engagement, identity and innovation: etienne wenger on communities of practice

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The association ecosystem is a series of complex relationships between different types of communities. Because of this, association leaders are beginning to realize that the act of creating and nurturing community is something that associations must address strategically and thoughtfully. Etienne Wenger, a leading thinker on the relationship between community building and business and an originator of the concept of communities of practice, spoke at length with Seth Kahan about the value communities of practice offer associations and the reasons association leaders might choose to cultivate these groups in their organizations.

By Seth Kahan

More and more organizations are realizing that creating community – not just networking events and directories, but the real thing – is something that executives must address strategically and thoughtfully. Embracing the timeless human capacity for and intrinsic movement toward community, unique business models informed by an understanding of community attempt to anchor associations against the storm of quickly changing value propositions and members' ever-changing informational needs.

Etienne Wenger was one of the first to use the term "community of practice" – groups of people who together accumulate and share their collective learning. For example, imagine a tight-knit group of general contractors that meets every Saturday evening at the bowling alley to update each other on their trials and tribulations. As they tally their scores and sip sodas, they discuss new building codes, dealing with difficult customers, and how best to sink a concrete pillar in the local soil. They are a community of practice, sharing what they know and developing and refining it so they can succeed in their work.

Wenger is widely recognized as a pioneer and leading thinker in the field of organizational community. His recent collaboration, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002) is a

guidebook describing the ups, the downs, and the how-tos for developing these groups in organizations.

In a recent conversation with Wenger about the value that communities of practice offer the association industry, he spoke on the changing needs of adult learning, the status of affiliation and its relationship to a member's professional identity, considerations on the return on investment in communities of practice, and reasons association executives might choose to cultivate these groups in their organizations.

A Profound Change

On the surface, communities of practice look considerably like what associations always have offered members: affiliation, access to best practices, and forums for discussing policy changes and other important trends. But something else is taking place here – something that many organizations have yet to fully comprehend and successfully integrate into their business models. The know-how being developed in these groups is being generated by the practitioners themselves, not by a centralized source. This is not a distinction that deserves only cursory attention; it suggests a profound change in the role that associations play as sources of knowledge and is potentially a harbinger of radically new ways they might conduct business in the future.

According to Wenger, associations that function solely as a centralized knowledge resource are ignoring the critical role of active engagement in effective learning and knowledge sharing. "Learning is best understood as an interaction among practitioners, rather than a process in which a producer provides knowledge to a consumer," he says. "If associations view their members as consumers of knowledge produced by the association, they are forgetting that learning means engagement."

According to Wenger, many associations have failed not only to consider the role of engagement in learning but also something even more fundamental: identity. Wenger asserts that "identity" in the context of how associations relate to their members means much, much more than simply "belonging" or "shared interest."

"A person's identity is their engagement in the world," Wenger says. "This has not been part of our models. To engage effectively, one must ask the questions: 'What will it take for our professionals to really feel they are learning – to really feel that membership in our association is transformative? What are the specific kinds of activities they should be engaged in with one another to draw this out?'"

Wenger cautions that there is no universal answer to these questions; every group has its own nuances, and different methods must be used with each group to, as Wegner says, "draw out" learners' identities.

"When you have engineers, the most wonderful activity to engage them in is a design problem," he says. "When you give them a design problem, it draws the engineer out of them," he continues, adding that the key to drawing out members' identities is through powerful storytelling.

"What does it mean to draw somebody's identity out?" Wenger asks. "This is what a good story does. When you hear a good story, you say 'Yes! I can identify with that!' This is because it is drawing you out. And so, this is the key to being an association: to find the activities that will draw out the identities of engaged learners."

How often do we think of the learning opportunities associations provide in such a way – as venues not just to provide knowledge but to do something much more profound and transformative: to draw out and engage the very identities of those we serve? If association leaders were to find ways to accomplish this, imagine the drawing power of such events and, more important, how valuable they would be to association members.

Affiliation and Engagement

Associations have long provided affiliation to their members, but the need for affiliation has attenuated dramatically with the advent of the Internet. People jump in and out of highly specialized groups all the time, securing the know-how they need, when they need it, from those who can most easily provide it – not necessarily those, like associations, whose reason for being is to provide it.

The dramatic escalation in the use of the Web as a knowledge-gathering instrument led many association executives to fear an erosion of relevance for their organizations. The question of relevance is something that remains at the forefront of associations today, and it's difficult to have a conversation about relevance without mentioning the Internet. The Web signifies a fundamental change in the way people obtain knowledge. This shift has affected all institutions of identity, which include associations and, even more broadly, nations themselves.

"Look at our major institutions of identity," Wenger says. "They are all losing ground. It is not just associations that are losing ground. In spite of the resurgence of nationalism, nation-states are struggling to be a source of identity. Certainly big companies have lost completely.

"The organization man of the 50s is pretty much gone," he continues. "Very few companies have the paternalistic ambition to be the source of your identity for the rest of your life. Institutions of identity are failing. They are being replaced by something that is much more dynamic and engaged in the world."

What's replacing them, Wenger says, is something that embraces a more complex view of how identity is created.

"[The idea of] identity is shifting today," Wenger comments. "People have multiple sources of identity. They have multiple ways of connecting. If you propose a simple identity merely through affiliation, you are going to lose out. Affiliation is becoming less important as a component of identity than it was in the past."

Identity as Fuel for Innovation

"Being engaged to the fullest of one's identity is the source of creativity required for participation in a knowledge economy," says Wenger. "The engagement of identity, if you will, replaces the whip of the early industrial model," he adds wryly. "In the industrial model, you told people, 'Forget your identity. Leave it at the door! Leave your sense of meaningfulness at the door. Instead, do what I tell you to do. Then, when you are done, you may go back, put your identity back on, go into the world, and do whatever you want.' That's the industrial model. In the new model, you can't do that, because the identity you want people to leave at the door is precisely the resource they have to be creative."

Not only did the industrial model force employees to leave their identities – and therefore, their creativity – at the door; it also denied the social nature of people, destroying any chance for collaboration and interaction among peers: something that many executives now consider a beneficial component of organizational culture.

"We are fundamentally social beings," Wenger says. "Our participation in human practices is how we become who we are. Learning in the context

of communities starts within our little family and then moves into broader and broader circles. … In this sense, the whole notion of social practice is fundamental."

If Wenger's notions are correct, then communities of practice could be considered successful vectors of learning and knowledge sharing in part because they are driven through social interactions.

"Communities of practice are flourishing because they provide support for this kind of learning," he says. "They are an expression of their members' will to make them exist. … They are not driven by institutional fiat. They are more in line with these more subtle forms of identity that derive from engagement with the world and engagement with peers and others.

"To provide anchors for identity is still very important," he comments. "It is not that the issue of identity is disappearing. On the contrary, it is becoming more intense a concern than in the past. But what serves people's identity is no longer simply providing affiliation and information. … Information is now a commodity. To be a source of information does not provide something unique. What provides something really unique is the ability to interact with interesting groups of people that mean a lot to you. People do not want to have the identity of an association. They want to experience their identity as professionals engaged in meaningful learning, alive in knowledge creation."

New Models for Learning

Many associations recognize that the old model of learning is fading. Professionals often resist attending old-style learning events that promise a lineup of the latest gurus dispensing knowledge. People can find this information for themselves in books, tapes, CDs, over the Internet, and in a variety of other media. So what kind of learning are today's professionals looking for?

Many would say that – in addition to having access to relevant, timely information – people also want an "experience," and that experience often involves feeling like an integral part of a community rather than feeling like a student attending a lecture. The answer to how associations are creating community within their ranks vary, but one thing is unwavering: Associations cannot ignore members' need for genuine community; they must address it in their core benefits.

According to Wenger, "Communities of practice may be a core business offering to members. To [offer communities of practice] effectively, you must have an understanding of the knowledge that is meaningful to members. You have to learn what kind of community activities would allow them to engage their professional identities in the processes of knowledge sharing and knowledge creation," he adds.

Considerations

Wenger is a champion of the potential use of communities of practice, but he is not a cheerleader: He is forthright about the considerable effort required to cultivate and effectively use these groups to an organization's advantage. He is especially clear that the effort to build such a community will never succeed if it is undertaken half-heartedly.

"If I were talking to a CEO, I would say to him or her, 'If you choose to build communities of practice for your members, understand that significant communication and nurturing will be required," he comments. "These communities are completely voluntary. If your communities don't create value, people will vote with their feet. … Don't just open a few discussion boards on your Web site. You have decided to cultivate something that is alive."

Wenger poses that associations offer engagement to their members through sustaining year-round, focused communities of practice punctuated by broader learning events where the communities are exposed to other practices. He says, "As an association, you want to offer your membership a good mix of in-depth engagement with very specific communities of practice that are meaningful to them … where people can free themselves from the focus on their own practice. People want to be exposed to new things in an *active* way – in a way that engages them, because *passive* encounters with outside practices is something we have so much of, with the Web and television. On television we can see court proceedings; we can see open heart surgery; we are exposed passively to a lot of practices to which we do not belong. To be engaged actively and constructively is much more difficult."

Vindicating the Idea of Boundaries

As business thinking has evolved to include the synthesis of multidisciplinary information, an emphasis – especially in the United States – to think in terms of the absence of boundaries has become common. Not recognizing boundaries, Wenger says, is a mistake.

"On a day-to-day basis, associations may enable people to really get into their community: deep engagement," he comments. "But there is always a price to the depth of the community. It tends to create boundaries. The term 'boundary' has a bad rap in English, in the American tradition of 'no boundaries' and 'no limits.' But, in fact, boundaries are part of life. They are unavoidable."

According to Wegner, these boundaries serve not as barricades but as agents of context and equilibrium.

"When a physicist interacts with a biologist, they experience their boundaries," says Wenger. "As learners we need a balance between core

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learning – that is, learning at the core of our own practices – and exposure to related practices. Often, innovation occurs at these boundary interactions. To be learning productively as professionals, we need a balance between depth and boundaries."

Communities of Practice in Internal Knowledge Management

In addition to building communities of practice outside the organization, many associations may want to cultivate and better manage their internal knowledge. Wenger states, "A CEO may wish to think of communities of practice as a vehicle for managing the knowledge in the association itself, among employees and volunteers who are working for the association. Internally, associations have similar needs to any company. They need to understand the critical domains of knowledge needed to be successful in their business. They need to be in contact with the practitioners who manage that knowledge."

Nurturing communities of practice is a significant strategic decision. There are many factors to take into consideration. Consider this passage from *Cultivating Communities of Practice*:

> "Executives and managers need to appreciate the strategic value of communities of practice and the role of management, but they also need to trust that they can rely on robust practices of community development. People in charge of knowledge resources need to know how to run a broad initiative, but they also need to understand in some detail what it takes to start communities and support their leaders. Community coordinators need to understand the developmental stages of communities and the specific actions they can take to help their communities evolve, but they also need to reflect on their work in the context of strategic objectives and organizational transformation."

How Do We Measure Value?

When we talk about strategic objectives, it is critical to address return on investment. Wenger comments, "The value of a community of practice usually manifests *outside* that community and not *inside* the community. In most cases, the practitioners have other places where they engage in the practice. Often it is not primarily within the community of practice – it is on their teams, in their business units, in their practitioner worlds."

In defining the value of a community of practice, Wenger again turns to the importance of storytelling.

"In terms of revenue generation, if you want to understand the value of a community, you have to follow the story of the knowledge that is generated," he says. "Through a mix of formal interviews and testimonies,

you have to engage the practitioners in telling you the story of how the activities of the community have translated into new and better performance. When you do that, most communities come up with very good ROI.

"Communities of practice have both a short-term value and long-term value," he continues. "In the short term, the people within the group help each other solve problems. They share and learn what can be reused across the membership of the community.

"There is also long-term value: Over time [communities of practice] increase their capacity. By solving problems together, they develop a repertoire of stories and issues they have solved. This becomes part of their capability."

"But, how much effort do you want to put into measuring this?" he asks. "People often ask me, 'Can you measure the value of the community?' I say, 'No problem.' But measurement doesn't come for free! Good measurement has to follow the course the story will take you. It takes time. To assemble the information that will allow you to see exactly how much this community has saved over a year is not impossible. But, you have to follow the stories."

Wenger says that through this process of analyzing the stories – called "systematic anecdotal evidence" – organizations have their first real chance of seeing the value of communities of practice and of viewing knowledge in qualitative, not quantitative, terms.

"There is a tradition in intellectual capital of attempting to quantify knowledge – for example, counting how many people have taken a course or how many knowledge documents have been assembled and so forth," Wenger comments. "In fact, the value of knowledge is a *flow* from knowledge-producing activity to performance and back."

In this learning cycle, Wenger says, the practitioners are involved both in their work and in their communities of practice. This interchange promotes the forming of new ideas at work that individuals then bring to the communities to develop. They then go back to work and apply the refined ideas to performance, and the cycle continues, building upon itself with each iteration.

Far-Reaching Impact

Wenger does not shy away from the impact this approach portends. Attuning organizations to authentic forms of learning, making them building grounds for human interaction and the generation of social practice has repercussions that extend far beyond the marketplace. As *Cultivating Communities of Practice* states: "Firms that understand how to translate the power of communities into successful knowledge organizations will be the architects of tomorrow – not only because they will be more successful

in the marketplace, but also because they will serve as a learning laboratory for exploring how to design the world as a learning system."

"When you start thinking about it, it is very transformative, changing the status of the organization from source to convener," Wenger says. "It shifts the power but in a way that is closer to the way things really work. In the world, professionals do not just buy what they are told at face value. They listen. Then they check it out with colleagues and against their own better judgment. They decide if and how they will apply what they are told. But many organizations do not operate this way. They operate as if they were the ultimate source of knowledge.

"What I am describing is a new way of doing business," he concludes. "I am talking about changing the designs of our organizations so that they are more in line with our behavior. … This is where the value is created in organizations that successfully contribute to the marketplace and ultimately to our world."
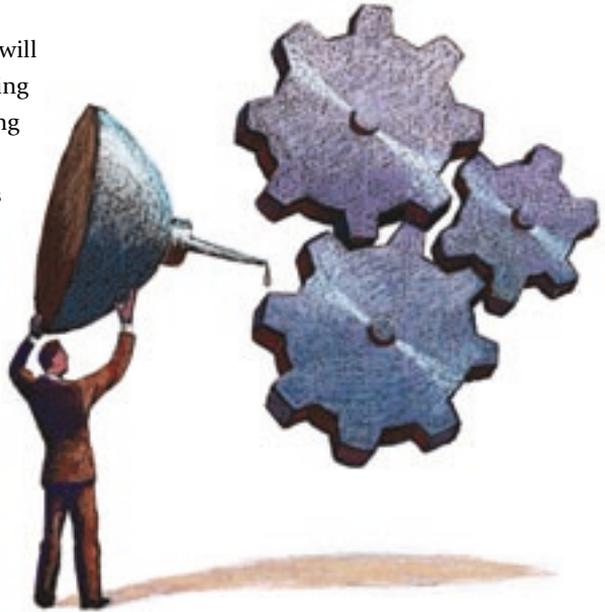
More information on Etienne Wenger can be found on the Internet at www.EWenger.com. Wenger is the founder of CPSquare, a community of practice that studies communities of practice. CPSquare is an open organization that includes people from both public and private sectors who are gathering, sharing, and learning together. It may be found at www.CPSquare.com

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It is not merely the distributed nature of communities that makes them a challenge to "manage" in the conventional sense of the term. The real challenge – and opportunity – that communities create is the need for organizations to strengthen their capacity for understanding and embracing difference. As Etienne Wenger contends, "a person's identity is [his or her] engagement in the world," and that identity is far more unique and complex than what is suggested by the relatively one-dimensional industry or professional affiliations we offer. To put it another way, not everyone who belongs to an organization is the same, even if they all have similar jobs or work in the same field.

Of course, this is not exactly a new thought, yet many associations seem comfortable operating on the curious assumption that their stakeholders' inherent diversity of identity, and thus experience and perspective, is something to be managed away. How else might we explain the fixation that associations appear to have with building consensus when what frequently is required to advance is courageous, if sometimes unpopular, decision making? It appears that the fundamental premise of the association, as we have come to live it as an organizational form, is that the very act of "associating" must by definition be about what makes us the same without much room for what makes us different.

This rather limited view of associating may serve us well in creating "a sense of community" (i.e., a feeling of "belonging" or "shared interest" in the broader organization). But it will work less well in the endeavor to cultivate and sustain communities as a form of organization, because the latter are as complicated as the people who live within them. A genuine community, be it geographic, interest-based, or professional, is composed of different people with different hopes and different views, as well as things in common. Sometimes ideas and perspectives shared in communities are in tension with one another, and sometimes they are in direct conflict. And that is a good thing, because a robust yet flexible community architecture creates a rich context for exploring difference

within a framework of shared purpose. Communities create meaning by liberating their members from the constraints of the centralized organization and by facilitating discourse that is real – and quite possibly transformative – for individual members, for the community, and for the organization as a whole.

Etienne Wenger and Seth Kahan ably challenge us to test our assumptions about what community means and how it forms. Smart associations already are acting to fully embrace community as an element of a strategy to leverage knowledge, organize for innovation, and support members in their quests to create value for themselves. Those organizations have learned (or are learning) a lesson of inestimable importance: That which makes us different is as much a source of extraordinary possibility as what brings us together. It is a basic premise of the American democratic tradition, of which associations are a part, and an important reminder for an association community in search of relevance in the 21st century.

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