there was one dissenting voice raised when
a person said that the organisation received no benefits because the community was
dysfunctional.

Regarding the CoP’s communication processes, emails, meeting face-to-face and telephoning
were the three most commonly used methods with almost half of the respondents indicating
they did so, either on a weekly or monthly basis. A similar number indicated they had phone
conferences, used the group email distribution list and had collaborated online (SharePoint), but
only on the 3–6 monthly timeframe. The CoP leader/oldtimer commented that an ‘online
discussion forum was used at the start but subsequently fizzled out’. Even so, some respondents
claimed they contributed to the CoP’s online discussion forum/s on a 3–6 monthly basis,
perhaps reflecting the CoP leader’s note that some discussions occasionally occurred via email.
More up-to-date ICT was not used. Regarding the CoP’s team building activities, including
socialising, one of the two youngest members indicated it happened weekly, another person said monthly, seven said 3–6 months while another seven people (including the two oldtimers) claimed it did not happen at all. Thus, there were different views and/or experiences concerning the CoP’s operations on an informal level and it may be further evidence of the difficulties members experience as a result of working in different geographical locations. Time spent communicating with others also varied. Two-thirds of the respondents (12 people) rated the CoP’s communication overall as poor to fair with the remaining six claiming it was good, although they were all currently inactive.

In considering the future and ways to improve the CoP’s communication processes, eight respondents made suggestions. These included a regular email giving updates on what is happening and pushing information to members as a reminder and more meetings. One person suggested subgroups in each State as she felt ‘isolated … and would love to work with somebody on a project or meet regularly to discuss local or organisation-wide issues’. The scenario seeking ways to spend an unexpected increase in funds attracted 15 responses. The theme repeated most often referred to increasing options for all members to meet face-to-face. Detailed suggestions about increasing the amount and regularity of the CoP meetings were provided such as funding travel with a couple of people mentioning the importance of all members attending: one person even stipulated the meetings should not be exclusively for those in a single city and that such types of meetings should be actively discouraged. More socialising activities were mentioned while others wanted to be able to ‘book’ their participation time. One wrote, ‘It’s not about money but time’. More administrative and IT support were also suggested as was the idea to appoint someone senior. Perhaps the respondent was thinking about a high level sponsor for the CoP. Three people touched on the idea of formal and public recognition, acknowledgment of effective participation and making use of their successes to market the community internally.

**Supporting Women CoP**

This community formed in 2006 when several women working together at a senior level decided to develop an organisation-wide initiative to actively mentor other women. Some financial support was received from their host organisation. The organising group comprised eight women who continue to promote, guide and manage the initiative. Three of these women successfully completed the survey. So, while the concept of newcomers and oldtimers had less relevance due to the limited number of survey responses, an elementary picture of this CoP was able to be constructed. None of the three women commenced employment in the organisation prior to 2002 but two said they were part of the founding group. All three women were currently active but they disagreed with each other when estimating the percentage of currently
active members in the community. One of the women was active on a weekly basis, seeking and sharing information, helping new members and socialising with others in the community. She brainstormed ideas weekly but developed new ways of doing things on a monthly basis. The younger woman participated more on a monthly timeframe with the third respondent’s involvement centred in the 3–6 monthly timeframe. All three women indicated that they received benefits from being in the community, e.g. meeting and networking with other senior women from other areas in the organisation. Helping other women grow and develop was also mentioned while the subsequent feelings of satisfaction and gratification were clearly perceived to be of great benefit. The idea that being involved could be a good career move was also evident when the younger woman pointed out that by being an active member, her profile within the organisation increased.

Considering the current state of the CoP, most of the indicators were positive with all three agreeing members were generous with sharing what they know. They all indicated they helped new members although the timeframes varied, from weekly to 3–6 monthly. They also said that overall, the community was welcoming to newcomers but only two agreed the community was enthusiastic about mentoring them while the other woman said somewhat. Members respected each other although the youngest woman thought there was some distrust. There were mixed responses about whether the community relied on a few to keep it going. On the other hand, there was no ambiguity about whether the organisation supported the community with the three women affirming it did and giving the following examples: provision of funds, accommodation and speakers. The women identified several organisational benefits, e.g. increasing women’s confidence and skills, higher engagement from women and a higher percentage of women in senior roles as well as improved employee satisfaction. Their communication processes were rated between good and excellent by the women and two indicated they meet face-to-face every month while the youngest said every 3–6 months. In terms of communication technologies, email and the telephone were used, at least once a month but none of the more recent ICTs were used. There were no suggestions offered about ways the community’s communication might be improved although all three had ideas about how to best utilise an unexpected increase in funding. The following possibilities were mentioned: more administrative support for the community, more mentoring/coaching programmes for women, more and different kinds of networking initiatives and more of a mix of internal and external activities and speakers.

**Training CoP**

The Training CoP began in 2002 as a consequence of a major change initiative to decentralise the training function in a large corporation. To combat the ensuing isolation, several trainers formed a small voluntary group, aiming to develop a network to maintain some links. The
resulting Training Network still operates successfully and it is predominately the original group of volunteers (of up to 12 trainers) who are its organising committee. For the purposes of this research, the Training CoP is this organising committee, even though identifying them as a CoP was problematic, as was also considering them to be a group distinct from the Training Network. It was similarly complex to define their practice but they operated like a CoP whose practice was the training function. Originally, they hid themselves (and the Network) underground as the organisational environment was hostile toward them, whereas at the time of the fieldwork, the CoP/host relationship was changing and they were once again valued by the organisation.

Eight of the 12 people in the Training CoP (six women and two men) completed the survey. The two men were the oldest (in their 50s) while five of the women were in their 30s and 40s. All the respondents had extensive organisational experience with the two newest recruits still having ten years with the company. These two have both been considered newcomers for this research’s purposes and they began their current job in 2006. Seven of the respondents were founding members and currently active in the community but three had more than 16 years in the organisation so for the purposes of this study, these three people (one woman and two men) have been regarded as oldtimers in the Training CoP. Only one of the eight respondents (a newcomer) revealed she was not active but opinions differed between the others about the number of active members. They shared information and responded to others’ questions. Six respondents said they brainstormed ideas together every month but they only developed new ways of doing things on a 3–6 monthly timeframe. Four people said they helped new members only every 3–6 months. However, new members who might welcome a little help seem quite rare in this CoP. All eight indicated increased access to knowledge as a benefit while the seven active respondents also highlighted the benefits flowing from the interpersonal relationships with others, including social networks. Four people mentioned a sense of community, camaraderie, friendships and sharing as benefits while five appreciated the availability of help and assistance from others. Words such as inspiration, feedback, ideas, support and empathy were used. The active newcomer said the community presented a chance for her to have some influence. The eight respondents had little difficulty in articulating the advantages they received from their membership of this CoP.

Respondents’ reports were that the CoP was healthy. All valued being part of the community and said that members respected others’ opinions. Conflict was handled constructively with none reluctant to share what they know, though three people said there was some distrust. Opinions were mixed about whether the community relied on a few to keep it going: four people agreed while the other four said somewhat. Similarly, four respondents confirmed the community tried to find new members with the others saying somewhat. All reported the
community welcomed new members, with only one not agreeing that members were enthusiastic about mentoring these new members. All but one respondent said the community was a diverse group and they all agreed that the organisation provided support, e.g. participation time and access to appropriate communication technology such as teleconferencing and an intranet site. Two respondents mentioned the hostile organisational culture and commented that while their individual managers supported the CoP, the organisation was more ambiguous. One person even claimed minimal support was provided.

Some of the tension between the organisation, the community and the decentralised training function seemed to have receded with time, but there was still some unease evident, particularly when respondents considered how the organisation benefits from the community. All eight respondents, except for the non-active newcomer, said there was less isolation. Filling communication gaps, being kept in the loop, keeping people in touch and a de facto training centre were all mentioned positively. Some consequences of reduced isolation were listed, e.g. time is saved as less rework is needed and there is less chance of ‘reinventing the wheel’. Increased personal interactions, sharing information and specifically being aware that help is available (and how to access it) were also noted as organisational benefits.

However, while four people rated the CoP’s current communication processes as excellent and the three oldtimers said it was currently good, there was one person who saw it as poor. Phoning and sending emails to others were the most popular communication technologies used on a weekly basis. The group email function was used less regularly with face-to-face meetings occurring on a random basis. The two newcomers indicated they did not meet face-to-face with others. While this was not surprising in the inactive woman’s case, the other woman newcomer indicated it was not possible for her to meet up, perhaps due to working away from the city. She also missed out with team building activities such as socialising with other members and again she said it was not currently possible. All but these two newcomers socialised with others, with varying regularity, perhaps pointing to a deeper issue regarding newcomers.

If those joining the community face participation barriers, their successful integration is potentially at risk. Newcomers have the potential to bring new ways of thinking and are thus particularly important in challenging the traditions of a highly cohesive and on-going community, particularly if there are any tendencies towards groupthink. New members are also essential in terms of the CoP’s future sustainability. There were variations about writing collaboratively; however, they all participate in a monthly phone conference. Newer communication technologies such as wikis, blogs, chat rooms and instant messaging (IM) were not used. The amount of time that each respondent spent communicating each month varied between two and 10–15 hours.
In considering the future, more ICTs, (a training wiki and an online forum) were mentioned as ways to improve their communication processes. Seven of the eight respondents provided suggestions about how to use an unexpected increase in funds. Dedicated administration support (ranging from two people full time to a part time position) to manage their website, member lists, organise meetings and to liaise with the network members was proposed by three people. Formal recognition and increased training/personal development opportunities were also mentioned. A proviso was noted that financial support should not comprise the CoP’s independence. In considering if there was anything else it was important to know about their community, four people responded. One person referred to the CoPs autonomous nature saying it was not ‘weighed down by formal structure’, making it relaxed and flexible. Another affirmed the reason for its success was the small number of members while two others focussed on interpersonal aspects: one said, ‘we are all friends and that was a crucial part in their success’ while the other highlighted the close personal links between the members while warning that this has ‘made it a bit difficult to avoid being a clique and being fully open to new members’.

Summary of the Stage 1 survey

The findings for each of the nine CoPs participating in this research are now drawn together to provide a more comprehensive picture. Aspects of membership, including newcomers and oldtimers, as well as their activities, benefits and communication processes are considered. Features of the community, as revealed by the survey analysis, are explored next, followed by the organisational context. Finally, the ways the different CoPs saw their community’s future have been considered.

Features of CoP membership

Summarising the features of the nine CoPs provides an overview of the basic demographics of the 73 survey respondents (42 women and 31 men). These responses represent a range of 17% to 75% of the total membership of their individual communities. The ages of these 73 individuals were unevenly spread across the five ages groupings with the majority in the 40s age group (25 of the 73 respondents or 34%), followed by 20 people in their 50s (27%) and then 18 in their 30s (25%). Thus the respondents were clustered primarily in the 40s and 50s age groups, i.e. 45 of the 73 or 62%. It is important to reiterate though that the following analysis was based on material provided by the survey respondents so it is incomplete in terms of constructing a picture of the individual communities. Still, it does provide some useful indications. This tendency towards older members was reflected when the respondents’ relative years of experience in both their current organisation and current role were taken into account. The commencement dates of the 13 respondents defined as oldtimers in their relative
organisations ranged from 1984 to 2002 although a member of the Ceremonial Band community (the only respondent in the 60s or older category) identified his involvement as beginning in 1948. The respondents’ employment history, including both the number of years within their organisation and their role-related experience (as determined at the time of the survey), was averaged with the aim of seeing if there were any comparative patterns between age and organisational/role experience within the CoPs being studied. However, this was only possible for six of the nine CoPs participating due to the small response rates from the Facilitation, Leadership and Supporting Women CoPs.

Accordingly, the focus of the following analysis centres on the 64 responses from six communities: the Catering, Ceremonial Band, Policy, Project Mgmt, Research and Training CoPs. The average years of experience in each of these six communities ranged between five years (Policy CoP) through to 18 years in the Catering CoP (the five Catering CoP respondents were in their 40s and 50s). The majority of respondents (around 64%) from both the Policy and the Training CoPs were also within this 40s and 50s age bracket but their average years of organisational/role experience were quite different (five years in the Policy community and 14 years in the Training CoP). This was somewhat unexpected in that traditionally public servants are assumed to have longer careers in the same organisation compared to the more mobile careers associated with contemporary corporate life.

It also became clear across these six CoPs that the number of younger respondents was quite low with only 8 of the 64 respondents being 20 or younger. These younger people were members of the following CoPs: four in the Ceremonial Band CoP, one in the Project Mgmt CoP, two in the Research CoP and one in the Training CoP. Although the age of CoP members provided some indications about relative levels of experience, it is important to challenge the perception that new members are generally younger people with little experience. This was certainly the view underlining Wenger and associates’ earlier years of writing about CoPs and legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). It is now understood that an incoming member will not necessarily be a newcomer to the community’s practice, i.e. a situation could arise where an individual with extensive job-related experience is recruited into an organisation or into a specific role and subsequently joins a CoP. Although a newcomer to that community, their participation would not be peripheral because of the extent of their practice-related expertise.

This notion that participation of new members is often perceived as peripheral (LPP) because they are generally young, and relatively inexperienced, is explored in the context of the communities participating in this research. The analysis around new and/or young members has been extended based on the survey responses in regard to five of these CoPs, i.e. the Catering, Policy, Project Mgmt, Research and Training CoPs. The Ceremonial Band was the sixth but
was not included in this more detailed analysis due to its long history as a community which would have skewed the time-based calculations. While there were 19 respondents from the five CoPs who had been members of their relative communities for less than two years, only three were aged in their 20s or less (one in the Project Mgmt, Research and Training CoPs). The majority (11 of the 19 or 58%) were actually in the 40s and 50s age group. Thus, in these five CoPs, new members were not necessarily younger people and it was quite likely they could be in 40s and 50s age groups.

Summarising what members of the nine CoPs actually knew about their community, the overall sense was that the survey respondents were rather vague about elementary aspects. Responses concerning such things as when the CoP commenced varied, although it is understandable that as time passes, and with the resulting turnover of the members, particularly founding members, it can become increasingly difficult to precisely tie down the CoP’s starting point.

What was more surprising was that the respondents appeared to know little about other members of their community. Responses to questions seeking the number of founding members still active in the CoP and even simply the actual number of members in the community were often inconsistent. Although this lack of connection with other CoP members can be explained in cases where the activity level in a community was not high, it was more inexplicable in active CoPs. Regarding member activity, all the respondents from the Catering, Supporting Women, Leadership and Ceremonial Band were currently active while in the Facilitation, Project Mgmt and the Training CoPs, more than 75% were active. Conversely, both the Policy and Research communities registered less than 50% active members. Variations emerged across the nine CoPs concerning the frequency of respondents’ participation. Table 21 indicates the timeframe of activity for each community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of activities</th>
<th>CoP name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3–6 months</td>
<td>Catering, Leadership, Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Facilitation, Project Mgmt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Ceremonial Band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Supporting Women, Research, Training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 21: Activity timeframe for each of the nine participating CoPs*

The main activity of the nine communities was seeking and sharing knowledge. Because the quantity of material received from the Supporting Women, Facilitation and Leadership CoPs was limited, once again the remainder of this analysis of member activities focused on the other six communities: Catering, Ceremonial Band, Policy, Project Mgmt, Research and Training. In
all six there was a range of activities including helping newcomers but respondents from the Project Mgmt, Research and Training CoPs had rather mixed views about helping new members. The relative levels of generating new ideas in the six CoPs were also compared, both in the quantity and frequency of brainstorming activities as well as the ways they translated ideas into action. These activities occurred regularly during their regular get-togethers, with some exceptions. While the brainstorming activities in the Catering CoP were linked into their three monthly meeting cycle, some members were generating new initiatives more often, even on a weekly basis. Conversely, while many of the Research CoP members claimed they brainstormed ideas together, almost half of them said they never developed new ways of doing things. So, this aspect of the functioning of CoPs presents a lead for further exploration.

Some interesting contradictions became evident when the overall state of activity of each CoP was compared with the amount of socialising based on the view provided by the survey respondents. Even though all respondents were active in both the Catering and Training communities, there was one member in each who never socialised while in the Project Mgmt community, two were inactive but three did not socialise at all. On the other hand, even though a large proportion of respondents were inactive in both the Research and the Policy CoPs, the number who indicated they never socialised was less. So, while being active in the community and socialising seem to mostly occur together, there were exceptions. Of course, differences in interpreting just what socialising means could explain these results. There were two main kinds of outcomes or benefits flowing to members from their community activities: more knowledge and increased connections with others, i.e. friendships, empathy and support. In terms of these interpersonal connections, helping others was also mentioned by respondents from the Supporting Women, Project Mgmt and Research CoPs.

**Communication processes**

Respondents’ self-assessment of their community’s current level of communication revealed differences relevant to broader aspects of their functioning. The communities that were relatively inactive, such as the Policy and the Facilitation CoPs, were self rated towards the lower end of the scale, i.e. poor to fair. The Project Mgmt CoP’s communication was mostly good while the two people responding as members of the Leadership CoP said their communication was also good. Of the remaining five CoPs, the Catering, Ceremonial Band and Supporting Women communities rated their communication processes as a mix of good to excellent. Interestingly though, the other two CoPs, i.e. Training and Research, had a real mix of responses about communication. While there were several respondents from the Research CoP who rated the communication as good, further examination revealed they were currently inactive members. In the main, communication was seen as fair to poor in this community.
Although the Training CoP responses varied over the whole range, it was only the inactive newcomer who said communication was poor, with the others in the community claiming it was good to excellent.

Face-to-face meetings were held regularly every three or four months by the Catering CoP, every month by the Project Mgmt community while the Ceremonial Band met weekly for practice sessions. The Supporting Women CoP members met on a less regular basis as did the Training CoP although they held regular monthly teleconferences due to their dispersed work locations. Different geographical locations also restricted face-to-face meetings for the Research CoP who relied more on video conferences, albeit meeting in person when possible. The Leadership CoP relied on virtual communication to some extent but they were also able to meet face-to-face on a three to six monthly basis. Again, it was the two relatively dormant communities (Facilitation and Policy) who did not meet face-to-face although the Facilitation CoP was trying to maintain semi-regular meetings. All of the nine CoPs used a mixture of telephone and email to keep in touch with few using more recent technologies, such as instant messaging or SMS. While online collaborative applications were available to some of the communities, e.g. the Research CoP’s access to SharePoint, their use of it was minimal.

**Features of the communities’ activity**

When comparing the overall level of functioning of the nine communities, quite a broad spectrum of differences emerged. Both the Catering and Training CoPs seemed to be very productive in the way that they operated with another two (the Ceremonial Band and Project Mgmt) functioning reasonably well. Conversely, the Policy CoP came across as being close to dormant while responses from the Research community on this point were mixed. The current state of the remaining three communities, Supporting Women, Facilitators and Leadership was unclear due to the low response rate. Overall, these results tended to confirm the views that each of the CoP leaders had about their own communities. Specific indicators such as trust within the communities revealed a different picture. The trend was for high levels of trust across the nine CoPs even though there were some intriguing exceptions. A few respondents from the Research, Training and the Ceremonial Band CoPs said there was some distrust and this included oldtimers from each of the three communities. It was rather surprising as well that there were high levels of trust in the Policy CoP even though it was the one that seemed the least active.

Trends could also be determined using indicators such as respect for others’ opinions, the degree of generosity in sharing knowledge and the general openness to learning from others. The views from more than half of the communities were positive but some contrary indications...
emerged in the Ceremonial Band, Policy and Research communities. Differences also emerged between the communities when the sense of belongingness, loyalty and perceived value of being a member were considered. The Catering, Ceremonial Band, Project Mgmt and the Training CoPs all reported positively, both the Facilitation and the Research CoPs had significant variations in their member’s responses and the Policy CoP was rated quite poor. No trends were obvious on these indicators in the Supporting Women and Leadership communities.

When the composition of each community was considered in terms of the degree of diversity within their membership body, at least one person in four of the CoPs (Catering, Ceremonial Band, Policy and Training) said there was no diversity at all in their community. It was only in the Facilitation CoP that all agreed that members were a diverse group of people. All the other CoPs fluctuated between agreeing there was diversity or at least some diversity. In considering how new members are treated, six of the CoPs were mostly unanimous in agreeing that they welcomed newcomers while the remaining three communities, i.e. Policy, Project Mgmt and Research were ambiguous. Overall, the tendency was to welcome newcomers. As to whether this welcome was translated into enthusiasm about mentoring these new members was not such a positive story. The majority of members in both the Policy and the Research CoP claimed there was little enthusiasm for mentoring while the other communities indicated mixed responses. It appeared none of the communities had a strong commitment to actively guiding and nurturing those who came into their midst as new members. Finally, comparing the CoPs’ overall degree of dependence on a few to sustain the group, the two respondents from the Leadership CoP both said they did not rely on a few people to keep the community going. One person in each of the Catering and Supporting Women CoPs also said that but all of the others admitted that the task of maintaining the community rested on the shoulders of a few, either completely or at least somewhat. This finding provides another pointer to an area of enquiry for future CoP researchers.

Because of the breadth of this investigation into different aspects of community dynamics and the number of communities involved, the foregoing discussion is rather dense and complicated. To assist the analysis, notes of each community’s features have been distilled to provide a comparative picture (Table 22 below). Question marks appear twice in the table in the area of belongingness and they indicate there was insufficient material available to make a judgment on that point for the two relevant communities.
CoP name | Trust etc | Respect etc | Feeling of Belonging | Diversity | Welcome new members | Mentor new people | Rely on a few |
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
Catering | Some distrust | Mixed | Positive | Mostly yes, but 1 no | Yes | Mixed | Mixed |
Ceremonial Band | Some distrust | Mixed | Positive | Mostly yes, but 1 no | Yes | Mixed | Mixed |
Facilitation | High | Good | Mixed | Yes | Yes | Mixed | Mixed |
Leadership | High | Good | ? | Some | Yes | Mixed | No |
Policy | Good | Mixed | Poor | Mostly yes, but 1 no | Some | No | Mixed |
Project Mgmt: Research | Good | Good | Positive | Mixed | Some | Mixed | Mixed |
Supporting Women | Some distrust | Mixed | Mixed | Some | Mixed | Little to none | Yes |
Training | Some distrust | Good | Positive | Some | Yes | Mostly | Mixed |

Table 22: Summarised details of the CoPs’ features

Organisational context

Regarding the ways their relative host organisations support each of the participating CoPs, there was some degree of support provided in all instances. In a general sense, this support was in the form of time being allowed for members to participate, in conjunction with access to some of the organisation’s resources, i.e. accommodation, technology and equipment. In addition, some organisations also provided funding for community activities, i.e. paying for speakers was brought up by the Facilitation, Research and Supporting Women CoPs. Only one community, the Catering CoP, explicitly referred to intangible support being provided by the organisation in the form of encouragement and praise. Considering the organisational return on expenditure or what the organisation receives for this support, two major themes were identified by all the CoPs except for the Supporting Women community. Increased flow of information, knowledge and ideas were described as was an increase in the opportunities available to network, connect and interact with other people. And while these were not specifically mentioned by the Supporting Women CoP, they did mention outcomes such as improved employee satisfaction and higher engagement from women. Greater satisfaction was also
touched on by the Catering and Research CoPs. Other outcomes identified were a sense of value and belonging (Training) as well as personal development (Facilitation). The Catering CoP was the only one of the nine participating communities who specifically mentioned a reduction in operating costs as an organisational benefit while the Facilitation and the Ceremonial Band communities highlighted marketing and recruitment opportunities as well as improving public relations as potential benefits.

Looking to the future

The final aspects of the analysis concern the future. Respondents were asked to consider ways to improve the communication practices of their community and all, except for two of the nine CoPs, had suggestions about possible change initiatives. It was only the Catering and the Supporting Women communities that were silent on this point. Many of the ideas of the other seven communities were framed around increasing the use of technology although the Leadership, Policy and Research communities also sought more face-to-face meetings. In terms of communication technologies, more use of email to facilitate contact between members was mentioned by people in four CoPs (Facilitation, Ceremonial Band, Project Mgmt and Research). Proposed changes regarding email ranged from a regular update email, meeting reminders, a newsletter and even just getting access to a membership list (with both phone and email addresses). Increasing the number and frequency of video (Leadership and Policy CoPs) and phone conferences (Project Mgmt) were also mentioned while both the Project Mgmt and the Training CoPs sought better technology to nurture an online shared/collaborative space. There were also three communities (Policy, Project Mgmt and Research) who took a broader perspective by again reflecting on the challenges associated with not having enough time to communicate and be involved.

A broader view of the future was elicited through a scenario imagining the community suddenly receiving additional funds. All but one community (the Leadership CoP) responded with suggestions about how to best spend this unexpected increase. Using the money to pay for administrative support was the most frequent comment and it was mentioned by five communities (Supporting Women, Facilitation, Project Mgmt, Research and Training). However, this idea of having more access to resources including support for time to participate was also very significant and it encompassed things such as increasing access to meeting facilities, appropriate technologies, speakers and also some light catering for meetings. Training and mentoring were also mentioned as well as marketing the community and public recognition of their successes. The final point to be considered in this analysis relates to an optional space provided in the survey where anything thing else that was important to know about their community could be mentioned. There was a common thread linking the CoPs who did
comment about support issues (and/or their lack) and the impact on the community’s operation. Responses covered the whole continuum. The lack of organisational support was highlighted by both the Policy and Project Mgmt CoPs. Conversely, the Training CoP saw benefits in being autonomous and outside the formal organisational structure while the Facilitation CoP drew attention to the need to find the right balance between formality and informality between the community and the organisation. Hence, the two extremes on formal support were seen as most desirable as well as the in-between position.

Stage 2 Selection

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the results of the Stage 1 survey were used to select which three of the nine CoPs participating in the research would be invited to move into Stage 2 as the aim was to study fundamentally different communities in more detail. The following four factors underpinned the selection: accessibility/interest, industry base, diversity in such things as their practices, members and location and finally, any distinctive features of interest. My intuition was also part of this decision process. It was the Catering, Research and Training CoPs who were invited into Stage 2 and their leaders agreed to my inviting their members to be interviewed. The degree of geographical dispersion of these three CoPs emerged as an influential characteristic. The Training CoP covered both inner and outer regions within a single city while the Catering CoP’s members worked across different regional areas in a single State and the Research CoP encompassed members from cities located across three different States.
CHAPTER 5: STAGE 2 — CATERING CO\textsc{P}

What we do works well for us and at the end of the day, that's all that matters

... Max, Catering CoP leader

Foreword

The Catering CoP was one of three communities selected to participate in Stage 2. It was of interest because it was very successful, achieving positive momentum over several years. Their inclusion also ensured a government department was explored in considerable depth, resulting in useful comparisons on the public/private industry continuum. However, while the Catering CoP was scheduled to be the first to move into Stage 2, delays were experienced as my elderly mother, who I care for, was very ill for several months in the latter part of 2007. On resuming the research in early 2008, I interviewed Max as the CoP’s leader but complications emerged when I asked him about contacting other members to gauge their interest in being interviewed. It seemed his enthusiasm for the research had waned since my initial contact with him as he was reluctant to provide contact details for other members. However, he did agree I could briefly attend their next community meeting which was fortunate as it seemed to be the only way I could instigate the necessary arrangements about setting up other interviews. At the meeting, I was able to enlist some of the members’ support regarding participation in the Stage 2 interviews. And while these access issues certainly slowed the research’s progress, the experience of briefly attending their meeting as an outside observer provided additional material about the Catering CoP which is covered in more detail later in the chapter.

List of interviewees

Following are some brief introductory details about each of the five people associated with the Catering CoP who participated in Stage 2. Four men and one woman were interviewed during a two month period in mid 2008 and all bar one of the men were current members of the CoP. The other male interviewee was the CoP’s sponsor and his interview was on the telephone while the other four were held face-to-face. As the CoP members work at different facilities, physically located across the State, doing the face-to-face interviews meant considerable travel was involved. Each of the five interviews lasted from thirty minutes to a little over an hour.
ADAM was a relative newcomer to the CoP. He and Catrina work together and he acts in her position when she is on leave. During these periods, he participates in the CoP as her replacement so his involvement is sporadic. I attended one of the CoP’s meetings — the same one that was Adam’s second experience of representing his facility on Catrina’s behalf. So, he has been considered a newcomer for the purposes of this research. The interview with Adam was conducted face-to-face at his work location and lasted for a little over 60 minutes.

CATRINA has been a long term member of the community since it began in 2003, making her one of the CoP’s oldtimers. As Catering Supervisor in charge of the kitchen at her facility, she is Adam’s boss. Incidentally, at the time of the study, Catrina was the only female member of the CoP. She was not present at the CoP meeting that I attended. The duration of Catrina’s interview was 30 minutes and we spoke face-to-face at her facility.

KARL has been the CoP’s sponsor since it began and he continues in that role. For the purposes of this study, he represented a formal connection between the community and the organisation’s management. In his words, ‘I’m here to look at any outcomes and recommendations they make’. His interview was the only one associated with this community that was conducted on the telephone and it lasted for a little less than 30 minutes.

MAX has been the CoP leader since it began in 2003 and he was largely responsible for getting it going, thus he is an oldtimer in the community. He has continued enthusiastically in the role since then except for some months during 2007/08 when he shifted his focus to concentrate on other work activities. He is the Catering Supervisor for the facility where he works. Max was my initial contact into the community and he remained my liaison. We spoke face-to-face at his work location and his interview was a little more than 60 minutes.

TOBY has also been a long term member of the CoP in his role as Catering Supervisor at a different facility. He was a founding member (an oldtimer) and seemed keen to help with the study if he could. It was obvious that Toby was very proud of the CoP and its achievements. His interview was held face-to-face at his facility and we spoke for a little over 60 minutes.

Table 23 follows which is a list the 12 people who are referred to by name in this chapter, that is, the five interviewees as well as another seven people mentioned but not interviewed. Those interviewed are identified with an asterisk and shown in bold type. Additionally, there are brief explanatory details provided for each person.
What is the Catering CoP?

The members of the Catering CoP are chefs (known as Catering Supervisors, or simply Supervisors) within a single government department who are responsible for catering services in facilities across different geographical locations. They first came together as a group in mid 2003. At this initial meeting, they decided to collaborate more directly with each other to share their catering knowledge within a CoP framework. They have the reputation of being a thriving CoP which has brought them a high profile internally within their Department. Their success story is beginning to reach outward to other, more external, audiences and they are seen as an excellent example of an effective CoP, achieving many positive outcomes. Through their collaborations, the Department has made significant financial savings from economies of scale with bulk food purchasing policies. Furthermore, catering for specific cultural dietary needs has improved, with other procedural changes implemented, ranging from major cost savers through to such simple gains as the sharing of favourite recipes.

The Catering CoP was the first such community established in the Department and the practice that binds them together is catering. Their early successes influenced the subsequent establishment of a second CoP focussing on each facility’s stores activities but while the Catering CoP continues its success story, the Stores CoP was not able to generate the same positive results and was subsequently abandoned.
CoP practices

The management and provision of catering services is the practice that binds this group of people together. ‘We share each others’ problems and we share each others’ solutions as well, so it’s a nice mix, it works for us ... Look, its unique and its different and I don’t know how everyone works their CoP but what we do works well for us and at the end of the day, that’s all that matters’, Max (CoP leader) explained. Catrina also spoke positively about the CoP, ‘The support network of the caterers is very, very strong because if someone comes across a product that’s really good and really cheap, everyone knows within a few minutes and everybody’s on board so and it just makes life a lot easier’. Later, she explained that the CoP is ‘so successful because we’re all enthusiastic about it working because it benefits us all and when we see benefits, that’s what makes it viable and we’re quite happy and plus the fact [is] we all get on well’. The CoP’s major activity centres on regular meetings where most of the members’ knowledge sharing and communication takes place. They also talk on the telephone and send emails, both on an individual basis as well as via group messages.

CoP meetings

Each meeting is a full one-day session which is usually attended by 9 to 12 members and is hosted at a different facility on a rotating basis. Senior management in combination with local operational level managers at each facility support these meetings in several ways, e.g. by approving relief staffing arrangements which allows the Catering Supervisor from each facility to be away for the day. If travel is necessary, a Departmental vehicle is also provided with two or three members generally travelling together. Depending on the distances involved, they drive to the meeting location either on the morning of the meeting or for longer distances, they travel the afternoon before and stay overnight. The hosting facility also provides lunch on the day. As Catrina put it, ‘We like going to each others’ facilities because at least we get someone to cook for us then, we don’t have to cook!’ In addition, there was usually a tour of the kitchen undertaken which included reviewing the equipment, the menus and food preparation as well as food purchase strategies and storage processes. At the start of each interview, I enquired about how often their CoP meetings were held. It soon became apparent that there was some confusion about the specific details. Adam thought they ‘meet up on a quarterly or six month [basis], depending on how often they can fit it in the year’ although later, he said they only meet every four to six months. He explained that the frequency was limited by the budget, saying a meeting ‘once every two months would be fantastic’ whereas Catrina was quite explicit that they meet four times a year, i.e. every three months. Max agreed as he had told me originally that they meet up every three months. Toby was also quite precise but said ‘we go for three a year ... and that’s what we stuck by’. Karl’s views (as the CoP’s sponsor and the link between the CoP and management) were also canvassed.
There’s no need to meet regularly, anymore than twice a year ... Initially it was very much a formal arrangement [between the CoP and the Department] but after getting going and being established, after a period of time, we can’t keep coming up with great new ideas ... Suppliers come on board and they talk to one another. Really, if they [the CoP] only met once a year now, it probably wouldn’t be a bad thing. I think they aim to meet twice a year in a group and that’s probably right but I think one should be enough.

Karl (Mgmt) confirmed there were costs involved with these meetings ‘but its operational necessities [that] are the biggest inhibitor, more so than cost. Yes, there is cost, I don’t deny that but the operational requirement that everybody be available on the one time, on the one day and more often than not, it necessitates an overnighter for a few of them, it isn’t easy to orchestrate’. While there are some differences of opinion between members regarding how often the CoP meets, the more significant disparity concerns the variance between their views and what their sponsor thinks actually happens. Irrespective of whether the CoP meets every three or four months, they occur more regularly that the six monthly schedule which the CoP sponsor understood was happening and the once a year that he stated would be appropriate.

I had the opportunity to attend a CoP meeting and while my attendance was brief, I understood more about how the CoP operated. The specific circumstances of my visit were to try to engender interest and support resulting in further interviews. After I introduced the study, Toby was very quick to volunteer to an interview. Adam then suggested Catrina in absentia: he was attending the meeting as Catrina’s replacement, being the temporary incumbent of her Catering Supervisor position. Once Catrina’s name was volunteered, everyone seemed keen for her to be one of the interviewees, with Adam starting to complete the consent form on her behalf. I was concerned about this turn of events and arranged to contact Catrina when she returned from leave to gauge her willingness to participate. Assuring me that Catrina would love to talk with me, almost all present joined in with nominating her amidst a lot of seemingly good-natured teasing. However, I found the incident disconcerting. Could their behaviour indicate a lack respect for her as an individual, being the only women in a community predominantly comprised of men? I wondered if a man would have been volunteered in absentia in such a way. I also wondered what this said about the community in terms of trust issues more generally. There was little doubt that my presence at the meeting and my request to interview other CoP members caused some unease. The situation was understandable because I was a stranger to both the community and more generally within the Department overall but I still clearly had some authority in terms of simply being present at their meeting. It turned out that some may not have even been aware that I was coming. Max had emailed the Stage 2 invitation to all members advising I would be at the meeting but it was done quite late on the day before the actual meeting. So, it was quite possible some may not have seen it. My being there became more complex as Max was not present even though he had been expected.
Adam, as a newcomer, appeared impressed when describing what happened at the meetings. They ‘discuss the costs of certain food items, if you can get it cheaper somewhere else and that’s why we have these meetings, so that we can get the best deals that we can, from our suppliers’. Catrina said, ‘We discuss budgets, menus, dietary needs, allergies, everything to do with catering and equipment. We bring in Reps from different suppliers with different products so we can compare prices and see what they’re doing and what the others are doing and we help each other out. The Reps will come and they’ll say, “What would you buy as a whole? We can offer you more substantial discounting”. [So] that’s basically how we work’. When external guests, such as food manufacturing representatives (Reps) attend, they introduce and promote their products to the community. Benefits flow both ways as it provides an opportunity for the CoP members to learn about new products. The arrangement provides Reps with a captive and interested audience to whom they can market their merchandise. Adam, as the newcomer, talked about his experience of the Reps at the second meeting he went to (the meeting I attended). He was quite critical and he said, ‘They had two new Reps come in and one of them, I wouldn’t touch with a barge pole cos, see there’s certain people, when they talk to you, you know that they’re just talking nonsense and, you know in yourself that you’re not going to buy anything from this person because you’ve already got a good supplier’. Clearly, while this is an opportunity for the Reps to talk with the Catering CoP members and promote their own products, it can also prove challenging as one of the Reps at this meeting was to discover. Adam reflected in some detail on his impressions of one of these two Reps and how this person’s attempts to create interest in his products were received by the CoP members. ‘He had no idea what he was coming to. I don’t think he realised that all [of us] were going to be there. I think he thought he might have just been pitching his sales pitch to one entity … he was out of his depth a little bit … After he had gone, Jim said, “what did youse think” and straight away I said, “Well, I won’t be buying anything from him. His prices are just well off the mark and to be honest, I didn’t even like him”’. Adam subsequently returned to this topic of the CoP members sharing their impressions of both the new products as well as the selling strategies used by the Reps, and also the Reps themselves, as individuals. He explained, ‘[It’s] not just a forum for them to pass on information, I think it’s a bit of an outlet as well because at the last meeting … they bagged a few suppliers … “I’m not using this guy again” and they would justify the reasons, which was good … then you don’t feel alone either because if you’ve got an issue, that’s the place to bring it up’. He certainly seemed to appreciate the opportunity to know others’ reactions, particularly if there were any negative factors. Interestingly, it was only Adam who specifically mentioned that the community held such a debriefing session after the Reps had finished and left the meeting. It was striking though that none of the oldtimers specifically referred to these review and feedback sessions. Although Catrina had briefly mentioned Reps in her interview and
during my preliminary conversations with Max, he had also told me that sales people sometimes attended meetings. Adam said there was no debrief after his first meeting, so it is unclear how often such sessions actually happen. Certainly, Adam’s comment about not feeling alone would indicate these types of review sessions have the potential to provide significant advantages, not only to newcomers, but to all members. Obviously, financial gains via reduced prices could be realised through such a dialogue but other, more intangible benefits might also arise as the different members share their responses on the product being promoted and its supplier. As Adam is considered a CoP newcomer, not being a permanent Catering Supervisor, it could be that this form of knowledge sharing about individual Reps and their products has become something that the oldtimers take for granted. Perhaps one of the challenges facing the Catering CoP is to more actively question their processes which may have become taken-for-granted. The lack of newcomers (i.e. as permanent supervisors) and their potential to bring in new ideas and new ways of thinking could be a further impediment to the ongoing revitalisation and long-term sustainability of the community.

Clearly the CoP has saved the Department quite a lot of money over the years. All of the interviewees mentioned these financial benefits and it emerged quite quickly this was extremely important to the community members. For instance, Adam said ‘we always discuss your main commodities [that] is what we really talk about ... milk, bread … we talk about the butchers, the veg people that we’re using, who’s using who and what kind of prices you’re getting from them ... So we tend to use a lot of the same suppliers which is really good because you can really beat them down on the price!’ Thus, Adam highlighted how their collective power plays out in practice within this community through their bulk purchasing strategies. Toby provided another example of the CoP achieving financial benefits when he explained how the members share information about short-term offers they receive from food suppliers. ‘Working as a group, for example, I can have a Rep. come to me, “I have so many pallets of this frozen fish, or whatever, going at this price”. I’m just straight on the net to let every other facility know and next minute, his pallets are gone. So it works well that way too and that’s something what we never had going before [the CoP started’].

Many of the community’s financial gains have originated from these bulk buying techniques but it does not even have to be that they actually purchase in bulk. Instead, it can simply be that they share information about the prices they are quoted for specific foodstuffs. Adam explained, ‘When we were up at the last meeting, they had a lot of their suppliers come in and show us different products and when I spoke to the actual Rep about the cost of the products, as much as it [the price difference] was only like 15, maybe 20 cents [the savings mount up]... that’s their success and that’s what they achieve every time they have one of these meetings. They achieve things like that all the time’. In the beginning of the interview with Toby, he spoke about
another very substantial saving that the CoP had accomplished which he said had saved over half a million dollars. The situation concerned the Department paying a government milk levy which some of the CoP members thought might not be right. They asked questions and were subsequently advised that they should not be paying this tax. Toby explained, ‘so, we all did audits on the amount of milk we’ve purchased over a certain period, up to that time ... all the facilities were refunded the money they had spent and it worked out over the life of it, something like ... $600,000 we would save the Department’. Although the amount saved through the milk levy situation was extremely impressive, the majority of their savings were more modest. Max gave an example about the purchase of items such as plastic wrap and foil which they had been charging to the wrong budget. We saved ‘$2,500 or something and its just little things like that and then two or three other people got onto it’, he said. It is indisputable this CoP is a source of power for its members when they combine as a collective in terms of their relationships with others external to the Department, i.e. they are much better equipped to negotiate better prices from their suppliers as a group rather than as individuals.

In addition, it emerged during the interviews that the CoP also wielded certain collective power internally within their own Department. Toby recognised the existence of this power and mentioned examples of different ways it had been exercised in the past to achieve outcomes that benefited the community’s members. As in any contemporary organisation, government departments today operate within tight budgets. In the Catering CoP’s Department, each facility is allocated an overall budget from which their kitchen’s catering budget is apportioned. So, while Departmental policies and guidelines are followed, each facility has some discretion about their catering budget which means different kitchens can be required to operate under very different budgets. Toby talked through the budgetary process and it quickly became apparent that the CoP members were using comparative figures from other members as evidence to add weight to each of their individual funding applications. Again, the CoP members became more powerful through their banding together into a community because it facilitated collaboration which ensured that each received the best possible financial outcome with their individual budgets.

Toby acknowledged though that his own success in staying within his budget might not advance the case of other members in seeking increased funds. As he pointed out, sometimes the end result of drawing input from other CoP members into individual negotiations may not provide the desired outcome. Toby explained the procedure, e.g. they sometimes have a small email survey of CoP members to find out what the others do in particular situations. He gave an example where ‘Evan emailed us all and we all emailed him back with the way we operate and do it and he’ll take it up to his management’. Toby continued on to say that he had also done a similar survey and that it could happen ‘probably a couple times a year ... You can work stuff
out yourself and other things [but] maybe this isn’t the best practice [so] I’ll check with the others. See how they do it and then send out a flyer to them all [i.e. email a short survey] to get their replies back and put it all together’. Toby continued, ‘I get [to see whether] I was right or I was wrong and maybe I’ve got to go that way... you’ll get a reply from them all’. This high level of engagement is further evidence of a strong community.

Regarding budgets, Toby also spoke of a situation that had occurred a few years ago when all catering budgets were reduced due to severe budgetary restraints. The CoP’s response was to gather detailed financial information from each member and then argue their case as a group at a meeting with the Department’s Finance Manager. Toby described the situation.

I mentioned this example to Catrina to gauge her views of the degree of influence the CoP has over head office and to see if she agreed with Toby. Initially, she seemed surprised about the notion that the CoP might have any power in regard to head office and budgets. ‘What! Influence head office? No, it doesn’t work. We tried that, it doesn’t work’. So, while Catrina agreed with Toby that the combined CoP members have more influence than any individual, she saw their effectiveness in arguing for larger budgets as being less powerful than how Toby portrayed it. Where Toby recollected that the CoP had implemented a very successful strategy culminating in a meeting at head office where budget cuts were rejected, Catrina recalled only that they ‘seem to ignore us when we want money’. It is clear there were significant differences in the perceptions of these two oldtimers regarding what power the CoP could bring to bear with management and the limits of their actual influence.

Toby also talked about the community having support from senior management. He believed the CoP provided an avenue where members could disregard the formal communication pathways and go directly to the Department’s senior management if a situation arose that warranted such an extreme action. This belief was grounded in what happened when the CoP was originally set up. Toby said that when ‘we got ours going, we all spoke to management, that we had the group setting up and this is what it’s going to be about. We will be having meetings every four months so everyone knew, and then, we had the Director come on board as our sponsor to represent us’. Toby’s view was that the CoP had the potential to act in ways

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We’ve been, as a group, [doing] financial planning and stuff like that, where the bean counters [Departmental Accountants] really wanted to do a job on us one year and we went down to head office as a group. At the end of the group [meeting] — I’ll never forget it — I was walking out of the meeting and the Finance Manager said to me, he said, ‘Oh Toby, you mentioned you don’t have a walk-in freezer’. And I said, ‘No, that’s right’, and he said, ‘Ah well, how much?’. I said, ‘around $15,000’. He said, ‘Go and buy yourself one’. So, from where they were going to take money off us, that’s what it was all about.
which might run counter to the requirements of each individual facility’s management by disregarding the usual chain of command. ‘Because you had someone so high up in the chain and you could ring and management knew this. You could just ring him and say, “Hey, I’ve got a problem here” and you’re talking to the highest ... management knew that and I think that was one of the reasons why the group was allowed to mature the way it has, because management backed it because, well they weren’t in a corner’. In following up on this point with Toby, I asked if the CoP members had ever ignored the chain of command in such a way. ‘No [there has not been a need for anything to be] taken higher’. Toby’s belief the CoP had such an extremely strong (and powerful) conduit to senior management was not really verified by anything the others said.

On the other hand, both Max and Toby talked about a more immediate, and perhaps relatively minor, use of CoP power in action. There was a situation where one facility’s management required their kitchen staff to provide morning tea (tea, coffee, milk, biscuits) for general staff use. Max explained, ‘Now, we’ve never done that before, so it’s those little dynamic things that’ll now come to the [next] meeting. What are you guys doing? Well, we don’t do that. And so he will then, [be able to use that] in evidence against this operation. Well, no one else is doing it, so why should we be doing it?’ Once again, the CoP’s use of collective power is clearly identifiable and, as Max observed, ‘If it’s important to you, it’s important to us all, because we like to back up and support one another and give weight to whatever it is. If it’s an issue for him, it could very well be an issue for us, at some time’.

**CoP members**

Initially, I understood that the criteria for membership of this CoP was quite clearly defined, being linked to the position of Catering Supervisor, i.e. the people in charge of each facility’s kitchen are the members. I explored this further with Max during our interview. In a couple of the larger facilities, two people occupy the Supervisor position; hence the CoP has up to 15 members. Connecting the membership body to formal positions in the Department in this way makes it simple to track its members over time, although there has been little turnover in the positions of Supervisors since the CoP began. Only one person has retired so all of the current members, bar one, could be described as founding/continuing members. Max reflected on the longevity of the members’ commitment, framing it like this. ‘The core dynamic group would be still the same from one year to the next. I think we’ve only lost one person who’s actually retired out of the initial group that turned up six years ago, so everyone’s sticking at it ... it just shows how successful it’s been because everyone’s prepared to stick at it at the same time. So after six years, those same people that turned up at the first meeting, apart from one who’s retired, are still turning up at meetings six years later’.
Oldtimers

With the Catering CoP, I initially understood it was those who permanently occupy the role of Catering Supervisor at each facility who were the members and they are the oldtimers. And that was the story as I understood it, until Toby’s interview revealed a little less definitional rigidity — a view Catrina supported in her interview. It seemed Max’s emphatic linking of CoP membership to the formal position of permanent Catering Supervisor was not so straightforward. Catrina, Max and Toby all spoke of actively encouraging others from their kitchen staff to attend one or two meetings, where possible, so they could experience what happens. This could be interpreted as the oldtimers (the Catering Supervisors) mentoring the newcomers, at least, to some degree. As a newcomer, Adams spoke positively of this experience: ‘the first time I went up to a meeting, I was lucky that I went with Catrina’.

However, operational requirements impact on who attends, e.g. Catrina explained that only ‘one nominated from each kitchen would go [to each meeting] because obviously it comes down to staffing issues and they can’t afford to release us all over one day’. Max and Karl (Mgmt) also mentioned staffing restrictions in terms of meeting participation. So, while membership was formally restricted to each kitchen’s senior caterer, it was recognised there were benefits in opening up the Catering CoP to other kitchen staff, where possible. On the other hand, tension could also result if anyone who was not a permanent Catering Supervisor wished to participate more fully. Adam relieved in Catrina’s position whenever she was absent and he seemed to experience this. ‘All my input goes through Catrina and anything that I say to Catrina, that I think is an issue, that I think she should bring up, I know and I feel confident that she’ll bring that up at the next meeting. I’d love to attend them in person, there’s no question’.

This practice of restricting CoP membership could have consequences in terms of the overall sustainability and renewal of the community. I endeavoured to engage Max in a critical reflection of their current membership policy and its exclusive nature by asking him what might happen if any of the relief Catering Supervisors wanted to be more involved. He responded, ‘I don’t have any control over who attends because there’s staffing issues at each individual location. If I go to the meeting, they’ve got to back fill me for the day. So, that would be up to negotiation between that person and their supervisor and their manager to sort out who’s going. That’s something I have no control over whatsoever’. While Max’s response made sense in terms of the Department’s operational strategies, he seemed a bit defensive in saying he had no control over it. Furthermore, he appeared closed to thinking about it any further. Perhaps the exclusive nature of the CoP could be seen to be somewhat of a status symbol. Still, as their objective is to harness their catering expertise to learn from each other, there may be some way the membership criteria could be broadened to allow others to play a more active part and contribute in ways other than attending the meetings.
An interesting issue emerged around this exclusiveness. Can individuals who are not nominally Catering Supervisors actually be CoP members (or potentially new members, i.e. newcomers) or are they simply visitors? Max rejected the idea they were new members. ‘No, they’re just someone that hasn’t been before. They’re not new to the environment; they’re probably new to the concept’. He gave an example of someone initially quite negative about the CoP whose viewpoint changed after experiencing their first meeting. As Max put it, when he had ‘actually seen what we done and what we discussed and things like that, once he’d had exposure to it, he completely changed. So, no, people they’re not new to us, you know, it’s just the first time they’ve been there’. Even though this is an inclusive view, it showed Max was uncomfortable using the term ‘new members’ to describe these occasional meeting attendees but equally they were not visitors. Thus, this community was not open to simply anyone else who might be interested in joining. I followed up this notion of restricted membership with Max, using a seemingly unlikely scenario where I asked how he thought they might respond if one of the Catering Supervisors choose not to participate. I was interested in how Max might perceive such an action. He responded quite forthrightly, and rather defiantly, by saying, ‘They miss out, pure and simple, if people don’t want to attend, then, whatever’s going on, they’ll miss out ... if they don’t know about it [an issue under discussion at a meeting], it’s going to be harder for them to deal with – simple’.

For Max at least, the only members of this community are those who permanently occupy the position of Catering Supervisor which gives them the right to participate in the CoP’s meetings. He seemed to want to completely distance himself from the idea of considering other people as members of the CoP. Instead, he insisted more than once that they were just someone who had not been to a meeting. It would logically follow that such individuals could not become members unless, or until, they were promoted permanently into the role of Catering Supervisor. This issue of the right to be a member is important because it concerns the boundaries of the community and how open the CoP is to new ideas as well as to new members. In exploring the membership base with Catrina, she brought a different perspective when I asked her the number of members in the CoP. She actually counted them out during the interview and eventually decided ‘it’d have to be about 24. It would be around about that, I’m sure, but not everyone goes’. For her, it was not just the Catering Supervisors who were members but also others employed in the kitchens who attended meetings on an ad hoc basis. Toby view was similar, ‘Occasionally, they [individual supervisors] can’t turn up, like that last meeting, for some unknown reasons but they always send their rep. So, the facility is still covered whether they’re there or not’ and ‘they’ll normally have a list of stuff, if they [their supervisor] need anything brought up’. In Toby’s interview, I asked him if he thought there might be two sub–groups with the CoP, ‘the original members (the permanent Supervisors) as well as the replacement supervisors for that meeting’. He agreed, returning later in his interview to this theme when he
said, ‘I think the group is open to anyone who comes along. Now we will have a lot of outside speakers ... it’s open ... just because somebody’s not a supervisor, it doesn’t mean to say he hasn’t got the training, or whatever’. Thus, newcomers are somewhat of a problematic construct in this CoP. Analysing the situation, it is interesting to consider if there are really three different levels of membership, one formal and completely visible with the others more informal, and more hidden.

- Those who regularly attend the meetings as part of fulfilling the permanent position of Catering Supervisor.
- Those who relieve their kitchen’s supervisor and who attend the meetings once a year.
- Other kitchen staff who might attend once or twice so they are introduced to the CoP meeting concept. Such individuals were always welcome to talk with their Catering Supervisor about any information, suggestions and ideas they might have which would then be brought up at the next meeting.

There are also people who attend meetings as visitors, e.g. manufacturing representatives and professional dietary advisors. Those in the first group are obviously current CoP members and most were also founding members. There was an exception though as a founding member retired some time ago, resulting in another person becoming Catering Supervisor and CoP member. As they are experts in the catering function, they are all considered to be oldtimers. But, can the people in the other two groups be regarded as members, or potentially new members coming into the CoP, i.e. newcomers?

Newcomers

It was difficult to define newcomers in the Catering CoP. The relevance of the newcomer concept and the potential difficulties in defining CoP boundaries are highlighted in this community. Still, using the newcomer construct promoted further exploration of the ways members are socialised and their impact on the CoP’s knowledge and communication processes. So, for the purposes of this study, staff who were not Catering Supervisors but who participated in the CoP on some level, have been considered as newcomers. Consequently, those in both the second and third groups listed on the previous page, including Adam, are portrayed as CoP newcomers. This was a situation that Adam was more ambivalent about as he slipped between first and third person during his interview. ‘They discuss the costs of certain food items, if you can get it cheaper somewhere else and that’s why we have these meetings’. I asked Catrina if her offsiders (such as Adam) were keen to attend meetings as her representative. ‘Of course, it’s a rort for them! Actually no, it’s good for them because they actually get to know what’s going on ... and it gets them involved and they get really
enthusiastic about it and ... I think it’s the friendship aspect as well’. There was no doubt Adam enjoyed being part of the community as he said he would love to attend all the meetings.

Reflecting on his experiences of going to his first meeting with Catrina, Adam explained that ‘she introduced me to everyone as soon as we got there and they’re a very accepting bunch of people. No matter what your background is, they’ll accept you for who you are and I must admit, I sat back a lot because I tend to do that. That’s how I get to know them because I sit there and I watch them and I read body language a little bit and see where they’re coming from and that gives me a better sense of who they are’. Subsequently, at the meeting I attended, Adam introduced another newcomer, Sam, to the community. This meant that Adam could contemplate his own newcomer experiences, in tandem with his understanding of Sam’s first contact with the CoP’s meeting process.

He had never been to one and he did the same thing [as me] because I watched him. I was more involved this time, straight away and he sat back and listened and he made a comment here or there, after we’d have lunch, he got a lot more involved. So, he did the same as what I did and I mentioned it to him funny enough because we drove up together and as we were driving back, I said to him, I says, ‘So, how did you find it? Did you feel a little bit intimidated, at first?’ He went, ‘Not so much intimidated, I just sat back and listened and watched how people were and then when I felt comfortable, I got involved more, you know’ and I did [know].

While he has been primarily considered a newcomer, Adam was in the unique position of facilitating Sam’s introduction to the CoP process, almost like an oldtimer. He felt strongly about the advantages of newcomers having someone to guide them through their introduction to their first CoP meeting. Exploring what actually happens for these new people provided additional insights into the group dynamics as they play out in the everyday life of the CoP.

CoP leadership

Max, the CoP’s leader, claimed he ‘was the one who kick started the whole thing’ while Karl (Mgmt) viewed the leader role as essential. He declared that ‘if you don’t have a motivated group leader, that group ain’t going to achieve diddly squat’. He continued,
group leader, call it what you like, I call it a group leader ... He is pivotal, he must be a person who’s interested, he must be keen, he must be eager, he must be dedicated, he must have all of that, otherwise, it ain’t going to fly.

This more traditional view of leadership where the leader was the most crucial element in the CoP was in contrast with Max’s own ideas. He said, ‘it’s not about individual people, it’s about the group ... [and for him that] is very, very important. I may be seen as the leader, only because they’d asked me to be but I don’t perceive myself to be that way ... we share each other’s problems and we share in the solutions’. Both Catrina and Toby framed the leader’s activities as being less centred on leadership per se and more on administration functions, i.e. a facilitator who does the paperwork, like scheduling meetings. Max also touched on this notion of paperwork and confirmed he was the CoP’s central contact point, with most outside communication coming first to him for redirection to the appropriate members. Thus, substantial differences about the leadership role emerged.

The management perspective provided by Karl (Mgmt) was that ‘it’s pivotal that the group leader is a person that has all of those qualities [i.e. keen, eager, dedicated and motivated] and wants to make the thing work and if he don’t, then it won’t work. I don’t care what environment it’s operating in, government or private’. It seemed that his experiences of both the Catering and the Stores communities and his role as their sponsors had influenced his ideas about CoP leadership. He said, ‘if you don’t have someone that’s prepared to drive it ... if you haven’t got a strong leader ... it doesn’t work’. For Karl, the qualities of the leader played a powerful part in the success of the Catering CoP while he seemed to believe that a lack of such leadership qualities was an important influence in the demise of the Stores CoP. Max was much less convinced that the leader had a large influence on the ongoing viability of their community. He agreed with both Catrina and Toby that someone else in the CoP would probably take over the role of leader if he left. Max had said that ‘It’s WE and we use that term more so than anything because its WE, it’s not one individual person, WE are a group and that’s the way we treat it’. Max’s view of the CoP’s current operating style seemed to have more in common with contemporary management principles aligned with transformational leadership rather than the more traditional management techniques associated with the leader-follower dynamic. Essentially, Max was saying that the CoP did not really need a leader because the members managed and led themselves. Toby also reinforced this view about the CoP not really having a leader, ‘we’ve all put up and put in and whatever but as for the definite leader, no, we haven’t got anyone that way’.

In considering the issue of future leaders, I asked Max what he thought might actually happen if he left the CoP and/or the Department. ‘I could see it continuing. I honestly could because
they’re very strong people, they’re very strong-willed people and they enjoy it too much to let it just … you know, to let it wane away. But yeah, that’s what I would honestly say, that it would continue because there’s enough enthusiasm and that creative juice is there around the table, to let it continue’. To further understand the ways that the leadership role was perceived in the Catering CoP, the same scenario was presented to a couple of the other interviewees, i.e. what might happen if Max left. The specific situation I constructed concerned Max winning a lot of money and leaving the Department to do other things, like a new career or overseas holiday. Catrina responded by saying that his leaving would not have a big impact ‘because there will always be someone emailing saying we’re due for a meeting, where are we going [etc] … I don’t see it folding up because we’re all pretty close, like I said before the network is very, very strong and we see the benefits, so why would be turn our backs on a good thing’. Towards the end of the interview with Catrina, she explained who was important in terms of the CoP’s success. ‘We’re all a vital cog in that. There’s no just one person, we’re all the same and we all like to keep it going’. Tony concurred with Catrina in his response to the situation about Max withdrawing from the CoP and also volunteered himself as leader ‘just [to] keep it going’. In summary, while leadership in the Catering CoP could initially be seen as simple and straightforward, it became clear that there were inconsistencies in the ways the different interviewees were constructing both the purpose and the functions of the role. Inconsistencies in viewpoints such as those that have become visible here usually have their foundations in what is being taken for granted. As such, they can point to the need for CoPs to reflect and even review their practices on a regular basis.

**CoP communication**

Just as opinions diverged about the leader role in the Catering CoP, differences also appeared in other key areas of their practice, for instance, something as simple as the frequency of their meetings emerged as significant. These types of things can be considered as norms of the community because they are fundamental elements within the communicative fabric that holds the community together. At this point, it is useful to examine the communication processes that support the operation and activities of the community. With the meetings being the CoP’s focus, it was not surprising that the conversations the members have with each other are often about these meetings. In addition, they do also use email, both on a one to one basis as well as via a group email list, as well as the telephone.

Email was quite heavily used by the members of the CoP as a communication medium. As Max put it, ‘We’re constantly emailing’ while Catrina told me that ‘if someone’s got a problem, we’ll go and help them with it … the support network is just fantastic. It’s just really, really good and it’s strong’. Both Adam and Toby also use email with Catrina giving an example: ‘if
someone comes across a product that’s really good and really cheap, everyone knows within a few minutes and everybody’s on board, so it just makes life a lot easier’. She uses both email and the telephone to share this type of information. Sharing the details about specials on individual food items as they become available seemed to be one of their major communicative events. As these special deals were usually only available for a short period, speed was essential to take advantage of the generous discounting on offer. Knowing about these food specials was seen as a significant benefit of the community as all of the members interviewed, including the newcomer, Adam, talked about them. Catrina explained, ‘if one of us is approached by a supplier with a good deal, well, we’ll just email the whole lot of them’ [all the CoP members]. Toby expanded a little on the details. ‘I can have a rep come in to me and say I have so many pallets of this frozen fish or whatever, going at this price, I’m just straight on the net to let every other facility know and next minute his pallets are gone. It works well that way and that’s something we never had going before, the facility would get these offers but they’d say, ‘Oh yeah, you beauty!’ and they’d take up the offer but now as a group and we find that the local manufacturers go through Max, cause he’s the leader of the group at the moment. They’ll go direct to him, so we have this and then from that, yes, we all latch on it’.

In seeking patterns around the CoP’s communication practices, it appeared this dynamic sharing of information about discounted food was the second most important communication activity, after the meetings. Information about how often members heard about these deals was of interest in building up a picture of everyday life in the community. Toby further disclosed that this sharing of information probably happens once a month while Catrina’s view was rather different. She said that six months might possibly pass. Max also described how these food offers sometime originate and the conversation moved to cover decisions about emailing versus phoning. He concluded, ‘I’d prefer to pick up the phone’.

Initially, Max had also talked about the SharePoint system (a collaborative workspace tool providing an electronic forum for online chatting, working together and sharing information). It turned out that implementing SharePoint as a new shared technology for the CoP was an initiative he was actively sought support for, during the early part of 2007. By the time I interviewed him in mid 2008, the proposal had been dropped as being too costly as it would have cost approximately $20,000. In explaining what had actually transpired about getting SharePoint for CoP members, this is how Max framed the situation. ‘We could have been all on there at the same time, chatting to one and other but it just didn’t eventuate. So it was a financial decision by the Department to not want to go ahead and we had the full backing of Microsoft, they were going to do all the training and all this sort of stuff, it would have been fantastic. So, there’s a whole range of things we could have done with this software but it just didn’t eventuate. That’s unfortunate, but look, we’ve still survived without it. So we just utilise what
we have’. Max appeared to be trying to make the best of negative circumstances. Clearly, he
had invested quite a lot of his time and energy into developing the idea about SharePoint. When
the decision was made that it was too expensive, it seemed he just wanted to put it all behind
him and move away from the idea of the CoP having access to these more developed
technological tools.

Considering Max’s original and seemingly passionate desire to broaden how members
communicated, i.e. chatting online with other members, his dropping the idea completely was a
little surprising. As an alternative, the Catering CoP could use the online collaborative tool
available to all government employees but it was perceived as quite clumsy and complicated to
use. While this issue of collaborating online was not really explored in detail during the
interviews, Max and also Karl (Mgmt) mentioned it. Karl raised the possibility of more online
interaction in the community but he was unsure about the details and may have been referring to
the government intranet system. The circumstances around a creative initiative arising out of the
CoP, its subsequent rejection and the impact on Max could highlight some issues. The
contradictions between what Max and Karl said (in their roles as CoP leader and CoP sponsor)
on this matter also drew attention to a lack of shared understanding. This could be particularly
troubling as it concerned the communication and sharing processes that are the lifeblood of all
CoPs. Still, $20,000 was a large financial commitment for the organisation and the benefits
access to such a shared collaborative space online could bring to the CoP remain unclear.

As the meetings are their most regular communicative event, I was interested in discovering
how the CoP members described what happened during these discussions. Generally, it seemed
the discourse was open, free-flowing, informal and sometimes quite robust. As Max put it,
‘we’re probably very, very similar in our passion and our intent, if you know what I mean? And
everyone will pipe in at some stage… I think that’s another thing that makes us so reasonably
successful is because everyone is prepared to chime in with something. Whether it’s small or
major, it doesn’t really matter but they’re all prepared to jump in and have a say’. I sought to
explore just how candid and critical these conversations were, i.e. was there a sense that
members could challenge and question other’s point of view? Was the environment of the CoP
meetings a safe place to express divergent and even opposing views? I was especially interested
in trying to better understand how conflict was managed in the CoP.

In attempting to discover more, I asked Toby about how the next meeting host was decided. He
responded, ‘We sort of work as a group and we think, yes well, we haven’t been to Evan’s
facility, so we put it to him when I said where’s your next meeting to be, a couple of them said,
well why not at your place,, we’ve never been there. So Evan takes that on board’. In response
to further questioning, Toby revealed that it would not cause a problem if Evan could not host
the next meeting. The discussion process around where the next meeting would be held certainly seemed to be quite flexible with little pressure being put on members. It seemed there was little reluctance, if any, to take on the role of hosting a meeting, instead they worked together to manage any potential problems. This further indicated the benefits the meetings bring to all the CoP members as they feel well supported by each other and seem keen to meet up again. As well as attending individual meetings, the members generally also have a tour of the kitchen at the host facility. Adam provided an example of a hypothetical conversation which could occur during one of these kitchen tours which illustrated the tone of the members’ interactions.

What they [other members] might say [to the host member] is, ‘We’re doing this’, instead of saying ‘We don’t like the way you’re doing that’. They will explain the way they are doing it, so that you might [think] I might try that’. So, they put it along more that kind of line rather than the negative side of it which is good because it doesn’t make you feel bad and it doesn’t make you feel like an idiot either ... They always try not to offend anyone ... why they’re such a great bunch because they all respect other people, which I’ve never seen before, to be honest. Not in a community that size because there’s quite a lot of us and I’ve dealt with a lot of catering people and I’ve never seen the amount of cooperation and respect that they have for each other anywhere else. It was an eye opener for me and it is a good thing. It was great to be a part of it, I must admit, I thoroughly enjoyed going up to these meetings. I do get a lot out of them.

Adam’s positive feelings about the meetings and his overall experiences of the CoP are obvious. However, as mentioned before, there seemed some ambiguity about his connection to the community. He seemed to fluctuate between using the first and third person as he spoke; sometimes, it was we and other times, he said, them. He really did seem to want to attend all the meetings, rather than just the few he currently does as part of his acting duties when Catrina takes leave. So, perhaps when he spoke in first person, he was expressing his desire to be a more permanent part of the community. Overall, a high degree of critical thought and acceptance of individual differences permeated their communication processes. Each facility had its own ‘little idiosyncrasies’ which Max said, ‘impact greatly on what we do, day to day’.

We all handle [things] differently ... depending on our own situation but that doesn’t preclude us from looking at someone else’s process, maybe perhaps adopting it. So, if it was a discussion around milk, we would go around the table and each and every person would put in their little bit about that particular subject. Now it’s going to be different, probably many times. So, we just take that on board, I’ll say, well look this is how we do it, this is why we do it and it saves us this much money, that’s a good idea. So, someone else may then pick that up. Probably from that discussion on milk, maybe five facilities now are all doing it exactly the same way as what I’m doing it. So we’re just sort of feeding off each other, all the time ... we pick the bones out of what it is and then utilise what we can of that.
Max felt very strongly their success was due to the members’ kitchens being different and it has been these differences that have allowed safe spaces to be constructed. This, in turn, has resulted in the emergence of an open and invigorating environment where they can all share their practices comfortably with each other, to their mutual benefit. Max spoke at length about how he perceived these conversations actually occur. ‘I don’t fully understand the nuts and bolts of someone else’s kitchen. I understand the basic outline of it is that they serve breakfast, dinner and tea and they do it in a certain manner … I think it’s because we are significantly different in our day-to-day operations because our environments are different … We can offer advice on what people are doing … no one’s going to tell me how to run the kitchen here and I’m not going to tell someone somewhere else how to run their kitchen’. Catrina also focussed on their differences and said ‘We’re all very honest and forthright’. She had the view that the discussions did not get ‘heated’ and said that this was because of ‘Maturity and we’re all respectful of each others’ thoughts and their thought processes and needs and how they do their job, you know, because everybody’s different and we accept that’. The theme that it was their differences that helped to make the CoP more successful was also confirmed by Toby. All three of the oldtimers interviewed specifically mentioned these differences when they considered how the meeting discussions unfold. Thus, it is clear they were all linking the CoP’s success, at least in part, to such differences.

It was clear that the members also saw the meetings as opportunities to catch up and socialise with each other. Such socialising strengthens the bonds between the members and could be seen as peer support, rather than idle chat. Their socialising also acts as a welcoming gesture toward newcomers. Adam talked about both his own experiences as newcomer and also what happened in regard to Sam’s first experience at the meeting I attended.

The meeting didn’t start as soon as everyone’s there. We’re all outside having a cigarette, having a cup of tea and chatting and getting to know people before going into the meeting and it’s all about ‘How’s the kids doing’, it’s all personal stuff. It was really good and because I was new and none of them knew me, they all kind of - not at once which was good because that would have really freaked me out but they all kind of went, ‘So, where are you from, what’s your background?’ and each of them would come up and introduce themselves and it was really good the way they done that and when I took Sam up they did the same to him. So, by the time we come into the meeting, everyone knew everyone, you were at ease pretty much straight away but he still sat back and watched and that’s human nature. I know I’ve done it plenty of times but they’re very good that way, I must admit, as a collective, they’re very good at making people feel welcome.

Catrina also reflected on the fraternising they do together at the meetings and acknowledged how important the friendships are between all of the members. She said that it was ‘because
we’ve all got so much in common, we all get on really well and we’re all respectful of each other’. Toby also said he enjoyed being a part of the community and like Adam; he too mentioned they went out for a meal together on the evening before each meeting. Newcomers were also included in this ritual of sharing a meal and it seemed the members worked hard to welcome newcomers. Toby further acknowledged the benefits of these informal times. ‘We’ll always go out for tea the night prior to the meeting … we probably cover more there over a few beers and a nice steak than at the meetings sometimes but we’ll bash out a lot of things there and yes, it’s just good getting together and meeting up with them’. There is certainly a respectful undertone to these comments, whether in welcoming newcomers or contributing to discussions, indicating a healthy CoP. The welcoming behaviour reflects the strength of their communication processes and the enthusiasm within the group.

**CoP/organisation connection**

As Karl (Mgmt) explained, ‘Communities of Practice are not mandatory things, they are totally voluntary. We can’t mandate that you must do this and you must do that. We can only just say, look in terms of organisation development, we think it would be the best if this happened’. He provided quite a detailed view of the CoP and how he, as their sponsor, saw it currently, particularly in terms of the community being formal versus informal. He also talked a little about the organisational culture that prevails through the community’s external environment.

*I think, the formal part of a Community of Practice [probably] only has a limited life span. There’s only so much you can do with the group and you can keep meeting forever and a day and after a period of x, let’s say two years, you’re not going to come up with that many great new ideas because all those just happen in the early stages. You make all your obvious changes, you put your processes in place and that part of it early on, is formal. After that, it becomes more informal but saying that, no less effective in terms of outcome - and that’s about where that group [the Catering CoP] is at now. There’s no need to meet regularly, anymore than twice a year, but they talk to each other over the telephone or by computer regularly. So as long as that continual dialogue continues to happen and I would say that’s much informal now, as it is formal. It needed to be formal earlier on, to get people to know each other, probably trust each other is the right term. The formal part early on is to establish that basis of trust and understanding of where people are coming from. Unfortunately … we were very cellular and nebular in the way we operated. They tend to be - we’re doing our thing our way and we look after our facility and we don’t really care what happens in other sites. That’s historically the way they were funded, the way they were set up and I’d have to say, the way they were managed. We’ve got a more holistic, a more - a total system here now, and we’re looking to work together rather than independently.*

Karl’s (Mgmt) comment about CoPs ability to generate new ideas being reduced over time was very telling in terms of how he saw CoPs and their potential for creativity, innovation and new
ways of doing things. Clearly, that might occur with CoPs that do not continually reinvent themselves through the inspiration that new members provide. But, there was little sense of such a loss in creativity evident from my conversations with the three oldtimers and the one newcomer interviewed. It is likely they would be disturbed to know that Karl believed this was happening. Max actually presented a different view about the CoP’s abilities to keep coming up with new ideas which challenged Karl’s mindset. He spoke about this on two different occasions during the interview. Firstly, he linked their creativity to the inherent differences in how they each ran their own kitchens and later he mentioned how ‘we just keep finding new stuff all the time, to improve the way we’re doing things and once again, that’s why we are left alone I think, it really is’. Karl (Mgmt) took it for granted that over time, there would be fewer new ideas generated by the community whereas Max did not. The members interviewed claimed their debates in the meetings were robust and lively.

Another point that Karl (Mgmt) touched on concerned the organisational culture within the Department. He said it had changed towards a more holistic environment and was ‘becoming a total system ... we’re looking to work together rather than independently’. Still, the existence of such a change program within their Department was not mentioned by any of the interviewees. This could potentially indicate some fundamental differences between the assumptions and thinking of the CoP and its sponsor or it could simply relate to the different realms of their work. Max added another layer in considering the connection between the CoP and the organisation. I asked him whom he saw as important, outside of the community itself, and he replied, ‘Probably nobody, to be honest. We don’t have a lot of people sticking their nose into what we’re doing … because I think they have a bit of trust and a bit of faith in what we’re doing … we pretty much run our own race’. He later returned to this notion of trust flowing from the organisation to the community and how important he saw it in relation to the ongoing success of the CoP. ‘If we had someone at every single one of our meetings, looking over our shoulder to see what we’re doing, then they would be suspicious of us because they’ve got that person there. The mere fact that they don’t, is that they trust us as group and as individuals, that we’re doing the right thing by ourselves and most of all, by them’.

CoP sponsor

As the link between the CoP and their host organisation, the sponsor occupies a very important position with some degree of influence over the community depending on how formal this connection is. Karl (Mgmt) explained his role like this.

The concept of a sponsor is simply one of a person who acts as a conduit between the group and other parts of the organisation. Any recommendations or ideas that they have, the
sponsor’s obligation is to put them into affect if you like. That’s certainly the approach, or the concept of a CoP’s sponsor that exists within the Department … Once it’s up and running, they’re basically an autonomous group … if they have recommendations … it would probably come to me and I’d feed it up to the relevant person within the Department chain … It’s probably just as pivotal that the sponsor has the obligation to push whatever recommendation as high up through the food chain as they can.

So, from Karl’s point of view, after the initial start, his role was simply to push the CoP’s recommendations upwards. Conversely, Max saw the sponsor’s role more broadly and his focus was that the sponsor provided backing for the community. ‘Karl’s the one who stood up and took us on [as our current sponsor]. He does Purchase and Supplies, so I suppose he has some sort of vested interest in what we do as a group anyway, and I think that was the marriage they tried to get between the leadership and the group’. In describing the relationship with Karl as their sponsor, Catrina certainly saw him as someone outside the community who was important. ‘He’s the finance dude. He likes to come along every now and then and see what we’re up to’. Toby agreed saying ‘Karl from the head office, who’s the Supply Manager, he’s nearly always involved with all the meetings. He didn’t attend the last one but he pushes it and he knows it’s a good thing’. Conversely Max said, ‘Karl doesn’t get to a lot of the meetings. I mean, he’s a busy man as well and he can’t always get there, so I mean, we can chug along without him’. Inconsistencies have been revealed, predominately about the sponsor’s role in that Karl appeared to consider it in a much narrower way than the CoP members themselves did. This also revealed differences amongst the CoP members in terms of how often Karl actually attended their meetings. And as discussed previously, there were also contradictions between Karl and the CoP members about the number of CoP meetings held each year. These variations in their understanding may simply be accounted for by their different work realms or perhaps relative seniority in the organisation. Some of the differences present between the CoP members and Karl, as the CoP’s sponsor, were relatively unimportant, but then again, other areas hint at more significant differences, such as their capacity as a mature CoP to keep coming up with creative ideas.

The existence of a sponsor or champion on the management team demonstrates a level of support that the organisation is providing to the community. But there are also other, sometimes quite significant and costly, support mechanisms that can be provided. Karl (Mgmt) touched on these organisational costs. As mentioned before, he pointed out that while there were certainly financial costs involved, the biggest difficulty with the community meeting up every few months related to the members being away from their usual workplaces for sometimes more than a day. But clearly there are equally significant benefits that flow back to the organisation from the CoP – as discussed previously, these benefits seem to all fall within the category of cost saving measures. But equally, there are limits. As Catrina noted, ‘We’ve got a lot of ideas
but unfortunately it comes down to money and our ideas will not be carried out because of that. We have ideas what we want to do because we can go to all the suppliers, like direct and say we’ve got a central cool room; we’ve got a central freezer and a central store. We want to order a couple of ton of this, a couple of ton of that, this is where we want it delivered to and if we had the logistics, we could actually export it - transport it around the State and that would bring considerable cost savings to us but unfortunately there’s no money so we can’t do that’.

Recognition and rewards

Recognition that the CoP’s efforts achieve positive results could be seen as another form of support that is part of the connection between the organisation and the community. Although it can be intangible, any form of recognition and/or acknowledgment of success can be highly influential. I asked Karl (Mgmt) if he felt the Catering CoP received much recognition. ‘Here, in this Department, we are very much focused on acknowledgement of achievements of individuals and groups and they have all - and I know Max has received some. [He] has been in for two award and recognition ceremonies ... I know Max has been up to receive awards from the Secretary for the Department for his work in the CoP and all the members received acknowledgments for their effort and outcomes. It is a very important thing to maintain enthusiasm and to increase the longevity of the group’s effectiveness’. In following this up with the members I interviewed, some intriguing facets emerged. Toby was confident that others in the organisation knew about the CoP’s success and he gave an example: ‘like a letter in one of the newsletters, just thanking the group for what it’s done and what it’s achieved for the Department. So there’s the Secretary of the Department acknowledging the group, so yeah it’s up there’. While Toby saw the newsletter article thanking the group as recognition of its efforts over the years, he also talked about the simple fact that they are allowed to meet up regularly, as a form of reward. ‘Because management right across the facilities now know how well the group works, so they’re not going to say “No, you’re not going to that meeting”. Yeah, they’ll just say, “Put in your claim and away you go”’. Max was not so sure. When I asked him if he would say the organisation valued the community, he replied, ‘You’d probably have to ask the organisation … I don’t know what they think about us, I really don’t … like I said, we don’t hear anything from them, good, bad or indifferent, we’re left alone … if the organisation aren’t sending people out to check on us, they’re happy as well, as far as we’re concerned’.

Max’s statements that he didn’t know how management perceived the CoP seemed somewhat intriguing, particularly as he had received several awards for his work with the CoP. About getting recognition, he said, ‘I don’t think we really care because we’re not in it for recognition. We’re in it because we want to help one another and at the end of the day, if I can help one person in that room go away and do something a little bit better, that’s all the recognition I
need. I’m not interested in the rest of it’. I also sought to discover how Adam as the newcomer to the CoP felt about this notion of recognition and rewards but from a slightly different perspective. I asked him if he had a sense that the community celebrated its successes. ‘No, actually no. I think they have more modesty than that. They’re proud of what they do, don’t get me wrong but I think as a group, they’re quite a modest bunch and I don’t honestly believe that they would go out and go “Yippee! We’ve achieved this” or “We’ve achieved that”. I don’t think they’re like that. I’m certainly not and I haven’t seen that side of them’. Nevertheless, he did believe the Department should recognise their efforts more.

I don’t honestly believe that they tell the guys how good a job they’ve done often enough and I don’t honestly believe that the Department as a whole, has ever once said, ‘Thank you’ to the catering staff because I’ve never heard that … I think it would be a good thing … just an acknowledgment that yes, you’re doing a tough job in a hard area, keep going. That would mean a lot to a lot of people and that’s where I think the Department needs to step up and say, ‘Well done’.

It was obvious that Adam did not know about the formal awards already presented to the community. There was some uncertainty though as to whether the CoP itself had been given formal recognition through the conferring of an award or whether the awards that both Karl (Mgmt) and Max mentioned were given to Max, as the CoP leader. Although Karl did say that members of the Catering CoP had received acknowledgments for their ‘effort and outcomes’. I also talked with Catrina about management acknowledging their efforts and she responded that ‘at the end of the day, they [management] see the savings and the benefits brought about by our participation in the Community of Practice ... They tell us. I mean, my bosses do, yes and especially our Financial Services Manager, Business Services Manager, yeah always. Just tells us how good we do’. From the context of Catrina’s interview though, it was apparent that she perceived the recognition as coming from her local operational management rather than head office. Interestingly, Max was the only one of the four members interviewed who mentioned any formal award as recognition for their successes which raises the question as to whether the other members knew about it. Perhaps, as Adam claimed, such appreciative feedback was relatively unimportant and they may have just forgotten to mention it during the interviews, particularly as it is unclear just how long ago Max had received the awards.

Possible futures

When the question of additional support from the organisation in the future was explored, the four CoP members interviewed were forthright in expressing their views. While Adam was proud of the economies of scale the CoP had been able to generate regarding their food purchases, he thought opportunities existed for the Department to become more involved and so
maximise these economies of scale. ‘The community themselves can only put so much pressure on but the Department, being [a] pretty… massive company, they could actually approach a company and say listen we’re going to guarantee you business but you need to guarantee me a price and they could probably lock them in for a longer period than we can’.

Another possibility he mentioned was having CoP meetings more often whereas Catrina’s ideas about increased support were more of an intangible nature in that she wanted head office to have more understanding about what the caterers do. Max, on the other hand, was happy with the current arrangements. Both Max and Catrina pointed out that there were really two levels of management supporting the CoP and its activities. Catrina talked about head office while both Max and Toby mentioned support from their local management. Toby provided the following example.

I’d come back from a meeting and … [my manager would say] ‘Sit down, what happened’. He was interested because he knew we’re gone from no meal choice to full meal choice and stuff like this and most of the work, what I’ve had to put into that, if I was doing it by myself, it would’ve taken me ages but the group helped. They’d send me copies of menus and everything else, so as a group, its really helped and its made management happy because he can go forward to the GM’s meetings and everything else and say, ‘Yes we’re now on [a] healthy eating diet’, all this sort of stuff. So, you get that recognition from management and a lot of it.

Toby’s example of the local facility’s management agreement to the holding of these meetings opened up another avenue of exploration around management support. To investigate further, I constructed a scenario where the current meeting arrangements were reversed, i.e. what would happen if organisational support for the CoP meetings was withdrawn by management. Adam responded like this.

I think initially there would be an email distributed to all the facilities to say, ‘Look, the Department can’t afford for us to have these, would anyone have a problem with us doing these in our own time’. I think that would be the first step. If there was a lot of people that did have a problem doing it in their own time, then they might well just stop but with this particular group, I don’t honestly believe it would. I think, they would continue regardless and people would do it in their own time because it does make for a better working environment and it makes everyone’s job that little bit easier because of what they get out of these meetings. So, I don’t think this one would ever end.

His reply indicated an extremely high level of commitment from the members as he clearly thought they would continue to meet but on their own time using their own personal resources such as their own vehicles. Adam returned to this subject later in the interview. ‘The reason I think the catering one is as successful as it is, is quite simply because of the people that are in it
and because of the way they go about doing their job. So all the people that I know, that go to the CoP are dedicated to what they do. They have that level and like I said, if the Department was to turn around and say there’s no more funding, they would still have them’. As Adam was the last CoP member I interviewed, no further opportunities to explore this scenario with the other interviewees were available. The situation provided a good example of the ‘flip-flop’ that can happen with this type of research where the material generated informs its conceptualisation and vice versa in a circular manner all the way through the project. Adam’s response certainly confirmed the overall view that the bonds holding the community members together are very robust.

To sum up this analysis of the Catering CoP, the members have demonstrated a strong sense of satisfaction in achieving the CoP’s objectives. Karl (Mgmt) was similarly satisfied with the CoP’s activities. In addition, the members seemed to enjoy, and even honour, the richness of their interpersonal relationships with each other. Even so, highly cohesive groups with a long and stable history together can become predisposed to certain types of knowing (Roberts 2006) which may result in a homogenisation effect on the CoP in the longer term, or even groupthink (Koliba & Gajda 2009). Critical debate brought about by the entry of new people opens up different ways of thinking, resulting in new ideas, processes and outcomes. At the same time, views can become polarised into established positions, particularly if the newcomers are relatively young and inexperienced. Such situations can mean that individuals become more inclined to conform to the majority view with newer members losing heart. Thus, new energy with the potential to invigorate the community can fade away and potentially be entirely lost. The issue of newcomers in this community is a vexed one due to the CoP’s closed membership which operates in combination with their more informal practices of inviting other catering staff to meetings, on an ad hoc basis.

A range of challenges have become visible as inconsistencies and potentially damaging trends emerged. In several areas, assumptions made by the community and the organisational host varied. Some of these issues were relatively simple such as the number of meetings being held, but others were more significant, e.g. different perceptions about individual roles such as the sponsor and even the CoP leader. All could create discord with the potential to disrupt the CoP’s future. On the other hand, there was strong evidence that this community and their everyday practices have ensured they are a vibrant CoP.
Foreword

This chapter focuses on the extended study of the Training CoP which has been constructed, like the previous chapter, through a comprehensive analysis of the community’s participation in Stage 2. Selecting the Training CoP as one of the three communities invited into the second stage of the research arose out of several factors. Of the nine communities in Stage 1, the Training CoP was distinctive in regard to the CoP/host organisation relationship as it was quite brittle. The result was this CoP habitually, and very intentionally, hid its existence to avoid being disbanded by the organisation.

The community started in 2002 when training was decentralised and since then the Training CoP has located itself, quite explicitly, outside the formal reach of the organisation and actively resisted any closer connections. Such a complex relationship was intriguing, particularly as researching the dynamics associated with the connections between a CoP and its organisation emerged as a significant theme of interest during the research. Serendipitously, significant organisational changes, involving both senior management personnel and complex structural issues associated with the training function, occurred during 2008. A flow-on effect from these changes was that the extremely weak ties between the Training CoP and the organisation began to grow and strengthen. These influential changes in the life of the Training CoP are explored in depth towards the chapter’s end.

Another important factor in the selection of the CoPs to move into Stage 2 concerned their industry base. The members of the Training CoP are staff employed by a large Australian corporation with offices across the country. The participation of the Training CoP meant that the private sector was represented in the extended studies of Stage 2 — providing an opportunity to take into account relevant contrasts between public/private industries.
List of interviewees

Here is a short introduction to each of the seven people interviewed (five women and two men) associated with the Training CoP. Five of these interviewees were current CoP members, one was an ex-member and the other interviewee was the CoP’s sponsor. The interviews themselves were held between July and September 2008: five were face-to-face with the remaining two on the telephone. The duration of the interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes each.

ATHOL was one of four core members who joined the Training Network and the CoP soon after it started in 2002 and he continues to play a key role. He works closely with Owen and they are both physically located in the head office building in the city. Athol’s interview was conducted face-to-face in his office and lasted over 30 minutes.

FERN has been a long-term member of the Training Network since 2002 but she was not part of the original centralised training unit. She was invited to join the Network’s organising group (the Training CoP) a couple of years ago due to her high levels of interest, support and participation. Fern works outside the city and seldom goes into head office. She generally communicates with the others by phone, email or using the company’s instant messaging system. Her interview was just under 40 minutes and was conducted on the telephone.

HELENA was the newcomer (for the purposes of this research) even though she has been a CoP member since the latter part of 2006. At that time, she was also a relative newcomer to the company’s training function as she first started work in the organisation during 2004. Prior to that, Helena had been a management consultant and before that, a secondary school and adult education teacher. Training forms only a part of her current job. She works at a city-based location but not in the organisation’s head office building which she seldom visits. The interview with Helena was conducted face-to-face and it continued for almost 90 minutes.

JULIE was my first CoP contact and key liaison. She has been heavily involved in both the Training Network and the Training CoP since it began in 2002. She attending the first CoP meeting and increasingly took on more responsibilities. Julie has remained committed to the Training CoP and the Training Network continuously since then, except for a brief period but she soon became involved again and continues to lead the CoP with Simon as co-leader. She has strong working relationships and social bonds with Simon, Athol and Owen (the core group of four oldtimers). Julie works at head office and her interview lasted 60 minutes.

MARGO was the CoP’s sponsor and her role includes managing the computer applications associated with the organisation’s intranet. Early in 2008, a significant shift occurred which
resulted in the management of the training information system (Managing Training System or MTS) being placed within her accountabilities. Before then, Julie had transferred into a position within Margo’s group and Margo had continued to support Julie’s CoP activities. After Margo’s team became responsible for the MTS, Julie was ideally placed as a conduit between the new owners of the MTS and the Training CoP – a connection resulting in far reaching impacts for both the Training CoP and the Training Network. Her interview was conducted on the telephone and lasted a little over 20 minutes.

**SIMON** was one of the instigators of the idea of the Training Network and the associated training community in 2002 and he has remained committed since then. From the CoP’s early days, he and Julie have jointly led both the community and the Network. With Athol and Owen they form the core group of four oldtimers. Simon was part of the centralised training unit prior to its dismantling in 2002 when he was transferred to a work location in the suburbs. He tries to meet up with the other members at head office around three times a year. I interviewed Simon face-to-face at his suburban work location and we spoke for almost 90 minutes.

**TRUDIE** was relatively new to the organisation in that she commenced in the same year as Helena (2004) although they work in very different areas. Trudie’s background was business systems and she became involved in both the Training CoP and the Training Network during 2007 as she was working on a training project. In 2008, she changed roles and her connection with training ended. Thus, while she was a CoP newcomer for a time, at the interview, she had become an ex member. It became clear that Trudy never felt a part of the close collegiality that ties the four core members (Simon, Julie, Athol and Owen) together. She also works at head office and her interview was face-to-face, lasting 45 minutes.

Table 24 below lists the 16 people who are referred to by name in this chapter, that is, the seven interviewees as well as a further nine people who were mentioned in this analysis but who were not interviewed (for those whose full name was mentioned by the interviewees, their pseudonym also includes both first and surname). The seven interviewees are identified with an asterisk and are shown in bold type. Relevant details are also included for each person as well as their geographical work location, where appropriate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Work location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Athol</td>
<td>Oldtimer and core member</td>
<td>Head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronwyn</td>
<td>Non-active member</td>
<td>Head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>Potential newcomer</td>
<td>Interstate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Fern</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Outer suburb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Details</td>
<td>Work location</td>
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<td>--------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helena</strong></td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
<td>City, not head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennie</td>
<td>Member, sometimes active</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Julie</strong></td>
<td>Oldtimer, liaison/key informant, joint CoP leader and core member</td>
<td>Head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiera</td>
<td>Ex-member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lart Taylor</td>
<td>Chief training Officer and CoP link to the organisation's executive</td>
<td>Head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Member but much less active now</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Past member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Margo</strong></td>
<td>Current sponsor and CoP link to operational management</td>
<td>Head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>Oldtimer and core member</td>
<td>Head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre Berr</td>
<td>Facilitated initial contact with Julie</td>
<td>City, not head office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simon</strong></td>
<td>Oldtimer, joint CoP leader, founding and core member</td>
<td>Outer suburb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trudie</strong></td>
<td>Was newcomer, now ex-member (left early 2008)</td>
<td>Head office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 24: Training CoP Stage 2 summary table

**What is the Training CoP?**

This community primarily emerged as a coping mechanism associated with a significant strategic change initiative enacted corporation-wide in 2002. The organisation decentralised the training function, changing the framework to a new Human Relations-based model. In operational terms, this meant closing the centralised training unit of approximately 300 staff who had been responsible for all training design and delivery. Each functional area within the company was then required to create their own training unit which would be staffed through the transfer of some of these head office staff. The remaining staff from the corporate training unit became redundant, resulting in a huge loss of teaching knowledge, skills and experience. It also meant many small pockets of training staff were scattered throughout the organisation with no effective corporate co-ordination. In the midst of all the turmoil, the Training Network and its associated organising group, i.e. the Training CoP, began. Access was provided to some secondary material, including several key documents or extracts, which underscore how the change impacted on the remaining training staff and their thinking about the future. One such document was an email, dated March 2002 which Simon sent to all involved in training, mentioning a ‘huge wake — some fitting end to this era’ as being important to think about. In
common with major change initiatives in organisations, it was clear that the loss experienced by
those who were retained, i.e. the lucky ones who still had a job, was substantial. Simon’s email
could be seen to have been instrumental in terms of their moving through these difficulties.

In hindsight, its importance cannot be overstated as it holds within it the seeds of the future
Training Network and the Training CoP. As can often be the case, in times of redundancy in
organisations, senior managers attempt to overlay a positive spin on bad news. Although
supportive of the email and its intentions, the National Manager of Training was quoted in it as
saying that this time (of change) was a watershed. Slightly more critically, Simon added his
own analogy in the message.

I think he [the National Manager, Training] understates the situation. I think of it
more as a Tsunami that will wash away the company’s central training provider.
Some people may unfortunately drown and some will undoubtedly ride the wave of
change to new worlds. But for many people, when they pull themselves clear of the
debris and look around, they’ll find themselves in small disoriented groups,
scattered across island of training in the sea of the company (extract of email
dated 22 March 2002).

This email presented a grim scenario but there was also a sense of looking toward the future,
perhaps not quite with hopeful eyes, but at least, attempting to resurrect something, in a
phoenix-like manner, from the upheaval. In this email, there was a list of questions which
foocussed on issues such as ways that isolated training staff might stay in touch and how they
could all maintain their knowledge assets.

It was Simon, as the author of this email, who sought to cultivate the seeds of a new beginning
to combat the coming isolation of training staff, an issue that was pertinent to him as he was
being relocated to a functional area outside the city. It was quite clear that he was also
concerned about the training knowledge drain flowing out of the organisation. Simon reflected
on these early days during his interview and spoke candidly of his own self-interest being a part
of his motivation in creating these connections. He drew up the group’s aims ‘in terms of
knowledge sharing and continuing, being able to utilise the other people, for mutual benefit ... as
much for my benefit as anyone else’s and particularly when I’m out here, to be able to
continue the networking and relationships with other people involved in training, in other parts
of the company and physically located elsewhere’.

The restructure was keenly felt on many different levels as the culture of the disbanded training
unit had been highly cohesive, close knit and collaborative. They had long-established
cooperative processes in place such as Brown Bag Sessions for knowledge sharing at lunchtime.
The pending loss of such processes and the entire centralised training framework proved to be a
catalyst for a few key thinkers, one of whom was Simon. As creative, innovative professionals, these astute few could clearly see a need for the old unit’s staff to create new opportunities around sharing knowledge in their new environments and to then nourish and grow these vital links. They were prepared to work together towards creating these connections. This initiative was fully supported by the unit’s Senior Manager who became the Training Network’s initial figurehead and liaison with the company’s hierarchy and who subsequently became the Training Network’s first sponsor.

Reflecting on those times, Fern said, ‘There was a real fear that they would all lose contact, that they would lose the knowledge sharing, lose their skills, that they’d be a lone person out in these different business areas and not have any support, which is why the Training Network formed’. Thus, the Training Network’s aim was to facilitate informal connections between the corporation’s training professionals/practitioners and their training knowledge assets. Trudie also reflected on her understanding of what was happening during those times and expressed both her somewhat derogatory view of the company’s actions and her admiration of the founders and gratitude for the ‘gifts’ they share. She said, ‘I wouldn’t say that the company makes stupid decisions but there are times in most organisations when they go through a restructure, where people with a lot of knowledge leave. ... Training Network was put together to keep that knowledge within the company and to pass it on ... So, I think they’re actually giving us a gift by sharing it because a lot of people don’t’.

The documents made available to me also included the minutes of the first few meetings held in the latter part of 2002. The inaugural meeting of what became the Training Network occurred in August of that year with 34 participants attending. Simon’s introduction is recorded in the minutes of that meeting. He explained, ‘This meeting is about whether we are ready to pool our resources, skills and knowledge – as a training community – to gain the synergies and efficiencies of a collective approach’. One of the issues discussed at the meeting was knowledge management and the attendees expressed interest in knowing more about knowledge management initiatives, both inside and outside the company (Minutes of the Training Network meeting, 14 August 2002). They were aware that the marketing area had instigated knowledge-sharing during 2001, utilising a community approach to learning and sharing. Thus, the Knowledge Management (KM) Community emerged and one of its aims was to ‘consolidate a framework, toolset and process guidelines for the KM Community which can also be used for the facilitation of other CoPs’ (KM Community notes). So, the training group’s first meeting saw an action point drawn up to invite a representative of the KM Community to their next meeting to do a presentation about KM and CoPs. The minutes of this first meeting also indicate that the Training Network was formally established at that point with a list of aims and agreement on its operation based on the following three major activities:
Monthly teleconferences for general information sharing and more formal presentations

Six-monthly review and planning meetings

Website with resources, event information, examples of training materials and newsgroups

The KM Community representative presented at the next Training Network meeting, held on 18 September 2002 which lead to the decision that the embryonic Training Network could fit quite naturally into the CoP concept. At the third meeting on 9 October 2002, the decision was made to set up a smaller group responsible for guiding the Network. Of the seven people who originally volunteered at that meeting to participate in the organising group, Simon, Julie and Owen remain current members. Athol and Jennie also joined soon after and still remain members. They were all part of the original head office training unit and except for Simon they still work in the head office building even though their new roles were devolved to different areas. Since 2002, the Training CoP has continued to guide the Training Network and facilitated knowledge sharing. They instigated different initiatives, e.g. the CoP members began a quarterly electronic newsletter in April 2005 as another communication vehicle for the Training Network and in August 2005, they celebrated three years of successful operation.

Nonetheless, their recruitment into the research was problematic. The CoP’s characteristics developed in my working definition (see Figure 3 on page 95) identified CoPs as having up to 20 members but there were more than 100 people in the Training Network. Thus, my original decision was that they did not meet the research requirements although, of course, very large communities have emerged, particularly online. As my liaison into the community, Julie was surprised and disappointed, as she had been very enthusiastic about participating in the research. The view that the larger Network was a CoP had taken firm root within the community’s consciousness — a viewpoint that had remained unquestioned since the time they were introduced to the concept at the KM/CoP information session held at their second meeting in late 2002. After further discussion with Julie and additional consideration of the original definition of CoPs and how the concept has evolved over time in conjunction with contemporary thinking about Networks of Practice, I decided the smaller, organising group was sufficiently like a CoP to invite them to participate. This decision was fortuitous in that they subsequently became one of three communities chosen to move into Stage 2 because of the intriguing results that emerged from the Stage 1 analysis of their community. Their participation in Stage 2 made it much clearer though that there were complexities associated with considering this group of people to be a CoP, particularly in terms of their practice.
CoP practices

Regarding the actual practice that draws the members of the Training CoP together, the community’s role is to effectively organise and steer the operation of the Training Network. The CoP members work together, accomplishing tasks to co-ordinate, support and nurture the ongoing success of the Network. Although the thrust of the Training Network is training, does that mean the Training CoP matches the theoretical definition of a CoP? This question makes visible some of the dilemmas associated with defining what a CoP is and what it is not. Drawing on Lave and Wenger’s original 1991 work where the social practices of the CoP’s members provided a self-directed framework for learning, it could be difficult to justify classing the Training Network’s organising group as a CoP. Their prime aim was to organise the Network, i.e. task-related rather than learning while the Network aims to share knowledge. Yet, it became obvious there were actually two layers of learning happening in the Training CoP. The first layer concerned the learning that radiated through the Network and as the Training CoP members participated in the Network, they were a part of this flow of knowledge. Maintaining this flow was essentially the reason for the CoP’s existence, i.e. to ensure that corporate training knowledge assets were not lost and that such assets were freely available to those who needed them in their everyday jobs within the corporation.

However, there was also another, less obvious, layer of learning happening. It occurred internally within the Training CoP, as members shared their knowledge about training with each other and voluntarily worked together on training matters at a high level. Such self-directed learning emerged through their activities in the social practices of the CoP and to some extent, it could be said to be an unintentional by-product of their work nurturing and guiding the Network. As Julie said, ‘I’ll go up and see them [Athol and Owen] and have a chat, especially if I need help’. Describing them as ‘the boys’, she said, ‘the boys come to me if they want help with my project and I can help, I can facilitate that really, really quickly’. There can be no doubt that the members in this community regularly share knowledge about the practice of training and learn from each other. As Julie explained, ‘We have, with Owen and Athol and Simon and myself ... [and] you’ve got Lily and Jennie as well, we’ve got a core group of people who are very, v-e-r-y good at their jobs. We’ve all got our qualifications and all that, we’ve also been here a long time and we know things. There’s a core level of experience, an understanding of how things operate and work within the company’. So, it was evident that, as well as learning moving from the CoP out to the Training Network (the CoP’s external environment), there were ongoing learning flows happening within the internal environment of the Training CoP.

As briefly discussed in the analysis of the Training CoPs survey results in Chapter 4, the Training Network and the Training CoP were considered as separate entities for the purposes of this research. On a theoretical level, the Training Network was classed as a Network of Practice.
and the organising group as a CoP. This created a rather artificial division that was sometimes
difficult to maintain. For, as Trudie put it, ‘I see the Training CoP and the Training Network as
a full body that’s working towards the same goal’. Still, it was the group of organisers as the
Training CoP that was the unit of analysis for the purposes of this research even though Simon
unambiguously presented the CoP’s main focus as being task-related, rather than learning or
sharing knowledge.

In the latter part of Julie’s interview, she went straight to the heart of this quandary around
identifying the group as being a CoP. In discussing Helena’s position as new member with Julie
and what that meant for the group’s dynamics, I asked her if Helena was learning from the
others or whether her lack of experience might cause her to feel somewhat on the outer. ‘I do
not know, because on the Training CoP, we’re basically talking about the nuts and bolts of
what’s going on across training and how we’re [the Network is] going. We’re not talking about
how to do a great instruction list, sound, materials and all that sort of stuff. I know though that
help will be there if she needed help in that sort of area’. Again, here was a clear indication that
both Simon and Julie saw the CoP as more concerned with the tasks of maintaining the Network
rather than learning and sharing what they know about training with each other. As the
newcomer, Helena can certainly access what the others know and so increase her own
understandings but more as a side effect rather than their reason for getting together. Julie
explained that she was the newcomer when the CoP first started in 2002. As she put it, ‘I was
Helena when I first came in, I was one of the junior members who leveraged off these guys [the
other three core members] and learnt so much from them, that I’m now one of the senior
members and I just really appreciate that so much’. There can be no doubt that the Training CoP
was sharing knowledge around the training function which resulted in the community’s
members learning from each other, even though this was not its primary purpose.

Thus, the complexities of defining what is, and what is not, a CoP are made visible and
illustrate the potential danger of rigidly applying theoretical definitions, without informed
reflection or consideration. In considering the community’s practices, the task of planning,
organising and managing the Training Network’s meetings (which are generally known as
forums) constitute their primary activity. These forums are audio teleconferences that are
regularly held every month. The conference call hook-up usually lasts an hour from 11am to 12
noon and network members across Australia telephone in to a pre-arranged venue while
Network members who work in the city may also attend to participate in the meeting. Simon
explained, ‘The general meetings [the Training Network forums], we always have a site, a
venue booked in head office because that’s where most of the people are and at times, there
have been small gatherings of people in Brisbane or Adelaide but that hasn’t happened for a
while. So, the rest of the people just phone in’. The CoP members expect each other to attend
each forum on a regular basis, either in person or by phoning in and, as mentioned previously, they are responsible for organising these forums. The secondary documents Simon provided included a sample forum agenda: an update he prepared in August 2008 listing the activities of the Training CoP. See Table 25.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum Agenda</th>
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<tr>
<td>– Guest speaker (internal or external)</td>
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<tr>
<td>– ‘Show and Tell’</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Training staff comings and goings</td>
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<td>– Training development opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Corporate training update includes updates regarding Corporate intranet and IT</td>
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<tr>
<td>– General training information sharing</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Recognition of outstanding contributions to the Network</td>
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*Table 25: Example of a Training Network forum agenda*

**CoP meetings**

Organising each Training Network forum means quite a lot of work for the Training CoP members. Simon explained that as well as organising the meetings, they also did other things. ‘We might be reviewing the direction and operation of the Training Network, the way we run the meetings, how the community itself operates or any other activities or events, apart from the actual meeting because occasionally, we’ve done some personal development thing’. At the same time, Simon admitted that ‘We’ve had this long standing desire to initiate or encourage someone to work with us corporately to run a company-wide training conference. Since the company’s training section was closed down, there’s never been anything at a corporate level that brought together all the people and had a collective focus on training across the company’.

Irrespective, it was quite clear that the CoP’s major joint endeavour was steering the forum meeting which required them to meet monthly. ‘We’ve always got to go through sorting out the agenda and inviting people and deciding the chair and the admin stuff’. In discussing these regular CoP meeting, Julie added that the CoP meetings were usually held a week before the Network forum and ‘we have a de-brief after the Training Network sometimes, actually, it’s usually just me and Simon who has a de-brief afterwards’.

**CoP members**

All eight members of the Training CoP, except for Helena and possibly Fern, could be considered oldtimers. Athol, Julie, Owen and Simon certainly are. While Jennie and Lily
participate less now in comparison to their activity levels at the CoP’s early days, they are still considered community members with Jennie more active currently than Lily. In further considering the boundaries within the CoP, who the oldtimers are and who belongs to the core group, Fern’s positioning was somewhat ambiguous. She joined the Training CoP at about the same time as Helena which would mean she is a newcomer. On the other hand, she has been a member of the Training Network since it began in 2002 and has been involved with training all that time but she was not part of the original centralised training unit. She explained though that she ‘still had plenty to do with them’. Thus, her previous experience in the Network and her many shared experiences with the other core CoP members, in combination with her familiarity with the training function in the company more generally, meant those interviewed considered her in a different light to Helena. She seemed more like an oldtimer than a newcomer. As Julie put it, ‘We’ve known Fern for years as well but she’s only become involved in the last, I’d say 18 months or so … [with] the Training CoP’. The vestiges of these old relationships seemed still important within the consciousness of some CoP members even though several years have passed since the organisation changed strategic direction by decentralising the training function. Regardless, while Fern’s involvement in the Network and the CoP was significant, it was only Simon who included her in the core group. It is important though to be careful in assuming that group boundaries can be explicitly defined in such ways and that all concerned might agree with such definitions. Simon did portray the core as being five people (rather than four) by including Fern. She herself said, ‘I’m sort of a sit back person, not that I don’t get involved but I don’t take the - you know, I don’t chair the meetings and that sort of thing’.

Although neither Lily nor Brownyn were interviewed, they were both mentioned several times by others in ways that can be related to boundary issues. They were both long-term members of the community (and past members of the centralised training unit of 2002) which would make them oldtimers. Julie explained Lily’s situation and her current lack of participation in the CoP like this. ‘Lily used to be a lot more involved but her role has changed. So, what you do find, as people change roles, they become more involved or less involved in the Training CoP but they still want to stay part of the Training CoP’. Later in the interview, Julie again mentioned Lily, saying she ‘is about to shift location … I’m hoping she stays in the Training CoP when she does move, it will be nice’. Julie had commented that ‘Lily is my best friend’. Her approach to the situation with Bronwyn and her decreased participation in the CoP was significantly different. ‘We have got somebody on the Training CoP at the moment, we wanna sack her! But, it’s a voluntary thing so we basically just decided to start leaving her off emails and everything, because in the last 18 months that she’s been on the Training CoP, she’s only been to two Training Network meetings and one Training CoP meeting …I would not consider her to be a legitimate member … I have a feeling she’s only on it so she can put it on her resume. When considering conflict in the community, Julie returned to this notion of lack of reciprocity in
regard to Bronwyn and claimed that it had become a source of internal tension. ‘The only conflict at the moment is we’re all really disheartened with Bronwyn, really find her disheartening and not sure what to do about that’.

Julie did say later that Bronwyn’s boss ‘has no sympathy at all for any involvement with things he calls extracurricular activity and he’s categorically said, they’re not allowed to go to the Training CoP meetings or Bronwyn, she can’t go, but that’s only last week, so this is her excuse, not to go to this one’. Julie does not seem to have really considered the impact of ‘leaving Bronwyn off the community’s emails’ as it would further limit her participation. Clearly, Julie believed Bronwyn was letting them down in terms of reciprocity which she found unacceptable. On the other hand, even though Lily’s participation was minimal because she had changed roles and was relocating, Julie was still hoping Lily ‘stays in the Training CoP when she does move’. This seems a contradiction when they ‘want to sack’ Bronwyn for her lack of participation. Apparently Lily had accumulated strong social capital while Bronwyn had not. Both Bronwyn and Lily gain some benefits from maintaining an ongoing link into the CoP. For Lily, it is a connection with senior management while Bronwyn’s resume is strengthened. On the other hand, Simon considered both Bronwyn and Lily as ex-members. The community’s boundaries were hard to define with participation rates clearly not the only influencing factor. There were eight people identified as members of the community at the time of the Stage 2 study. These eight people fit rather neatly into three subgroups in terms of the roles they play in the practice of the Training CoP.

- Athol, Jennie, Julie, Lily, Owen and Simon (the six oldtimers)
- Fern (newcomer/oldtimer)
- Helena (newcomer)

Over the years, other people have joined as members and then subsequently left which Fern explained in this way. ‘They had not so much come and gone ... maybe their roles changed, so they can’t justify it to their manager, I suppose, being involved because they’re no longer in a training role’ which was the reason Bronwyn had given for her participation dropping off. It was also the case with Trudie who was interviewed even though she had actually left the community because she had sought a job change.

Oldtimers

The relationships between all six oldtimers were strong which Julie credited to the extensive work history they shared. ‘It’s because me, Owen, Athol, Simon, Lily, Jennie, we worked
together six years ago [and] we’ve got a long history together’. All were part of the centralised training unit before it was disbanded in 2002. When the organising group was first formed at the third Training Network meeting (in late 2002), Simon, Julie and Owen all volunteered. Shortly after that, Athol, Jennie and Lily became involved in the Training CoP. So, as well as these six people having extensive experience in the training function, they all have a shared history as colleagues working together in the original centralised training unit and as influential members of the Training CoP and subsequently of the Training Network. Simon explained, ‘There’s all the people who knew each other well from the company’s training section and a lot of them are very good friends. Julie and Lily and Owen and Athol and so on and Jennie, so all the people in town and then Helena is really only the new person who’s come into that picture’.

Simon’s disclosure that Helena had been the only newcomer ‘to come into the picture’ and join in with the original six was telling. With Helena seemingly being the only newcomer, other than Fern whose positioning in this grouping was rather ambivalent, there can be no doubt that the long established links between these six oldtimers remain strong. And even though all these oldtimers continue to be involved in the community to somewhat differing degrees, it quickly became obvious there was a very active and highly prominent inner core group within these oldtimers. Those in this subgroup were highly influential in the early days and they still continue to direct the CoP’s activities. And while there was some difference of opinion about whether there were four or five in this core group, the predominant view was that the core was four people: Simon, Julie, Owen and Athol. Julie agreed that they have been central to the CoP ‘since the inception ... the four of us are the ones that really keep it going … I do really think that the key members of the Training CoP are … the four of us’. Trudie concurred with Julie’s assessment when she said, ‘They definitely are the seniors in that role … the fact that I didn’t have much control over what was happening up the top, really didn’t faze me. I get the feeling that they [the inner core of four] actually do like to have a lot of control and they love the positions they’re in’.

Interestingly, Simon was the only one of these four core members who did not work at head office and he hinted that location does matter. He said, ‘Julie, Owen and Athol, and they’re sort of inseparable, join in and do everything’. He then included Jennie by saying, ‘They’re all close in terms of friendship and working together in the city and they’d probably see each other for lunch and whatever’. Julie agreed, saying that Athol, Owen and her ‘catch up a lot more often [because they work in the head office building] … we’re all here … we all work closely together’.

The strength of the ties that bind them together became obvious as the interviews progressed. As a previous newcomer and now ex-member of the community, Trudie’s view was similar. ‘I
have to say, I’ve always seen them [the core four] as a bit of a unit’. Earlier, she had said, ‘I also think they would welcome a change, at the same time, they’re also more than happy to stay up there’. Generally, the existence of a group, simply by its definition, means that some people belong (the insiders) and some do not (outsiders). The degree of definition between insiders and outsiders depends on the permeability of the group’s boundaries. So, studying these boundaries and subgroups has the potential to reveal significant facets about the Training CoP which may be taken-for-granted by members to the degree that they completely lose sight of them. These boundaries themselves can also be significant, not only within the internal structure of membership subgroups (the insiders) but also between the CoP and the recruiting of outsiders as potential new members. A third boundary exists, i.e. between the CoP and the organisation which is explored in depth later in this chapter.

**Newcomers**

Helena, Trudie and Fern were the newest members of the CoP and although Trudie started in 2007 and had left the CoP shortly before I interviewed her, she was able to reflect on the community in retrospect and provided further insights into the newcomer experience. Trudie’s view was generally very positive.

*I’ve had a very positive and amazing experience with Training Network [and the CoP] because everyone I was dealing with, I was fortunate enough to know and be confident they’ve been here for awhile, they generally knew what was happening … and I guess I knew I was going to get the right side of the information. Not necessarily, the correct information because we’re only got exposure to … it’s very rare to get a full picture. So, I definitely used them as a good resource. I also felt I was a good resource as well … So, with networking, the Training CoP was really easy to join, it was easy to find, it gave me access to seniors and I guess, a wealth of knowledge and I felt quite welcome … the community itself, they’re also quite open.*

While Fern could logically be included in the category of newcomer (as discussed previously), it seemed others did not perceive her that way. Julie’s view on this was quite clear, ‘I wouldn’t consider her [Fern] a new member … I consider her a member of the Training CoP’. So, it seemed like as though Helena was really the only person who could be considered as a newcomer for the purposes of this research. The idea of Helena comprising a group of one was also apparent in Julie’s comments as she seemed to consider the community comprised people from the original centralised group and then there was Helena. Julie actually said, ‘We’ve got a long history together. Helena has just, sort of, come in. We’ve had lots of other Training CoP members come in, and then leave, as their job role changed, but we, who were friends have known each other for that long and we have kept it together’. While such strong bonds can cement social groups together, they can prove daunting for newcomers. Simon said, ‘When
Helena turned up and she didn’t really know anyone ... I don’t know that she actually knew anyone. She was just, you know, putting herself forward and wanting to get involved. A lot of people wouldn’t have taken that step. You needed a bit of confidence to take that step’. Julie reflected on Helena’s participation as well. ‘I hope she feels welcomed. I do. We’ve been very grateful for all the work she’s done and everything, but you’re right, she’s not quite one of the gang, yeah. So, I don’t know, you’d have to ask Helena. I hope she feels okay and welcomed because she’s a great asset! Yeah, I … I’m not sure ... We do try to be inclusive’. Julie’s point about Helena that ‘she’s not quite one of the gang’ was telling: a point that Helena herself confirmed when she said ‘it was like they have a club’.

**Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP)**

Helena was candid as she talked in considerable detail about coming into the CoP as a newcomer and her subsequent experiences. This process was of special significance in this community as there seem to be so few newcomers who continue their participation and become long-term members. This was how Helena explained what she did in the beginning.

> You spend a lot of time listening to them and saying, ‘Oh gee, I didn’t know that. I didn’t know that’. So then, I’d call Julie and say, ‘Oh, when were the Standards due out? How did you do that?’ And so I realised, well, Julie is the Standards person, she’s got a way with it, or seeing their responses to other people’s questions ... You see where their expertise is and where their interests lie, from the way they really answer the others and they will say, ‘Speak to Julie on that one’ or ‘Give Owen a call, they did something similar last month, they’ll be able to tell you what tools they [used]’.

She spent much of her first year ‘listening and learning and asking questions and getting the relationships and understanding, helping out on something little and saying, “Oh Julie, send that to me, I’m happy to read it or I’ll edit that if you like”’ and you know, doing those sort of things and learning’. As the newcomer, Helena was on the periphery of the community and her thoughtful reflections on these early days provide insights into the process of legitimate peripheral participation as it has been enacted within this CoP. I also asked Simon about Helena coming into the group: ‘I think it had to be a big step for her ... she’d have to tell you how difficult. I’ve only spoken to her, quite a few times on the phone but I’ve only seen her face-to-face, a couple of times but the last time I had lunch with everyone in the city which is going back four or five months, she was very much, a part of what was happening. She looked as though she was quite comfortable with everyone. So, I’m assuming she would tell you that she feels comfortable in the community’. Simon went on to explain how the degree of commitment was important. ‘Helena was quite passionate about what we were doing. If someone turned up and they weren’t really that interested in training and they weren’t prepared to put in some of...
their own time - because a lot of what we end up doing, you can’t fit it into your work, you end up doing it in your own time, if someone wasn’t really interested in putting in that extra effort, they would feel out of place and they, it wouldn’t really work’.

I also asked Helena about whether being the newcomer had been a comfortable space for her. ‘I was learning a lot and I wouldn’t say it was comfortable in that, it’s not always great to turn up for meetings and think “Oh wow, I’ve said nothing for the whole hour”. But I walked away with a lot of knowledge and I’ve felt that I was going through this for a purpose and I too, don’t like people who join something new and want to change the world without taking that time to listen, to learn, to ask the questions, to understand the environment. I wasn’t only new to this role; I was new to the company compared to the history these people have’. Helena confirmed that the questions flowing from her inexperience seemed to allow the others to become more aware of things they had grown used to and were being taken for granted. ‘I remember saying once, you know, ‘I’m sorry if I’m always the one asking all the dumb questions here’ and Simon actually said, ‘They’re really valuable because it makes us stop and think ... well, why are we doing it that way, or why is that the focus?’.

At the time of the interviews, Helena had almost completed her first major task as a member of the Training CoP which was to look after the membership records for the Training Network. Julie explained, ‘I think Helena was with us for about six months and we said, “Who would like to [help]” because Owen was struggling, trying to manage the new members as they enrol and Helena said, “I’ll take it over”. This was quite a complex task with more than 100 members in the Training Network working across many different areas of the organisation and located throughout Australia. So, Helena became responsible for the project. The outcome for the community and the Network was that significantly more detailed and accurate statistics became available about the membership body of the Training Network. This provided a key resource not only for the community but for the company overall, particularly in terms of the distributed nature of those involved in the training function throughout the organisation. Through this project, it seemed that Helena had successfully passed what could be perceived as her initiation and she was well on the way to being accepted as a legitimate member of the community. Julie said, ‘Helena has just been a godsend, coming in recently, because she’s taken over all the membership lists, and she’s really got structure around it … so, she’s been really good’.

Later in the interview, Julie again said, ‘so, that was great, so she was participating for a while and then she took over this facet of it and that was really great, it was a really, really positive step’. Legitimacy in this community is all about the individual member’s ongoing contribution to the tasks involved in steering the Training Network. And it seems as though Helena’s success with the membership records has given her some degree of legitimacy. As Helena put it, ‘I
always felt it was like, proving myself. Yeah, you want to join, you’re new, we don’t know anything about you, so let’s see whether you actually will contribute or whether you’re doing this for yourself’. Helena had moved past the stage of inexperienced novice and was no longer on the periphery as she had proved herself. She had also learnt more about how the community operates and about training in general within the organisation.

[You need to] find your space and then suddenly you realise that they were asking you … I felt that they were doing the same thing. [Julie said], ‘Well, let’s see, what she’ll do? Let’s just see how she’ll … there’s people like you, Helena who don’t say anything and then just say, ‘I’ll fix that, and they just go off and do it’. So, I felt from that statement I had somehow proven myself as an equal contributor, although I lacked a lot of their history and their friendships and they worked together, they see each other every day, they don’t see me every day, I’m usually a voice on the phone.

Helena actually talked about passing an initiation which meant that ‘what I was going to say was valued and listened to and I’m not part of the club because I’m still not going to lunches and you can understand that. That’s normal. It’s got nothing to do with liking someone or not valuing them. It’s got to do with proximity’. It was notable that Helena talked about her initiation, almost as if it were a rite of passage as she said she has ‘got my little hat now’. She continued, ‘I’m an equal in that I can speak authoritatively about my area of expertise as well as Julie … since I’ve done the membership though, it’s [as if] I’ve showed them I can. I feel that I’ve got my area of expertise now within the group. So, if they’ve got a membership question, they’ll come to me, where before they weren’t coming to me on anything. Now they will’. It was obvious that Helena felt she had earned the others’ trust by successfully looking after the membership project even though they have known her for a relatively short time. ‘I think that they have a very strong trust in each other, that has accumulated over the years … I think that they trust me. Interestingly though, in discussing new members during Julie’s interview, she became concerned about Helena’s experiences as a newcomer. ‘You’ve made me really worried now about Helena … which is good because it makes us more mindful, when we bring in new people and I’m actually taking something on board from this meeting, for our next Training CoP meeting. I’m going to say, “Helena, you’re the latest member who joined us, is there any way when we approach new members that we can make the transition easier?”’.

This is a good example of the intangible benefits that can result for organisations participating in social research and it also illustrates the ways in which even highly trained professionals can sometimes lose sight of fundamental aspects of the socialising process. Mentoring of newcomers was also of interest but it seemed there was little formalised mentoring happening. Helena said there was ‘not officially but out of all of them, I think Simon has the mentor role, that you could go to Simon and he’s almost like the father of the group, a founding father’.
Julie’s slant on mentoring once again reinforced the mindset that the nature of the community was exclusively task-related. Julie did return to this topic of mentoring later in the interview though. ‘When we were talking about Helena just being dumped in the Training CoP, doing the membership lists and everything, Owen did do a handover, so he did mentor her through that process’. Athol also briefly mentioned that Helena had received some mentoring when she took over the membership records. I raised a question about mentoring within the CoP with Simon and he appeared taken aback about the notion there would be any mentoring in the community. He replied, ‘not overall’ and continued on to then explain,

I’m not sure if that would even work or what that would mean. Where there would be mentoring would be in relation to specific roles. So, if someone for example, took over the news page, then the person who was doing it previously, would be the mentor for the new person who was going to do that, that role. So, that would certainly apply but I mean it wouldn’t amount to anything. I mean, what would the mentor actually be saying. ‘You turn up to the community and you express your view about what we’re discussing’.

Simon’s comments about mentoring concurred with Julie’s and reinforced their focus on task-based activities but does this overlook the very real learning and knowledge sharing that was taking place at a deeper level between the members?

Membership

During the Stage 2 interviews, the CoP was in the process of actively thinking about the future with a specific focus on the membership size. Though not specifically addressing succession issues within the community, the future was on their minds. As there are a large majority of oldtimers (at least 75% or six of eight), the issue of who will take over in the future assumes greater importance as time passes. Several interviewees, i.e. Simon, Julie, Helena and Athol, mentioned how recruiting new members might work and what it might mean for existing members and the CoP overall. The optimum number of CoP members was part of this discussion. Athol said that some may have to stand down to allow new members to come in. He seemed to think the community should have no more than 10 or so members. Simon also talked about the best size for the community. ‘There’s a general feeling that you can’t have too many people or it’s too difficult to operate’. Helena recalled discussions about potential new members joining the community. ‘Should we have a core member of six people who are always there or should they move and let new people in and so we’re talking about how can we bring new blood into it’. Some people joined and then soon left. Helena remembered one such incident. ‘There was another guy who has left since and when he joined the Training CoP, he was amazing. Every time he spoke, [I thought] “Oh my gosh, this guy knows so much” and how we should do this and that and it’s really important and we should … and I’m thinking “this is
going to be great, really dynamic” and then he left’. Regarding this instance, Helena recalled ‘ringing Julie and saying, “Do you know why he left, I thought he was re-writing strategies?” ... I remember Julie said, “There are people who join groups like this and say, “We have to do this and we have to do this and we’ve got to do that and that’s important”, but they never actually do anything”.

A comment Julie made concerning new members provided some clues to the culture of this community. ‘We’ve got a list of new people that we wanna bring in to, so the more the merrier as far as we’re concerned’. However, she then went on, ‘We don’t wanna have too many chiefs at the top because we are very collaborative’. Perhaps she meant that new members are generally welcomed into the community, as long as they do not challenge the existing power holders (a situation not uncommon in groups). The challenge is to appreciate and encourage newcomers, with their new ideas and new ways of doing things. Simon understood the need for new members, saying that for ‘long term viability, you would certainly have to have new people come in, willing to make the commitment, to take over the key driving roles’. As a new member then ex-member, Trudie described an ambivalent succession plan. ‘I’ve noticed with the new Training CoP members, [they tried to] see if we can do a rotation system. So, one month you do a meeting, another month [someone else], they started doing that. So, that must be a part of that, to make sure you can hand over, so it’s not just them four running it, all the time, and I think that’s a great idea, but at the same time, I don’t really think they’re very keen to leave’. It was generally expected that potential new members of the CoP would have some practical experience as a Training Network member, joining which entails a registration form, thus the Training CoP has always had access to a pool of potential new members. One of the CoP’s recent initiatives was to redesign this form and all existing Network members were asked to complete it. The redesign process evolved into a more extensive project seeking to ensure that accurate membership data was collected and then maintained. The first step in recruiting new members into the CoP now begins with this membership form. Julie explained the process. ‘One of the questions [on the new form] was, ‘Would you be interested in helping on the Training CoP ... in this role, [or another]?’. Some Training Network members had indicated an interest and Simon described what happened next.

We invited three new people to come to our last Training CoP meeting. Our expectations for people joining the community, was really just that they’d be involved in the general meetings [Network forums], so they’ve got a bit of an idea of what the Training Network was about from that point of view and we’d obviously be expecting them to be attending reasonably regularly at the Training CoP meetings. Basically saying if you do it, you have to make a commitment to actually be part of it ... we selected four that we thought we’d like to invite along ... So, I asked the four people and one of them, we’ve heard nothing back from a couple of emails. One person, Don came along to the meeting and one was on holidays and one was working
Simon concluded that ‘if we can get two [new members] out of that four, that’d be about right. So, we’ve got eight [current members], so I would say 10 would be the maximum, in my mind, but we didn’t really quantify it with an exact number’. Julie also talked about potential new members, ‘we have got people saying they’re interested in helping us on the website and we’re trying to get people, specifically, to help on the website, people to help run the forums, people to help with the newsletters and yeah, cos remember, it was me!’.

The thought of more people helping with the community’s tasks seemed wonderful to Julie. But, as had already been made clear, it was really only those who were affiliated and active in the Training Network who were eligible for recruitment as new CoP members. I asked Simon if new people coming into the community ‘would actually know the other people in the community? He replied, ‘Oh, have heard of, yes, have heard of people but not necessarily know them’.

But there are other hoops that potential members of this community have to negotiate. The organisation has different forms of staffing arrangements, including contract work, in place. Simon mentioned an incident that was being discussed about whether contractors could (or should) be members of the Training CoP saying ‘, I feel a bit ambivalent about - one of the people who is a very good contributor to the Network and helps, [is] very good with knowledge sharing in the particular area of expertise and he’s a contractor. I don’t really see that that makes any difference in terms of his performance in what he’s doing in the Community of Practice but some people have concerns about there might be issues to do with non-disclosure of information and things like this. So, a decision was made not to invite [him]’. It seemed as though the contractor’s outsider status was just too risky in terms of confidentiality issues and the more influential members of the CoP firmly rejected this person’s attempt to join. The decision about eligibility to become an insider is also very closely related to succession and generational change. I was interested in discovering more about the process the community followed when making decisions to either welcome or reject potential new members. Simon explained, ‘There’s no voting as such, it’s not formal, it’s really informal. There are some people who are very vocal and strong, strongly opinionated and strongly put their views forward and some people that don’t say anything much at all and it’s to some extent left to people, if they’ve got something to say, to say it ... It’s more or less just getting a general sense, we seem to have a bit of a consensus here that the general feeling is that we shouldn’t have contractors, so we’ll go with that’. As in all CoPs, it can be quite problematic to define just where the boundaries lie, i.e. who is in and who is out. In the Training CoP, the contractor issue highlighted a need to consider the membership criteria, instead of taking it for granted.
CoP leadership

For this community, the notion of leadership was complex due to the need to navigate between the two layers of the Training Network and the Training CoP. Athol, for example, seemed definite that the CoP itself did not have a leader but he observed that the community depended on Simon and Julie. Trudie considered Simon and Julie and two others to be the community’s leaders.

The core four people are definitely the organising type and I rely on them to schedule all the meetings. So, they would be considered as leader - I don’t think there is, a leader in, between them. I know there are some people that are more active, like Julie, for example, she’s definitely has a lot more passion than a couple of other people in that group … umm and I actually see that as a great thing because I can rely on her to get passionate about the things that upset me … I’ve always seen them as a bit of a unit … There’s not one leader, so if Julie left, for example, I think it would still continue … it’s just being involved, being always out there, being open, communicating, being very active, makes them, by default, the leaders.

Generally, interviewees would mention Simon, or Simon with Julie when asked about a CoP leader. Simon himself said that ‘we’re [Julie and he] still, by far, the strongest elements in the picture’. It seems that this CoP does have leaders, and others sometimes referred to us as ‘Ma and Pa Training Network’. Being the original architect of the Training Network and the community, Simon’s perspective on this idea of leaders and leadership was revealing. ‘Julie and I, are really de facto leaders … we do more of what’s got to be done … So, part of it is just in terms of doing more and putting the time in but part of it also is very much just having a consciousness of what the Training Network is wanting to do and what’s required to keep it happening … nothing has actually happened or been expressed that gives me a sense that other people have that’. So, for Simon, the CoP leadership role comprised these two elements:

- Knowing how the Network operates and having the motivation and the capabilities (time, energy, know-how etc) to ensure the CoP effectively steers the Network’s activities by organising what needs to be done.

- Having a vision about where the Network should be in the future and the interpersonal skills to move the collective towards that future.

Julie agreed with Simon that being responsible for the community was hard work and she reflected on a time when she became extremely discouraged. There was ‘a couple of years ago where I just hated it and I just wanted to be out, and I had a hissy fit for about a week and said, “I’m not doing it anymore”, because it does take a lot of work’. Apparently Simon played a stabilising role as Helena put it, he ‘is more the wise sage, that sort of stuff’ and she explained that he usually guided the allocation of tasks in their regular meetings. One of the key factors in
the long term viability of a CoP is being aware of the need for succession management, along with appropriate strategies. Thus, to explore the future sustainability of the Training CoP in terms of leadership, I asked Simon about the consequences for the community if either he and/or Julie left. He thought someone would take over but acknowledged that ‘if Julie and I both were taken out of the picture for some reason, then the whole thing might just dwindle away which would be a shame. I don’t know if that would happen, or not’.

[But] until it happens, you really don’t know and it can be quite surprising ... some people then step forward and assume a role because they have to, someone’s got to do it and someone you don’t even expect, you find they’ve got all sorts of strengths and qualities that you didn’t realise were there or are then developed because they’ve been forced into that role ... I suspect it would be more likely to be Helena than anyone else, at the moment, to be honest ... Jennie surprised me recently because she’s been a bit reticent about putting herself forward, she does have team leader experience and that sort of background ... she is a potential, Helena, could do it, Fern’s a bit shy, doesn’t really like being in the spotlight ... So, it sort of, comes down to Jennie and Helena I think, really, from that point of view.

It appeared unlikely the community had so far deliberated on the issue of succession leadership. Simon’s view that Helena, as the newcomer, could potentially lead the CoP in the future might disturb the status quo unless there is some open discussion about the issue.

CoP communication

The communication processes used by this community are associated primarily with the CoP meetings which, in turn, are directed towards organising the Network forums. They meet both before and after the forums as well as communicate via email and the telephone. Regarding email, Julie said, ‘We [are] cc-ing all the time, yeah, especially when I had to find some information I had no idea where to find it, so I send it out to the entire Training CoP or I’ll send it out to select people in the Training CoP who I know will be able to help me. No, there’s lots of communication going on, feedback’. To understand more about the different roles within the community, specifically in terms of newcomers, I asked Julie how Helena fitted into their seemingly long-established patterns of continually cc-ing each other. She replied, ‘I know, she sends a lot of stuff to me and Simon, before she sends it to everybody and we get consensus there’. Helena’s seeking Simon and Julie’s feedback before she emailed something to the other CoP members could indicate her seeking the community leaders’ approval. Perhaps being a newcomer and on the CoP’s periphery, she was attempting to legitimate her participation through learning just how things were done in this community. In considering how the CoP used email, Helena agreed with Julie that ‘there’s a lot of follow up emails about discussions about things and how to do it and why we shouldn’t and what else is needed and stuff like that’.
Returning to the newcomer socialisation process in this community as constructed through their communication processes, I asked Helena whether she felt part of these conversations. ‘Now I do, now but there are still things that they can bring up that I haven’t heard of before ... I don’t think that gap will ever be bridged because I don’t have that history ... [but] I’m here for this history ... So, in five year’s time, when we’re talking about the way things were in 2008, then I’ll be part of that’. Helena’s explanation of her position in the community and the barriers flowing from her newcomer status was insightful. Nevertheless, it highlighted the complexity of the socialisation processin moving beyond being the newcomer. Her assumption though that these communication barriers would inevitably disappear in the future as she accumulated more shared history may be somewhat simplistic, particularly in light of the strong bonds between the existing oldtimers.

Further study of her trajectory in terms of moving in from the periphery could provide significant insights but more in-depth study of this aspect was beyond the scope of this project. The process of newcomers moving from the periphery towards fuller and more influential roles, perhaps even as community leaders, is a key element of a CoP’s long-term viability. At some point in the future, a new order will take over from the current oldtimers (provided the CoP continues). Attempting to understand the effects of the communicative environment on these issues more fully, I raised the question with Simon as to whether the CoP was currently open and safe enough for newcomers to air differences of opinion and thereby question or challenge the dominant thinking. He approached the question from the perspective of the members’ individual personalities. ‘Helena, I think is a pretty strong character in herself ... she may well be willing to challenge and maybe more so, than me’. Whether the community was a safe space for that to happen, he replied, ‘I don’t feel it’s totally, sort of, open and a safe environment for people to express radically different viewpoints ... it has resulted in tension from time to time ... but on the other hand, we’ve managed to survive it and deal with it, up to now’.

As Ma and Pa of the CoP, both Julie and Simon play a key role in the established norms regarding the CoP’s communication practices. As the community’s leaders, they have some influence over how the community engages with differences of opinion and whether or not divergent views which argue against the dominant thinking can be made public to promote critical discussion. But do these critical discussions happen in the Training CoP or are they, perhaps unknowingly, curtailed by the force of Julie’s personality? As Simon put it, ‘Julie’s a very dominant player and you’d have to be pretty strong to challenge something that she’s adamant about’. He acknowledged there was occasional tension between Julie and himself as they sometimes disagreed on the best course of action and he spoke candidly about a current issue. ‘I don’t think we’ve really had a proper, careful, unemotional, objective discussion about what are the real pros and cons and what is the best way for us to handle that situation because
Julie does tend to be very strong and steamroll things a bit, and I’m not very good at, you know, if things start getting, you know, really tense or if it starts feeling like it’s going to get very emotional, I tend to back off and just let it go’.

Simon portrayed himself as being constrained in such circumstances and his response to Julie in this instance was to ‘back off and just let it go’. This is an excellent example of the potential that strong personalities, like Julie, have to hamper debate. Although Simon acknowledged that situations can sometimes arise where a decision needed to be made quickly with very little consultation with others, i.e. steamrolled. Julie also spoke about the sparks that sometimes fly between them. ‘Simon and I have had heated arguments years ago, over the years, we disagree on certain things but we always come to an understanding because we can talk to each other quite well ... and I think that’s the key, there’s no real egos’. It seemed that Julie was uncomfortable framing these ‘heated arguments’ with Simon as conflict because egos were not involved. Although she later said, ‘Simon and I might have had spats, I don’t know, but apart from … no. I can’t think of any other conflict’. In considering this question about robust discussions a little broader with Julie, she admitted ‘I’m bossy, but I think, I hope, they’re used to it now! They just roll their eyes! I really value all of their opinions, so much, I’ll come from one angle and be adamant and Simon will come from another angle and he’ll be equally adamant. But we’ve never not ended up agreeing’.

Even though Julie was quite happy to acknowledge she was ‘bossy’, it was clear that she expected the others to know their opinions were still ‘valued’, just as she valued and respected Simon. Given this tension occurred between the two leaders of this community, it is probable that less powerful members, particularly newcomers, simply back off from debates that became too polarised. In such ways, the energy and creativeness of divergent thinking can be blocked and even shut down. Thus, real dangers exist for communities that do not actively, and quite consciously, place a high priority on working together to create an open environment so that different opinions, ideas and viewpoints can be safely opened up for discussion. Creese (2005) highlighted these issues when she said that ‘views of community which are unable to describe the complexity of language use will not capture diversity, contestation or issues of power’ (p. 74). Julie later joked about everyone being entitled to different views ‘so long as they know, mine’s the right one! {laughs} That was a joke! {laughs again}’. I wondered how her forceful nature influenced the discussion processes in the CoP. On this topic, I asked Helena if she thought the CoP members challenged each other’s ideas very much. ‘I think they do. I do, especially the four of them [Julie, Simon, Athol and Owen]’ but she explained it was all ‘playful and that’s the part that you miss being a new person because you’re not part of that. But, there are a lot of the other people in the Training CoP who are not physically present and not part of that either but it’s not the relationship you see them have with the others’.
There seemed to be a lot of good natured humour running through the conversations of the oldtimers and in terms of creative thinking, Fern’s view was very positive and she agreed that the community was a ‘safe and encouraging space for new or different ideas’ and in doing so, made a connection with their actual practice. ‘In the instructional design or the online design field, you’re always constantly looking for new ways to do things, anyway. When I create a new training module, I always think, “What can I do this time that’s different from last time” or “Can I incorporate new technology, or whatever?”’. So, I think we all, kind of, have that mindset’. However, Simon’s perspective that the environment was not always a safe place to express views that were inconsistent with Julie’s was revealing. For those outside the core group of four, there could be some reluctance by some, particularly newcomers, to push against the dominance of Julie’s views. It would seem that Julie herself was aware that other members might be reluctant to join in. ‘My respect for Simon has just grown and grown and grown, all these years working with him, same with Athol and Owen. I just really respect where they are coming from, and their level of experience and everything, whereas I find some of the others, who don’t have that level of experience, will hang back a bit, almost, in terms of the conversation that we’re having’.

While seeking to maintain inclusive communication flows within the CoP, they have essentially done the opposite in regard to communication between the community and the organisation. They worked hard in the past to maintain what they saw as a ‘safe’ distance and have been careful to refrain from marketing or promoting themselves internally within the organisation. Simon, explained, ‘We avoided, for a long while, trying to do anything like that because we didn’t want to draw attention to ourselves because of the lack of support. I mean, it would be appropriate now; it would be fine now, if there was an article about us on the corporate news’. As a newcomer coming into the CoP, Helena was surprised they kept such a low profile and said ‘there’s still a lot of work to be done in raising the awareness of the training community’. Even though the community had quite consciously made efforts in the past to stay out of sight, Fern explained that word of their existence (and their expertise) did escape out into the wider organisation. ‘I suppose the key members are there as resources outside of the monthly meetings and things, so other people in the business often email us and ring us individually when they’ve gone to the forums and they’ve been on the meetings and they might hear Julie speak or they might hear me say something about my project and they go ‘Oh, that’s somebody I can talk to, about that’. So, [it] filters out to the wider business’. It seems that with the changing fortunes of the community that are discussed in the next section, they may become more active in the future in promoting their activities broadly within their organisation.
CoP/organisation connection

In looking at the CoP/organisation relationships, it was first necessary to consider the training function and its place within the culture of the organisation as there were significant and fundamental changes underway during Stage 2 that were impacting on the community. As mentioned previously, the entire training function was decentralised in 2002 and this change stimulated the creation of the Training Network and the associated Training CoP. This organisation has quite an extensive history of strategic direction changes regarding training.

- ‘There’s been different leadership models in the company that have tried to centralise training’, Fern said.
- For Helena, ‘[Training is] one of those areas that they [senior management] decide that “Now it’s gonna be a centrally-run thing” and then “No, no, no that doesn’t work, lets devolve it back out into the business areas” ... Historically, I think it’s gone through ups and downs, according to the focus of the company’.
- Margo (Mgmt) also highlighted the volatility of the policy making processes in the company. ‘They [the oldtimers of the CoP] have lived through many restructures and many changes of management and changes of training philosophy and various CEOs have had varying levels of interests in professional development and so their star has waxed and waned, depending on whether it’s the focus for the company, or not’.

The issue of strategic policy changes was on Julie’s mind as well although her perception was somewhat more cynical. ‘It is a huge company and our policy changes happen overnight ... So many competing interests and training is usually one of the first things to go. It’s not valued. There's still that perception by the company that anybody can write training, as we’ve seen by the decimation of training over the last six years’. Many times, she returned to this point that training was not valued. But, this was not just Julie’s view; it was shared in some form by all of the other interviewees, including Margo (Mgmt). Julie explained that it was changing though.

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\text{It’s always been us, [like] pushing something up the hill, trying to get things done, and then all of a sudden, there was a very change within the company of how training was perceived and the new powers that be within the company needed to get contact with everybody in training and they needed to leverage off the training assets that were there and all of a sudden we, the Training Network, became a very valuable commodity and the people in the Training CoP became incredibly valuable.}
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Helena reinforced the change was positive for the CoP when she said, ‘it’s [the relationship with the organisation] not as good as it could be and I don’t think it’s as valued as it could be, but I think they’re [management] starting to see how they could use the Training Network to better effect’. Simon also portrayed a changing environment when he highlighted that ‘there just
hasn’t been a serious enough, high priority enough focus on training in the company [before]’
but now it’s a whole different ballgame.

Turbulent times

Simon explained, ‘what’s different in my mind, when I say, it’s a different ball game, the
picture for training in the company is very different now to six months ago, that’s what’s
changed’. It appeared the organisation’s valuing of training was a key part of these changes – it
was a topical subject at the time of the interviews as a very large redevelopment initiative was
going on. Margo (Mgmt) described the changes.

It’s [training] back on the agenda. I think it disappeared for years. No one was interested; there
was no funding, there were no investments being made in online learning. The application we
had was kind of run down, then it was replaced with something that didn’t work very well. And
it’s definitely back on the agenda, largely due to the massive IT redevelopment project that was
going on where there’s suddenly this enormous project required to retrain all of our front of
house staff, all of our sales staff in new systems and processes and so, the volume of training
hours has gone up astronomically, in the last two years. As a result, there’s been a highly
recognised need to improve all the infrastructure and support and the policies and the
processes and the resourcing around providing online learning. So, it’s back on.

Simon supported Margo’s analysis but with a slightly more cynical edge. ‘There was a huge
focus on getting the Managing Training System sorted out as well and it forced them to invest a
fair bit of money in getting a whole lot of things sorted out. So, there were a whole lot of
reasons why there was a really strong focus on training over the last six to 12 months’. Part of
these changes was the recruitment of a new senior Human Resources Manager and he, in turn,
employed an overseas training professional with the brief to revitalise corporate training. Thus,
Lart Taylor entered the picture as Senior Training Manager aiming to, as Julie put it, ‘re-
energise training’. All of those interviewed, except for Trudie, portrayed Lart as being a key
influence in the changing fortunes of the Training Network and the CoP. But it seemed it was
Helena who first initiated contact with him in his new role as Training Manager. Apparently,
she said to him, ‘We’ve got this community out there, we’ve got the Training Network. What
do you want to know about these people? It’s an opportunity for you to know who they are,
what they want and what they’re doing’. Helena explained, ‘we [Lart and her] had a chat and
that was the start of redesigning the process and the forum and then trying to get the
membership [details], to give him a little bit of information’. Simon also mentioned this.

Part of this new guy coming in, Lart, part of what he was trying to do was identify who was
involved in training because there wasn’t any adequate records of just what the whole picture
was. So, he wanted to get a handle on who was involved, what they were doing and he wanted
One would expect that Lart would have been surprised, and probably delighted, to know that such a Network and community existed in his new portfolio of training responsibilities. Although I briefly raised the idea of interviewing Lart with Julie, she said it would not be possible but went on, ‘Margo, my boss, might be able to talk to you’. Margo, who reported directly to Lart, was agreeable to a telephone interview and she was able to provide some useful glimpses of the management viewpoint this analysis incorporates. She explained that Lart appreciated the benefits ‘because he is new to the company, and because he understands the kind of support that this group has, again, he would be very inclined to use them as a resource and to help frame his next move rather than getting them off side, which is definitely worth not to do’. Margo was fully cognisant of the benefits as Julie said, ‘I know, my manager [Margo] has been really impressed at how the Network functions’.

As previously discussed, over time, the training function has been integrated into the structure of this organisation in many different ways, i.e. centralised, then decentralised and it now appeared to be in something of a hybrid form. As Helena put it, ‘there is a central-style focus of training but an appreciation that there are these different business areas out there that are doing it’. One of the ongoing training issues has been the need to have effective processes in place including an effective information system and data repository to manage the corporation’s training data. Julie explained, ‘the Managing Learning System - it’s a fairly [standard] MLS. Every course that’s designed within the company gets access through the MLS, and it’s a way to keep records, assessments, evaluations, everything is done through the MLS’. The online MLS had quite a chequered history and became Lart’s responsibility as Training Manager. Julie said, ‘the very first thing this guy [Lart] did with the new MLS, he said, “It’s too big for my team” and he transferred it to my team’, i.e. within Margo (Mgmt)’s responsibilities. Julie continued, ‘My team look after the intranet which goes across the company. We now also look after the MLS ... And we’ve put the same rules around it that we put around the intranet. The only people that can access the system have to have had training ... All of a sudden; it’s got rigour and structure’.

Associated with these changes, a new portal on the company’s intranet was established which, as Simon said, ‘is consolidating training information from all around the company, so instead of having all these different websites and bits and pieces of information, [the portal] is bringing it all together’. Clearly, the portal was seen by the CoP members as being of tremendous
importance at the time of the interviews. This training portal initiative was mentioned by Fern and Helena, as well as Simon and Julie which indicated it was quite a significant issue for the Training CoP members. Fern described it as ‘a central, company-wide intranet site. What they’ve done is they’ve bought in all the training stuff that was floating around the company, so for instance, your mandatory training curriculum, how to use, learn, achieve, all that kind of thing has been brought into one site’. Julie became a key player in the implementation processes of these substantial changes to the training function as the company moved to establish one centralised training data repository, i.e. the training portal. It seems she was in the right place, at the right time as her job was heavily involved in managing the company’s intranet. Then, when Lart devolved responsibility for the MLS to Julie’s group, her strong connection to the Training Network and her influential role in the Training CoP became invaluable. Margo (Mgmt) put it like this, ‘She [Julie] already had that role [with the CoP] when she moved into my group but she inherited that and for quite a while there, training wasn’t really part of our formal charter as a group. We were managing the intranet but not managing training’.

After the MLS was shifted to the intranet group, Julie very quickly drew the CoP members, particularly the four core members, into the process of setting up the portal. Thus, she was in a key position because, as she put it, ‘I could bridge both worlds’. But another consequence was that the CoP was being drawn closer into the formal mechanisms of the organisation. Lart’s aim to centralise all training knowledge through the new portal brought mixed feelings for the CoP members, particularly in regard to their future role in the new arrangements.

The Training CoP’s oldtimers had purposely maintained a position outside the formal structure of the organisation. Julie provided an example illustrating what the organisational culture had been like. ‘Two and a half years ago, we wanted to advertise that we existed on the page at the company and we were told, “Do not draw attention to yourselves, the company will shut you down”. [Management] do not like being told how to run their business and the fact that the company had broken up training and then we tried to … keep it together, they’ll really not like it’. Hence, there were robust discussions about what the creation of this new organisational environment might mean for the Training Network and the CoP.

One option was to amalgamate the entire Training Network, including the CoP into the portal setting but Julie was concerned about losing credibility and had strenuously objected. Both Simon and Julie had definite views about maintaining the Network’s identity as a separate entity and neither wanted to see it completely merged into a more formal role within the organisation as had apparently been proposed at one point. In discussing this issue, it became difficult to distinguish the boundary between the Training Network and the Training CoP as they tended to merge together in regard to their organisational connection. Their major concern
was loss of control. Julie emphasised they had built up a good reputation and were perceived as trustworthy with high levels of creditability so ‘there is a fear that if we go under that corporate umbrella, then we’re going to have to talk the party line ... Simon and I both agree that we’re going to resist going under that corporate umbrella’. But what exactly would such resistance mean for them? Questioning Simon about these issues, he replied that he ‘wouldn’t like it to be completely taken in, as a formal thing, no’. He continued.

The reason the Training Network existed was to keep a number of things happening and carrying the light, at a collective level, in the organisation because there was no one doing it, corporately. So, now there is someone doing it corporately, we can, kind of, hand that those things back. So, what does that actually leave for the Training Network? And there was a suggestion at one point that our own website should disappear and everything of relevance should just be put on to the portal. But we were quite resistant to that and have resisted that because that’s the focus for our identity and our existence which, as a grass roots collective, is different to anything that’s going to happen through a corporate portal.

Margo (Mgmt) firmly rejected the idea that all the changes associated with the new portal meant they were becoming more integrated into the formal structure of the organisation. ‘It doesn’t actually report anywhere, they are not accountable to anyone but we will happily give them the space to do what they want to do because it is a valuable asset’. Nevertheless, Helena was concerned about succession arrangements. She pondered future scenarios in this new world order and indicated that it was Simon who felt the strongest about remaining independent with a view to ‘just let’s see what happens’. On the other hand, Helena thought that Julie’s occupational role might mean she would become more comfortable with closer ties to the formal organisation with Helena adding a postscript by saying that being a ‘bit more closer aligned ... isn’t always a bad thing, but risks losing it when you’re tied’.

In terms of ownership of their knowledge assets around training, it seemed the Training CoP (or at least, Simon and Julie) were quite comfortable with allowing such assets to move back under the organisation’s control. Simon said, ‘one of the things suggested as part of that process ... was taking over part of the information that was on our Training Network website. So, the reason the Training Network existed was to keep a number of things happening and carrying the light, at a collective level, in the organisation because there was no one doing it. So, now there is someone doing it corporately, we can hand those things back’. Julie also spoke about their willingness, and indeed their joy, at being able to hand over their repository of training so that it resided on the new Training Portal. ‘The reason we set up the Training Network originally, was because we’re so afraid of information being lost ... So, we had all this stuff and it ... is why we actually stored it all in a central place and now it’s all stored on the training portal, it’s been given legitimacy ... we’re very happy to have it there because it’s never our intention to hide
away this stuff and go, ‘It’s ours, it’s ours, it’s ours’. We just never wanted to lose it so now that it’s got that legitimacy; it’s out there, again. We’re really rapt!’.

In effect, what they have done was, as Julie explained it, ‘handed over all our resources to the Training portal, we’ve handed over our documents to the Training portal, all the nuts and bolts, all that sort of stuff, they know where it is’. In addition to storing knowledge assets about training, the Training Network’s original web page had also provided an interactive question/answer area where any Network member could pose a question and the community members would respond. It seemed there was little concern about passing that functionality over to the new portal as well. Julie explained that they were ‘actually quite happy to move that [question/answer forum] under [the portal] yeah, because it’s hard work for us to do’. There seemed to be a sense that a new day was dawning and that the bad times for training, and so for the community, might now be over. Helena was quite explicit as she spoke about this.

So, they [CoP oldtimers] do carry a lot of baggage from the history but I’m starting to understand that a lot more now, in just seeing the ups and downs of the way that they’re viewed and I … looking at their history I’m surprised, sometimes, that they stuck through it … and there was no reward, there was no recognition … and through the worst of times, when the whole restructuring happened … and they lost so many good people, so much knowledge walked out of the company … I’m surprised that they haven’t said, ‘Oh, stuff it, who cares, you just do it the way you wanna do it’. They’ve persisted and I think that says a lot about the kind of people they are, that it’s really important to them. It wouldn’t have survived a lot of the things that it’s gone through, if it weren’t for these core members.

Formal/Informal

While agreeing to freely hand over their knowledge assets, they were also concerned about still maintaining a space in which the Training Network and the Training CoP could continue operating. Helena examined the pros and cons associated with these changes and the tighter connection to the organisation. She explained that currently participation in both the Training Network and CoP was voluntary ‘you don’t have to go, you don’t have to join, it’s not part of your role, you’re not getting extra brownie points for attending, its only cos you want to and it doesn’t matter what job you do, you don’t have to have any training, to be part of the group … That’s a major thing, being able to separate it from the mechanics of the major organisation but at the same time, by being outside, you miss out on a lot of involvement, a lot of input into the major decision-making. So, you know, it’s a fine line to tread, so I understand the dilemma’.

This notion of being a little less on the outside and how that has played out in reality was brought to the fore in several of the interviews. Four of the five interviewees said a range of different, and potentially more influential, individuals were now attending the Network forums.
‘Suddenly, we’ve got people from the Programme Office, people from H.R., we’ve got a G.M. Suddenly people attending are of a higher level where they’re paying attention and going out to find out things and reporting back. It just seems to be [that] it’s picked up speed’ (Helena).

‘So, all of a sudden, at every Training Network forum, we had people from I.T. coming saying, ‘What’s going on, how can we fix it, this is what the fixes are’ and all of a sudden, communication was really happening’ (Julie).

‘Why I think it’s had more exposure in the company, in support of it, is that a lot of the higher senior managers that just joined the company [i.e. Lart] have been interested in the group and had attended to speak to the members[giving] a lot more visibility’ (Trudie).

‘I do attend the Training Network forum [but not] the CoP meetings and so my communication is usually just to give an update on how the application is performing ... what [new] resources we’re going to be providing and so, it’s more a general interest’ (Margo (Mgmt)).

As well as an increased level of interest in their meetings, a representative from the community was now being invited to attend senior strategic meetings concerning the training function so they were gaining a voice where one did not exist before. As Helena stated, ‘I feel they’ve been overlooked when decisions have been made, its changing, with this new changing of the guard in training now. I’ve noticed Simon is invited to the Senior Training Meetings which is really great’. Earlier, she had said, ‘I think they’re starting to see how they [management] could use this Network to better effect’. Julie also recognised that new doors were opening for them.

‘Now we’ve had this about shift, where the head of HR is meeting regularly with Simon and Athol and it’s an amazing shift, I can't believe it. So, that doesn’t mean … [though], I’m still, still mistrustful of the company - distrust. I still don’t quite trust the company’.

It was quite evident that the changes have created new communication channels between the community and the organisation, particularly at quite a senior level which brings significant advantages with it. Then again, it also brings increased risk.

Simon emphasised the dual nature of change in that both advantages and disadvantages can follow. He said, ‘each time a new person’s come in, with that overall training role at corporate level [like Lart], there’s always been that danger that they’ll try and formalise us out of existence’. The danger that Simon talked about was well recognised by others, with distrust being the primary emotion flowing through the discussions about these changes. Helena said, ‘I think there’s a lot of scepticism amongst the group towards trusting the company’. She continued, ‘I think there’s a lot of mistrust towards the company ... so it [these changes] hasn’t taken away the distrust though, it’s like, this looks good, but let’s just see where and how it pans out and it’s understandable’. Julie pointed out that they had experienced cycles of being
valued and not valued and she felt strongly that they were like ‘guardians of it [the training resources] to make sure it doesn’t all go because there are people out there, who need this stuff to do their jobs.

Julie later came back to the trust issue and said, ‘I still don’t quite trust them to hold it together’. In repeating this sentiment several times, Julie highlighted doubts about the wisdom of moving closer to the organisation. There was also acknowledgement these changes brought increased legitimacy. This seemed quite important, particularly to Julie but others as well. Several mentioned having a presence on the new portal — a button had been provided at the entrance to the portal on the company’s intranet that linked to the Training Network website. Helena said the link was ‘good to see’ while Fern said that they ‘have direct links on that site [the portal] back to the Training Network so people can find out about us and click a link and find out when our next meetings are’. With Julie acting as a bridge between the intranet management group and the training Network/CoP, it seemed likely that she had been able to influence this. She was certainly pleased about the change as she explained, ‘one of the links on the training portal - the first link on the training portal is through to our Network ... So, it’s actually, yeah, it’s a very positive experience with us, what I found anyway’. In talking about the changes, Julie was very animated and spoke excitedly and at one point exclaimed, ‘So, I know this is probably all a bit ... [laughs] But, yeah, the minute this MLS got transferred into my team, things started to really take off, and I do think that’s one of the reasons why the Training Network and the Training CoP particularly, became so valued’. Towards the end of her interview, she returned to talking about her feelings around these changes and said that although she was speaking for herself, she assumed the others would agree. ‘I feel really appreciated at the moment. I put in so much work putting those Learning Standards out there, that they’re there, they’re published, they’re and especially, being in my team, they value my feedback and all this stuff that I’ve been saying for 18 months is finally happened ... It’s amazing. I feel really good about it’,

As discussed before, the relationship between the organisation and this community has many layers with some significant shifts occurring at the time of the Stage 2 interviews. Previous to these changes though, the community had effectively hidden itself away from the formal management of the organisation, hence they did not actively seek support. Julie put it like this, ‘we’re, sort of, set up despite the company, in a lot of ways’. From discussions held during the recruitment phase, it appeared that the local managers of individual members certainly knew about their CoP activities and tacitly gave approval for their participation except in Bronwyn’s case where her manager withdrew support for her to participate. Julie said, ‘there are still pockets out there, where the bosses don’t realise how valuable having this Network is, which is quite interesting’. Being paid to participate in the community was important, particularly with Julie’s point that some managers resist linking into the training community, seeing it as an
‘extracurricular activity’ that distracted from a training person’s ‘real job’. Such thinking harks back to very traditional management techniques, such as Taylorism and scientific management and its value in today’s rapidly changing work environments has to be questioned. In a large organisation, management thinking will vary and be influenced to a large degree by the individuals occupying senior roles. Julie was very fortunate in that her manager, Margo (Mgmt) had a more contemporary mindset concerning the value of knowledge sharing activities.

I’m Julie’s direct line manager, so I guess I have always endorsed her time commitment and her involvement in both the Training Network and the Training CoP. And to a large extent actually, she already had that role when she moved into my group but … we were managing the intranet but not managing training. That was the case for several years but I knew that Julie had a professional interest in training and that it was something she was passionate about and I also recognised that, although it wasn’t formally endorsed by the company that they were doing work that was of value and that it would be a shame to not continue to support it when it was relatively small involvement and I would end up with a fairly disgruntled employee, had I said she couldn’t work on it because it wasn’t related to her current job role. So happily, I continued to support her involvement and then serendipitously, this year, we have actually taken on training as our formal responsibility, to manage the application that supports the company’s training. So, it’s all tied in very nicely.

Tacit approval for activities like CoP membership generally relies on individual personalities. Thus, formalising such arrangements can bring advantages. This was recognised as Julie told me that, ‘We’re currently writing KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] for people, that they can include them in their Performance Reviews, saying that one of their job requirements is to participate in the Training Network, so that they know what’s going on’. It turned out that this was the case with Julie’s current position, as Margo (Mgmt) again explained ‘Julie’s involvement in the Training Network is in her formal job role accountability and I don’t know whether the others have got formal support for that involvement. So, it’s acknowledged and recognising in her key accountability’. The idea of including CoP participation within formal job accountabilities could be seen as controversial, though much, if not all, of the member’s activities occur on company time. On the other hand, it meant that involvement was no longer completely voluntary. Either way, the organisation does indirectly support the CoP with access to the communication infrastructure as well as a Conference Room for the forums.

Recognition and rewards

Margo (Mgmt) was more than ready to acknowledge the community’s efforts and highlight their achievements saying ‘I can’t speak for Lart but my own view is, you know, hats off to them. They have taken time out of their job to really focus on furthering their own professional development but also raising the quality of what other people are doing, around the organisation. They seem to have done it in a very, very structured and very professional way ...
It’s not a kind of loose collective who occasionally meet for lunch, they are very formally organised and that, of course, lends weight to their credibility as well, within the organisation’. ‘Hats off to them’ she said and, as she put it, even ‘through all of that turmoil [of their changing fortunes over the years], they have just got on with what they will do and so they are very tight-knit and they are very well organised. On my raising the issue of corporate recognition of the community’s contributions, Margo (Mgmt) responded, ‘I guess there might be a case for providing funding for the occasional {pause}’. She then referred to the local managers being a more likely choice [than her] if the CoP required funds. She might have been about to mention the company funding a small celebration as she continued, ‘it’s something I probably should talk to Lart about, about whether we could perhaps provide them with a morning tea or something, just to say, “Thank you for the work that you’ve been doing” ... But, that kind of formal endorsement would probably go, with a lot of kudos would come out of it, I think’.

Right at the end of the interview with Julie, I asked her if the community celebrated its successes in any way. She said they didn’t because they didn’t have time. She then went on, ‘plus, if we did celebrate it, like, we could take morning tea or something to one of the - we’d be paying for it, ourselves!’. Julie did say though that ‘the powers that be, Margo, sent out lovely Thank You’s to us, who helped [in setting up the Learning Portal], all that sort of stuff but we, in the Training CoP, no, we didn’t do anything like that. We probably should have but we didn’t!’’. She also mentioned, albeit with an air of disenchantment, that she had received a $20 shopping voucher which was apparently part of the organisation’s reward process. I asked Simon about recognition and rewards as well and he responded that he could not say there was any acknowledgement they were a valuable resource but he thought ‘it would be nice if they did’. But he continued, ‘I wouldn’t expect that, you know, they would shout us to lunch or something like that or I don’t think the sort of reward and recognition that works around here is that you get some movie tickets or something like that or whatever. I don’t think any of that would be relevant or appropriate’. So, while the notion of a small celebration as recognition for their efforts had not previously been considered, there might be some discussion about the idea. Simon’s dismissal of the idea that ‘lunch or something like that’ was not appropriate might again lead the community into robust discussions.

Possible futures

In thinking about the future of this CoP and organisational support, the current mixed feelings about moving closer to the organisation reflects some of the complexity of this issue. I asked Margo (Mgmt) about other possible ways the organisation could support them and she mentioned that they had no ‘regular budget’ but instead they probably ‘leaned on the most likely manager from within the Training CoP who can provide them with what they need’. Julie
seemed positive about the future of the Network and the CoP in regard to the opportunities they were encountering to change the direction of their activities now that the ‘nuts and bolts’ were being done elsewhere.

The future, I think, we definitely still have a legitimate role, as a Community of Practice ... and we do want to return to our roots, because we were the guardians of training within the company ... We want to [go] back to helping people because, really in our core group, we have, with Owen and Athol and Simon and myself and who else behind there, but you’ve got her and Jennie as well, we’ve got a core group of people who are very, v-e-r-y good at their jobs ... We’ve also been here a long time and we know the things, and there’s a core level of experience there, an understanding of how things operate and work within the company .... So, we’re hoping to get back to that sort of mentoring role and having that knowledge shared.

Simon was more uncertain about their ‘nuts and bolts’ activities, saying they ‘could, sort of, be taken over, and taken out of existence, if things were formalised too much’. He talked pragmatically about the future (or potential lack thereof) of the Network and the CoP and their reason for existence. ‘I’ve got a bit of an open mind as to whether we will continue and it might get to the point where really, objectively, there isn’t the need for us to continue because everything’s being handled now in another way and if that’s the case, then we’d have to face up to that and say, ‘Okay, well, there’s no point in us having a separate existence’ in which [case] we should disband as a separate identity ‘. Simon was not comfortable with allowing their separate identity to be phased out. Julie appeared more hopeful than Simon. Towards the end of her interview, she said, ‘no one knows what the future’s going to hold, so I think there’s still a valued place for the Community of Practice. We’ve got legitimacy, people come to us, we’ve got a really good reputation out there, we solve problems’. The artificial boundary between the Training Network and the CoP in this research seemed to be lost when both Simon and Julie were questioning how the upcoming changes would impact on their common future.

Interestingly, Margo (Mgmt) also looked to the future with questions and said, ‘it will be interesting to see in two years time, when the redevelopment project has finished up ... a lot of the [training] roles will probably go, but whether training is valued as much as it is, right now [is unknown]’. Her current thinking about the future of the CoP (and the Training Network) was very positive.

I can’t imagine a day when someone would say, ‘You guys aren’t needed, or aren’t wanted’ ... In fact, if what they were doing was seen as being subversive or anti-company policy or something, I don’t actually think that would happen because they are really the subject matter experts and so we would be more inclined to get them involved in helping us develop that policy or way of working I would go to them for information to help me decide what to do, every time. Because they’ve been here for years, they know what they are doing.
Margo was sounding a warning to management in general about their expert power around the corporation’s handling of the training function. She said, ‘because they have visibility, you can see them, you can see their output, you can see what they are doing and so it’s hard to ignore or deny their existence, best to work, work with them. In ending this study of the Training CoP, it seemed fitting for the final words to go to Simon. ‘I feel this has been one of the greatest achievements for me, in my time at the company’.
Connections don’t happen by themselves. You have to work at them and it is that willingness on everybody’s part to make it work ... to be a centre where you get nourished rather than your batteries getting flattened!

... Natasha, Research CoP member

Foreword

The focus of this chapter is an extended study of the Research Community: one of the three CoPs invited to participate in Stage 2. As well as the interviews, a little primary and secondary material was also drawn upon as an opportunity opened up to briefly observe the 2007 Science Conference. Additionally, I was given access to a few of the community’s early documents. The decision to invite this community to participate in the second stage of the research arose through consideration of the relatively large size of this community and it’s geographically spread across three different Australian States). While these factors meant the community was of interest in its own right, they also differentiated it from the other eight CoPs.

List of interviewees

There were eight people interviewed in association with this community (four men and four women) and they all indicated they were members of the CoP although the interview with one of the men focussed more on his role as a management link between the community and the organisation rather than his CoP membership. One of the women interviewed had left the organisation some years previously although she was attempting to maintain links with the CoP so she was considered an external CoP member. The eight Stage 2 interviews took place across three different States: five at the CoP’s primary site (identified as Site A), two at a secondary site (Site B) and the other one was at another secondary site (Site C). All the interviews were conducted over a two month period in mid 2008. Seven of the eight interviews were face-to-face which necessitated extensive travel across different States while the other interview was held on the telephone. The duration of each interview ranged between 50 to 90 minutes.
CRAIG first became a member of the community in 2005 when he also took on executive responsibilities associated with administering the Portal: an organisational initiative that fosters collaboration between different Departments. However, at the time of the interview, Craig had moved on from those executive responsibilities while remaining in the community. He considered his current participation as a CoP member as ‘passively active’. He was interviewed at the primary site (Site A) for 60 minutes.

FREDA joined the community early in 2008 so she was the newest member and had only attended one CoP meeting at the time of the interview. So, she is considered to be a newcomer in this CoP. Freda’s interview was also held face-to-face at Site A for about 60 minutes.

JUDY played a key role in the early days of the CoP (2004) when she worked at the primary site (Site A). By 2006, she had left the organisation and since then, she has tried to participate in the community as an external member (the only external member interviewed). Thus, Judy’s experiences of community membership spanned multiple phases of the CoP’s life cycle, i.e. a founding oldtimer, ongoing member and currently as an external member. The interview with Judy was conducted over the telephone and lasted 50 minutes.

KATHLEEN was also a founding member who strongly supported the creation of the CoP in late 2003/early 2004 and she actively worked towards its development. Being geographically located at one of the secondary sites (Site B) meant that she was less able to be involved in face-to-face meetings and was less active in terms of her participation in the CoP. Nevertheless, during the interview, she said that she was ‘not convinced that I am any less active [now]’. She was interviewed face-to-face at Site B for 50 minutes.

NATASHA was located at Site B and is a long term member and one of the founders. She works with Kathleen and like her, she has been less able to participate in activities over the last couple of years. Natasha did say that her ‘involvement was fairly active, taking into account geographical difficulties’. She was interviewed face-to-face for 75 minutes.

NEIL took on the leader role when the CoP began and his ongoing commitment is evident. He continues to be the driving force within the community and he appeared to be the bedrock on which the community has been built. However, by 2007, his enthusiasm and energy were flagging which resulted in his completely removing himself from the CoP’s activities for a time. After a hiatus of several months during which the CoP lay dormant, Neil again took up the reins in 2008. Neil’s face-to-face interview lasted for 90 minutes at Site A.
**PETE** was ‘not an ardent participant’ even though he had been a long term member of the CoP. It was unclear whether he was directly involved in the community’s establishment as he joined the organisation during 2004. His location was also Site A and sometimes he and Neil worked on projects together. Pete’s interview was at his site and lasted for almost 90 minutes.

**TERRY** was a newcomer to the CoP although his participation in Stage 2 centred more on his liaising role between the organisation’s management and the community itself. While not really the CoP’s sponsor, he was able to expand on the links connecting the CoP and the organisation. He worked at Site C and was interviewed face-to-face for 75 minutes.

Table 26 below lists the 12 people referred to by name in this chapter: the eight interviewees and another four people who were mentioned as relevant to the CoP. The eight people interviewed are identified with an asterisk and are shown in bold type. The pseudonyms for the four people who were not interviewed include a surname as the interviewees used their full name when they spoke of them. Relevant details are also included for each person as well as their work location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Work location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brett Silver</td>
<td>Ex member, successfully organised the 2006 Conference but who has since left the organisation</td>
<td>Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Craig</td>
<td>Member, ex CoP/organisation link as Portal Executive</td>
<td>Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Freda</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
<td>Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald Jones</td>
<td>Current member of Portal Executive</td>
<td>Site C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Judy</td>
<td>Oldtimer, foundation member and now external member</td>
<td>Used to work at Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Kathleen</td>
<td>Oldtimer, foundation member</td>
<td>Site B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Natasha</td>
<td>Oldtimer, foundation member</td>
<td>Site B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Neil</td>
<td>Oldtimer, liaison/ key informant and CoP Leader</td>
<td>Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Pete</td>
<td>Oldtimer</td>
<td>Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Sharna Albright</td>
<td>Non-core member who offered to help Neil with the CoP's administration tasks at the time his enthusiasm was fading in 2007.</td>
<td>Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Sophie Kusker</td>
<td>Past member who briefly lead the CoP in conjunction with Neil around 2006</td>
<td>Site A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Terry</td>
<td>Relative newcomer and Portal Liaison (link between CoP/organisation, i.e. through the Portal Executive)</td>
<td>Site C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 26: Research CoP Stage 2 summary table*
What is the Research CoP?

This study focuses on the Research CoP which is a community of social scientists and others interested in their particular practice. These people are primarily individuals working within an Australian organisation although a few people external to the organisation are also involved in the CoP. Both primary and secondary material has been drawn upon in the following description of the community. Neil provided documents about the evolution of the Research CoP which, with documents in the public domain, were used to supplement the interviews as secondary material. Thus, a reasonably detailed picture of this community and its history has been constructed. One of the documents provided was a draft list of the Terms of Reference (2004) of the then newly-created community. The group’s vision was to support the development of the research community working in the social domain. The mission was to facilitate and promote the community’s work and to provide an environment within which members could develop and improve their knowledge and research competence. The key outcomes and benefits expected to flow from the new community were listed and included the following points.

- Provide a forum and community for the currently scattered pockets of researchers already engaged in social research. Such a forum will nurture and strengthen this research, facilitating collaboration and raising the profile of this work.
- Assist in the application and development of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and establish the appropriate and ethical application of such methodologies.

From this, several points of interest emerged. In addition to the obvious aim of improving their communication and collaboration processes, it was clear they sought to address the challenges associated with the geographically-dispersed nature of the community. They were also unambiguous about seeking to promote social research activities within their organisation and the need to advocate the use of qualitative as well as quantitative research methodologies. The issues expressed concerning the promotion of social research in the organisation and the application of different research methodologies still remained of concern to the interviewees in 2008. Many referred to the prevailing organisational culture as heavily privileging the ‘hard sciences’ while perceiving the organisation’s culture as undervaluing the qualitative work undertaken by social researchers. Both Natasha and Pete talked about this. ‘The organisation, as an organisation has a tradition of so called hard sciences ... those who are working in sociology, human sciences and so forth, are in the minority and very often considered as if they were a lesser scientist because the mindset is, if it is not simulation, experimentation, or mathematical modelling, it is not science’, was how Natasha put it. While Pete said, ‘the social sciences or studies field if you like, always seems to be immature, that’s the sort of language they use in here because when you’re in a culture, or a research environment, which is dominated by...’
chemists and physicists and you know engineers and hard scientists, this is the language they are using’. Later in Pete’s interview, he continued on this theme by saying, ‘Even though I’m a part of them, there’s still a lot of us and them. It could just be [in] my own head though, I mean, they probably don’t intentionally try to alienate me and they don’t. They’re not like that at all but it’s just those mental maps that we use to look at things and they don’t necessarily overlay’.

Such a mindset of social research being less scientific had a long history in this organisation, obviously reflecting traditional tensions of epistomological and ontological debates. Kathleen described a situation from her early days at work. ‘I remember when I first got here, totally naïve ... about ten years ago ... I was asked to contribute to a thing on methodologies and so I said, ‘I’ll take half an hour and I’ll talk about the range of qualitative methodologies’, which is what my background is. And I literally went through the process, looked at people and by the end of it, they were there, with their mouths hanging open and somebody said then, ‘That’s very interesting but is it science?’”. Pete, who was recruited into the organisation about six years after Kathleen, i.e. in 2004, also reflected on his initial experiences. ‘I had only been here two weeks and I had to present something on the social construction of knowledge to these people and they all looked at me like I was some kind of alien’. Although ten years have passed since Kathleen’s audience listened to her talk about qualitative methodologies, it seemed not much has changed. Craig explained that the profile of the research being done in the organisation meant that most of the staff focussed on scientific research. ‘The types of people who are employed here tend not to be people-people; they tend to be more science and electrons’. Judy also touched on this, saying ‘a lot of the scientific community obviously err towards the introvert and would much prefer not to be dealing with humans’. No doubt the qualitative researchers were being stereotyped by others but these comments also revealed their stereotyping of non-qualitative research.

CoP practices

Thus, a small group of relatively senior social researchers including Judy, Kathleen and Natasha decided that one way to create a more enriching and collegial environment would be to form their own community. A strong sense of group identity seemed to exist between them which probably owed much to the us and them thinking. Their outsider status was accentuated because, as Judy explained, there was only ‘a sub-faction of people doing social and management, sort of weird things from the edge. Well, they were apparently weird. So, we wanted those people to stand up and be counted and not be seen as the fringe dwellers’. She later detailed how the community emerged in 2003/04. ‘The human sciences/ergonomics groups used to go along to those [conferences] and spend all the ergonomics lectures out in the coffee area, gossiping and complaining and so they sat there and that's what really formed the concept,
‘let’s start our own social/organisational science group or research community’. So, when we sat out there and it was us against them, there was a far stronger bond of community, as you would expect’.

Natasha also described the community’s beginnings, saying Neil was able to transform their initial enthusiasm for the idea of a new group into something more concrete when they get together after the 2003 conference. However, Neil’s reflections of that time present a somewhat different picture of the conference and the subsequent initial coming together of those associated with social research. He provided glimpses of an organisational culture where some attempts were made to open up opportunities for younger, and newer, staff. ‘The issue of raising a new area was mooted [at the conference] and Judy was one of the key people involved, as was Natasha and Kathleen … I think they basically put my name forward … I was the one that said, that was young enough, and enthusiastic enough, and stupid enough, perhaps, to say ‘Yeah, all right, I’ll give it a crack’ … there’s, kind of, a culture in the organisation where the young whipper snapper tends to get handed a baton for things like that’.

In this organisation, a strategic and operational initiative, known as the Portal, had been in place for many years — the objective being to support collaboration across Departments. Although hosting the SharePoint application as a collaborative workspace, the Portal is much more than simply a collaborative tool. Senior management support for the Portal was originally harnessed through the creation of a high level Portal Management Team, known as the Portal Exec. Craig was a past member of the Portal Exec. and he explained his role like this. ‘My role was as Executive Officer, facilitating the activities of the Portal to try to encourage, and make it easy for the Portal leadership to arrange functions, activities, vocation discussions and seminars and those type of things. [It is a support process] basically to do the leg work and to try to get some economies of scale on, you know, someone who does it more regularly is bound to do it a little bit more productively’.

The Portal provided the organisation with an umbrella structure made up of separate domains or interest areas. Each domain then comprised smaller, more tightly focussed groups within it. It was one of these smaller groups, the Research Community, who participated in Stage 2 of the research and they are situated within the Human Sciences Portal domain. The Portal has always provided some funding to these groups to encourage cross fertilisation of ideas through collaborative events such as workshops and presentations. Kathleen explained, ‘A lot of the early days, when we had money those days to travel, we used to go to a lot of the sessions and you learnt about what other people were involved in at the time’. However, the relationship between the Portal Exec. and these smaller groups changed significantly in 2007. Previously, each group had to comply with specific accountabilities to have continued access to Portal
funds. Craig explained, ‘There was an expectation that each community would conduct some sort of major activity at least annually and I guess that would have been incorporated into some report that the Portal leader made to senior management to say this is what we’ve done in the last 12 months’.

One of the 2007 changes concerned the removal of this reporting requirement, in part because several of the smaller groups had become inactive. Although the required reports were generally still produced, the picture presented about activity levels was, to differing degrees, quite superficial. Another change concerned the philosophy around these smaller groups: a move to framing them more as Communities of Practice occurred. Neil played a significant role in this change of thinking and in effect, what was happening was a decoupling of the groups from the Portal Exec. As a consequence, these newly-labelled communities moved into a less controlled/formalised environment and were more able to manage their own processes. Still, as Neil put it, ‘they [the new CoPs] do [still] have, if you like, a formal existence that is acknowledged under the Portal structure’. The funding arrangements were also changed to resemble a sponsorship model where communities could initiate their own events and seek sponsorship from the Portal, rather than the Portal stipulating a certain number of activities. Another quite substantial change concerned the Portal staffing arrangements in terms of overall organisational productivity. Although the Portal had operated for many years, all activities associated with it had needed to be fitted in with individual job accountabilities i.e. there was no time specifically allocated. This changed in 2007 when the Portal Exec. was reduced to three people who could negotiate for dedicated time which specifically covered the time they spent on Portal tasks. These 2007 changes heralded in a modified environment for the Portal and for all Portal activities, only some of which have been described here. However, it is worthwhile mentioning that previously, the Portal requirements were that each group (community) needed to formally elect a leader. Neil pushed for that to change as well for, as he put it, ‘Look, if you are going to have a Community of Practice, you shouldn’t have a leader, you should have someone whose role is to facilitate’. It became clear that Neil had played a significant role in the new strategic direction of the Portal and his group (the Research CoP) was seen to be a model for communities in the new environment.

CoP meetings

One of Neil’s initial activities on behalf of the new community was to set about organising a major two-day workshop to be held that year (2004) to bring them all together. It was wholly dedicated to the organisation’s social science activities with the aim of igniting vigorous discussions. As Judy said, ‘it was literally a forum for us to bounce ideas’. But because the members of the CoP were spread across three different locations, some members were better
positioned to do this than others. Located at Site B, Natasha said, ‘there is strength in numbers, if you know what I mean. So, having one or two people here and there, it’s probably not as invigorating or nourishing or satisfying as having a choice of many more people to talk to and so there is a certain disadvantage of being in a minority in whatever State’. Kathleen also spoke about feeling ‘a little bit out of it’ regarding interpersonal contact but went on to say ‘maybe we do our own sub-thing here but I just think that’s a really important part of it, to actually build the trust and maintain the links so we become more than just the community’.

Another facet of the practice of this CoP concerned brief presentations which were generally held at Site A. These presentations are put on by CoP members discussing their own research or invited guests speaking on topics of interest to the members. Pete explained that just to be able to sit there ‘and actually hear what other people in the community are doing made me think that there’s a lot of people here doing different things and they seem to be quite interesting and there could be opportunities or maybe I’d like to talk to this person’. The first major event (a two-day workshop in 2004) was very successful which encouraged the CoP to put on another in 2005 which was held at Site B. It was primarily organised by Natasha and was also a success. Between 20 to 50 people attended, complete with invited keynote speakers. As Natasha explained, ‘there were people from different disciplines, not strictly social scientists. There was, I remember, there were people, one of them was a mathematician who looks at the human modelling from a mathematical point of view’. However, organising events like these two-day workshops consume huge amounts of time and energy, especially if the organising tasks are not shared with others. Natasha observed, ‘you see one of the things that people expect when they prepare papers, they want proper conference proceedings because they will put effort into writing papers and so forth and because it is more a venue for idea venting, we don’t put so much time into getting the proceedings and the glossies now’.

Neil’s enthusiasm about driving the community was also dwindling around the early parts of 2006. He announced this to the community via an email which said, in part,

> ‘Look, if you really want this [another annual workshop], it’s yours’ because I had organised the last two and it is a major undertaking. I said, ‘Look, I don’t want to know about it, I want other people to review the abstracts, I want other people to organise it, I will provide, you know that sort of support, and so on but it is over to you guys’. And luckily someone stepped up. Brett Silver, he’s no longer with the organisation and he was again new to the organisation. So again, hit someone who is new and enthusiastic. Unfortunately, he lost that enthusiasm quite quickly and moved on but he helped out and got that workshop going.

Natasha explained that no annual workshop has been held since 2005 saying, ‘we have somehow ceased to organise our own for the probably last, well, it must be close to two years,
[since we have] had a whole, group meeting’. On the other hand, smaller events have continued to be held, i.e. presentations which have been generally organised by Neil and mainly held at Site A. The organisation has a video conference system which some CoP members at the other sites have utilised in the past to participate in these presentations. There seemed to be little other contact between members facilitated through the community although, as many of the active members had strong work-related connections, they did communicate with each other by email and telephone as the need arose.

Neil has maintained an email group distribution list for the community which he still uses to broadcast information to all the members from time to time. His email messages usually relate to future activities such as upcoming presentations he was organising. There seemed to be little, if any, email conversations between members. Thus, it seems that the activities of this community centre on these somewhat ad hoc presentations. Craig wanted more presentations to happen. ‘I think the organisation is, or has been, very insular and protected from the outside world and we don’t take enough notice of good practice … I like to hear what other organisations are doing but I also would like to hear a lot more about what our staff are doing as far as, you know, research into communication mechanisms and that sort of thing’. In considering their practice, the common thread that binds them together as a community focuses on sharing what they know and the social research projects they are working on. While Neil has been the driving force in creating opportunities for such sharing to take place, it is important to acknowledge that he had support from Natasha and Judy, particularly in the early years, which contributed to the CoP’s successes.

**CoP Members**

As the CoP’s leader, Neil was my initial contact with the community and he became a key informant. The majority of members are all employees of the organisation and they are directly involved in social research, either as practising researchers or support staff. However, of those interviewed, Judy was an exception in that she no longer worked at the organisation so she was an external member. I was originally told that there were also some other external CoP members. In early discussions with Neil during the recruitment phase (in late 2006), he said the community comprised 80–90 members. This was a surprise as the CoP model being used for the research was framed around communities consisting of between 10 to 25 members. Further discussion with him at that time indicated that while he had this number listed as members on his email group distribution list, only about 10 to 12 would be considered core members who were actively involved in the CoP’s meetings and presentations. However, by 2008, the total membership numbers had seemed to dwindle with an active core group of less than 10. Neil said that the community is ‘in a more tenuous state than it was’. Although identifying the
number of people in CoPs can be tricky. I asked interviewees how many members they thought there were. Craig explained that ‘I wouldn’t know who else is a member other than seeing the people who turn up to the meetings’. As a CoP newcomer, Freda simply guessed that the community might have about 50 members while Kathleen agreed with Neil that there would be ‘maybe 12 to 15 core’ members. Pete thought the community was smallish with ‘only about 12 to 20’ and he made similar statements at different points during the interview.

We’re a small community and diverse which, to me, seems counter-productive for being sustainable. If we’re more homogenous and small, I think it would be okay. There’s more opportunities for it to try and hold together because we’ve got that commonality but the diversity and the smallness of the group can lead to it being fragmented. That’s why I like to see a bigger group ... I would have thought a vibrant sustainable community would have something like maybe a hundred or so. Just in terms of keeping up with the flow of people moving in and out of the organisation and ... just to get us stopping being insular looking because we all know each other’s business, in a sense, you know, it’s probably a hundred or so.

Pete was quite convinced that more members (100 to 200) would be an improvement. Conversely, Judy’s view was that the CoP was too large. She said, ‘I think size has been a significant factor for us. The bigger you get, the less you feel part of ... what ... what's that thing [CoP] doing, you've got no idea’. In referring to all of the communities associated with the Portal (including the Research CoP), Terry (Mgmt) supported Judy’s view, saying, ‘the communities are too large, too broad to serve the function they are supposed to and that’s because people like me joined all four or five communities when they started ... so I think they’re too large, I think they’re too cumbersome’. There were disagreements about whether the CoP was too big or too small. However, Pete’s point that diversity caused too much fragmentation highlighted the challenges of balancing too much difference with too little, i.e. too much can cause remoteness while too little can stifle new thinking.

Oldtimers

Of the eight interviewees, four (Neil, Judy, Kathleen and Natasha) had all played key roles in the start of the group in 2004. So, for the purposes of this research, they are all considered to be both founders and oldtimers. As Pete joined the organisation and the CoP in 2004, he is also considered to be an oldtimer. Regarding their level of participation, Neil as leader, was the most active. Although on reflecting what had happened since resuming his leadership role, he said, ‘it’s in a more tenuous state than it was then and the reason I say that, is people like Natasha and Kathleen haven’t been part of it ... I was hoping they would be at the [2007] conference, they weren’t, they haven’t hooked in for any of the events this year but they were essential participants and central attendees to most events, if they could get to them, prior to that point ...
I don’t feel I have got as much of a core team as I had before’. Pete presented himself as playing quite a passive role in the community. ‘I would be peripheral, I think ... I could be classed as a vampire or a leech in a way but I like to be able to draw upon what people are saying and have that sort of thing presented to me and then I engage and interact where I feel it’s warranted without actually taking a vital interest in maintaining the group as such ... you can even think about that in terms of a CoP. I’m benefiting from the labour of others because I am not, as I said, instrumental in organising the group and maintaining it and keeping it going’.

Newcomers

Freda was the only one of the eight people interviewed who could realistically be identified as a newcomer to this community for the purposes of this research. She first participated in a Social Sc CoP activity early in 2008 when she attended a presentation put on by the community. As she explained, she now receives ‘invitations to come along to different talks, you know arranged guest speakers and people presenting on some research that they had done’. While Terry has only been a community member a little longer than Freda, he was not considered a newcomer in this analysis, rather he was interviewed because of his role as liaison between the CoP and the organisation’s executive. At the time of his interview, he had recently taken on the part-time role of Community/Portal Liaison (one of the three Portal positions which the 2007 organisational restructure established). Craig was clearly not a newcomer but he has not been defined as an oldtimer either, even though he first began participating in the CoP around the end of 2005. He was ‘passively active! In that I didn’t actually run any seminars for that Community of Practice or whatever it was called. No, I was really a member of the audience and participated in discussions. If there was a guest speaker and they said something which interested me or I was puzzled about, I would ask a question. So that was the level of activity really, just as a participant rather than a leader in the group’.

This notion of members, particularly new members, presenting their work to others in the community was something that Neil encouraged. ‘If I’m feeling particularly motivated, [I’ll] find out what they are about and then encourage them to potentially, when they are ready, to brief’. In a similar way, Kathleen also did the same thing, ‘what I’ve always tried to do is to get our new people to go and present or attend one of those formal sessions because I think that’s important for them to actually meet their community’. Joining the Research CoP is quite an informal process. However, active promotion of this community, particularly to those coming into the organisation, can seem rather haphazard. As Craig put it, ‘unless somebody saw me walking down corridors in buildings such as this, it’s not obvious that a Community of Practice exists’. On the other hand, there are different ways that a potential new member might become aware of the community. For a start, all new employees undergo an induction process during...
which the Portal, the SharePoint application and the associated communities are briefly mentioned. Kathleen said that she ‘would actually make sure they [new employees] know about the community because I think particularly if there’s someone coming in with that soft science discipline, they need to understand there are more of us’. Natasha agreed that ‘informal chatting’ was a key process for informing new staff about the community.

Another method could be for recruits to simply come across information about the Portal on SharePoint while browsing. However, Natasha was rather sceptical about that. ‘The research community is not prominent ... I am not aware that it is prominent, on any organisational intranet so when you open the intranet, it doesn’t jump at you. It would probably require a bit of browsing around’. Pete echoed her scepticism as to whether all new employees would find information about the CoP from the Portal. ‘They wouldn’t find out, if they’re like me and very illiterate in terms of being technologically set, they wouldn’t find out by finding it on the Portal or anything like that. It would definitely be word of mouth and usually from someone who is very active’. Clearly though, people do become aware of the community. As Neil explained, ‘some people would find out about the Portal and want to join that and contact me’. Terry (Mgmt) was able to further develop the picture about a newcomer’s first encounters with the CoP by talking about his own recent experiences of joining the community. ‘In relation to the Research CoP, I got an email from Neil saying, ‘G’day, welcome aboard and very simply, this is what we do’. I heard nothing from any of the other communities [on the Portal]’.

While it seemed the boundaries of this community would be easy to define, this was not always the case. Terry (Mgmt) clearly valued the information he received by email from Neil via the CoP’s distribution list (at least, to some degree) while at the same time, he had mixed feelings about actually being a member. In fact, earlier in the interview, Terry had said, ‘I wouldn’t consider myself a member of the Community of Practice. No, I’m just on the [email distribution] list, kind of thing’.

This pointed to an intriguing situation where he was interpreting being on the distribution list as somehow different to being a member. Kathleen seemed to have a similar perspective: that CoP participation (what she saw as the formal side) could be separated from the communicative connections (the informal component). I interviewed Natasha first and then Kathleen at Site B. Natasha said that they had both become less active members of the community so I attempted to explore this further with Kathleen. ‘I’m not convinced that I am any less active. I’m less actively involved in actually attending the sessions and things like that but I don’t actually believe that is the essence of CoP ... I still use the community because I will still ring up, email or contact someone, if I need some information in a particular area where I know there’s expertise. So, I think to that extent, and they do the same to me, to that extent, I think the
community still exists and I’m still part of it. The formal part of it I’m not so involved in anymore’. Terry (Mgmt) and Kathleen came from different positions regarding what it means to be a CoP member and it was a little confusing to work out what they meant. For Kathleen, it seems that her communicative actions (in contrast to her participation in community activities, i.e. workshops and presentations) were more what being a CoP member was about. On the contrary, Terry’s perception was that the communication aspect, i.e. the CoP’s distribution list emails, could be seen to be distinct from being an actual member.

Views about these two elements of CoP membership (communicating and participating) were not expressly examined in the interviews. However, most participants did not see much difference between them nor a difference between CoP-related communication as compared to other more general job-related discussions. Neil explained that while he often shared information with other Departments, ‘am I doing that because I’m facilitator of the Research CoP? No, because that’s the sort of thing I do, I know those people. Would I have known them if they hadn’t been involved in the Research CoP? Probably not as much ... It’s not as simple to say, this is the community and this is what happens’. Pete underscored this lack of simplicity by saying he talked ‘to these people outside of the Portal anyway because we’re a small community ... [so] in terms of just a general networking within the community, it won’t be a big loss for me [if the CoP did not continue] because I already communicate with those people’.

External members

There was little, if any, evidence of attempts by members to actively engage the interest of those outside the organisation in community membership. As Pete explained, ‘a lot of my ... involvement with the community doesn’t extend outside the organisation ... Because I think it’s convenient. It’s just easier to be able to have those sorts of interactions within ... it’s people you’re familiar with. It’s just ... easy to communicate with them’. Throughout his interview, Pete expressed a strong view that the CoP needed more members external to the organisation but he was reluctant to try to engage their interest himself.

I still maintain contact with people from university and the Sociology Department ... I’ve never thought of including them in the Research Community and I think that’s probably because I see it as being such an eccentric world and I like to keep those worlds separate. I like to have my dealings with academia and that’s my community ... because it gives me an opportunity to remove myself from this world and I’m quite happy to be there and engage with them. But, I don’t want to necessarily bring them here because it suits me to have them separate.

Kathleen also provided glimpses of the culture of the organisation when she mentioned academics and the CoP. She said, ‘I tend to go out a lot to the academic communities because I
get my warm fuzzies from them rather than the organisation, which is a little bit confused about what we do’. Later she returned to this point and said, ‘I’d like to see more inclusion of people outside of the organisation, that we routinely invite people from the universities’. But, it was unclear whether she meant that such individuals should be invited to present to the community or to actually become members. There was one external member of the community who I was able to interview as part of the Stage 2 study and she occupied a unique place in the Research CoP. As mentioned previously, Judy was one of the key initiators of the idea of a separate community back in 2003/4 and she had remained highly active since then. She left the organisation in 2006 and has tried to maintain her social science contacts through the CoP since then. However, as she explained, she was ‘not sure that they are quite as comfortable with the external members’. Although the timing may have been coincidental, the year that Judy left the organisation was the same year that Neil’s disenchantment with the CoP began to grow.

CoP leadership

Neil had continually been in charge and it is quite understandable that his enthusiasm for the demands of the role fluctuated over the years. And although I have used the term, CoP Leader, consistently in association for all three CoPs who participated in Stage 2 of the project, the terminology they themselves used varied. Regarding the Research CoP, Neil stated, ‘I no longer consider myself the leader ... I now consider myself, the facilitator. ... For all intents and purposes [though], the function is exactly the same’. When the organisation was considering the changes that were ultimately implemented in 2007, Neil pushed for this name change. ‘Look, if you are going to have a CoP, you shouldn’t have a leader, you should have someone whose role is to facilitate’. Leadership is something that is kind of a little bit more, yeah it might emerge and you might call it, sort of, a de facto leader’. Irrespective of which label was applied, it emerged that Judy believed ‘it is a one person job. Somebody has to care enough to pull it [together]’. Pete agreed. ‘On the one hand, I see that it’s great ... that we’re all there for a mutually sustaining journey and we’re sharing things together, but I still think you need some key person within that community who holds it together ... always thinking of the interest of the community as a collective above themselves and trying to keep things bubbling along nicely ... inviting certain people over or maintaining those sorts of interactions’. He returned to this notion of the CoP needing to have a leader twice more at different times during his interview.

You do need these key central figures within the community where there is some sort of charismatic leader or some sort of visionary who can stand outside and ... think, ‘Well now, where is this community going?’ . You know, just have to take a step back from it ... you do have to have key figures or nodes within the network or within the community who have the ability to reflect, be a bit reflexive in the practice of the community as a whole, just to take stock of where it’s going and we’re heading and whether it’s healthy and what do we need to keep it viable.
Key people

The view of Neil’s leadership generally revealed through the interviews was consistent with Freda’s initial impression as a newcomer to the community. She said, ‘[Neil’s] a very organised man ... He’s got a good momentum in keeping things happening’ while Natasha considered him a social network star. ‘When you do social network [theories] and you have those so called stars that are connecting networks. Well, I would definitely call him [Neil] the one who was bridging a number of those communities or stars, or whatever they call them. So yes, I felt that his role was, and is, fairly central to that and I think also comes with personality, he is very passionate’. Kathleen confirmed Neil’s importance when she said that ‘without Neil, there wouldn’t have been a formal organisation [of the CoP], so he’s terrific ... that’s why I asked him to take that on when we first set it up ... and that was before he had kids too, so he had time then, as well as passion’. The leadership role obviously requires Neil to put in time and energy so I asked him why he did it. ‘[It’s] to do with a personal style and desire to not only have my own needs for community be satisfied but also the enlightened bit, as opposed to self-interested bit, in that I believe others also appreciate that opportunity’. Other interviewees saw it somewhat differently, in terms of it being a communal responsibility, rather than simply Neil’s, to hold it together.

Kathleen said that all the members were important and even though ‘Neil is important, it is the willingness of all the other members to actually continue that makes it [the CoP] work’. Freda agreed; ‘They [the CoP members] are probably all important in different ways!’ while Natasha spoke about all members needing to be willing to be actively involved in the community, for it to work. ‘Connections don’t happen by themselves. You have to work at them and it is that willingness on everybody’s part to make it work and to make it grow, to contribute to it, and to be a centre where you get nourished rather than your batteries flattened! ... if there is a blame, it’s a collective blame and again if there is something good, it’s the collective recognition because I think ... some individuals would be more proactive than others but again it is that willingness to participate, to do, and to exchange ideas and so forth’.

Neil was also quite conscious of the need for more of what Natasha had framed as ‘collective effort’ to happen within the CoP. He explained that the responsibility for organising the community’s activities had been shared much more in the early days but active participation by others now seemed to be decreasing. ‘The workshops we have had up til now though have been driven by a much more democratic idea and that is, ‘What would you like it to be about, let’s have a meeting beforehand, throw some ideas on the table’ and so, some of them actually have been shaped by committee ... one of the ideas specifically came from me but the other two were very much a community-based thing ... But we don’t have that committee, anymore’. Judy spoke about the CoP’s flagging participation like this. ‘If the community was about to drop off, I would start yelling and doing something. But, it definitely isn't in my list of things to do regularly, to try and keep it alive. I assume that's not my responsibility. I'm a user, not a
provider’. The members’ lack of commitment to make the CoP work and Neil’s disenchantment as CoP leader was also raised by Natasha. ‘The whole principle [about CoPs is that] if people feel passionate, they don’t need a leader to get things going. So, I don’t know whether this implied that there isn’t enough passion or enough interest but I think Neil, because of other commitments, he has pulled back … maybe it was partly intentional … [to] see how the momentum would develop, if he took a back seat’.

Neil did pull back and actually removed himself from the community in 2006/7 when he stopped trying ‘to hold it all up’. He explained his role as being ‘one of trying to get people together, get them thinking about issues to do with their own professional interest, providing opportunities for sharing the work they are working on, bringing in a lot of people from outside’. By 2006, it became too draining for him. ‘To be honest, part of the reason why I spat the dummy … literally spat the dummy, not literally, but got very stroppy about the whole situation … I pulled together some people that I knew, who were participants or people who had attended, and said, “Look, I’ve had enough.” I shouldn’t have been surprised but I think I was starting to resent the fact that I was carrying the can, even though everyone seemed to enjoy the community and want to be part of it, they didn’t seem to want to step up and organise anything’.

Although the timing was a little difficult to pin down precisely, it appeared this was happening in the period when the Portal changes were under consideration and Judy was leaving the Research Centre. As the Portal changes impacted on all of the individual communities, Neil attempted to establish a process for members to review the future of the community in this new environment. He sent an email to the members seeking to start a discussion about their future as a community. As he explained, ‘When I did spit the dummy, I said to people, ‘Look, what do you want to do, where do you want to take this thing? I want you to set the direction, not me; it’s your community, yada, yada, usual sort of stuff’. I got a few emails back but I think when I sent that email out to the 50 or 60 people on list, I got four responses. Basically saying, ‘Keep going, Neil’… Keep going, Neil, we don’t want to do any more work, but keep going. Okay, alright, so I tried’. Kathleen was clearly one of the few who responded to this email as she specifically mentioned it. ‘There was an email that went around that basically said, ‘Do we want to continue with this or do we want to just give it away?’’. And I was absolutely horrified by the thought and I know other people were, as well’. But did Neil’s ‘spitting the dummy’ prove effective in terms of any lasting changes, other than this immediate sense of alarm as expressed by Kathleen and others? Did his cry for help evoke much of a response and ultimately make a difference?

It would seem that the answer to these questions was both yes and no. Yes, in the short term but not really, in the longer term. Neil was able to devolve the responsibility of organising the 2006
workshop to someone else. Although, ‘for whatever reason, the community hasn’t been at that point where it has wanted to, where particular individuals have wanted to necessarily explore it in the same way that I have and I would welcome that ... that’s kind of my role as being to either keep it going or walk away from it and let it just rot on the vine because that’s what happened when I stopped putting in the effort to find things to do. Nothing happened, in twelve months’. The community simply hibernated during the 2006/7 period as no-one else stepped up as leader in Neil’s absence.

During the second half of 2007, I had several phone conversations with Neil during the completion of the Stage 1 survey and its analysis. My interest in the Research CoP, as a potential Stage 2 participant, was growing even though Neil had told me the CoP was now in hibernation. He mentioned the Research Centre’s planned to hold a Human Sciences Conference in October 2007 and suggested I attend. He also indicated he was thinking he might try to organise a CoP meeting during the conference which I could also attend, as an observer. I did go to the last day of the conference and during the formal closing session, Neil announced that a Research CoP meeting was happening straight after the conference closed and he invited anyone interested to remain to discuss the CoP’s future. Only a few people stayed, one of whom was Judy. At this meeting, Neil made it clear that he was struggling with the demands the CoP was making on his time and energy and he was quite discouraged when no real plans were developed around the CoP’s future.

During his interview, Neil reflected on how this meeting ‘was really an opportunity to get it going again’ although he was ‘very non-committal about the whole thing but I felt there was a need to at least try and see if they were still interested and it, kind of, started again then, to some extent’. Neil continued, ‘I think it’s a combination of “Oh, I had better do something seeing as I’m going to this event [the conference], a lot of the people that I’m interested in will be there, [I should] try and organise something, start of a new era through this restructure”. So, in a sense, the restructure, the Portal Exec. played a role as well. There’s lots of contributing factors to be honest’. Judy also reflected on this meeting saying, ‘I put my hand up and said, “let's do this and this” but nothing came of it and I suppose from my perspective, I have to accept that I'm not able to make things happen any more outside unless someone called me in to do it, which is not going to happen ... I have a commitment to Neil and I would honour that and I would continue to’.

In fact, Neil credited Judy with providing the impetus, at least in part, which propelled him to return to actively leading the CoP in 2008 when he again organised a couple of CoP presentations. ‘Judy said, “Neil, this is important, you know, come on, what are you doing” in a nice chiding way ... Judy has stepped in, in a de facto way, to be the sort of, behind the scenes
cajoler and facilitator, or helper’. In another way, perhaps this is an example of how social researchers can potentially influence those they study. For instance, my interest in the CoP participating in Stage 2 in combination with my attending the 2007 conference, may have contributed to Neil trying to kickstart the CoP at that meeting. While the community’s dependence on Neil raised questions about its future sustainability, Neil, himself, was well aware of the dangers. But, apparently, the persona he had created for himself in the CoP was such that he felt that ‘the community is completely dependent on me’. Pete certainly saw it like that, ‘Neil is a key person to keeping this group viable’ although he then went on to say it ‘is dangerous, I think, for the livelihood of the community ... If Neil left, ‘I think it would peter out’. And Neil’s view was that his pulling back from organising activities for the community meant that ‘it died. Well, no, it went into hibernation while I decided not to do anything’. In January, 2008 though, circumstances emerged which resulted in Neil organising the first real CoP event that had occurred for well over many months. He claimed that it was ‘serendipity, I suppose you would say. I got a call from someone’.

So, it got started again through simply being involved in a activity that led to someone calling me and me then thinking, ‘how can I, not how can I add to my CV, that was never in my mind, but how can I, there’s a real opportunity for people here [in the CoP] to hear about the person who is doing it. So, for me, it was, I suppose this is something I haven’t necessarily drawn out but for me I’m strongly driven, not just through this community but through my normal everyday behaviour, to link people up because I am compelled to do it, in fact. I can’t stop myself from doing it ... so I thought, ‘Well, I’ll see who is interested [in hearing this person speak]’ and there was a fair bit of interest ... so in a sense when I decided to go asleep at the wheel, I wasn’t looking for those opportunities and in some ways I didn’t have as many of them. Perhaps [this happened] as a consequence because I wasn’t really seeking out to provide my colleagues and I with opportunities to hear what people had to say, whereas now, it is back on.

And while it seemed to be ‘back on’, it was clear that, as the CoP leader, Neil still wanted other members to share the organisational load. He wanted others to move away from passively participating in events that he had organised to actually helping him. As Pete put it, ‘I think he really wants other people to step up’. Judy appeared ready to contribute but she could not really see her way forward on doing that, particularly as she was an external member. ‘One: if they had an infrastructure that gave people roles, I would be more than happy to put my hand up for one but they don’t. Two: the apathy, lack of interest from the other people [is an inhibitor]’. Later she came back to this point expressing her perception that her external status limited her impact but equally, she indicated that she still wanted the community to continue and was prepared to do what she could to achieve that goal. ‘I’m right behind Neil because Neil and I started this and I think Neil is doing a fantastic job against insurmountable odds ... I told him if he needs some help in something, I’m more than willing to try and keep breathing [life] into it’. Concerning help for Neil, the CoP apparently had an informal committee-type arrangement in
the early days but Neil explained that ‘we don’t have that committee anymore’. Furthermore, Natasha also spoke about the community originally having satellites. ‘When we first started, we did have those satellites, I was this State’s representative and I must say at the onset, I was reasonably active and we all would organise regular get togethers and have a chat’. Kathleen also talked about others helping in the past. ‘There are the odd people who’ve - Natasha did some stuff, I did some stuff earlier in the piece, Sophie Kusker does stuff, Pete, other people that have helped in the actual formal organisation’. Could it be that some of this initial enthusiasm has faded away as the CoP has matured? He continued:

Judy has stepped in, in a de facto way, to be the sort of behind the scenes cajoler/facilitator or helper. But I don’t feel I have got as much of a core team as I had before. ... there was another person called Sophie Kusker ... Because I had been a leader for a while and basically the Portal Exec. had this nominal idea of rotating the leader every two years ... [but] no one wanted to take it. So, same thing repeats itself, except Sophie said, ‘Look, I have got babies and things happening, and my work load and so on, how about we go co on it?’ I said, ‘Fine’ ... Did that for a while, that’s right, she actually fell pregnant and then she’s basically not been part of the community ... I think she probably put her hand up out of a sense of obligation rather than strong desire to actually lead it, if I can put it that way.

It emerged that another member had also offered to help Neil with the community’s activities in the past. He explained, ‘A woman by the name of Sharna Albright who I hadn’t previously mentioned but she put her hand up to help out, when I spat the dummy. But she didn’t do much, it was more of a sort of ‘Yeah, I’ll help out but...’. A bit like Sophie, there wasn’t any real effort on their part to organise events or anything, just to sort of help out a bit I suppose, as a point of contact’. Apparently Neil failed to gain much benefit from these two offers of assistance so I asked him why it had happened like that.

Probably because their desire to do the right thing by the community was not matched by their personal orientation towards wanting to link up people and organise events for them. Like for me it’s just a mismatch between the desire to help and capacity to help. There’s no disrespect to them. I just don’t think, some people simply aren’t good at, or find it very uncomfortable to organise stuff. You know either they don’t want to do it or they find it, maybe they are too self-effacing, to not want to be in the limelight or whatever it might be, I don’t know but I think it is just the fact that yes, they were motivated by a desire to try and help but not motivated in a way that particularly was useful to me, that is taking a load off and coming up with ideas. So, and not that that was necessarily their responsibility, that’s actually every member of the community has that right and responsibility to do that, but, so they are not aligned being like that, but I was kind of hoping that would happen.

Two CoP members, both women, had offered to help Neil in the past, but as he pointed out, not in a way particularly useful to him. Perhaps there is a delegation issue here because the outcome for Neil was that he still ended up having to do it all himself. He seemed particularly critical of
the abilities of these two women and rather rigid in seeing any potential in their offers of help. It was useful at this point to consider the mentoring process in this community.

Mentoring

In considering mentoring, it seems that little of it happened in the Research CoP. I asked Neil about it. ‘It is certainly something we did discuss earlier on, but on that, I don’t know, but certainly it is a logical extension of the community. But again, I have a hard enough time getting people to come up with an idea for a presentation, let alone saying, ‘Oh, by the way, do you want to be a mentor?’’. But having said that, it’s a cop out, I think, if we were to really want the community to grow, that is a function that it should necessarily serve because mature CoPs do exactly that and we tend not to’. It was obvious that Neil understood the need and he saw the potential benefits which could flow if there was more active mentoring done in the community, particularly in regard to young people, i.e. newcomers to the CoP. It also seemed that the CoP members’ initial enthusiasm and their subsequent energy for these types of activities had diminished, to a large extent. His reflections were insightful.

If the community had more momentum then, and more effort thrown at it, then that’s something [mentoring] perhaps could happen … Whereas I don’t tend to hit the airways too much at all, tend to play more of a passive thing, ‘Here’s an opportunity, you’re coming along, right?’, rather than ‘Come on, guys I haven’t heard from you for a couple of months, who wants to talk?’. I tend not to do the latter which would be more consistent with following up at the next stage. Because of course, it’s fine to get someone on the distribution list but for them to own that sense of community, then they need to be part of it and at the moment there isn’t that follow through, other than them rocking up to attend something.

Neil did not seem to make any connection between these types of undertakings and the assistance he had been offered from the two women mentioned previously. As he put it, their offers of help were not ‘in a way that particularly was useful to me’. Perhaps these lost opportunities highlight the need for a little more lateral thinking about how Neil could benefit from others’ help. Once again, Neil appeared to believe that it was his responsibility rather than the CoP’s collective responsibility to create a sustainable community. ‘Maybe I’m not good at designing teams, I don’t know. It just hasn’t tended to work for everyone’. Pete also seemed daunted about the practicalities of moving away from Neil’s current leadership style into a more contemporary management arrangement where the community effectively managed itself. He responded, ‘how would you organise that, Eileen? Because I think there’s a danger there when you have several, you said you could [possibly] have several people taking on that role. Then my experience is that people generally think that they’ve assumed that someone else is taking care of that so things don’t happen unless you actually engage in some sort of active
communication with them to ensure that you’re not riding on those assumptions’. Apparently Pete did not have much confidence about the effectiveness of the community’s communicative ties. On this point, Kathleen had mentioned that they had previously tried to rotate the leadership role of the community which can be a form of mentoring but she said it was not successful. ‘We tried to do that. Poor old Neil has been trying to hand over the mantle for a long time. Now, he tried to hand it over to Natasha at one stage but she was just not in a position to. She just started her PhD and she was not in a position to do anything about it’.

Kathleen was also quite aware of the potential benefits which could emerge if the community was able to do more mentoring. ‘We should be using these people [retirees] as mentors and as just people who can tell their stories and I think story telling and mentoring are just the ideal sorts of - what’s the term I’m trying to think of - way to give it back - the payback that you can give and the wealth of information that young people can get from that … corporate knowledge just walks out the door and we never get it back. So yes, I hope I will get an opportunity to mentor when I retire’. However, her tone indicated that she did not feel very encouraged that she would have such opportunities to mentor others when she retired which could be construed as an indication of the organisation’s culture around this form of knowledge transfer. Craig actually talked about the organisation-wide mentoring program in place but he seemed to doubt whether it was very successful. ‘I don’t think mentors actually received much encouragement [in the organisation]’.

It was clear the Research CoP was facing significant challenges in terms of its future viability. But, as Pete said, ‘you can’t force people ... That’s the whole thing about CoPs, people have to be, if they’re interested, they come in and they jump on board and they take what they like out of it and if they move out and then go somewhere else and get experience, we could then bring that experience to this community again in a year’s time ... so it sort of lives by the sword and dies by the sword.’ While Pete’s living and dying by the sword was rather poetic, clearly these challenges do not only impact on Neil (as the CoP Leader), rather they affect the whole community. In fact, the CoP’s reliance on Neil appears a significant threat to its ongoing sustainability. Neil admitted that the CoP ‘is highly dependent on me and I feel, despite the fact that I do have an ego, which gets me in trouble, I am not that egotistical to believe that’s something I would desire. You know, I actually don’t revel in the fact that the community is completely dependent on me ... I don’t like that but, on the other hand, I recognise that it’s just the way it’s turned out’. The reality for this community seemed to be that few, if any, were prepared (or able) to become involved in organising activities for the community? Neil also spoke about the possibility that organising another annual workshop might ‘kind of give us a kick? I think it would because when you bring people together like that and they are away from the office and they interact with each other and they enjoy the social interaction and they enjoy
finding out who’s who in the zoo again and who the new faces are and it, kind of, gives the community a bit of a boost and we haven’t had those events for a couple of years now. So I’m conscious of that and I would like it to happen but… {long pause}’. It seemed too difficult for him, at least at that time.

Neil described one of his ideas concerning a way the community might grow and potentially become more sustainable. He introduced the idea by saying ‘one way of achieving momentum without personality is through process, right?’ and he went on to describe an initiative around his establishing a regular timeslot, maybe every two months, for the community to meet up. As he said though, ‘it would involve more work… [but] in some ways it would make it less personality driven, because you would have a certain time in the month that you know is Tuesday nights on whatever, third Tuesday of the month is our night. You have that in your mind but it still requires the individual to organise it. But it is less, that would be less dependent on me bringing stuff in and more dependent on others’ saying “Look, I’ll present, oh look, no one has said anything” … so that’s probably something we need to think about’.

As a newcomer to the CoP, Freda’s views of the challenges facing the community around the question of leadership were useful. ‘I don’t know whether the responsibility tends to fall largely on one, or a few people, with the other people being less active or maybe riding on the back a bit, probably how I am a bit, at the moment. So, I think, [leadership is] important in terms of the coordination of communication functions but all other people, I guess, should be as active as they are able to be, in terms of contributing what they have to contribute’. Even Freda, as the CoP’s new member seemed convinced that members should actively contribute, if the community was to function successfully. Neil agreed. ‘Look to be honest, we … the community is at a point where we need to have that sort of strategic discussion about how we structure ourselves to best provide a service to its members and we just haven’t had that conversation. We have had it before and we have talked about who is going to do what and we’ve talked about roles. Yep, we’ve done all that’.

But it actually seemed as though there was little interest in having such a conversation or it could be that their work pressures do not allow the CoP members to participate. This notion was raised by several during their interviews and will be explored when organisational support for the CoP is considered. Although Neil said the CoP members had done some strategic planning/review in the past, it seemed obvious there was little succession planning currently in place. Would the community survive if Neil, for whatever reason, left the CoP on a permanent basis? In the interviews, I set up this scenario and asked what might then happen. Pete said he would be disappointed as Neil ‘does bring in external people’. Judy did not think the community would end but she believed the momentum created by Neil would be lost. She also
believed that management would eventually compel someone to do it. As she put it, ‘there will be someone who will be jiggled along and told you are, kind of, running it [but] whether they put the energy in that Neil has or not, is another question’.

**CoP communication**

The communicative activities of this CoP centre on individual presentations which Neil organises on an ad hoc basis. In addition, they previously held an annual workshop. Over time, the opportunities for members to communicate with each other at specialised CoP functions have decreased. There seemed very little communication happening between members. Craig described their email use: ‘[it] is [usually] one way, from the top down or the leadership down and then they would point you towards the SharePoint, maybe if it was just presentation [documents] to look at or you might attend a workshop [or presentation], have some face-to-face [contact]’. Pete said, ‘without those formal mechanisms, if you like, of someone organising a presentation or conference, which brings us together, there isn’t that many opportunities’. Previously, he had commented, ‘I don’t know if we necessarily communicate all that well’. This was a sentiment that Judy echoed, ‘that feeling of connection from the human dimension, that’s sorely missing’. Some members did communicate with others in the community more than just at CoP events but it was difficult to separate CoP-related interactions as distinct from their everyday work-related conversations.

The CoP’s membership list played an important part in their communicative environment. Neil explained that he put new members’ details on SharePoint and then sent them an email advising them to update their personal details on the system. Thus, newcomers faced few obstacles in joining in the CoP’s communication processes. Neil further explained that ‘one of the things I was big on, was using SharePoint to facilitate networking and linking. So, there was a list of people who were members, what the interests were, who they worked for and all that kind of stuff. So, I strongly push that’. Such a register of members, with details of their individual areas of interest and expertise has the potential to be an extremely valuable resource for the CoP and for the organisation. I sought to explore what Freda, as a newcomer, knew about this list of members. It was something she had not used and was unaware of it but said ‘it sounds like a really good resource ... [but there may be] privacy issues’. Obviously seeing the potential value of such a list, Freda mentioned it later in a positive sense saying ‘that would be useful to know the magnitude of the group and the diversity, the mix in the group’. Judy also suggested something similar. She said that Neil could ‘perhaps create an organisational chart or even a social networks diagram that shows all the different people, all the different Departments they’re in, how they all matrix together, how our community knits [together] ... but there’s none of that’. It also became clear that Judy did not know about a membership list when I asked her if she was
the only external member. ‘I’ve got no idea, actually. I am sure there would be others. I mean the intention is to keep it open but the infrastructure to enable that is probably not right, they don’t necessarily have permission to send out a few documents on different servers etc, etc, so probably a bit tricky for them’. Like Freda, Judy pointed out the challenges that today’s organisations face about privacy and confidentiality issues in association with technology.

Speaking about the membership list as well as other CoP documents, Kathleen said that it was essential they continued to be available. In the context of discussing what might happen if Neil reached a point where he could not carry on, she was firmly of the view that there would always be a need for ‘a central repository in terms of documents ... [and] maybe just a static website might be better than SharePoint’. Although Kathleen clearly recognised the value of a list of members for newcomers to join, her emphasis, and that of others interviewed, was on the list’s potential to support communicative connections between members wishing to engage in knowledge-sharing activities. However, just before the end of the interview with Judy, we were discussing the size of the CoP and I referred to Neil saying there were currently around 10 active members. She then said, ‘That's interesting. I'd like to see that, as a member, if it was diagrammatic, these are the ones that he considers to actually be [active], they'll be the people I'd talk to ... These are my other fellow members, not those other 70 that I keep seeing at conferences and I'm not sure if I should be talking to them, or not ... I'm just on a mailing list, that's how I feel ... those 12 or so brains, I would love to play with, put my brain in amongst them’. Judy’s idea was to use the membership list to find others with similar interests and bounce ideas around. Thus, the list could form a bridge to forging new connections between members of the CoP based on common areas of interest. Kathleen concurred, ‘being physically located [at Site B] away from where everything’s happening, the actual events aren’t that important to me but the contacts are’.

In considering the engagement or otherwise of the community’s communication, it was significant that there was such a real sense of us (CoP members) versus them (others in the organisation) as noted earlier in the chapter. It might be expected there was a true sense of cohesiveness amongst those in the community, perhaps to the degree of stifling critical debate and the emergence of new ideas. I wondered if members forthrightly challenged others’ ideas in this community. Pete felt that ‘people do voice their disapproval or if they don’t particularly agree with something, they can do that sort of thing and they’re not looked down upon for doing it necessarily’ but he also felt that conflict did not surface. ‘I’ve never witnessed any conflict of any sort. I’m just trying to think if we’ve had any sort of barnies, or anything like that’. Seeking his perspective on whether that was a good thing, he replied ‘No ... conflict is really good at generating new ideas and things like that. You need someone who’s going to rock the boat a bit to get people out of their complacency and think about things differently ... I like a bit of
conflict. I think it’s actually very useful, otherwise you can become a bit, sort of, stifled in innovated ways of thinking and being’.

Craig said that offering critical feedback seemed to be the norm in the organisation. ‘I think that one of the things about people in the organisation is that they’re willing to challenge a speaker and or ask an awkward question and make them sort of test their knowledge. So yes, I think new ideas, well certainly, new ideas to me, certainly do come from those sort of discussions’. Craig then expanded a little more. ‘By observing what happens, I think that people who are challenged tend not to take it personally. They tend to listen and think, “Oh yes, I’ll find that out” or “I’ll get back to you” or “Yes, that’s probably a good idea but I’m not interested in it”. So, I think, it’s pretty well accepted and overall, it’s a very positive thing’. However, he went on to clarify that for newcomers, it might not unfold in that way. ‘It would be very much personality dependent that if a person is used to going to discussions at university and participating in them and not just sitting in the background, well, they would continue that here. I don’t think the organisation suppresses that ... in a small group, I would say there’s nothing stopping anyone from participating’. Speaking as an actual newcomer to the Research CoP, Freda’s comments on this point portrayed a community with a readiness to engage with different ideas. ‘I get a sense that they would welcome that and I think the people that I can recall from going to that meeting, I think they also have got pretty good people skills and social skills and I think also would encourage input, or maybe challenging ideas ... they would probably see that as an opportunity to grow or to learn and I don’t get the impression that they would be resistant to that, or try and keep a lid on that sort of stuff’. Freda was also clear about everyone (and not only newcomers) being responsible for their own contributions to the topic under discussion. ‘I can see that there will be instances where you might not be familiar with other people’s terms but I suppose if you are at a session and you don’t understand, then it’s your responsibility really to ask rather than feel left out, to ask if you don’t understand the terminology’.

Communication choices

It became clear that face-to-face communication was the preferred medium although members also used email, video conferencing and the phone. Neil had also attempted to promote their SharePoint site as a static data repository, although he acknowledged he had little success.

I have pushed the technology angle pretty hard. I mean, I tried to get this discipline going, of people accessing material on SharePoint rather than attaching documents [to emails] and I always use it that way, so there’s a link to SharePoint whenever I have an event. But, over time, I have recognised that to be a poor model because it is not attending to their usage behaviour so I also include enough information on the [emailed] invitation for them not to have to do that
Neil’s point that the organisational culture showed a distinct preference for the richness of face-to-face communication was supported by other interviewees. Pete clearly valued what Neil called ‘face time’ over what he depicted as a ‘faceless mechanism [the CoP’s SharePoint website], it doesn’t cut it as far as I’m concerned’. While Craig said that he ‘wouldn’t go to the website unless I knew that there was something new there’. Natasha had strong feelings about this. ‘I haven’t actually logged on to that site now for probably 12 months which is not very nice of me, but that is the truth ... I’m not saying the technology doesn’t work, it doesn’t work for me. It is not that there are actually difficulties with having connections, it is just I feel somehow disconnected’. She explained her preferences saying she was ‘more a face-to-face person. For me it is easier to pop into somebody’s office and I prefer that and have a quick conversation, than go to SharePoint ... So, despite lots of fantastic databases and so forth, there are people who would prefer human contact. I used to log on, to look up a number of things on SharePoint but, as I said, for probably 12 months, I haven’t even logged on at all’. Natasha also talked about increasing work-related demands so it was not only her personal preferences for face-to-face interactions which had caused her to cut back her use of the CoP’s SharePoint site. Not all of the interviewees had such a negative view of SharePoint. Interestingly, it was Freda, as a newcomer to the CoP, who said, ‘the thing I have probably most [used] is the intranet stuff, if I am having lunch at my desk, I tend to browse. So, I do try and have a look there [at the CoP’s SharePoint site] fairly frequently so that would be my most frequent kind of communication access [with the CoP]’. Freda also explained said that [the site] ‘is not too hard to find’. This was quite a contrast to Natasha’s views about the system’s accessibility. ’[The SharePoint site] is not prominent on any ... organisational intranet, so when you open the intranet, it doesn’t jump at you. So, it would probably require a bit of browsing around. I have it bookmarked so I go there but I wonder if I did not have it bookmarked, how I would find it’.

As the CoP’s leader, Neil’s view was that a lack of ease and expertise with the technology itself was common across most of the members of the community. ‘I can’t really talk for my colleagues too much but I’m the most technologically, I believe, one of the [most] technologically-savvy members of the Portal. That sounds a bit conceited but I’m the one that set up SharePoint, I’m the one that drove that agenda to some extent and our community is the one that most uses that facility, mainly because I set it up’. He sounded rather aggrieved by the situation and put it like this. ‘I’m frustrated by the fact that my colleagues, for whatever reason, haven’t reached that stage and therefore haven’t seen the opportunity that the technology could
afford them in terms of efficiency, in terms of knowledge management, in terms of all those goods things that technology can support but you can’t, I mean, it’s not my role to teach them how to become savvy but nevertheless I’ve tried to serve as an example and all they do is come to me to help them’. Once again, the onus seemed to rest with Neil and it was clear that he felt cast in the role of teaching the other community members, a role he had tried to reject. It was also clear though that he had attempted to support others becoming more familiar with using SharePoint although he had now reached the stage of giving up on seeing any such behaviour change. Kathleen confirmed she preferred information to be pushed to her rather than it being her responsibility to pull it from the SharePoint site. Like Natasha, she put down her decreasing use of the site to increased pressure at work. Thus, one of the outcomes was that the higher level communicative possibilities offered through the SharePoint system, such as online discussions, were being ignored.

Neil was discouraged and spoke of an initiative he had tried. ‘If we were to go to a distributed, asynchronous model of once a month, post something, people write some comments on a distribution, on a, what do you call it, a posting whatever, it would fail. We have tried it ... Failed abysmally ... discussion boards have tended not to be very successful ... I have tried to some extent to push the technology angle but it just hasn’t taken’. I canvassed Neil’s thoughts about why others saw little benefit in trying to overcome these technological barriers. ‘Put it this way, if we were to turn the SharePoint site off tomorrow, for our particular community, I wouldn’t expect a clamour of discontent to occur, put it that way ... I put stuff on there and very few other people post stuff’. He ended up saying that ‘email is the key, email is core to the way we do business. SharePoint is secondary, very, very secondary’. Kathleen agreed, although as she explained, ‘most of the time, I don’t do [email] the community as a whole unless there is something like a paper or a reference which I think would be of interest to everyone but if there’s not, then I won’t and I’m terrible, I don’t use SharePoint so I won’t put it on SharePoint, I’ll send it [by email]’.

As an older technology, email was common place in their communicative environment although several had other preferences. Natasha said that email was ‘probably the easiest’ but her first choice was the telephone. Kathleen agreed, pointing out that unless you knew the other person, and had previously established trust through face-to-face contact, it was ‘always a little harder to frame the words and make sure they can’t be misinterpreted ... It’s not as relaxed’. Pete also mentioned email but in the context of listing some of the downsides. He then said he preferred face-to-face communication. ‘A lot of the stuff is via email and I think that has some benefits to it but it also has some limitations to how things are communicated and then particularly if you’re getting all these emails, you see another email, you just quickly skim over them and click it and move on. So, I would prefer more person face-to-face, sort of, exchange’. So, face-
to-face communication was sometimes preferred, not only as a counterpoint to the SharePoint system but also to email.

Freda acknowledged the situational nature of the choices being made. ‘I would hope to do more of the face-to-face stuff and actually have dialogue, be part of that process ... I guess in terms of expressing ideas, in terms of discussing topics, expressing ideas, I think that face-to-face is really very valuable’. Pete drew in another factor when discussing the CoP’s communicative environment. His point was that the prospect for face-to-face interactions was diminishing as ‘there’s going to be less opportunities for us to go interstate for conferences or travel with work’. He went on, ‘While you’re there, you can catch up with people in the community and have a chat and talk, all those sorts of things. Now that avenue is going to be taken away from us. We are going to be more reliant on email, video conferencing where required and I think that’s to the detriment of the community. Nothing beats looking at somebody and talking to them and asking them, pulling them aside when you’ve got the opportunity … I like face-to-face communication, I prefer that’.

Speaking in some detail about the cultural norms of the organisation, Pete also touched on the differences between face-to-face discussions and those mediated by technology. In this instance, he referred to the video conferencing system and emphasised how the limited time influenced communication ‘You’ve got to be fair and everyone has their little time allocated where they can say something and if you’re hogging the limelight, someone would say “Well okay, let’s move on from there or we’re not going to agree here, let’s move on to this next point or is there anything else that someone else would like to discuss?” So, they’re regulated’. Earlier he had said, ‘I would prefer more face-to-face sort of exchange … well I’d love to, it doesn’t really happen that much other than via video link ups and things like that because we have people in other States ... so it’s hard to get us all in the same room together and I prefer that sort of interaction ... video conferencing, that’s the next best thing - that’s all right, that’s good, its okay’.

Being one of the members from another State (Site B), Natasha’s comments provided another perspective on what Pete said about video conferencing. ‘I know that the technology now allows us to hook to video conferencing but ... I believe that those things should be a bit more spontaneous and well, I wonder ... whether because the bulk of them are co located [at Site A], are they meeting, bumping into each other in corridor and then carrying on some conversations and planting seeds’. With Natasha and Kathleen geographically located at Site B, they both spoke in some length about the difficulties associated with connecting with other CoP members via the video conferencing system. Natasha went into quite specific details about the shortcomings of the technology itself and her preference for face-to-face communication.
‘There is certain disadvantage, sometimes voice distortion ... okay, they are on the screen [and] we listen to them ... I think I am behaving differently and engaging differently to having face-to-face ... there is a drawback, at least from where I sit ... I do appreciate we now have technologies... but I think there is still a need, at least, I get more gratification talking to people [face-to-face’]. Natasha’s dislike of the technology was echoed by Kathleen.

It [video conferencing] is useless, for ... networking. It’s sometimes useful for talking to someone or listening to a presentation which is largely the way we use it. We’ve had, in the early days, one or two meetings but even that, they’re difficult because you don’t always see everybody who’s in the room. You can’t always hear everyone. There’s always two people speaking at the same time, they block each other out. So, you don’t want to formalise the meetings but you want to be able to have it so that you can actually communicate ... I think you miss that networking, you cannot network on video. And just - maybe if we had webcams, you could do it on an individual basis but part of the benefit of those ventures is you can actually go and meet more people and talk to them about your work ... You can’t do that and in fact ... I find it frustrating because they often can’t get both the video and the speaker, up at the same time. Not the video, the PowerPoint. So, you either have the speaker’s voice and the PowerPoint, which I don’t like or you have the speaker and I’d rather have PowerPoint in front of me to read ... but that’s a personal preference and I don’t know, sometimes it’s just as easy to read the PowerPoint presentation but I think it’s a poor substitute for being there.

The communication processes linking Judy into the community (as an external member) were indicative of the overall low level of CoP communicative activity. She explained that she did not have access to the CoP’s SharePoint site ‘but, I’m not a big technology buff, so I probably wouldn’t use it even if I did, I’d rather go through humans ... [this means that] something may be going on in SharePoint that I have no idea about. However, she does get the emails that Neil sends out through the CoP’s distribution list but she prefers face-to-face communication.

In contemplating the communicative relationship between the CoP and the organisation, all the interviewees, except for Judy, mentioned an internal staff magazine called ‘In Touch’. It was clear they were all quite familiar with the publication although Judy, perhaps because she was now an external member, did not specifically mention it during her interview. Craig talked about the magazine from the perspective of his previous role on the Portal Exec. saying that he would put ‘an article in every second edition, talking about what’s been happening in the Portals and so, I guess, if something happens in a particular Portal, well, that would tend to get a mention six weeks later, or thereabouts’. However, he was reflecting on the process before the 2007 Portal changes when the need for the CoPs to regularly report their activities to the Portal Exec. was dropped. Since then, the Portal Exec. may not become aware of individual community events so it appeared unlikely that details would have appeared in the magazine. Pete said, ‘I can’t think of the last time I saw the Research Community mentioned in our ‘In Touch’ magazine ... I think it does mention the Portal and things but I can’t remember the
Research CoP being in there’. Altogether three CoP presentations had been held since the start of 2008 but none of them had apparently been mentioned in the magazine. Such situations can be seen as lost opportunities as Pete recognised, ‘things like that [being mentioned in the magazine] help raise the profile, if you like, of the group’. Freda was also aware of the magazine’s potential to support their knowledge sharing practices and to more generally promote the CoP throughout in the organisation. It’s ‘an avenue for kind of disseminating information. I guess that the Research Community or Neil or the group would have an option, if they wanted, to use that as a channel for communication, they could do that’. Terry (Mgmt) was another interviewee who believed in the magazine’s potential to promote the communities and the Portal itself. As the liaison between the CoP and the Portal, he explained, ‘When I started this role, and I was full of enthusiasm I intended to go and speak to the editors of ‘In Touch’ and all the other publications to see what kind of information you could feed them, what they wanted and stuff like that and I think that I should do that’. But, apparently, he was still to do any promotional-type activities in regards to the CoP and the Portal. Coming from another angle, Freda felt that the SharePoint site itself could also be considered as an internal marketing tool with the promise of raising the profile more generally throughout the organisation. Natasha expressed the need for the community to sell themselves. She said, ‘I think Neil pointed out, and I tried to, [that] it was important also that we are seen by the organisation as a group that contributes significantly’. Effectively promoting CoP initiatives to the organisation is likely to be beneficial to the community.

CoP/organisation connection

In some ways, the Portal could be considered to be sponsoring the CoP as it formed the connection between the CoP and the organisation. As detailed previously, significant changes concerning the operation of the Portal and associated communities were implemented during 2007. Craig’s views were probably coloured by his past experiences of the Portal Exec. Officer role but he described the CoP/organisation relationship like this.

\begin{quote}
I think the senior management use and talk about the Portals because the Portals are a good thing, they’re a good communication mechanism … and senior management are trying to develop cross Departmental cooperation activities … but on a day-to-day basis, I would say that the organisation doesn’t really think about the Portals too much. But when someone within the Portal takes an initiative and sets up a seminar or a workshop, the organisation will say, ‘Yes that’s a good thing’ but it is really very much person-dependent, on the leader of the Portal or the leader of the community. So it’s not a strong culture and there’s more than tolerance, its welcome tolerance, if you like. I’m sure the organisation is very pleased to have this mechanism and throws out little bits of encouragement but it’s really dependent on the actual practitioners [CoP members].
\end{quote}
While Craig said the relationship between the community and the Portal was ‘welcome tolerance’, Terry (Mgmt), in his role as the CoP/Portal Liaison, also described it more from a grassroots understanding. ‘The Portal is really static and it only reacts if it’s, kind of, prodded or poked. So, they [CoP members] communicate as a community and only come in contact with the Portal when they require the Portal’s resources or if they think they have got information which is of benefit to the broader Portal community’. In considering the advantages of the CoP being formally linked to the Portal, candidly he said, ‘in some sense, it’s only useful for the communities if they get access to Portal funding’. He then seemed to reconsider his comment about money being the only benefit by saying ‘but what I said before is the pessimistic view of why you get your community to become formally recognised by the Portal’. However, Craig had an intriguing idea about how the organisation could better support the CoP:

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The organisation could probably expect more of an output from the Portal and challenge the Portal to be accountable a bit more. If that was done, it would indicate to the Portal members that the work they’re doing within the community is really needed and is really appreciated rather than this almost invisible activity which is great in the long term and the organisation would be the poorer for it, if it didn’t exist ... But if there was a pull from the top to say this is what we’re giving to the Portal, this is what we want out of it, we need to see X number of guest speakers, we need to increase cross Departmental collaboration in some way. They should have some performance indicators that can demonstrate to management themselves that they’re getting value out of the investment and to the members that what they’re putting in will be valued by the management.

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Craig continued, ‘maybe the organisation isn’t as clear as it could be about what it wants from the Portal’. And he said, ‘it is hard to measure ... [but] a lot of the communication that goes on between Departments has been derived from the contacts that people have made through the Portal ... I’m sure our research would be poorer if those networks didn’t exist’. He agreed with me that the Portal stimulates connections while adding that it ‘legitimises it as well’. However, it became obvious that Craig’s proposal requiring the CoPs to meet performance indicators was similar to the reporting requirements which were removed in the 2007 Portal changes. It was also quite clear that his emphasis was rather different from the views expressed by other interviewees about the earlier formal reporting requirements. Craig saw benefits in the CoPs having tangible outcomes which could then be used to justify their resourcing. Conversely, the long-term members interviewed indicated that the previous reporting requirements were simply a bureaucratic burden and of little value as they did not accurately reflect what was happening.

Regarding support, the organisation provides some funding under the umbrella of the Portal, i.e. part of what Craig had described as ‘little bits of encouragement’. As was the case with the other two CoPs participating in Stage 2, the Research CoP was also able to use the organisation’s IT/communication infrastructure which gave them access to SharePoint,
videoconferencing, email and the telephone. Similarly, they also had access to office facilities such as conference rooms etc to hold workshops/presentations. But, like the other two Stage 2 CoPs, they also seemed to take these forms of community support for granted. The availability of funds through the Portal was generally mentioned as the support mechanisms. Natasha said, ‘there is also a certain amount of money … given to organise events and things like that and once there is, even a token amount of money given, it is recognition because the accountability and what have you, they won’t give money for a purpose that they don’t feel is worthwhile … So there is that recognition, I suppose’. Her point that receiving funds signified the organisation recognised the community, and in some implied sense, valued it, was significant. Terry (Mgmt) agreed although he used the word legitimacy rather than recognition. He continued, ‘I think it [the funding] also acts as a stimulus for these people to get together more, just being part of that formal group’. However, as Craig pointed out in a rather abrupt fashion, funds that can be given, can also be taken away. ‘They do provide some funding which enables workshops and that type of thing to take place. They provide some funding for people to travel interstate if there’s some meeting interstate. That would probably be seen as discretionary spending and is likely to be cut when the pressure comes on, it’s not seen as core activity’.

From the interviews, it appeared Craig’s forecast of financial pressures on the organisation impacting on the availability of these funds seemed to be coming true. Pete had said, ‘with all our travel cuts and structural impediments in place, [it] is going to make that sort of thing [meeting up with other CoP members face-to-face] even more difficult because there’s going to be less opportunities for us to go interstate for conferences’. The tense budgetary situation was on Kathleen’s mind as well. ‘The whole organisation is now at the stage where we’re all expected to do more with less and that’s only going to get worse, with the new cuts. I think, there’s every possibility that the formal structure will fail. I hope that we have got sufficient momentum in there, in the informal structure for that to continue and I will certainly do my darndest for that to happen’. While Kathleen’s line of reasoning was a little unclear, it seemed as though she was predicting that the formal structure of the Portal could possibly collapse which would mean the end of the funding. However, she remained hopeful that the community could survive such an event and she expressed her commitment to working towards such an objective.

Budgetary constraints

A theme of work pressures building over the past couple of years with associated budget cuts ran through the interviews; a situation faced by most contemporary organisations. Thus, Kathleen’s surmise that the CoP could have additional financial difficulties in the future seemed possible. While there was no doubt that the Portal currently provided a degree of funding to
organise CoP activities, it soon became clear there were no internal costing arrangements in place to cover the time members spent participating in CoP activities. While this was an issue for members in a general sense, it was much more crucial for Neil, as the community’s leader, because he organised all of the community’s activities. Judy explained Neil was ‘not paid to do that [lead the Research CoP], he’s paid to do something totally different and, in no way, is he able to put his time to anything he does for the community. He weaves it in neatly with some other projects’. And as Neil pointed out, because he was ‘not booking it [his CoP participation time] against our system’, it meant he was not getting any recognition of his efforts. In considering whether the CoP was valued, Freda also touched on this point. ‘For someone like Neil, who has a much more critical role and probably that role would take up more time, I think that needs to be valued and he would, I assume need management endorsement to do that, as a bit of a corporate role’. Earlier in her interview, she had also spoken about the increasing financial pressures being experienced organisation-wide and its potential impact on the CoP. Her view though was that she saw ‘the value of the community is really relevant in terms of knowledge sharing and collaboration and it is actually consistent with what the organisation is saying it needs to do. So, people’s participation I think should be encouraged and supported’. She was uncertain about the organisation’s internal processes though, in terms of staff participating and thought about it aloud, saying,

> When it comes to those individuals making a choice about whether they will or they won’t [be actively involved in the CoP], I don’t know whether that’s just up to the individual, or whether they’re liaising with their supervisors or their work area. And I don’t know if there are any impediments, either spoken or unspoken to being involved. I was surmising before when I was saying that ... if people aren’t as actively involved, or if there are fewer people than you might expect to be involved, [I wonder if] the current level of work pressure [is] having some impact.

The idea that operational managers might support or obstruct CoP members’ participation was important, especially as Freda used the words, ‘spoken or unspoken’. Craig explained the management mindset: ‘There’s no pressure on people not to devote time to Portal activities. So, in other words, the organisation provides that flexibility to people but if they decide that this is an important activity to participate in, the organisation will support that’. However, a thread running through many of the interviewees’ comments was that the organisation did not support their individual involvement in the community in a way which really mattered, i.e. by allowing them to charge their time to CoP activities. As Natasha put it, ‘unfortunately, the amount of work hasn’t shrunk, so it’s just really keeping up with [it] and I think it is counter productive in many ways because obviously you get enriched by talking to people but it is the trade off you know, the time that it takes versus the other things you are obliged to do’. Kathleen reinforced the challenging nature of their circumstances concerning CoP participation as it ‘still depends on people having enough time to do that and to make the contacts and when they do that, that
being valued by the people that they then present their work to and they’re all unknown quantities’. Neil reaffirmed this point by saying, ‘it’s tricky! How can you be an impetus for formation of a strong community in a context where no resources are explicitly allocated to support it?’ However, he was also quite convinced that the 2007 Portal changes were a step in the right direction in regard to resources being formally allocated for Portal and community activities.

The difference now though is we can formally bid for, sustain an allocation ... One of the things that could be done is anyone who is a community of practice facilitator might, for example, be able to give 0.1 of their time, half a day per week, to manage and coordinate community activities ... I actually wanted to do that when I was more heavily involved when it started [but] I wasn’t able to. So, I had to sort of hide it in the margins of whatever else I was doing.

Then again, the changes to the Portal arrangements meant that a formal resource allocation was made available to the three people who form the Portal Exec., one of whom was Terry (Mgmt) as he had recently taken on the responsibilities of Portal Liaison. Terry said, ‘Up until now, I haven’t had time allocated to spend on the Portal so if I want to work on it, then its above and beyond my line of duties, which is tough ... but from July this year, I understand that I’ve negotiated point one of my time which is essentially one day a week that I can allocate to purely Portal duties. So, from now on, it looks like they’ve given me their blessing to do that’.

It would seem that management did see value in the Portal and associated communities as substantiated through the formal allocation of resources even though Kathleen claimed that ‘it’s [the CoP] not something that is highly valued by your managers’. As a newcomer to the community, Freda was more tentative about whether it was valued or not. ‘I think that, if the senior levels have visibility to what they are doing, I think it would be, they would see the value in it ... I mean, I don’t know what level of recognition they have received to date, from that level, from management level’. Freda considered what the organisation might seek in return for the resources allocated. ‘They [the organisation] would probably hope that they would, that the functions of that group and the sharing of knowledge might translate in some way to better outcomes, now that’s a very nebulous term ... so that in some way, the value of the info, or the collective knowledge in that group somehow translates to better outcomes but just how that would be benchmarked and measured I don’t know, its very… nebulous’.

Terry (Mgmt) introduced another level of complexity when I asked him his views as a member of the three-person Portal Exec. ‘I think, at that higher level, the Portal is viewed as more valuable than it is at the lower level ... which is kind of odd … people like Gerald Jones and above as a research leader, they see the activities of the Portal is pretty essential but its over the
head of people working day-to-day ... the push for the Portal is coming from the top, not from the bottom, aside perhaps from the active and/or emerging communities’. Neil certainly felt his operational management saw little, if any, value in his community activities. He spoke candidly about a working environment which was substantially lacking in trust and he seemed to believe that, in some ways, he was even penalised because of his community activities. He spoke about a possible future where he shifted his ‘energies [away] from the Research Community and invested more within the formal structure because frankly ... it would be received more favourably by my executive’. Apparently, there were significant differences between the mindset of Neil’s immediate management and those more senior in the organisation which were revealed through the interviewees’ comments.

This study of the Research CoP has revealed a community facing challenges from a multitude of directions including Neil’s enthusiasm as the CoP leader burning out, the dearth of others accepting responsibility for the community’s endeavours and the tightening budgetary situation more generally throughout the organisation. However, the Portal changes represent a real attempt to move into a more sustainable framework where knowledge sharing can be encouraged, supported and rewarded more effectively.
CHAPTER 8: UNDERSTANDING COPs’ EVERYDAY PRACTICES

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes...
... Marcel Proust 1871–1922

Foreword

This chapter reports on the findings of the two empirical stages using two different organising frameworks. The first is based on the primary literature of CoP characteristics as reviewed in the literature review in Chapter 2. The second is a more comprehensive picture of CoPs, utilising the Synthesised Model which I developed in the literature review. Applying these two theoretical frameworks to the empirical findings of this research promotes a deeper understanding of the everyday practices of CoPs.

CoP characteristics

Several CoPs have been studied to understand more about their practices: nine were surveyed in Stage 1 and three of these CoPs were studied in more depth in Stage 2. The analysis is anchored in the varying theoretical approaches emerging from the CoP literature concentrating on identifying elements or characteristics operating in successful knowledge communities.

Many schemes have been developed over the past few years with the aim of classifying the key characteristics of CoPs and they were critiqued in the Chapter 2. Commonalities exist between the schemes proposed by the various authors but also some intriguing differences. For instance, while Scarso and Bolisani (2008) briefly touched on the work done by Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2005, 2006) and Andriessen and Verburg (2004), they did not mention the other authors critiqued. The failure to fully encompass the history associated with CoP research into key characteristics was found to be a significant shortcoming of other studies as well.
Primary literature framework

Four studies of CoP characteristics (Scarso & Bolisani 2008; Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2006, Ruuska & Vartiainen 2005, and Andriessen 2005) were deemed primary. They have been supplemented by a few others where relevant and were critiqued in detail in chapter 2. Thus, a theoretical picture of CoP characteristics was constructed (see Table 7 on page 41). Although Ruuska and Vartiainen’s (2005) research was considered one of the four primary sources, it was not specifically used because their scheme was similar to Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008). It is this body of knowledge that provides the first of two theoretical frameworks.

The studies are now interrogated in relation to the three CoPs participating in Stage 2. Andriessen summarised the ‘key characteristics of knowledge communities that were identified by the various authors’ (2005, p. 200) and detailed eleven characteristics. Two ‘clusters’ emerged (Institutionalization and Connectivity). The remaining few characteristics were grouped together and called the Dispersion and Interaction Mode. Institutionalization drew together a CoP’s operational aspects, such as its purpose and composition while Connectivity referred to the members’ interrelationships. The third, and more miscellaneous, cluster of Dispersion and Interaction Mode described how scattered the community was, both in regards the host organisation and geographical locations, in combination with their methods of interacting (Andriessen 2005, p. 206). To analyse CoPs based on his 11 characteristics, Andriessen (2005) developed his own CoP archetypes scoring scheme which is presented at Appendix 9. Applying his work to the Catering, Training and Research CoPs allowed both similarities and differences to become more visible. This analysis is presented as Table 27.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key CoP characteristics</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contract value:</strong> degree to which the community has to deliver concrete results</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong> Having a common mission versus only exchanging information, or also: having an organizational orientation, i.e. developing best practices or even innovative solutions, versus an individual orientation, i.e. exchanging information for solving personal problems and learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defined membership:</strong> whether the community is closed or open for new members, having fixed or shifting relationships and membership</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of formalization:</strong> having more or less formal meetings and an appointed coordinator, formally set-up by management and clearly visible to management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composition:</strong> only experts or both experts and newcomers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reciprocity (connectivity): degree to which members interact mutually and know each other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connectiv-</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity:</td>
<td>Feelings of cohesion, trust and belongingness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intra- or inter-organizational

Geographical dispersion

Size

Type of interaction: face-to-face (FtF), ICT or both

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dispersion &amp; Interaction Mode</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intra- or inter-organizational</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical dispersion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of interaction: face-to-face (FtF), ICT or both</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 27: Analysis based on Andriessen’s (2005) CoP archetypes

Inspection of Table 27 reveals that of the three CoPs, the Catering CoP was more institutionalised while the levels of connection seemed strongest within the Catering and Training CoPs. In considering Andriessen’s (2005) third dimension, no differences emerged overall although important variations did when the four underlying elements were considered. This highlights the importance of moving beyond the summary level of Andriessen’s (2005) dimensions. Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) typology of CoP characteristics is covered next, although it was originally constructed for emerging virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs). For the purposes of this research, it was applied to the Catering, Training and Research CoPs even though they are not VCoPs nor are they in the early development stages. Many characteristics the same, or similar, to Andriessen (2005) were revealed, some further subtleties have also become visible as shown in Table 28.

Table 28: Key CoP characteristics
Table 28: Analysis based on Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob’s (2006) topology

All three CoPs have an operational orientation and have reached a mature level with the Training and Research CoPs moving past that stage. This topology introduced the notion of organisational slack, i.e. the degree of excess capacity in the organisation’s allocation of resources that the CoP can potentially access to support their initiatives. None were high on this dimension though the Training CoP was moving to medium with the organisational changes in progress. Another new element concerned the strength of interpersonal relationships between members before the CoP formed. The Research CoP members had previously had quite strong bonds while the Catering CoP members were the opposite, hardly knowing each other as they had previously worked in isolation. Thus, this analysis has shown that all three CoPs are mature communities with varying ties between their members. Additionally, differences in their access to organisational resources are highlighted.

Moving to Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) framework, it augmented and re-formatted the list of characteristics in some significant ways. A new addition was the Economic Dimension which made visible the trend of CoPs being used by their host organisation to increase performance levels. Examining the analysis in Table 29 over the page brings the Catering CoP’s emphasis on saving money to the fore. As discussed in Chapter 2, Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) work also reflected the increasing prevalence of technology in the communication processes of all CoPs. Their work seemed to privilege ICT over face-to-face communication even though their unit of analysis was generic CoPs, and not VCoPs. In claiming that ‘KMS [Knowledge Management Systems] do not guarantee, automatically, people interaction’ (p. 383), it was apparent that their communicative focus was directed towards technological, rather than social aspects.

KMS were not used extensively by any of the CoPs studied in Stage 2 although the Training CoP did have teleconferences while the Research CoP held videoconferences and all three used the telephone. The Research CoP was the only one where an online collaborative workspace, e.g. the SharePoint system, was available but the members’ response to it was dismal. They also spoke negatively about their experiences of videoconferencing and clearly preferred face-to-
face communication. On the other hand, the Training CoP favoured technologically-mediated communication but mainly because they operated within a highly technical environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key CoP characteristics</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Transverseness’ across organisation:</td>
<td>Small Medium</td>
<td>Small Low Medium</td>
<td>Large High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size Geography</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low Medium Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with existing org. structure: integration</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Moving to yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal acknowledgement</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Semi-open</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance mechanisms:</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Informal → formal</td>
<td>Semi-formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ roles</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Sub-groups</td>
<td>Difficult to judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind of leadership</td>
<td>Clearly assigned at creation</td>
<td>Assigned by original members</td>
<td>Assigned by original members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of shared knowledge</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ cultural proximity</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ knowledge gaps</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge domain</td>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Social research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM processes &amp; flows:</td>
<td>Bi-directional (balanced)</td>
<td>Bi-directional (balanced)</td>
<td>Single directional (mostly using)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing versus using</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Med → low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of trust</td>
<td>Possibly Financial Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (some) No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metrics to evaluate:</td>
<td>Resources allocation Yes No Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs</td>
<td>Incentive/rewards systems Non-monetary (Dept Award) No No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>KMS application Intranet Intranet SharePoint</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM processes underpinned by technology:</td>
<td>No Yes</td>
<td>Yes, low usage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-using knowledge (databases)</td>
<td>Email, phone</td>
<td>Teleconferencing, email, phone</td>
<td>Videoconferencing email, phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Relationships with social/org context FfF preferred Highly technical FfF preferred</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensity of use across CoP</td>
<td>Low Med Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with ICT</td>
<td>Low High Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 29: Analysis based on Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) framework

In using the primary literature on CoPs characteristics as an organising framework, a more detailed picture of the three CoPs has been constructed with additional and meaningful insights about their day-to-day practices becoming more visible.
Synthesised Model framework

The second organising framework is underpinned by the Synthesised Model which I developed through the literature review. This newly-constructed model consolidated a range of theoretical ideas concerning CoP characteristics from both the auxiliary and primary studies reviewed in Chapter 2 — refer to Table 9 on page 46. Applying this model to the three CoPs revealed more detail about their characteristics though the result is a dense, picture of their practices. It is also a test of the Synthesised Model to see if it adequately reveals the dimensions and practices that most differentiate between CoPs and, hopefully, provides some ways to account for success.

In the past, the complexity of CoPs seems to have been smoothed out in academic and practitioner writings about these types of communities. Table 30 below presents the Synthesised Model and its application to the Catering, Training and Research CoPs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key CoP characteristics</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Transverseness’ across org:</td>
<td>Small Medium</td>
<td>Small Low-&gt;Medium</td>
<td>Large High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic dispersion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with existing org. structure: integration</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low-&gt;Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal acknowledgement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Moving to yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism of participation</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Semi-open</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance mechanisms:</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Informal-&gt; formal</td>
<td>Semi-formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ roles</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Sub-groups</td>
<td>Difficult to judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind of leadership</td>
<td>Defined by orig. Sponsor+members</td>
<td>Assigned by orig. members</td>
<td>Assigned by orig. members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>Operational?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life span</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of maturity</td>
<td>Maturing</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation process</td>
<td>Spontaneous/ Intentional</td>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Facilitating</td>
<td>Obstructive-&gt; Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational slack</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>Low-&gt;Med</td>
<td>Med-&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members enrolment</td>
<td>Encouraged</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of shared knowledge</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ cultural proximity</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ knowledge gaps</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge domain</td>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Social research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM processes &amp; flows: Contributing versus using</td>
<td>Bi-directional (balanced)</td>
<td>Bi-directional (balanced)</td>
<td>1-directional (mostly using)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 30: Applying the Synthesised Model

Following Scarso and Bolisani (2008), the Synthesised Model has been grounded on the four dimensions they created within their CoP classification scheme, i.e. organisational, cognitive, economic and technological. The next four sections of this chapter present the critical application of this model to the three CoPs, beginning with the Organisational Dimension, noting that relevant material from the Stage 1 survey has also been integrated, as appropriate.

Organisational Dimension

Almost half of the total characteristics in the Synthesised Model relate to the Organisational Dimension. For this reason, it was useful to reduce the complexity of analysis further by grouping the organisational characteristics as internal or external. The internal elements refer to a CoP’s members and the community itself while the remaining organisational characteristics relate to a community’s external environment, i.e. the relevant aspects of the host organisation itself as well as the CoP/host relationship. At times, this meant difficult choices had to be made, resulting in the order of the individual characteristics being different to Table 32. To deal with this additional complexity, the details relevant to either the internal or external group are reproduced in tabular form in the relevant sections that follow. Thus, Onwuegbuzie and Dickinson’s (2008) allegation that graphic exploration and display are underdeveloped by researchers utilising qualitative approaches (p. 221) is also addressed, in some small way.
Internal characteristics

Overall, in terms of Wenger’s original profile of a community being ‘free and untamed’, the Training CoP seemed to fit the closest to this early model. The Catering CoP was more closely aligned with contemporary management thinking around ‘cultivating’ the community while the Research CoP was located somewhere in the middle. It was by looking more closely at these internal characteristics that further details became visible and several were quite noteworthy, i.e. the roles and relationships of CoP members. It is also worth noting that one of the unexpected findings of the Stage 1 analysis was how little the survey respondents actually knew about the other members of their community while the grounded nature of Stage 2 meant these important aspects could be studied in greater depth. One such focus was the construct of ‘newcomers’ which arose from Lave and Wenger’s original 1991 work in explaining legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) although the entire LPP concept mostly disappeared from Wenger’s later work. Another major focus was directed toward the ways the leadership function plays out in CoPs. All the internal characteristics are now explored but it is these two elements (newcomers and leadership) that are developed in depth. As explained before, though, it was useful to replicate the internal characteristics group in tabular form (see Table 31 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members’ roles</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Sub-groups</td>
<td>Difficult to judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism of participation</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Semi-open</td>
<td>Open</td>
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<td>Kind of leadership</td>
<td>Defined by orig. Sponsor+members</td>
<td>Assigned by orig. Members</td>
<td>Assigned by orig. members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>Operational?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life span</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of maturity</td>
<td>Maturing</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 31: Internal characteristics (Organisational Dimension) of the participating CoPs

Studying the membership and activities of each of the three CoPs provided insights on multiple levels. For instance, the participation mechanism referred to the CoP’s openness but it was problematic to classify as either an internal or external characteristic because the community members themselves might make this decision or it might be imposed by their host organisation. Membership of the Catering CoP initially seemed straight-forward being restricted to those individuals who permanently occupy the Catering Supervisor positions but the situation became less clear cut. Conversely, while anyone interested in social research was welcome to join the Research CoP, one member was having difficulties continuing as an external community member since leaving the organisation. The situation regarding the Training CoP was ambiguous because the connection to their host organisation was less defined with different dilemmas being revealed. New members needed to be active contributors to the Training...
Network while ongoing members had to keep on contributing to stay a legitimate member. Debate was also unfolding as to whether contractors could be Training CoP members and a decision was made to exclude them. So, while there were certainly no official restrictions on joining the Training CoP, tension arose about participation requirements and their seemingly unspoken nature. Davis (2005) highlighted the importance of the taken for granted, and uncodified, conditions facing ‘an aspiring member of a self-constituting community ... There is no “person specification” as there might be for a job, or an academic course of study. Simply, they are evaluated as a prospective member under criteria that they may not know or understand’ (p. 567). A potential explanation for the variations revealed in the three CoPs’ membership conditions could be the degree of formality existing between the CoP and their host organisation, with the Catering and Training CoPs at opposite ends of the continuum.

The members’ behaviour, i.e. their participation and mutual engagement activities, was examined next, noting though the impreciseness of Wenger’s use of the two terms, participation and mutual engagement. Handley et al. (2006) cited Wenger (1998, p.55) writing about CoP participation as being not just a physical action or event, ‘it involves both action (“taking part”) as well as connection’ (p. 643) while Bozarth (2008) argued that ‘Wenger (1998) often blurs the distinction between “participation” and “engagement,” … (engagement includes meaningful interaction with other members; participation may not)’ (p. 226). Through her research, Bozarth (2008) identified and confirmed indicators of mutual engagement. One was the concept of ‘enabling engagement’ which included ‘the importance of being included in “what matters” and in the work of community maintenance’ (p. 230). She proposed the two terms be redefined thus: participation ‘as individual actions and individual’s ways of making meaning’ (p. 254) while engagement ‘requires being involved with others in meaningful ways’ (p. 252). In the three CoPs studied, there was no doubt members were participating, although the reduced activities in the Research CoP meant their participation level was in decline. Considering mutual engagement, there was little sense of belonging among the Research CoP’s members, not surprising due to the ambiguity of the CoP’s recent history. In contrast, the Catering CoP had the strongest sense of community and there was an equally strong sense of community amongst the core members of the Training CoP. These tight bonds appeared to present a challenge for newcomers, especially in the Training CoP. As Davies (2005) put it, ‘membership is not simply about practice, it is also about acceptance’ (p. 567).

The Stage 1 results indicated there were new members joining, at least in five of the nine CoPs surveyed. In the Catering, Policy, Project Mgmt, Research and Training CoPs, 19 of the 55 (35%) survey respondents had less than two years experience as a community member which meant they could be considered relative newcomers. However, only three of these 19 newcomers were aged in their 20s or younger, with most in their 40’s and 50’s, thus showing
that new members were joining but they were more likely to be older, and potentially more experienced in the CoP’s practice. By contrast, there was a lack of new members joining the three communities in Stage 2 although the reasons varied, e.g. the Research CoP’s partial dormancy, the joining restrictions in the Catering’s closed community and the consequences of the Training CoP’s high levels of cohesiveness and shared history. It seemed the problems Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) described about newcomers might have some relevance: ‘New members disrupt the pattern of interaction the core community has developed. They ask different questions, have different needs, and have not established the relationships and trust that the core group enjoys’ (p. 98). As newcomers brought ideas that challenged the status quo, the inwardly-directed thinking that was prevalent in the Stage 2 CoPs created issues for their sustainability. Matters such as generational change and the CoP’s ongoing sustainability did not appear to be under active consideration by any of the three CoPs, nor their host organisations. The Stage 1 findings supported this as the majority of the respondents indicated their community relied on only a few to keep it going. Furthermore, the survey revealed a failure to nurture newcomers was prevalent across the nine communities (at least, to some degree) with very little mentoring happening, to welcome and socialise new members into the CoP.

Because leadership had emerged as an important area in the early stages of the study, it was studied more intensively and Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs’s (2007) CoP facilitation tasks’ taxonomy was useful to do that. It provided a foundation for teasing out patterns in each of the three communities based on what their leaders actually did. At the highest level of their taxonomy, CoP leadership was broken down to 33 different tasks which they then split into 22 internally-directed activities and 11 outwardly-facing ones. Though my focus is now on internal activities, external ones are also considered later within the CoP/organisation connection section of this chapter. The 22 internal leadership tasks were split into the following three areas: Information Source, Inspirator and Guide. In fine-tuning my application of the Synthesised Model as a theoretical framework, this taxonomy was useful to explore the leadership and facilitation processes within the three participating CoPs. As a general statement, internally-focussed leader tasks were performed much more frequently when compared with leader activities directed outwards to the external environment. The leaders of the three CoPs seemed to focus more on providing information to the community with less emphasis on the inspiring and guiding functions. The Research community stood out in terms of how influential the leadership role was on the CoP’s current status and future viability, particularly as Neil has always been in control as the leader. Table 32 shows how this typology has been applied to the three CoPs, albeit with a simple rating scheme: if the specific activity is something the leader currently does, it is rated as 1, if not, it is zero.
### Table 32: Facilitation tasks (Tarmizi, de Vreede & Zigurs 2007) of the participating CoPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoP facilitation tasks: INTERNAL</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening, clarifying and integrating information</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding community tools and their capability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating comfort with and promoting understanding of the tools and tool outputs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting information to the community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing important information to new members</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering new members concerns</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informing members regarding management concerns</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL: Information source</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating and maintaining an open, positive, and participative environment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing and asking the right questions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting ownership and encouraging group responsibility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging multiple perspectives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging new members to participate in the community’s activities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting new members to the community</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL: Inspirator</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning community meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping community focus on its purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting appropriate tools for the community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing the community through guidelines and rules</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building cooperative relationships among members</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediating conflicts within the community</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanning community for ongoing/current activities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming up with suggestions, if necessary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding the community to match with organizational processes and standards</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL: Guide</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three points of interest (shown circled in Table 32) stood out, which confirm and extend the previous analysis of the three CoPs. The Research CoP’s leadership was prominent as the source of information while the Training CoP’s leader was the most inspirational. The third aspect concerned leadership actions guiding the CoP and it draws attention to some key points. While the Catering CoP’s leadership was ranked high on this aspect, it reflects the leader’s self-
management philosophy as Max’s leadership style is very inclusive and he shares many of these internal activities with other members. By comparison, the Research community was quite low — Neil’s prioritising of the first category tasks (around providing information) meant that he paid much less attention to leadership tasks associated with inspiring and guiding others in the community. Still, his efforts in organising events certainly included some elements of both the Inspirator and Guide categories.

Could the very traditional view that differentiates team leadership behaviours as directed either towards achieving tasks or nurturing interpersonal relationships have some relevance here? It seems possible as several of the CoP leadership tasks Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) drew together in their Inspirator category could be seen as people-focused behaviours, e.g. the first inspirational task was ‘creating and maintaining an open, positive and participative environment’ (p. 24). This certainly concerns the social relationships connecting community members which currently seem to have little definition in the Research CoP. In fact, Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) found that this task was the most important task for the CoP leader (p. 26). So, if their research was used as an indicator or a benchmark for success, it would reflect poorly on the Research CoP’s accomplishments. Cargill (2006) also emphasised this task, claiming that actively drawing in contributions from all CoP members, facilitating interactions and encouraging a culture of egalitarianism were among the most important leadership functions (p. 321). A little more generally, Garavan, Carbery and Murphy (2007) wrote that CoP leaders need ‘strong interpersonal, team building, conflict management and consensus seeking skills’ (p. 47). Burke et al. (2006) suggested that ‘both task- and person-focused leadership are almost equally important in team effectiveness’ (p. 303) and both would seem to be of equal significance in CoPs. Some of the Research CoP’s current difficulties may be attributed to these Inspirator and Guide-type tasks receiving insufficient attention as they are not being done in any systematic way. It seemed feasible that the two women who had previously offered Neil their help could have contributed to these types of tasks.

Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) identified that ‘promoting ownership and encouraging group responsibility’ was the most important leadership activity within the inspiration process (p. 25–28). The prevailing view of the Research CoP’s members who were interviewed was that one person should run the community although evidence of potentially double standards emerged as a view was also expressed that everyone was (or should be) responsible for the CoP’s success. This is something to be addressed if the Research CoP is to have a sustainable future as currently there is little evidence that members feel any ownership of their community. Another aspect within the area that Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) define as inspiration concerns the newcomers’ socialisation process and encouraging them to participate. However, they go one step further and promote a technological solution; ‘Tasks such as “presenting new
members to the community,” “presenting information to the community,” and “answering new members’ concerns” are good candidates to be (partly) automated and to be integrated into future COP technology. If facilitators are relieved from some of these tasks, they can focus more on tasks considered high in importance’ (Tarmizi, de Vreede & Zigurs 2007, p. 28). As the Research CoP members’ take-up of the SharePoint application was quite poor, a more practical, and potentially beneficial, option could be to share these sorts of tasks with other members. Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs’s (2007) point that some leadership tasks are either easier to do, or more important than others, is of some significance. A recurrent theme in discussing the Research community is the relative absence of a sense of connection between the members. It is ironic that while the practice of this CoP is social science, it is the social aspects of community that are neglected. Although resourcing cutbacks have reduced the opportunities to socialise face-to-face, why do members not participate in other ways, including taking on some leadership tasks? This question could not be decisively answered though insufficient time or motivation may be contributing factors for members. Of course, there may be other restrictions that could not be articulated preventing members from playing more active roles and/or creating connections within this CoP.

In considering CoP leadership from another perspective, Cargill (2006) reported that a lack of clear positional authority regarding the leader’s power base favoured ‘those with high tolerance for ambiguity and strong “people” skills’ (p. 321). She emphasised the need for CoP leaders to frequently renegotiate their status in the CoP. While it did not seem any such renegotiations took place in the Catering CoP, the other members reinforced the view that if Max left, another member would step into the leader role. Yet, this did not happen when Max absented himself for some months. Likewise, if Neil left, the Research CoP would most likely simply hibernate until an unknown person was asked (by management) to restart it while leader succession had neither been addressed nor discussed within the Training CoP. In considering succession processes and shared leadership, Taggar, Hackett and Saha’s (1999) view (albeit in formal teams rather than specifically in CoPs) was ‘that the effect of emergent leadership was greatest when other team members also demonstrated high levels of leadership influence’ (cited by Mathieu et al. 2008, p. 451).

This was only partially supported in the current research. This idea that shared leadership would more likely emerge in a group whose members had high levels of leadership capabilities did hold true in the Catering CoP, to some degree — two members shared the leadership role in the Training CoP — but it had not happened in the Research CoP. The ambiguities revealed in these three CoPs around the question of leadership underscore the importance of further research and support the question asked by Mathieu et al. (2008), ‘Who is best positioned to fulfil which types of leadership tasks?’ (p. 453).
External characteristics

The external characteristics associated with the organisational aspects of the three participating CoPs are now explored. These connections do not appear to have caught the attention of many of the researchers with an interest in understanding CoPs. In fact, Roberts (2006) pointed out that the organisational context of CoPs was an important direction for future research, asking ‘how do communities of practice interact with the formal structure of an organization?’ (p. 636). This question forms a framework to discuss the external characteristics of the Organisational Dimension. Yet, my work approaches the CoP/host connection from a different angle and turns Roberts’s question on its head, i.e. how does the formalised organisation structure interact (in terms of support) with CoPs? First reading of this might result in the two being seen as simply variations of the one question. It was useful though to tease the issue apart by looking at bi-directional flows, rather than only what flows from the CoP to the organisation. The trend, started by Wenger in 1998, whereby CoPs can be harnessed by their host organisation has accelerated to the degree it now appears accepted that CoPs can be decreed by management and members appointed.

The complexities of this relationship were brought into focus in the Stage 1 survey analysis with a couple of the nine participating CoPs having problems with organisational support. Conversely, the Training CoP framed their invisibility (and corresponding lack of support) as beneficial while another of the CoPs emphasised the need for balance in the relationship. Both the Training and the Research CoPs began in line with Wenger’s original thinking, i.e. they were spontaneously created by founding members (an internal act) while the Catering CoP was the reverse. It started with host organisation support, in combination with its founding members. So, perhaps the Catering CoP was an early example of the current trend towards these types of communities being more institutionalised. To rigorously extend the discussion, I have extracted the relevant material concerning the three CoPs’ connection to their host organisation and the external environment from the overall analysis table that was first presented as Table 30 on page 253. This segment is presented as Table 33 and it illustrates the place each community occupied within their host organisation and identifies differences between the Catering, Training and Research CoPs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisational Dimension</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Transverseness’ across org:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic dispersion</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low→Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational slack</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>Low→Med</td>
<td>Med→Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance mechanisms</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Informal→formal</td>
<td>Semi-formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism of participation</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Semi-open</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of the degree of ‘transverseness’ or spread across their host organisation, the Catering and Training CoPs appear similar. Both are small communities with members physically located relatively close to each other: the Training CoP members are in the same city area while the Catering CoP is a little more widespread though all members are still in the same State. The Research CoP is more geographically dispersed as its members are located across different States. On the other hand, the availability of organisation resources is low to medium across all three with only minor differences between them.

Considering the remaining six forms of external connections listed in Table 33, it was useful to look at them from a perspective of their degree of formality. But, it is essential to be clear that these terms, formal and informal, can have many different connotations.

Table 34 presents more detail in this examination of external characteristics of the three CoPs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Externally</td>
<td><em>Facilitating</em> because when the CoP was set up, the Dept was trying to be more ‘holistic’ and to shake off a bureaucratic public service past — a strategy that continues today. Org. culture has always been supportive.</td>
<td><em>Obstructive→neutral,</em> when the CoP was created, the training function had been severely devalued with the org. culture actively hostile though this is now changing.</td>
<td>*Mostly neutral although the org. culture and its valuing of ‘hard’ science over ‘softer’ forms of science research was, and still is, isolating. The Portal continues to provide them with a home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal acknowledge</td>
<td><em>Yes,</em> as the CoP is formally acknowledged with pride. It has built a reputation of success both internally in the Dept but also more broadly within the Public Service. Support from both local and more senior management.</td>
<td><em>Mostly low,</em> now→<em>yes,</em> as the members kept the CoP hidden ‘under the radar’ until recently. Situation changing as new senior managers begin to acknowledge the CoP and its efforts. Some local support since CoP began.</td>
<td><em>Yes,</em> resulting from the CoP’s affiliation with the Portal which is strongly acknowledged and supported by senior management levels but much less so by local management. Portal affiliation provides some financial support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Catering CoP operated within the most positive setting in terms of support and their organisational culture generally supported CoPs, from the senior management’s perspective. With the local successes the members have achieved, their operational managers were also supportive. The Training CoP was very different as originally they lacked any formal attachment or connection to their host organisation. Members felt they needed to hide the community as the organisational culture was actively hostile and it effectively formed underground. This meant that as it was not formally acknowledged, the host organisation had no impact on the community’s operations. In essence, their freedom was evident as this community was created spontaneously with a permanent life span where everyday operational issues are their primary focus. During the Stage 2 fieldwork, things were changing and they were moving towards a more formalised role in the organisation.

In some ways, a comparison between the Training CoP and the Catering CoP revealed almost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External</th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governance mechanisms of the host organisation</td>
<td>Formal in that the Dept follows well defined Public Service KM policy and procedures. Their collective power can influence the Dept.</td>
<td>Informal→formal. None til recently. Talks underway about how governance might be enacted in the CoP’s changed situation. Becoming more powerful.</td>
<td>Semi-formal in that the Portal operates under defined (though broad) policy and procedures. They have little collective power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanisms around participation from the hosts’ position</td>
<td>Closed as only people who formally hold the position of Catering Supervisors can be a member. There are no external members.</td>
<td>Open to all staff but the situation for in-house contractors was under review by CoP members due to confidentiality issues. There are no external members.</td>
<td>Open to all interested in social science. Members are mainly employees but there is an ex-employee (and original founder) who has tried to continue participating as an external member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ enrolment and the hosts’ position</td>
<td>Encouraged in a very explicit way as all Catering Supervisors are expected to join. Potential problem if a newly-recruited Catering Supervisor chose not to.</td>
<td>Voluntary although CoP members expect newcomers to ‘pay their way’ by contributing to the running of the CoP and the Network.</td>
<td>Voluntary with the degree of recruitment activities left to the newcomer’s local management. Little emphasis placed on it by management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with the hosts’ existing org. structure: integration</td>
<td>High integration with little mgmt intervention from mgmt sponsor. Was Dept’s CoP test case and advocated by a KM champion who helped Max in the early days. Emerged jointly top-down &amp; bottom-up.</td>
<td>Low→medium levels of integration changing as members effectively kept the CoP hidden until recently and even now mgmt intervention is tentative. Emerged underground.</td>
<td>Medium→low levels of integration with operational mgmt although there are strong connections into the organisation’s Portal process. Emerged bottom-up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 34: Some of the external characteristics (Organisational Dimension) expanded
opposing circumstances, with the Caterers receiving high levels of formalised support while the Training community received little. The Research CoP provided an opportunity to explore a very different situation in terms of its external characteristics. It began as a protective measure against the isolation of a hostile organisational culture that favoured the hard sciences. Thus, it was created through bottom-up action and then gained legitimacy through its link to the Portal. Figure 4 summarises the three CoPs relative positions on the formal/informal continuum, with the Training CoP moving from its previously informal nature to becoming more formal.

![Figure 4: The formal/informal continuum](image)

At this point, all of the external characteristics associated with the organisational dimension have been reported on. However, as discussed previously, it makes sense to extend the analysis of the resources the host provides and its corresponding incentives/rewards system beyond the monetary context. Clearly, these elements can be embodied within the support that flows from the host organisation to the CoP. As a general statement, organisational resources are always limited so it is understandable that host organisations are interested in measuring the financial support they provide to CoPs and the returns realised from such support. Even though capturing that which is predominantly intangible is problematic, Dupouët and Yıldızoğlu (2006) attempted to quantify the relationship through computer simulations where they compared CoPs with other, more formalised and hierarchical, organisational structures (p. 669). They found that, long term, CoPs built competences and if members were experienced and communicated well together, CoPs were found to perform better than hierarchies (p. 688). In this research, the measurement of these financial elements is discussed later in the Economic Dimension section.

Still, envisaging the support that flows to the CoP from the host organisation as restricted to financial matters is limiting in that it renders other forms of support invisible. For this reason, two of Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) three Economic Dimension indicators (resource allocation and incentive/rewards systems) are addressed at this point as they fit more logically within the external characteristics of the Organisational Dimension. The host organisations of each of three CoPs studied provided at least some ongoing support, as shown in Table 35.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to meeting facilities (room etc).</td>
<td>Access to meeting facilities (room etc).</td>
<td>Access to meeting facilities (room etc).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of host’s communication infrastructure (email, telephone etc).</td>
<td>Use of host’s communication infrastructure (email, telephone, telephone link-ups etc).</td>
<td>Use of host’s communication infrastructure (email, telephone, video conferencing system etc).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full day CoP meeting held every three months during working hours. Each member officially allowed time to participate in this meeting with all travel expenses covered.</td>
<td>Events held during working hours. One or two members currently have their CoP participation formally recognised in their performance review processes.</td>
<td>Events held during working hours. Currently, there is no time allocated to cover CoP participation but it is possible that in the future, this may change in regard to the CoP leader’s CoP activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 35: Resources provided by the relevant host organisation

All three CoPs use some elements of their host organisation’s basic infrastructure and all assumed the ability to do so. This infrastructure included rooms for meetings and access to technology (intranet, email, telephone etc) although these resources were provided unknowingly to the Training CoP as they had effectively remained hidden til recently. There was tension though, around the question of providing paid time to support members’ activities. The Catering CoP received the most tangible support through paid participation time while the Research CoP instead had access to discretionary funds through the Portal arrangements.

On the other hand, members of this CoP saw their organisational support as being eroded as budgets tightened, meaning that members located at sites other then the primary site were less likely to be funded to travel interstate for CoP meetings and other events. The Training CoP provided a counterpoint being positioned outside the formal organisation structure until recently. While the ties binding them to their host organisation were certainly changing, only minimal impact had been felt at the time of the study regarding the level of support.

Considering potential sources of CoP support within the host organisations, Peltonen and Lämsä (2004) proposed a list of eight functional positions, including line managers (p. 256). Both the Catering and Training CoPs received support from their line managers although the Catering CoP’s senior managers were also supportive, originally through the advocacy of an internal KM champion. The Training CoP seemed to have been supported (at least, implicitly) by the members’ local managers but not their senior management. The Research CoP was different again, as their support came through the Portal arrangements. Thus, the sources of support for the three CoPs come from a much narrower range than Peltonen and Lämsä (2004, p. 256) suggested. In addition, evidence revealed differences existed between senior and
operational management levels, an important finding. Perhaps these variances point to the CoP/host relationship in all three being at an immature stage as the host moves to come to grips with the complexities of the relationship or perhaps Peltonen and Lämsä’s list was a hypothetical ‘best case’ scenario.

During the Stage 1 survey, an optional scenario was provided about a CoP’s host organisation unexpectedly increasing financial support. Respondents from eight of the nine communities suggested ways to spend it. Five listed more administration support which could perhaps reinforce the technological solution promoted by Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) who suggested several leadership tasks could be partly automated (p. 28). Paid participation time for members was also mentioned by many of the survey respondents. Thus, opportunities exist for future research, particularly with the increasing trend toward institutionalisation, or as Roberts put it, ‘how can organizations leverage their access to such communities to build their internal knowledge assets?’ (2006, p. 636). The other characteristic from Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) economic dimension that I have linked to organisational support related to incentives in the form of recognition and/or rewards. Clearly, the CoP’s contributions must be valued before rewards come into play. An overview of the circumstances around rewards relative to the three CoPs follows in Table 36.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Catering CoP</th>
<th>Training CoP</th>
<th>Research CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rewards</strong></td>
<td>CoP is highly valued and widely portrayed in the public service as a successful CoP. Leader had received more than one Departmental award.</td>
<td>Beginning to be valued with incoming senior training managers aware of, and appreciative of, the CoP.</td>
<td>Little, to no, evidence that the CoP was valued. In fact, the CoP leader's efforts were sometimes perceived in a negative light.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 36: Recognition and subsequent valuing of the CoP's contributions

Only the Catering CoP received any form of formal recognition from its host organisation. This confirmed the Stage 1 survey which also showed this community was the only one of the nine participating communities where intangible support was provided via encouragement and praise. CoP scholars have drawn attention to the importance of social interactions within CoPs, illustrating how simple activities such as eating together can forge stronger bonds between members (Schenkel & Teigland 2008; Watland, Hallenbeck & Kresse 2008). It has also become clearer that host organisations can further support CoPs by shaping circumstances where socialising can occur. This point was supported by the survey findings in that six of the nine CoPs participating in Stage 1 reported some socialising. Still, contradictions appeared when the overall state of activity was compared with the amount of socialising being done.
This analysis has shown that how, when and with whom members socialise, and then with what result, are intriguing areas for further exploration. Sponsoring a social occasion, such as a lunch together, could be one method of recognising, celebrating, and even honouring, a CoP’s contribution. While the Catering CoP members organised their own socialising on the evening before their regular meetings, the Training CoP also got together, sometimes over lunch. The Research CoP’s situation was different in regard to the community being valued and its contributions recognised. The low level of CoP activities could provide an explanation but it emerged that Neil (as CoP leader) saw himself as being penalised by his operational manager for his CoP activities so it appeared the value placed on the community was inconsistent across senior and operational levels of management. Again, this is another pointer for future research.

Cognitive Dimension

The Cognitive Dimension of the Synthesised Model (as per the Table 30 on 253) is considered next. These characteristics concern the ways both individual and collective knowing and learning occurs and they are applied to the three CoPs in Stage 2. It is noteworthy though that there was much less complexity in the discussion about this and the remaining two dimensions when compared with the previous section on organisational aspects. The challenges currently being experienced by the Research CoP are obvious. The medium to low levels of trust and high levels of knowledge gaps (the term ‘silos’ was used during the interviews to describe the organisation’s islands of knowledge) further indicate this is a community under pressure.

The Stage 1 survey results tended to support this, as a small group of Research CoP respondents identified some distrust. Additionally, the survey indicated that respect for others’ opinions and generosity toward each other could be somewhat lacking in this community. But, then again, the survey also showed some distrust present in the Training CoP: a finding that the Stage 2 results supported only if linked into the divide between those in the inner core group of four and other members. While the Research CoP members knew each other before the CoP formed, i.e. the members’ community experience was extensive, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) proposal that these previous work-related links would strengthen the community was also less clear-cut. They claimed where ‘members already know each other and are used to collaborating and sharing information among themselves’ as an experienced group, they will have ‘an advantage over a newly created CoP’ (p. 79).

It is important to mention that the authors’ reference point was the creation of a CoP moving from a face-to-face to a virtual environment which was not the case with the Research CoP. On the other hand, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) point that CoPs whose members have prior working relationships have an advantage could be seen as one-dimensional because such pre-
established links could also hinder CoP communication in some situations. For instance, the powerful ties between the founding members of the Training CoP have advanced the community, particularly in the early days but then again, such robust relationships can obstruct the socialisation of newcomers into the community.

Another challenge to Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob’s (2006) claim was revealed through Mueller, Renzl and Kaar’s (2008) study. Although they were exploring the differences between ‘the evolution of two types of virtual communities: deliberately created ones and emergent ones’ (p. 23), they found that members of the former favoured the use of their own established network rather than the more impersonal networks associated with the management-created CoPs. Again, while the Research CoP was not deliberately created by management, interviewees found it difficult to distinguish between their everyday work-related networks and the community network, with some perceiving the CoP network to be somehow separate to CoP membership. The situation concerning the Cognitive Dimension appeared more positive in the other two CoPs. Still, it is possible the high levels of members’ cultural proximity or homogeneity in both the Training and Catering CoPs could be troublesome, in terms of their ongoing ability to generate new ideas. In terms of diversity and difference, these two communities were among the four out of nine surveyed from which at least one respondent claimed there was no diversity at all within their community.

Scarso and Bolisani (2008) wrote about a trade-off being required between wideness/richness and the heterogeneity of a CoP, whereby too much similarity can stifle creative thinking while too little can cause its own set of problems. In a similar vein, Dubé; Bourhis and Jacob (2006) cited Pan and Leidner (2003) who noted that ‘while cultural heterogeneity is an asset that brings a rich variety of perspectives and experiences and provides a mechanism against groupthink, it can also make participating and sharing difficult’ (p. 80).

**Economic Dimension**

In citing Desouza and Raider (2006), who claimed a CoP’s economic contribution needed to be measured because they must create value for the business, Scarso and Bolisani (2008) wrote that ‘the central issue is to establish who can really benefit from the CoP, and who pays for it’ (p. 381). Koliba and Gajda (2009) also questioned the merit/worth of CoPs, claiming ‘the need to establish an empirical link between indicators of CoPs quality and indicators of organizational performance is being increasingly important’ (p. 115). Such assertions provide evidence that CoPs have become ‘a managerialist conception’ (Cox 2005, p. 534) or as Kimble put it, CoPs are now ‘unambiguously of benefit to the organization’ (2006, p. 230). This is quite a change from the original thinking around CoPs which were originally seen as being ‘driven by
themselves internal needs’ (Kimble 2006, p. 224). Reflecting on the evolution of CoP characteristics revealed further evidence of such communities having to justify their existence on an economic basis. This focus on economic return is not new; rather it is the degree of importance being placed on it that has grown. While the Economic Dimension includes three characteristics, it is only the measurement aspect that is still to be considered. The other two (resource allocation and incentive/rewards systems) were covered as part of the external characteristics of the Organisational Dimension. Refer to Table 30 on page 253 to recap on the overall economic picture of the three CoPs.

Generally speaking, it was only the Catering CoP where economics was a primary driving force. Both the Stage 1 survey and the Stage 2 interviews revealed the CoP members were strongly attuned to maximising financial benefits. Measuring the money they have saved the Department, (the benefits) was relatively simple as it related to economies of scale with food purchases and group power in terms of negotiating more favourable bulk rates. Examining the Catering CoP’s contribution through an overall cost/benefit analysis, it would be expected that the costs incurred by members through participation could be quantified through the Department’s accounting system. There may be a dedicated CoP costing code in place to identify direct labour costs as well as supplementary costs such as accommodation and travel allowances covering the members’ expense to attend their regular CoP meetings. However, this aspect of cost metrics was not explored during the fieldwork so it is unknown if accounts are kept of the CoP’s financial performance. Such metrics were not mentioned by any of the CoP members interviewed nor their sponsor but it was clear that all of the Catering CoP members were extremely proud of the community’s impressive record in the financial benefits they have achieved. This sense of pride was also felt by the CoP’s sponsor and they have built up a strong reputation as being a very cost-effective community.

Conversely, the Training CoP had little interest in their economic position, overall. There was no mention of any metrics in place to identify costs versus benefits, to cover either the Training CoP or the Network during the interviews. Clearly, the CoP’s less formal nature influenced this and with their CoP/host organisation relationship changing, financial aspects may receive more emphasis in the future.

The circumstances facing the Research CoP in terms of cost/benefit metrics were unlike either of the two other communities. The organisation did allocate some funds to support the Portal in its collaborative efforts. Under traditional accounting arrangements, the funds distributed through the Portal would most likely appear in the Research Centre’s financial records. Thus, the cost of supporting the CoP would be quantifiable but there did not seem to be any attempt to quantify benefits from the Research CoP’s activities. As noted before though, these issues
around measuring the financial costs versus benefits were not directly explored in the interviews nor in the survey although a representative picture of the different situations facing the three CoPs was able to be constructed.

**Technological Dimension**

The fourth and final dimension in the Synthesised Model relates to the use of technology and the original analysis in Table 30 (page 253) shows the technological characteristics of the three CoPs. Overall though, it was less relevant as each CoP preferred face-to-face interactions, compared to technology being a part of their communication mix. Still, as Kratzer, Zboralski and Leender (2009) claimed, such a dichotomy was ‘misleading ... [as] a purely face-to-face group that does not use any communication technology is rare’ (pp. 203–204). Variations were revealed in the extent of the technological platforms available and also in the ways that each CoP used the technology. Such variations were also visible in the Stage 1 survey material. There was little evidence that online data repositories were being used to make explicit their learning outcomes as might be expected based on the Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) SECI model.

The Research CoP had access to SharePoint through their host’s IT infrastructure but it was not popular as it was perceived to be hard to use. The Catering CoP members’ attitude to technology was similar to the Research CoP. As caterers though, communication technologies generally played a smaller part in their everyday working environment, particularly with their regular face-to-face meeting process firmly established. While there is a Departmental intranet, they generally use the more everyday technology of individual and global email in combination with the telephone. Considering the Technological Dimension in regard to the Training CoP revealed little of note as they work in a technologically-advanced organisation which gives them access to an extensive IT infrastructure including an intranet, teleconferencing, email and the telephone. All members are technologically literate and make extensive use of email and the telephone to stay in touch with each other.

As CoPs become more virtual though, with geographically-dispersed communities becoming more the norm, the communicative and collaborative technologies available (and how they are used) become more relevant to the success of CoPs. Peltonen and Lämsä (2004) explained that ‘All technologies to some extent influence behavior by placing emphasis on or facilitating certain processes, but some companies also take intentional steps to make their technologies reflect some principles or processes and influence behavior accordingly (p. 257)’. So, the types of technologies that CoPs can access through their host organisation can influence the support process. It would seem though that Andriessen’s (2005) view of adequate ICT support being
one of the two major success factors for informal communities (p. 207) is somewhat overstated in terms of the complexities associated with technology use in two of the three CoPs studied.

To sum up, this analysis of the CoPs participating in the research has enabled a rigorous and comprehensive picture of their everyday practices to be constructed. The next and final chapter concludes the research and further develops insights into the characteristics of CoPs.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION
— THE COP’S KEY PRACTICES MODEL

Foreword

This final chapter concludes the research with the presentation of a new analytical model, the CoP’s Key Practices Model, remembering that the research aim was to seek increased understandings about what is actually going on within CoPs, in terms of their members’ day-to-day activities. Two theoretical approaches to CoP characteristics (the primary literature framework and the Synthesised Model) have been applied to the empirical findings with the result that the fluidity and complexity of the CoP construct in contemporary organisations has been made visible. In addition, the empirical work also pointed to ‘gaps’ in the Synthesised Model and as a consequence, I have developed an enhanced analytical construct, called the new CoP’s Key Practices Model and it advances our understanding of CoPs and their practices.

Synthesised Model

Some major issues came into focus with the application of the Synthesised Model. The Organisational Dimension became more significant, particularly when compared to the Cognitive, Economic and Technological Dimensions. In part, this occurred because many of the cognitive aspects seemed to fit more logically in the Organisational Dimension although other issues also came to light. Firstly, the Economic Dimension of Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) organic framework provided clear evidence of the trend towards CoPs being more institutionalised, reflecting the mindset that CoPs should ‘pay their way’. Secondly, Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) framework placed much more emphasis on technology than previous authors had. Again, this reflected an increasing trend which sees CoPs becoming more virtual, particularly in a world of globalised work. Kratzer, Zboralski and Leender (2009) have been critical of dichotomising virtuality with face-to-face interactions in CoPs because it is likely that few, if any, communities do not use some form of communication technology. They suggested a continuum rather than a dichotomy and a continuum accurately represents what is actually
going on in the three CoPs studied. Thirdly, while the Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) model acknowledged some aspects of the CoP/host relationship which had not previously been made visible, they did so in a limited manner. The dual nature of this CoP/host relationship is expressed through resources being made available to CoPs by their host organisation on the expectation that benefits would accrue. However, Scarso and Bolisani’s (2008) treatment was to situate elements around these ‘give and take’ arrangements entirely within an economic dimension. For them, the economics of CoPs involved the following: performance metrics, the resources allocated by the host and incentives/rewards provided to the CoP by the host.

My challenge to this concerned the restriction of these elements to purely monetary terms. It was clear that framing all potential support a host organisation might provide a CoP (either as resources or incentives) as being restricted to financial aspects was limiting. Thus, it emerged that although the Synthesised Model was a valuable step toward a more accurate, and representative, view of the key characteristics of CoPs, i.e. its practices, this research has demonstrated a need for further enhancements of the construct. Therefore, I am proposing the CoP’s Key Practices Model as a refinement to the Synthesised Model.

**CoP’s Key Practices Model**

On a theoretical level, the basis for this model is the current scholarly thinking about what CoPs do. Working through key characteristics, a model was synthesised to provide an organising framework for the empirical work of this research. While the results of the Stage 1 survey and the three CoPs in Stage 2 revealed that the Synthesised Model allowed rich understandings to emerge through the ethnography, possibilities for enhancing this model also became apparent. The CoP’s Key Practices Model encapsulates a structured method of understanding just what happens within a community. The aim has been to construct a rigorous approach to teasing out nuances about what ‘goes on’. To some degree, the new model provides a response to Koliba and Gajda’s (2009) call for researchers ‘to systematically isolate and operationalize variables that give shape and meaning to CoPs’ (p. 103). Conversely, Ribeiro, Kimble and Cairns (2009) claimed that any ‘such classification is a very personal way of seeing CoPs. One can argue that CoPs are naturally unique and therefore deny any possibility of classification’ (Section 3). However, there is value in providing guidance about what it actually is, that can be classified about CoPs. The CoP’s Key Practices Model creates a disciplined method of critically analysing CoPs and it brings both simplicity and complexity, (interwoven through multiple layers), just like the real-life experiences of most CoPs. It has three main factors: foundational aspects, internal/external elements and communication processes and will be of interest to both CoP scholars and practitioners alike. The model is presented as Figure 5 on the following page.
Foundational aspects

The foundational aspects associated with the process of creating a CoP provide an appropriate entry point when seeking to understand their everyday practices, for all communities have a beginning, a stage where they are started or launched. Research originating in the early part of the 21st century has become influential when considering CoP developmental pathways, i.e. Gongla and Rizzuto’s (2001) evolutionary stages and the CoP life-cycle approach from Wenger, McDermott and Synder (2002). However, more recent work by Ribeiro, Kimble and Cairns (2009) raised intriguing possibilities, further extending the CoP construct. They queried if communities that formed in situations where information systems were being heavily used, might follow a different path, i.e. the CoPs move in and out of existence (Section 1). The key point was that all communities go through an initial founding stage where matters are decided about the setting up, and operation, of the CoP. While such decisions are generally made in the early life of communities, they continue to evolve and flow through their ongoing processes.

In the central area of the CoP’s Key Practices Model, nine foundational aspects are shown which relate to critical decision points. The first is one of the most significant matters associated with starting a new community: the relationship between the CoP and the host organisation or sponsor. The nature of this connection lies at some point along a continuum, which contrasts a CoP being created by management, compared to being self-generated by its founding members. In essence, this relationship can be described as based on a formal/informal dichotomy. As the ends of the continuum are extremes, it could be argued that a community located at the left-hand end (i.e. management-generated or top-down and totally formalised) would be hard to differentiate, on a conceptual level, from a self-managed project team. It also seems doubtful that a CoP at the other extreme would exist, i.e. a community created bottom up, without any connection to a host organisation or sponsor.

While these extremes may be possible, they are unlikely to occur often in practice. On the whole, the contemporary trend towards increased institutionalisation over the last few years has resulted in generalised movement along the continuum toward the left side. Management increasingly seek to harness and benefit from these types of communities so they are becoming more controlled and hence, more formalised. The tendency toward increasing formality began with the cultivation metaphor advanced by Wenger and colleagues in 1998 and it has been enthusiastically taken up by management since. The remaining eight foundational aspects in the CoP’s Key Practices Model are similarly shown as a continuum and they are all heavily influenced by how formalised the community is. In applying the model to tease out a full picture of a CoP’s characteristics, it is useful to consider all of these foundational aspects as decisions which emerge through consideration of the types of questions shown in Table 37.
Table 37: Decision points regarding foundational aspects of CoPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundational aspects</th>
<th>Questions driving the decision process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CoP creation</td>
<td>Where does the drive to create this new community originate? Is it management generated (top-down) or is it being driven more by the founding members (bottom-up)? It is this decision about how closely the new CoP is connected to their host organisation that sets in train the responses to many of the following issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal acknowledgement</td>
<td>To what degree does the host organisation formally acknowledge the CoP? The possibilities on this continuum fade away the closer the community is located towards the right side, i.e. to being self-generated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational slack</td>
<td>How prepared is the host organisation or sponsor to provide additional resources to the CoP on an ad hoc basis and what capabilities do they have to do so? Again, the further a CoP is located towards the right side of the continuum, the less relevant this notion of organisational slack becomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>What are the ways in which the CoP is governed? Are there policies and rules imposed by their host organisation or do they emerge from the members themselves or is there a combination of both happening?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader/member roles</td>
<td>Who decides how the CoP is organised? Is there a leader and are other roles defined? Who makes these decisions and how do they decide? Members of CoPs located towards the Mgmt-generated end of the continuum (i.e. those with more formal connections to the host organisation) may be directed while less formal CoPs may determine their own roles by election or even simply through self-selection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifespan</td>
<td>What is the lifespan of the CoP? Is it dictated by the host organisation, e.g. is the CoP established to achieve a specific goal within a defined timeframe or is the community undefined and potentially ongoing? How long is the CoP going to last?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>Is the CoP open for anyone to join or are there membership requirements that new members must meet, either imposed by the host organisation or self-generated by existing CoP members?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ enrolment</td>
<td>Does the host organisation mandate membership by making it compulsory or do members simply volunteer themselves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ orientation</td>
<td>What is it that motivates members to join the CoP? Are members seeking to achieve their own individual goals or is their objective more attuned to advancing organisational goals or again, is there some combination occurring?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these are all very open questions, they encourage examination of the degree of formality versus informality in terms of the CoP/host organisation relationship. And, even though all of these decisions are initially made at the time of the CoP’s creation, changes can impact on the CoP at any time. Such change could be initiated internally by CoP members or it could arise from their external environment. The Training CoP provides a good example of the latter as the relationship with their host organisation was undergoing significant transformation due to the training function receiving more emphasis, particularly at senior levels. The CoP’s connection to their host appeared to be growing stronger and more definite so in terms of the model, they
were moving a little along the continuum towards the left. At the time of the Stage 2 interviews, the CoP’s response to their changing circumstances was somewhat cautious although they seemed hopeful it would be a positive change for them. Change always brings potential risk though, with Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) identifying organisational change as one of the three major reasons for the disappearance of CoPs (p. 301).

Internal/external elements

The second set of factors associated with the CoP’s Key Practices Model concern the internal and external elements that weave together through the everyday life of communities. The majority of these elements are not new as they appear throughout the CoP literature, in different shapes and forms, although some have not been specifically identified in previous characteristics classification schemes.

What is new, however, is that the CoP’s Key Practices Model draws them together with more recent theoretical ideas which have themselves been supported by the current ethnographic research. For instance, Bozarth (2008) recommended changes to Wenger’s original framework with her defining participation ‘as individual actions and individual’s ways of making meaning’ (p. 254) while engagement ‘requires being involved with others in meaningful ways’ (p. 252). The differences between these two concepts became quite visible in the case study of the Research CoP where there was some participation by members but there seemed to be only a low level of mutual engagement. Hence, the internal elements of the CoP’s Key Practices Model include both participation and mutual engagement as member attributes.

In looking at the internal elements factor of the new model, a further refinement is evident in the way the internal elements have been treated. They have been pulled together and follow a simple, but intuitive, arrangement of what, why, how, who-type components which come together to identify exactly what it is that the CoP is doing and how it is doing it. Most of the individual elements are not new but several have not previously been highlighted. Examples include the individual member’s commitment levels, expressed through the time and energy they dedicate to participating in the community. The model also makes visible the notion that communities have their own rules which are sometimes unspoken and quite often are taken for granted. As Davies (2005) stressed, ‘there is no “person specification” as there might be for a job, or an academic course of study. Simply, they are evaluated as a prospective member under criteria that they may not know or understand’ (p. 567). Community rules are also applied to members more generally, so it is not only new members who are judged in terms of their compliance with the CoP’s rules and regulations.
Another addition is the degree to which an individual member’s efforts are recognised by others in the CoP including acknowledgement, and even celebration of such efforts. It is about the actual degree of recognition which flows from the respect members hold for each other within the dynamics of the community. Such recognition may not be anything tangible as a form of appreciation, rather it might just be a simple ‘well done’. Iverson and McPhee (2002) referred to recognition which originated outside the CoP, i.e. provided by the host organisation, when they noted that ‘celebration is to recognise knowledge accomplishments and problems solved’ (pp. 263–264). The CoP’s Key Practices Model makes the notion of members rewarding each other’s efforts explicit, something which has not generally been present in earlier work on CoP characteristics. The model also includes a new element, i.e. a formalised review and revision process undertaken by CoP members. Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) advocated such a process with their four steps, ‘Investigate, Decide, Plan and Implement’ although they were specifically focussing on CoPs facing disappearance (p. 304). However, instigating a process where members regularly review the CoP’s operations makes sense.

Turning to the external elements, it is clear that the trend towards increasing institutionalism is changing the relationship between CoPs and their host organisations. The three CoPs studied in Stage 2 have cast some doubt on the magnitude of this trend though. While the first of Probst and Borzillo’s (2008) ten commandments of CoP success was to ‘stick to strategic objectives’ which they defined as management ‘setting clear and measurable objectives [as it] provides COP members with a concrete direction to follow, [e.g. ] % of cost reduction’, this was not the case in two of the three CoPs studied. And although the Catering CoP was focussed specifically on saving money and so improving the financial performance of the Department, the thrust towards that objective seemed to come from the members themselves, rather than being dictated by their management.

Within the CoP literature, there is no doubt that more emphasis is being placed on attempts to measure performance benefits which emanate from community activities. However, portraying such measurement processes as being wholly financially-based, as Scarso and Bolisani (2008) have done, is restrictive. Wenger and Snyder (2000), originally suggested that ‘the best way for an executive to assess the value of a community of practice is by listening to members’ stories, which can clarify the complex relationships among activities, knowledge, and performance’ (p. 145). In a similar way, the element of rewards and incentives has been refocussed in the CoP’s Key Practices Model, moving away from purely from the purely financial to measures and descriptions of a range of achievements. Milne (2007) explained, ‘People want to feel that the recognition they receive is sincere, genuine and personal. They need to understand clearly why they are being recognised, they prefer the reward or recognition to be given by someone who means something to them and they want it to be timely (pp. 36–37)’.
Communication processes

The communication processes of a community form the third, and final, building block of the proposed CoP’s Key Practices Model and establish a clear link into the message web (Day 2000, 2005) construct. While the technological dimension from the Synthesised Model is included here in the CoP’s Key Practices Model, communication practices are incorporated on a much broader level as the CoP discussion moves beyond ICT. The model makes it explicit that social interactions, e.g. face-to-face meetings, are distinct from the technological aspects of communication, although, of course, these two elements merge together in the everyday practices of CoPs (as illustrated through the message web idea). Both aspects of communication are represented on a continuum in the model, with computer-mediated communication becoming increasingly more prevalent, particularly in the case of VCoPs. But, like the three CoPs in this study, many communities exist, and thrive, using relatively unsophisticated technologies and relying on regular face-to-face meetings.

As noted earlier, Kratzer, Zboralski and Leender (2009) challenged the virtuality dichotomy that frames communication, ‘There are neither entirely traditional nor virtual groups or CoPs and there is a continuum of interaction from more face-to-face driven (traditional) to more asynchronous communication (virtual)’ (p. 216). Still, there is no doubt that ICTs are interwoven into the communication processes of most, if not all, CoPs, at least to some degree. There can also be little doubt that communication forms a major part of the glue which holds such communities together and as Schreyögg and Geiger (2007) put it, ‘knowledge is communicative in nature … there is no knowledge without communication’ (pp. 86–87). Patriotta (2004) observed that ‘studying knowledge in organizations is like seeing silence in a world of noise. It essentially amounts to understanding the subtle interaction between background and foreground’ (p. 5). To use another metaphor, communication can be seen as the connecting thread in the CoP’s Key Practice Model, uniting that which is both internal to the community as well as external to it. In essence, the background is brought together with the foreground in the model, the tacit with the explicit. As well, these communicative activities orbit around and through both the CoP and the host organisation — as indicated by the arrows on the model.

Since the technological dimension has already been covered in the previous chapter, it is the non-technical aspects of communicating which are explored here. As indicated previously, the three CoPs studied in this research all communicated face-to-face, at least to some degree. In considering face-to-face communication, specifically meetings, Kratzer, Zboralski and Leender (2009) claimed that they became less important as CoPs mature and thus management could reduce their support of such meetings (p. 217). This claim was not supported in any of the three CoPs studied. Although they were all mature communities, there was no decrease in the
perceived importance of their face-to-face meetings evident. Research by Schenkel and Teigland (2008) also challenged this point. They found that the reduction in a CoP’s face-to-face communication opportunities caused by a physical relocation meant ‘the CoP’s cognitive processes and structural dimensions were negatively affected’ (p. 114). In a similar way, it became apparent that, as the members of the Research CoP had fewer opportunities to meet face-to-face due to tightening budgets, their connection to the community seemed to erode. Less likelihood of being able to meet up was perceived to be a significant disadvantage by several of the members.

In summary, I have developed a model termed the CoP’s Key Practices Model. It consists of three factors, the first of which concerns foundational aspects which flow from the original decisions made during the CoP’s creation process. Effective communities revisit these decisions throughout their life cycle, particularly when something changes. The second factor relates to both the internal and external elements which flow through the CoP’s everyday practices. Aspects of the internal functioning of the community are identified, including what the community is about, why and how it operates, who the members are, as well as what outcomes are achieved. Externally, the two-way relationship the CoP has with its host organisation is considered by examining the resources provided to the CoP, as well as the benefits the host organisation enjoys in return and just how such benefits are measured. Other features of the external environment within which the CoP operates are also scrutinised, such as the prevailing organisational culture of the host organisation as well as the degree of integration and trust between the community and its host organisation. The third factor within the CoP’s Key Practices Model links into the communication processes and distinguishes between technologically mediated and face-to-face connections while acknowledging that communication provides both the foreground and the background to all social interaction within organisations.

Research insights

The objective driving this research was to develop a more finely nuanced picture about what actually goes on within CoPs. Emerging from an intensive review of the many different classification schemes that currently theorise the practices of CoPs, a Synthesised Model of CoP Characteristics has been developed. This model presented a comparative history of the ways in which the features of CoPs have been defined while also clearly identifying the current trend toward increased institutionalisation. Furthermore, this model has been empirically applied to the CoPs participating in this research, resulting in a finely tuned appreciation of their inner workings. However, some problem areas in the Synthesised Model were discovered through its application to these real-life CoPs. As a consequence, further analysis and conceptualisation
was undertaken with the result that an extended theoretical model, the CoP’s Key Practices Model, was developed. I then used it to develop further insights regarding the participating CoPs. Applying the CoP’s Key Practice Model to better understand just what is going on within a CoP promotes reflection on the everyday practices and the underlying processes sustaining them. It could be said that this new model has been constructed to assist in opening the ‘black box’ of CoP life by making the elements associated with these types of communities more visible. Thus, the major contribution of this research is the CoP’s Key Practices Model, supported by the Synthesised Model of CoP Characteristics.

Significant insights have also emerged concerning the roles of members within CoPs with the leader/facilitator role becoming increasingly significant during the fieldwork. Tarmizi, de Vreede and Zigurs (2007) found that there were three categories of internal activities which successful CoP leaders carried out, i.e. providing information, inspiring, and then guiding others. This research confirmed that it was necessary for all three groups of activities to be performed within a community, although there was some ambiguity about whether they needed to be done by the one person, commonly the CoP’s leader. Similarly, the CoP/host organisation connection emerged as being of key importance during the fieldwork. This research revealed that the degree of increased institutionalisation of management-created CoPs which the literature currently portrays was not reflected within the nine participating CoPs. Furthermore, while the trend toward more virtual communication replacing face-to-face as the prominent mode used was evident, the research revealed that this trend was generally not favoured by the participating CoP members.

The working definition of CoPs that underpinned this research covered the following elements: a group (usually comprising 5 to 15 people) who come together voluntarily to share their knowledge of a common work-related activity and who see themselves as a community. Re-assessing this definition based on the research findings highlights that while increased institutionalism of CoPs is prominent in the literature, only one of the three CoPs studied in Stage 2 showed evidence of this trend, indicating that many variations are possible. There seems little doubt though that a movement toward control shifting from the CoP to the host organisation warrants further investigation. The definition of CoPs as forming voluntarily may need to be modified but this study does not give strong evidence for doing so. However, the development of the CoP’s Key Practices Model provides a basis for extending the definition of CoPs. Drawing on its three main factors, the foundational aspects of a CoP, its internal/external influences and their communication processes could also be helpful in defining these types of communities so the model supports an alternative way of looking at CoPs.

The CoP’s Key Practices Model will be of interest to CoP scholars and the findings will also
benefit CoP practitioners, including those associated with CoPs, both as members and/or as organisational sponsors and managers. However, Robinson (2008) made a pertinent point: ‘using ethnographic methods for research is a process which attempts to fast freeze, like a photographic, something which is ever changing’ (p. 251). It is important to be clear that CoPs are always in motion and depend on their own unique circumstances. The findings of this research reflect a slice in time for the nine participating CoPs. Thus, the CoP’s Key Practices Model presents the opportunity of using an investigative tool to better understand how a CoP works but it would be inappropriate to use the model as a prescriptive device to define how CoPs should work.

The discoveries made through this research suggest several intriguing directions which future scholars may follow in exploring CoPs and the associated CoP’s Key Practice Model. There can be little doubt that the CoP/host organisation relationship plays an influential role in the practices of CoPs and the trend toward increased institutionalisation and management control brings interesting fields of study into view, particularly in terms of the formal/informal dichotomy. Although I have a personal view about the increasing institutionalisation of CoPs, the research findings are not of a kind to provide a firm basis to discuss the degree of change happening. The three CoPs studied in detail in Stage 2 were not well along the institutionalisation pathway but I believe there is little doubt that CoPs will generally move further along such a pathway in the future. Accordingly, the relationship between the CoP and its host organisation appears as the first critical decision in the CoP’s Key Practices Model. The trend towards increased institutionalisation of CoPs presents scholars with significant research opportunities in the future. Similarly, there is still much to understand about the connections that link members of these types of communities, particularly in considering the dynamics between the different experience levels of newcomers and oldtimers. Opportunities also abound to undertake further ethnographic studies with a longitudinal component to investigate changes within individual communities over a period of time. A focus on the context of the external organisational environment within which CoPs operate, seeking to understand how these larger organisational forces both shape and limit the community’s activities would be useful. Exploring the determinants of a CoP’s ongoing viability, particularly in communities such as VCoPs where face-to-face communication is being marginalised in preference to ICT mediated processes, would also contribute significantly to our overall understandings of CoPs.

Other areas of interest remain relatively unexplored. There is much to be discovered about communities that self-select their own leader and how the leadership role plays out in practice. As Mathieu et al. (2008) asked, ‘Who is best positioned to fulfil which types of leadership tasks?’ (p. 453) while Dupouët and Yıldızoğlu (2006) suggested that deeper understandings about what actually motivates members could lead to valuable insights. In addition, paying
more attention to the ways in which language is used in CoPs also has great potential (Al-Sayed & Ahmad 2006). Creese (2005) explored the dynamics involved with language and CoPs with a focus on Wenger’s notion of communities having a shared repertoire and what that means in terms of the language used. She concluded that ‘views of community which are unable to describe the complexity of language use will not capture diversity, contestation or issues of power’ (p. 74). In a similar sense, Archer (2006) highlighted that incongruent language (natural and/or professional) use by CoP members was a common problem. Further investigations would reveal more about the intricacies of the ways that language is being used within CoPs.

In concluding this research, I have been troubled by the escalating institutionalisation of CoPs as organisations seek to gain short-term benefits from these types of communities. Increasingly, they are being portrayed in the literature as being controllable by management. However, it has become clear that there are differences between cultivating and controlling such communities and that these management-generated CoPs bring potential for both advantages and disadvantages. The CoP’s Key Practices Model provides an additional tool for those seeking to understand just what is going on and for systematically researching the consequences for both the communities themselves and their host organisations. Should CoPs be ‘wild and free’? Should more emphasis, and more control, be placed on measuring costs versus benefits? Time, and attentive research, will tell.

It is fitting for this CoP research to turn full circle and to finish on a point that Lave and Wenger originally highlighted in 1991. Although they were specifically addressing LPP, I believe this viewpoint can be seen as encapsulating the everyday life of CoPs more generally. They explained that community membership could be perceived as a landscape, constructed through a combination of ‘shapes, degrees, textures’ associated with learning. ‘In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice—as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world’ (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 35). Through this research, I have made visible some of these shapes, degrees and textures of what it means to be a CoP member.

As a postscript, closing vignettes of the three Stage 2 CoPs are provided at Appendix 10.
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APPENDIX 1

Example of the CoP Recruitment Search
(An Advertisement in a Professional Association Newsletter)
PhD Research into communication, communities and knowledge — Your opportunity to participate

An intriguing communication research project is currently underway, focusing on how communication processes (and associated technologies) shape knowledge creation and sharing in organisational life, specifically within Communities of Practice.

These communities (CoPs) are informal groups of individuals who voluntarily choose to get together to help each other develop their knowledge (know-how) of a common interest (or work practice).

The researcher, Eileen Day, is now seeking leads into corporations that have CoPs, for possible inclusion in the study.

This is a valuable opportunity to be involved in some leading-edge research with significant benefits for those who participate. If you think your organisation might be appropriate or have other suitable contacts, Eileen would love to hear from you (eileen.day@newcastle.edu.au).
APPENDIX 2

Invitation and Organisational Participation Information Letter
Date: ............................

........................................
........................................

Invitation and Organisational Participation Information
Research Project on Communications, Communities and Knowledge

Hello ..............................<org liaison>,

As discussed previously, this is a formal invitation for the
........................................<org.name> to take part in the above study. The extent of the
........................................<name again> involvement is covered in the following three
steps:

1. To identify, in consultation with the researcher, two knowledge communities of
   practice (CoPs) within the organisation which meet the two primary selection
   criteria: (a) they satisfactorily match the theoretical definition of a CoP and (b)
   they currently use at least two different communication media in their operations.
2. To inform the members of the two selected communities about the study seeking
   their agreement in principle to participate in the study
3. To distribute the formal invitation to participate to the relevant members of these
   two communities.

As previously discussed with you regarding the study, the research aim is to gain
insights into the ways that communication technologies are being used within CoPs as
members interact with each other and so develop their shared knowledge and
expertise.

The two-stage study will involve about 90 to 100 people (made up of members of two
different CoPs within three different Australian organisations). Completion of an
online survey is the first stage while Stage 2 involves selected participants being
interviewed. Access to the survey is via a web address and it should take only around
15 minutes for the CoP members to complete as it is quite straightforward. The
survey will be available online from ............. through to .............

After Stage 1 has been completed, one of the two CoPs in each organisation will be
invited to participate in the next stage which involves short face-to-face interviews.
Members of the CoPs selected will be asked to sign a consent form before being
interviewed. Progression into Stage 2 is voluntary with individual participants being
able to withdraw from the research at any stage. The interviews will be digitally tape-
recorded and then transcribed. Participants may review their interview transcript if
desired.
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. All responses from those participating in the study will not be linked to their name or the organisation in any written or verbal report of this research and all data will be securely stored and only accessible by the research team.

As discussed previously, a copy of the final dissertation will be provided to the organisation. In addition, each of the three organisations supporting the study will have the opportunity to have the research findings presented in brief to their senior management.

In your role as primary liaison between the researcher and the ......................<org.name>, would you please confirm your verbal agreement by signing the attached consent form. If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me at eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au or my Project Supervisor, Professor Patricia Gillard at patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au.

Regards,

Eileen Day (PhD Research Student)  
School of Design, Communication and IT  
University of Newcastle  
Callaghan NSW  
Australia 2308  
Phone 03 9743 5768  
Email eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au

Professor Patricia Gillard (Project Supervisor)  
School of Design, Communication and IT  
University of Newcastle  
Callaghan NSW  
Australia 2308  
Phone 02 4965 4515  
Email patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au

Concerns about this research

This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-308-1006. Should you have concerns about your rights associated with your involvement in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, telephone (02) 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.
APPENDIX 3

Organisational Consent Form
ORGANISATIONAL CONSENT FORM
Research Project on Communications, Communities and Knowledge

I am signing this form to say that members of the two nominated communities of practice (CoPs) within the ......................<org.name> (i.e. ......................and ............................<names of the two CoPs>) are able to participate in the above study, if they choose to. The study is being undertaken by Eileen Day, a student from the University of Newcastle, N.S.W.

I understand that information identifying either the communities and/or the organisation will remain confidential to the researcher student and her academic supervisor.

I also understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Invitation and Organisational Participant Information, a copy of which I have retained. My questions have been answered and I also understand that the organisation can withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason for withdrawing.

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<tr>
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<td>Job Title:</td>
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<td>Signature:</td>
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</table>

Eileen Day (PhD Research Student)  Professor Patricia Gillard (Project Supervisor)
School of Design, Communication and IT  School of Design, Communication and IT
University of Newcastle  University of Newcastle
Callaghan NSW  Callaghan NSW
Australia 2308  Australia 2308
Phone 03 9374 5768  Phone 02 4985 4515
Email: eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au  Email: patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au
APPENDIX 4

Invitation and Participant Information Letter
INVITATION AND PARTICIPATION INFORMATION
Study of Communications, Communities and Knowledge

Hello. You are invited to participate in the above study. My name is Eileen Day and I am a postgraduate student at The University of Newcastle in N.S.W. The research aim is to gain insights into the ways that communication technologies are being used within communities of practice (CoPs). These communities are groups of people who come together voluntarily and choose to help each other develop and share their knowledge of a common interest in an informal way. It is important to examine what is happening so that we understand the implications of these changes.

On discussing the study with .................(liaison’s name), she/he immediately thought of the ................. (topic of the community) community as a possibility within .................(organization name). It seems to meet the two primary selection criteria: (1) it fitted the theoretical definition of a CoP and (2) the community members were currently using at least two different communication media.

.........................(liaison’s name) briefed the community about the research and there was agreement in principle to participate. Thus, as a member of this community you have been selected to receive this invitation from ......................... (liaison’s name) concerning your possible participation in the study. The study itself has two stages and the first stage will involve about 90 people from three different Australian companies. Stage 1 participation simply involves filling out an online survey which should take only about 15 minutes as it is quite straightforward. Access to the survey is via an online portal (at www.xxx.xxx.xx). It will be available from December, 2006 to the end of January 2007.

Even though the .........................(organization name) has provided consent for the research to be conducted and you have received this invitation due to your membership of the ......................... CoP (topic of the community), participation in the study is entirely your choice. At the start of the survey, you will be asked if you agree to participate and informed consent will be assumed if you fill out the survey. Should you decide not to complete the survey, you can withdraw from the research by simply shutting down the webpage before you finish answering the survey questions. Data from any partially completed surveys will not be included in the study. If you prefer to complete the survey offline, email Eileen your request for a printed version to be posted to you (a reply paid envelope for its return upon completion will also be included). In such cases, an extra week will be allowed for delivery and despatch through the post.

No electronic identifiers will be collected online about you - other than the first survey question which asks you to select your CoP from a list of those participating in the research. Your responses will remain confidential and will not be directly linked to your name in any written or verbal report of this research i.e. to disguise true identities, pseudonyms will be used to identify you, your CoP and your organization. All data will be securely stored and accessible only by the research team. The research findings will be reported in a range of public forums and a copy of the research thesis will be provided to your organization.
After Stage 1 has been completed, members of approximately half of the communities participating will be invited to progress to the next stage of the study. Brief interviews will be conducted to seek in-depth information about the communication processes being used and possible variations across a range of differences such as individual demographics and community roles, alternative technologies and knowledge activities.

Individual members of the selected CoPs will be asked to sign a consent form before being interviewed and participation is voluntary. Members of the selected CoPs can withdraw from the research at any stage. The interviews themselves will be digitally tape-recorded and then transcribed. Those interviewed will be given the opportunity to review the recording and/or transcript of their interview to edit and/or erase any part of their contribution if they wish to.

The benefits to participants of being part of this study include the opportunity to focus attention on things that are generally taken for granted e.g. daily communication activities, the ways that such practices occur within the CoP and the resulting management of knowledge. Having busy lives means that we don’t usually think about these things and a benefit for participants might be the opportunity to briefly reflect on them. Other benefits flowing from the research will include practical and up-to-date guidelines on ways to maximise the benefits that knowledge CoPs bring.

If you have any questions about the study, please email either eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au or patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au. Additionally, if you would like to receive a brief summary of the findings at the end of the research, simply email your address details to Eileen.

Thank you for considering this request.

Ms Eileen Day (Research Student)  Professor Patricia Gillard (Project Supervisor)
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Australia 2308  Australia 2308
Phone 03 9743 5768  Phone 02 4985 4515
Email: eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au  Email: patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au

Concerns about this research

This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-308-1006. Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, telephone (02) 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.
APPENDIX 5

Stage 2 Invitation and Participant Information Letter
INVITATION AND PARTICIPATION INFORMATION

Study of Communications, Communities and Knowledge

Hello, this is an invitation to participate in the second stage of the above research which is a PhD project that I am undertaking at The University of Newcastle in N.S.W.

Through the research, I am seeking insights into communication processes and communities of practice (CoPs). CoPs are groups of people who come together voluntarily and choose to help each other develop and share their knowledge of a common interest in an informal way. I believe it is important to critically examine what is happening so that we can further understand the implications of these changes.

Stage 1 of the research has been completed with nine communities participating in an online survey. Three of these nine CoPs have now been selected for Stage 2 and the ..................... CoP is one of these, hence this invitation to an interview.

Through the interviews, I am seeking to further explore the communication processes associated with synthesising knowledge so that insights about emerging differences across individual demographics and community roles, alternative technologies and knowledge activities can emerge.

To confirm your participation in these Stage 2 interviews, the attached consent form will need to be signed by you and returned at the start of the interview.

The interview itself will take approximately an hour of your time and will be digitally recorded and then transcribed. You will be given the opportunity to review the recording and/or transcript of their interview to edit and/or erase any part of their contribution if you wish to. Note that participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any stage. And while ..................... (your organisation) have approved the research and my sending you this invitation (as a member of the ..................... CoP), participation is entirely your choice.

All data collected during this study will be securely stored and accessible only by the research team and it will be destroyed after five years. The research findings will be reported in a range of public forums and a copy of the research thesis will be provided to ............................. (your organisation).
The benefits to participants of being part of this study include the opportunity to focus attention on things that are generally taken for granted e.g. daily communication activities, the ways that such practices occur within the CoP and the resulting management of knowledge. Having busy lives means that we don’t usually think about these things and participating in the study provides an opportunity to briefly reflect on them. Other benefits flowing from the research findings will include practical and up-to-date guidelines on ways to maximise the benefits that knowledge CoPs bring. However, there will be some minor inconvenience to Stage 2 participants, for example the interview time.

Should you have questions about the study itself, please email either eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au or patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au.

Additionally, if you would like to personally receive a brief summary of the findings at the end of the research, simply indicate this at the start of the interview.

Thank you for considering this request.

Regards,

Eileen Day (PhD Research Student)        Professor Patricia Gillard (Project Supervisor)
School of Design, Communication and IT    School of Design, Communication and IT
University of Newcastle                   University of Newcastle
Callaghan NSW                            Callaghan NSW
Australia 2308                           Australia 2308
Phone 03 9743 5768                       Phone 02 4921 4515
Email: eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au    Email: patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au

Any concerns about this research:
This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the University of Newcastle (Approval No. H-308-1006). Should you have any queries about this research, please contact the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, Tel 02 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.
APPENDIX 6

Stage 2 Participant Consent Form
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM — STAGE 2
Study of Communications, Communities and Knowledge

I am signing this form to say that as a member of the ........................................ [name of CoP] within the ............................................................... [name of organisation] I give permission to Eileen Day, a student from the University of Newcastle, N.S.W. to interview me, record the interview and use my interview in the analysis and reporting of the project. I understand that researchers may use quotations from me, identifying me by a pseudonym and that my personal information will remain confidential to the researcher student and her academic supervisor.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the “Invitation and Participant Information”, a copy of which I have retained, and my questions about this have been answered. I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.

Name: ........................................................................................................................................

Signature: .......................................................................................................................... Date: ..............

Eileen Day (PhD Research Student) ................................................................. Professor Patricia Gillard (Project Supervisor)
School of Design, Communication and IT ......................................................... School of Design, Communication and IT
University of Newcastle .................................................................................... University of Newcastle
Callaghan NSW ...................................................................................................... Callaghan NSW
Australia 2308 ...................................................................................................... Australia 2308
Phone 03 9743 5768 ............................................................................................. Phone 02 4985 4515
Email: eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au ........................................... Email: patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au
APPENDIX 7

Stage 1 Survey
SURVEY: Communications Communities and Knowledge

Welcome.

Have you ever wondered just how technology is changing the way we communicate in today's workplaces? Are we now better able to share what we know ... and what about the creation of new ideas, new knowledge? I am passionate about the importance of exploring questions like these and they are the focus of my current doctorate research program.

As a member of one of the communities of practice (CoPs) participating in this study, you are invited to respond to the following questions in relation to your experiences as a CoP member. The survey itself is quite simple and easy to do and will only take around 15 minutes. Completing the survey means that you are answering 'yes' to the following statements

1. I have received an Invitation and Information Sheet about this survey and I understand it
2. The details of the research have been explained to me through the Information Sheet and I have kept a copy
3. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time
4. I understand that by answering the following questions, I'm indicating that I am giving my informed consent to participate in Stage 1 of the study
5. I understand that I can register to receive a summary of the study findings by simply emailing a request to: eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au (PhD Student Researcher)
6. I understand that if I have any questions about the study, I have the right to contact: eileen.day@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au or patricia.gillard@newcastle.edu.au (Project Supervisor)

Many thanks ... Eileen Day

PART A: Firstly, a couple of questions about you.

1. What year did you start working in your current organisation?

2. What year did you start working in your current role?

3. Your age
   - in my 20's or younger
   - in my 30's
   - in my 40's
   - in my 50's
   - in my 60's or older

4. Your gender
   - Female
   - Male

Next  Cancel
PART B: Now, some questions about your experiences as a CoP member.

5. What is the name of the CoP participating in the study that you belong to?*

6. How many people are currently members of this community (if unsure, estimate how many)? *

7. What year did the community begin (if unsure, estimate the year)? *

8. Are you one of the founding members of the community?
   ○ Yes ○ No

9. What year did you become a member?*

10. Will you still be a member in two years time? Why or why not?*

11. Would you describe yourself currently as an active member of the community?*
   ○ Yes ○ No

12. As a member of the community, what benefits do you get?*

13. As a member of the community, how often do you do the following?*
14. If you do any 'other' community activities, please provide details (optional).

15. As a member of the community, how often do you communicate with other members by: *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Every week</th>
<th>Every month</th>
<th>3 to 6 months</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Not currently possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Meeting face to face</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Telephoning others</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Undertaking team building activities (i.e. socialising)</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Sending individual emails</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Making use of the organisation’s wiki</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. Participating in a phone conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>G. Writing/editing/sharing documents on the organisation’s Intranet</td>
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<tr>
<td>H. Connecting with others via the community’s blog/s</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I. Using a group email distribution list</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Meeting up in a video conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>K. Using Instant messaging (IM)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>L. Contributing to the community’s online discussion forum/s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Texting (SMS) others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Chatting online using the community’s chatroom/s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>O. Other forms of communication (see Q.16)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

16. If you communicate in any 'other' ways, please provide details (optional).
17. How many hours (on average) would you spend communicating with other members each month?*

- Less than 2 hours
- Between 2 to 4 hours
- Between 5 to 9 hours
- Between 10 to 15 hours
- More than 15 hours
PART C: Lastly, a few questions about the CoP itself.

18. What percentage of the current members have belonged to the community since it began? *
   - Less than 25%
   - 25% to 50%
   - Over 50%
   - I’m unsure

19. Generally in these types of communities, there is usually a small core of very active members. What percentage of members would you say are currently very active? *
   - Less than 25%
   - Between 25 and 50%
   - Between 51 to 75%
   - Over 75%
   - I’m unsure

20. How many of the current members joined the community during 2006 (if unsure, estimate how many)? *

21. How would you rate the level of communication within the community overall? *
   - Excellent
   - Good
   - Fair
   - Poor

22. Briefly describe any ideas you have that might improve communication processes within the community (including the use of other types of communication technologies) (optional).

23. Overall, do you agree that the members of the community...

   - [ ] Yes  [ ] Somewhat  [ ] No
   - value being a member of the community
   - welcome new members
   - distrust some people in the community
   - seek opportunities to learn from others
   - feel a sense of loyalty and belonging
   - are generous in sharing their knowledge
   - rely on a few to keep the community going
... respect each others’ opinions
... are enthusiastic about mentoring new members
... benefit from being a part of the community
... limit sharing their knowledge
... try to find new members to join the community
... are a diverse group of people
... handle conflict in a constructive way

24. Does your organisation support the community e.g. by providing money, time, other resources? Yes ☐ No ☐

25. If yes, briefly describe the types of support the organisation provides. (optional)

26. What benefits do you think the organisation gets from the community? (optional)

27. Is there anything else you would like to add that is important to know about the community? (optional)

28. And finally, would you please imagine yourself in the following situation. (optional)
Your organization has recently been reorganized. The effective operation of the community is now formally part of your manager’s key deliverables. A generous budget has been allocated to maximise the community benefits that flow to the organisation. How can the money be best used to support the community?
Stage 2 Interview Framework for CoP Members and Host Organisation Representatives
Interview framework: CoP member

Three main areas: (1) basic details about being a member of this CoP, (2) information about how the CoP works and the communication processes and (3) the organisation/community relationship.

Demographics re interviewee’s background as a member of the community, i.e. why are you a member? And, how long have you been in the CoP? Are you active now? What does being active mean to you. Are you a core member? and what does this mean?

Now, let’s talk a bit about the community (very open Q to start with)
- Is the community membership diverse? In what ways, i.e. gender/age/culture/org.role/research expertise? What do you think that means for the CoP?
- Do many new members join? How does that happen, e.g. how do new people find out about the CoP and then who the experts are and other things the new members might want or need to know? Do most continue as CoP members or do some stop?
- Is there any kind of ‘buddy’ or mentoring system for new members? How does that work?
- How and when would a ‘new’ member stop being ‘the new member’?
- Who are ‘important people’ to the CoP? Why?

Moving on to communication processes, who do you communicate with in the CoP? Why and How?
- What sorts of things do you talk about? Do you think the CoP has its own jargon, i.e. words specific to the CoP that might confuse a new member
- And what about new members, are they encouraged to ask Qs, give their opinions, perhaps even challenge the more experienced researchers?
- Do members challenge each others’ ideas and opinions much? How might that happen (+ which medium) and with what outcomes? Can you give me an example?

Thinking now about the supporting org. and the CoP, how would you describe that relationship?
- Do you think the org. could support the CoP more? In what ways?
- What do you think the org. expects/wants in return?
- Do you think the org. has benefited from the community e.g. improved ‘things’ perhaps with new ideas, new practices, new relationships/connections? Can you give me an example?

Is there anything you think I should know about this community that we haven’t mentioned?
Interview framework: CoP/host org. representative

- What is your role/background and your connection to this community?
- How would you describe the relationship between the CoP and the org.? Is it healthy? Why/why not?
- Does the CoP receive any support from the org? If yes, what type of support?
- Do you think the org. could/should increase that support? Why? In what ways?
- What do you think the org. wants (or hopes) to get in return?
- Do you think the org. has benefited from the community? How, e.g. improved ‘things’, perhaps with new ideas, new practices, new relationships/connections? Any examples?
- Do you think the efforts of communities such as this CoP are valued in senior levels in the org? How do you know that?
- Do you have any ideas about fine-tuning the CoP/host org. relationship?
APPENDIX 9

Andriessen’s (2005) CoP Archetypes’ Scoring Scheme
CoP Characteristics (Andriessen 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Scoring scheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>1=individual organization; 2=both; 3=organizational orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract value</td>
<td>1=low; 2=medium; 3=high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalisation</td>
<td>1=no appointed leader, few rules and procedures; 2=appointed leader; 3=appointed leader, several rules and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>1=all kinds of members; 3=only expects (no score 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundary</td>
<td>1=access for anyone; 2=limited membership access; 3=closed membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>1=low level of interaction; 2=medium; 3=high level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>1=low level of shared feeling of group identity; 2=medium; 3=high level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>1=10 to 40; 2=41 to 150; 3=&gt;150 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intra-organisational</td>
<td>1=interorganisational; 2=intra-organisational but from different business units in very large organisations; 3=intra-organisational in relatively small industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical dispersion</td>
<td>1=local, 2=national; 3=international</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of interaction</td>
<td>1=mainly face-to-face communication; 2=both; 3=mainly ICT based</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 10

Closing Vignettes of the Three CoPs in Stage 2
Catering CoP

The Catering CoP was in quite a different space to the other two communities. Based on Wenger, McDermott and Synder's (2002) development life cycle, they seem to be a composite of maturing and stewardship stages. In defining the maturing stage, they wrote that "community members get to know each other’s style ... they discover their strengths and weaknesses and come to appreciate others' contributions, energy, interest, perspectives, and individual styles." (Wenger, McDermott & Synder 2002, p. 98). The Catering CoP's conversations are filled with extensive debate and they certainly have rich, full bodied discussions which they all seem to enjoy and get a lot of benefit from. Regarding the maturing stage described above, they not only exchange information, their meetings are also "a dance of styles and perspectives." The members' view was that their differences created an open and invigorating space where they could talk about new ways of looking at things as well as different ways of doing things. One of the defining elements of Wenger, McDermott and Synder's (2002) maturing stage is that the community generally grows larger and "new members disrupt the pattern of interaction the core community has developed." (p. 98) They also bring new ideas, fresh energy, different interests and potentially novel perspectives and diverse ways of looking at things, in effect, they challenge the status quo. However, in the case of the Catering CoP, this does not happen as it is effectively a closed community with membership restricted to occupants of a specific organisational role i.e. Catering Supervisors.

The outcome for the Catering CoP is that there is very little member turnover in terms of newcomers joining the community. Although, it must be noted that its fixed or closed nature is balanced somewhat by their practice of inviting outside visitors and other kitchen staff to occasionally attend their meetings. In some sense, there are indications that the Catering CoP is moving towards Wenger, McDermott and Synder's (2002) stewardship stage: "Established communities regularly experience a tension between developing their own tools, methods, and approaches and being open to new ideas and members ... Because communities naturally go through cycles of high and low energy, most regularly need to rejuvenate their ideas, members, and practices." (pp. 104, 106). The challenge for the CoP is to maintain its momentum but their ongoing and strong relationship with their host organisation provides them with a solid foundation into the future.
The Research community appeared in a transition stage, facing the very real danger of disappearing altogether. Work published by Wenger, McDermott and Synder (2002) and Gongla and Rizzuto's (2004) research on the final stage of CoPs provided the background to a more detailed understanding of just what was happening in this transition stage. Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) explained that there is a long period before it is recognised that the community is not really there. Members gradually leave the community, slowly decreasing their participation in community activities until finally there is minimal or no participation at all. They identified other outcomes, i.e. members are not replaced when they leave and the sense of community becomes diluted as members stop identifying with the community (Gongla & Rizzuto 2004, p. 298). Several of these elements are being experienced by the Research CoP, e.g. low levels of participation overall with core members (Judy, Kathleen and Natasha) reducing their contributions. Loyarte and Rivera (2007) warned that the greatest danger to communities is for them to lose energy and drift into apathy (p. 71). While some connections still occur, it was becoming problematic to separate CoP-related interactions as being distinct from their everyday work-related conversations. Their dwindling identification with the CoP is in line with what Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) claimed was an outcome of communities drifting into non-existence (p. 298). However, it is important to point out, as Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) do, that no one specifically is trying to dissolve the community and there is no pressure to end it (p. 299) at this stage. But equally, there is little sense of the community being alive as Wenger, McDermott and Synder (2002) described a healthy CoP (p. 50). Judy said, I don't think it will disband ... there will be someone who will be jiggled along and told you are, running it, whether they put the energy in that Neil has or not, is another question? Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) warned that where communities just disappear, it may be symptomatic of a nonsupportive, or even hostile, environment (p. 296). Unless some intervention occurs, it seems possible that the result could be as Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) described. At some point, however, the community finally goes out of existence completely, but no one usually knows when that point actually occurs (pp. 298–299).
Like the Research CoP, this community also appears to be in a stage of transition but it is in an extremely favourable position of having opportunities to redefine, or transform, itself in the face of changing circumstances. As Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) explained, at such stages, members face an identity crisis commonly as a consequence of something significant changing in their environment which results in them re-examining their original reasons for existing i.e. who are we? (p. 299). The catalyst for this CoP to redefine itself emerged through expansive reforms directly associated with the corporate-wide training function. It was at this transition point in the life of the Training CoP that the fieldwork stage of this research came to an end. A longitudinal study following the evolution of the Training CoP would have added wonderful insights as well as being a fascinating exploration but unfortunately, that was not possible as part of this research. The Training CoP was in a state of flux, as was the corporate-wide training function. Would these changes be for the better, and better in what ways, and better for whom: the CoP members as individuals, the community itself or even the host organisation, or some combination?