



## **TURNING THE INFORMAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK OF AN ORGANIZATION INTO A KNOWLEDGE TOOL THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper is an attempt to bring forth, analyse and compare different aspects in terms of informal communication in the workplace. It focuses in the knowledge shared within the informal communication network which is considered a significant factor for an organization's internal and external progress. It is a study on literature, which aims to link the literature findings with an organisation that seeks to improve its workplace communication and get advantage of the knowledge shared and the collaborated information. There is an effort to identify whether the adoption and implementation of Communities of Practice, as a knowledge tool, could be succeeded. Thus, cultivation of Communities of Practice is expected to influence and turn the informal network to an added-value for the organization. Furthermore, such an innovative approach would capitalise the spare knowledge of the organisation and improve its status in the knowledge society creating new standards and valuing the daily routine. The synchronised knowledge, if shared and administered properly, may create opportunities and cope with the uncertainty especially in crisis situations.*

*Keywords: communication, knowledge, workplace communication, Communities of Practice (CoPs).*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Almost forty years ago, *James Granger (1970)* described a number of obstacles that companies faced in order to gain an effective communication. He identified: the existence of fear among employees; the inertia due to a non-rewarding system; the sense that management did not care about their problems; the fear that disagreement will block their promotions; and the lack of supervisory accessibility and responsiveness. To cope with that, Granger claimed that companies should take three actions, in order to change radically the environment: (a) the management should start building trust between them and employees; (b) the management should put a premium on integrity; and, (c) they should get out of their offices and find out what's going on, in their organization.

Over the years, different studies concluded that top management is necessary to build the right infrastructure of communication within the organization. An effective communication framework provides conditions for cultivation of knowledge and information sharing. When an organization grows, it is easier to be entrapped in a complicated system of communicating. Opposing to this, practices such as: honesty; integrity; knowledge share; and reward; create trust among employees. Workplace communication is definitely affected by the infrastructure of the organization, but this is not the only parameter. The second section of this paper -the literature review- relates to the workplace communication with emphasis in informal communication network within the organization. The review includes an extended survey on communication and communication process, communication channels and barriers of communication. Different aspects are presented through comparisons of academic studies, theories' synthesis and discussion of findings. The third section describes the issue of how informal communication, if approached as an asset for an organisation, could be converted to a useful tool through Communities of Practice.

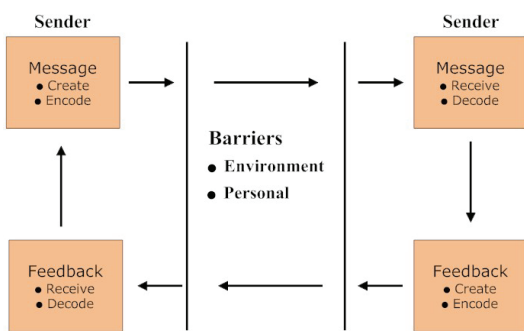
## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Communication and Communication process

According to *Scott (2005)*, communication is about sending, receiving, and understanding information and meaning. He claimed that "receiving" and "understanding" are the most important operations in the communication process, since the response of the receiver defines whether the communication attempt is successful or not. He further defined two types of communication that are related to workplace communication; the effective and the efficient communication (*Scott, 2005*). Effective communication, when the message of the sender has a successful decoding from the receiver; and efficient, when the communication is done effectively at a low cost. Furthermore *Guo and Sanchez (2005)*, defined communication, as the creation or exchange of thoughts, ideas, emotions and understanding between sender(s) and receiver(s). They found a strong relationship among communication and the efficient and effective performance of the organization.

Communication process is the procedure where a sender and a receiver communicate. This scheme incorporates the "encoding-decoding" operations and describes the usual transfer of the message. *McShane and Von Glinow (2003)* have illustrated this process by adding the feedback and communication barriers:

**Picture 1: The Communication Process**



Source: McShane, S.L. and Von Glinow, M.A. (2003) *Organizational Behavior: Emerging realities for the workplace revolution*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Boston, McGraw-Hill, p. 324.

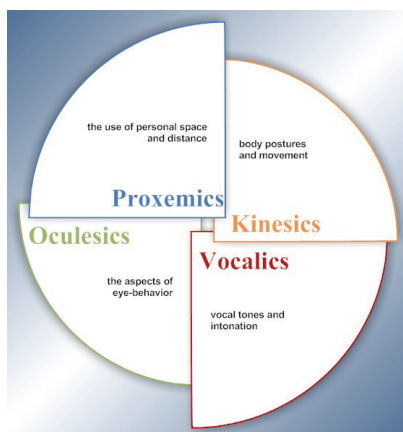
In communication process, feedback is considered an indispensable component, since it contributes correctively to the new inputs of information and knowledge, or even works towards the adjustment of sender and receiver. As *Guo and Sanchez (2005)* asserted, lack of feedback corresponds to one-way communication, where there is no possibility of response. On the contrary, two-way communication is more accurate and information-rich. To this extent, combining with *Scott's* findings, the adoption of two-way communication, could direct an organization to effective and efficient communication.

## 2.2. Communication Channels

These are the ways that messages and information travel around such as: (a) the verbal communication, (b) the non-verbal communication and (c) the technology-aided communication, which accommodates e-mailing, instant messaging, micro-blogging, ontology, and communities of practice.

Verbal communication is considered the spoken and written modes. Non-verbal communication on the other hand, is the communication that transcends the written or spoken word (*Gabbott & Hogg, 2001*). *Gabbott and Hogg (2001)* identified that non-verbal communication channels incorporates much more complex aspects, and grouped them into 4 categories:

**Picture 2: Non-verbal Communication**



Different surveys have shown that non-verbal communication channels covers the 70% or even the 90% of workplace communication (*Dumbrava & Koronka, 2009; Gabbott & Hogg, 2001*). The non-verbal communication may encrypt hidden knowledge. In addition, *Butkeviciene et al. (2008)* highlighted the importance of use of non-verbal components for business purposes as they have greater impact. The impact and reliability of non-verbal communication is higher than the spoken word, but it is conditioned to proper interpretation and the ability to place it effectively in a framework of wide communication which includes other channels as well.

Besides that, the introduction of technology in workplace communication, as well as, the high levels of penetration in the globalised markets, created the essence of effective collaboration. For example *Whittaker and Bradner (2000)*, introduced the terms of interaction and outeraction. Interaction is “exchanging information”, while outeraction means “stay connected” to coordinate impromptu meetings. The components of computer-aided communication such as instant messaging, e-mailing, groupware, phone, other social computing tools etc., have altered the communication process by providing flexibility, better informed-employees, more accurate decision making and finally by changing the organizational structure of the company. Companies that have cultivated a technology-friendly environment in terms of communication and knowledge sharing have achieved a more competitive position in the fast-changing business environment (*Lau et al., 2001*).

Micro-blogs, a new technology in broadcasting messages and information, according to *Zhao and Rosson (2004)*, contributed in (a) the enhancement of information sharing, (b) the build of common ground for the participants and (c) the sustainment of the feeling of connectedness among colleagues. Another research by *Kurokawa (2007)*, introduced the mechanism-protocol of ontology for cross-organizational communication, a fundamental tool for communication, which combines the organization-to-organization communication where colleagues from different areas or even companies could share information in a mutually understandable way.

### **2.3. Barriers to Communication**

As communication barriers are considered anything that filters, blocks or distorts the message or the information during the process of “encoding-sending-decoding”. *Longest et al. (2000)*, classified the communication barriers in two categories: environmental and personal. *Guo and Sanchez (2005)* described as environmental barriers the characteristics of the organization that derive from its environmental setting. As personal barriers they defined anything that arises from the nature of individuals and their interaction with others. According to *Smith (2002)*, workplace communication barriers are depended on the company’s infrastructure. As it seems, before *Guo and Sanchez*, *Smith* connected the effective communication with the built-in communication systems of the organization, actually implying the relation between potential barriers and company’s environment. She claimed that inadequate communication systems result in miscommunication and missed communication (*Smith, 2002*). Similarly, *Anand and Shachar (2007)* identified that a focal attribute of communication is miscommunication. However, miscommunication could be avoided if right mechanisms are applied. Such mechanisms involve (a) greater focus to be given in the perception of the message or information which is about to be sent, and (b) to try to improve the precision of the message. At this point, *Marks (2009)* noted that personal visits, face-to-face communication, speaking a common language, increase credibility and improve communication, tearing down barriers.

Besides organization's structure, as another barrier is considered the managerial philosophy which causes ambiguity. *Tourish and Robson (2006)* revealed that, specific attitudes from managerial to non-managerial staff, directs to organizational problems. They researched the phenomenon of "sensemaking heuristic" which on the one hand, is the cause of making managers disregard the communication comes from their subordinates while on the other hand, make the subordinates to minimise their feedback to upper levels.

*English (2001)* surveyed another barrier, the distance. A communication barrier may arise among head offices and overseas staff, especially when there is a problem in the understanding of a common context and the remote reality. The domestic mindset restricts organization's performance and creates barriers which directs some time to alienation.

Another communication barrier, according to *Vijaya and Tiwari (2010)*, is the lack of cross-cultural adaptation and understanding. Globalization, organization change and communication technology are the driving forces of multicultural teams. In order, for the organization to achieve an effective framework, special focus should be given in its intercultural effectiveness. *Abe and Wiseman (1983)* identified four dimensions of intercultural effectiveness: (a) the ability to communicate interpersonally, (b) the ability to adjust to different cultures, (c) the ability to adjust to different social systems, and (d) the ability to establish interpersonal relationships. As *McLean and Lewis (2010)* commented, cross-cultural communication focuses on how people from diverse cultural backgrounds communicate with each other, both verbally and non-verbally. *Lewis (2000)* has developed an interesting model regarding the cross-cultural communication and cultural awareness. This model categorises people in three cultures: (a) the linear active cultures, which are task-oriented, highly organised planners, (b) the multi-active cultures, which are emotional, loquacious and impulsive, and (c) the reactive cultures, which are mostly listeners. It gives a better understanding in terms of similarities and differences among cultures, as well as possible explanations about certain behaviours. It could be used as a guide in order to act proactively in cross-cultural issues.

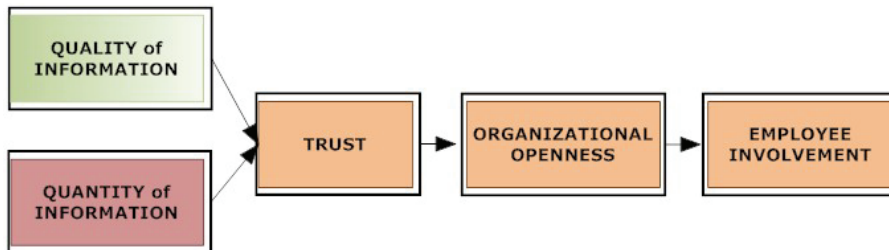
#### **2.4. Intra-organizational Communication**

Communication is not a cost item for an organization, but an investment. Since communicating is not optional, the opening of communication channels in order for the information and knowledge to flow in the right directions is critical for the organization's performance as well as the morale of employees (*Sinickas 2001*). A research presented by *Kandlousi et al., (2010)*, proved that if employees are satisfied with the communication within their organization they acquire a positive attitude and feel more engaged. Furthermore, it is the managers' responsibility to handle and administer the communication process. *Bidya (2009)* agrees with *Sinickas (2001)*, regarding the open communication channels, and adds that open communication should be administered and if possible monitored since it may direct to the employees' detachment towards the organization. Furthermore, open communication is related to trust which in turn is very fragile (*Conchie and Burns 2008*). Therefore, this is difficult to build and easy to lose. In their study *Conchie and Burns (2008)* identified that workers' trust intentions, are minimally affected by good news, while they are biased toward bad news. However, a good way to increase trust within organization could be through open communication.

*Thomas et al., (2009)* have clearly stated that communication is a mean to develop trust and cultivate employee's involvement. They defined as trust the "embedded beliefs about

the other party”, which are shaped through information and communication. In addition, according to their findings, interpersonal trust is related to open communication. In upward communication the most important think is the quantity of information, while in downward and lateral the quality of information exchanged. *Thomas et al., (2009)* presented a theoretical model based on their findings:

**Picture 3:** Theoretical Model of Perceived Communication, Trust, Experienced Openness, and the Effect on Employee Involvement in Organizational Goals



Source: Thomas, Gail Fann et al. (2009) The Central Role of Communication in Developing Trust and its Effect on Employee Involvement. *Journal of Business Communication*, 46(3), p. 289.

*Nelson (2010)* asserted that the communication style of an organization is related to its business growth. Thus, a style based on clear and open communication cultivates trust and concern. Following *Haas and Arnold (1995)*, communication is a competence. The central element of the intra-organizational communication should be listening. The adoption of listening or listening-related processes among co-workers, either in upward, downward or lateral communication, plays a significant role in terms of functioning effectively in the organization. Moreover, *Ferrante (2010)* in her research on the sector of “risk and crisis communication” identified that, if managers develop and maintain trust and credibility with their employees during crisis situations, they get back their involvement and dedication. By listening, speaking with honesty, being frank and open, they simply improve their competence in communicating.

*Orsini (2001)* declared that the art of internal communication lies in knowing which tool to use, and which communication channel is right for a certain circumstance. Furthermore, *Smidts et al., (2001)* deepened by introducing “employee communication” which defined as the communication transactions between individuals at various levels and in different areas of specialization in order to coordinate day-to-day activities. They also linked the communication climate with the organizational identification. An organization that supports open climate and values active participation of its employees increases the sense of belongingness and self-worth for each member. In the same way, *Cameron and McCollum (1993)* studied the relationship between organizational culture and communication. Their findings suggested that the bottom-line of successful communication among management and employees, is the two-way communication through a commonly agreed scheme. Such scheme should involve, consensus among the parts, shared beliefs and shared reality in order to achieve enhancement of effectiveness.

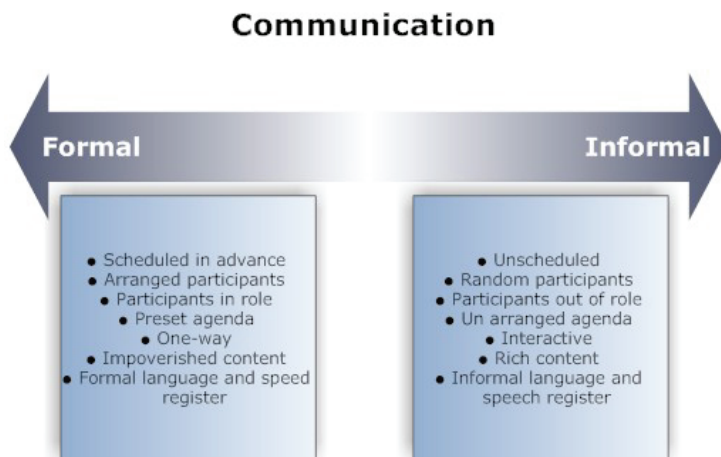
*Kaul and Pandit (2008)* divided the workplace communication to task-oriented and relationship-oriented. They found that the most important aspect of communication is pragmatics, which is the practical use of language to communicate. In task-oriented communication the accuracy of information is necessary, while in the relationship-oriented politeness is much more significant.

The organization's structure is the vehicle for accessing and communicating information (*Driskill and Goldstein, 1986*). *Driskill and Goldstein (1986)* claimed that the volatility and complexity of an organization's environment, defines in a way, the nature of communication. Lack of information and communication may direct to uncertainty. Therefore, it is crucial for the companies to adjust their structures in order to deal with the complexity and change through communication. Managerial attitude which derives from the structure of organization and the managerial style has an immediate impact in the communication milieu. *Khatri (2009)* concluded that in most cases, there is a communication gap between superiors and their subordinates. This gap comes from the power distance. As a result, high power distance organizations appear symptoms of inertia, low participation and low performance among employees. Such symptoms usually enrich a poor communication environment and maintain a culture of inadequacy.

According to *Imberman (2003)*, communication is a key to employees' involvement. Making people involved through the sharing of information creates a strong potential to motivate different aspects of their performance. Upward communication is a process, where employees' ideas, responses, critiques or plans are shared with their superiors. This type of communication involves listening. *Housel and Davis (1977)* defined as upward communication the process of transmitting information from the bottom levels to the top levels of an organization. On the other hand, downward communication implies the adequate amount of information passed from managerial levels to the bottom of the organization. *Goris et al., (2000)* concluded that this type of communication affects job performance and job satisfaction.

Word-of-mouth is a communication process which supports information diffusion. Nowadays word-of-mouth lies mostly in technological means which in return multiply the effect in terms of time and value. However, *Subramanian (2006)* identified the word-of-mouth process as a component for both formal and informal communication network of an organization. *Kraut et al., (2002)* have described thoroughly informal communication and proclaimed it as an integral component of any organization. Informal communication is crucial for coordination to exist, since it depends on four top human's necessities: (a) the physical proximity, (b) the instinctive need to communicate, (c) the sense of being a member group, and (d) the hierarchy. Moreover, they introduced the use of technology as a mean to overcome barriers in terms of making it more effective. Also, they separated formal from informal communication by registering some of their characteristics which are presented in the figure below:

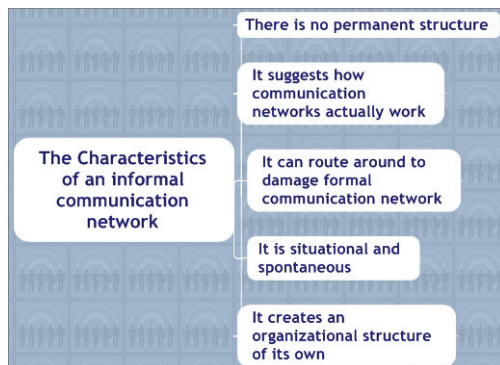
**Picture 4:** The formality dimension of communication



Source: Kraut, Robert A. et al. (2002) Informal Communication in Organizations: Form, Function and Technology, *White Paper*, p. 5.

In addition, *Subramanian (2006)* claimed that informal communication appears between people, due to proximity, perception of each other as a reliable or knowledgeable member, friendship and trust. He, moreover, has given some characteristics of an informal communication which are presented below:

**Picture 5:** The characteristics of an informal communication network



According to *Subramanian (2006)*, informal communication is called grapevine. A further research made by *Crampton et al., (1998)* who examined the grapevine activity a little earlier concluded that it is an inevitable part of the organization. In addition they have researched the factors that influence it revealing the idea of the existence of an informal communication network. The interesting part of this study was that the authors investigated whether this network could be controlled or not by management. If the formal communication network, appear to have inconsistencies and vulnerabilities in terms of the flow of information within the organization, this is the opportunity for the grapevine to take place. Ambiguity, threatening, insecurity and overstress are factors that support the creation of an environment of mistrust. In particular, *Crampton et al., (1998)* reviewed that four factors are associated with grapevine operations: (1) the intensity and importance of the communication to employees; (2) the degree of ambiguity and lack of clarity of the communication to employees; (3) an organizational environment that is insecure or threatening; and (4) an organization climate where lack of trust exists among employees



toward formal communications. Management could adopt a proactive strategy focusing in the control of this activity, analysing the above operations.

*Subramanian (2006)* asserted that both formal and informal communication is like blood to any living organisation. The attempt to devalue any of it, may direct to organizational chaos. He introduced the significance of rumour and gossip as components of the informal communication network and framed the grapevine as a standard uniform grey code. Rumourmonger and gossiping were also studied by *Michelson and Mouly (2000)*. They have identified a common feature in these two elements the “sense that information is received third hand”. However, they are not the same. According to *Michelson and Mouly (2000)*, rumour is hypotheses, unconfirmed propositions where the receiver does not know whether or not to believe the message. Gossip, on the other hand, being perceived as idle talk or trivial chatter it might have some basis of factuality. Nevertheless, both of them incorporate the information exchange and are components of the informal network communication within the organizational context. *Houmanfar and Johnson (2003)* claimed that gossip and rumour are cultural practices that involve inter-individual transmission of organizational information. As *Michelson and Mouly (2000)*, they have agreed that gossip is not synonymous with rumour and they gave another perspective. Gossip is intimate and personal, while rumour has a more social context. Furthermore, *Houmafar and Johnson (2003)* asserted that rumour is used to explain, justify and provide meaning for emotional interests associated with issues of importance while gossip consists of talk about people, for the purpose of exchanging information, entertainment, gaining influence or social control.

Concluding in this section, as *Shahaida and Nargundkar (2006)* identified, rumour, gossip, grapevine activity and breakdown of formal communication constitute informal communication and they impact organizational functioning. Although, informal communication networks are difficult to measure and monitor (*Fischbach et al., 2009*) it would be a challenge for any organization to find ways and turn this seeming weakness into a competence.

## **2.5. Literature Findings**

The effective and efficient workplace communication is based in the organization’s structure and culture which are interrelated. Concurrently, the management style defines the nature of communication climate and in result the formal and informal communication networks and how they operate within the organization. The management, in top or medium level, has the full responsibility to administer the communication process, to define the communication channels and to form the policies which should be followed; in other words, to create the communication’s framework. This framework and its implementation scale employees’ involvement, morale and concern, sense of belonging, trust and finally performance. Use of technology is considered a significant mean in the operation of workplace communication.

Informal communication is a vital element for any organization. It satisfies different human aspects and interacts with formal communication. Grapevine, rumour, gossip and breakdown of formal paths of communication, are integral components of a company, which may or may not get advantaged of their existence for the sake of its mission, aims and objectives. In any case, adoption of open communication supported by tactics such as: listening from upwards to downwards; a two-way honest and frank communication; the

use of common language; is a given strategy which could turn the workplace communication into a competence for any organization. Consequently, communication is like the blood which you cannot control it, but you can provide it a healthy body to live.

### **3. COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (CoPs)**

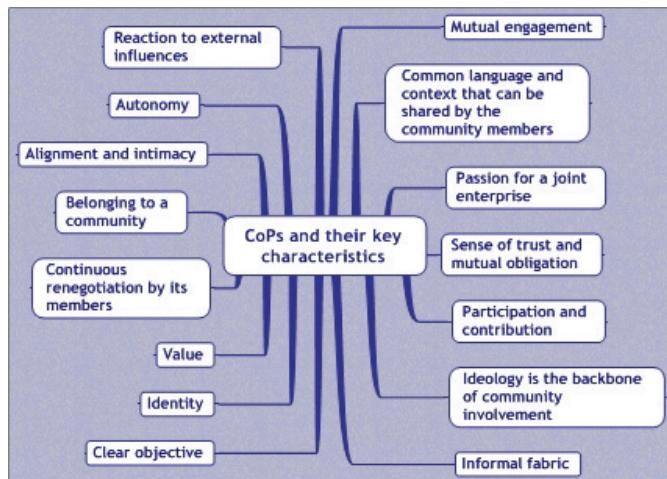
The informal communication network may create distortions and restraints in the flow of formal communication. As a result, the organization seeks for ways to improve the environment in order to increase productivity and optimize the functionality of workflows. Afterwards, a company is a knowledge-centric organization. By identifying the communication channels as a vital component, there are two components which could embed a different mentality: (a) technology and (b) social concern.

Communities of Practice are a social-oriented tool based on the technological aspect. According to *Lesser and Storck (2001)* a Community of Practice (CoP hereafter) is a social unit, a social entity that includes individuals, informally bounded, who share and learn, based on common interests through their mutual engagement. This entity operates as an engine for the development of social learning that occurs when people, who have a common interest or a problem, collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions and build innovations. This collaboration is done mostly through the use of technology (workgroups, instant on-line systems, other social interaction digital tools, skype, elluminate etc.). Therefore, since an informal network has characteristics of sharing information, common knowledge, and personal satisfaction of interacting, the implementation of CoPs is a way to accommodate such interactions or even outeractions.

Besides that, as derived from previous studies (*Loyerta and Rivera, 2008; Roberts, 2006; Ardichvili et al., 2006; Chalmers and Keown, 2006*), a Community of Practice is the most versatile and dynamic communication resource, operating beyond typical frontiers, based in very different internal mechanisms of communication, based also in leadership and trust, with specific norms and a strong idea of the shared practice.

In addition, the heart of communication is the individual. As communication incorporates community, the management of the organization is suggested to adopt a managerial style which will be closer to community sharing which is the basis of CoPs. A number of managers will form the first groups of CoPs with the involvement of employees. That means, cultivating communities from the inside. By supporting different CoPs and trying to encapsulate them in the existed informal communication network this is expected to affect culture and trust. Furthermore, CoPs have a number of attributes - presented in the next figure – which opposes to distortions and restore miscommunications.

**Picture 6:** Communities of Practice: Their key characteristics



CoPs should be implemented through technology-aided communication. Such communication should stay informal in order to empower the sense of belonging, overcome distances effectively and merge cross-cultures. The idea is to maintain a network of CoPs within the organization and get advantage of their characteristics which more or less remain untouched during their existence. The backbone of this network should address the following:

- *Learning the people of the company*, by observing their behaviour, by watching how they interact physically and emotionally with their job, by experimenting their different formats of reaction, by exploring other companies' cultures and compare them with your people;
- *Organizing the people of the company*, by helping them to overcome obstacles, by giving them the vision and drive them to innovative thoughts, by grouping them and inspiring new combinations and cooperation among them, by identifying the talented and boost them forward;
- *Building the people of the company*, by setting standards for creating a climate of internal morale and external awareness;

As discussed in the literature review, the absence of a clear formal communication drives employees to ambiguity and increase the affect of informal communication network.

A CoP approach could contribute in overcoming complexities and minimize personal and environmental barriers. Also, it is expected to decrease the power distance between managers and subordinates by bridging the existed gap. Miscommunication, especially in medium-large organizations, derived from the management's ignorance of what's really happening in "low levels". The cultivation of such contacts opens the communication among employees and management.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

These days' "command-and-control" communication approaches are unlikely to generate positive responses in employees (Denning, 2008). Workplace communication is much more complex and affects organization's evolvement.

Moreover, it is true that technology-aided communication has high penetration. Although technology has evolved and dominated communication channels, the face-to-face contact remains untouched and continues to be a top-level priority for all employees. Personal contacts empower business relationships, create trust and resolve ambiguities.

Informal communication networks are important entities for the organization. In this paper we recommend that they should be maintained and in parallel be ingrained with a more innovative communication channel; Communities of Practice. If the organization succeeds in turning the informal communication network to a network of CoPs, it is expected to increase its agility and cope with internal and external challenges. The key remains in successfully get advantage of the CoPs characteristics within the organization.

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