

Integration of Learning and Practice for Job Sharing Partnerships

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This paper explores the forces that support the proliferation of the flexible work arrangement called job sharing. Moreover, the paper will illuminate the need for integrating learning and practice as a way to develop and support job sharing partners, or "Partners in Practice" (PiPs). The author puts forth a model derived from learning in Communities of Practice (CoPs), which is argued to be similar to learning and practice that occurs in PiPs.

Keywords: Learning and Practice, Job Sharing, Communities of Practice

This paper examines the dynamic convergence of two external forces currently shaping U.S. organizations today, ICT and changing demographics in the workforce. Further, the author describes a response to these forces on the part of organizations--the utilization of the flexible work arrangement, job sharing. This conceptual analysis will present a model that outlines the integration of learning and practice for job sharing partnerships, or "Partners in Practice" (PiPs). Several questions will be raised about learning and practice integration as a source of support for on-the-job effectiveness in PiPs, and as critical elements for developing intellectual capital (Cooper & Spencer, 2006). In this light, PiPs may be conceptually framed similarly to Communities of Practice (CoPs), which has an emphasis on learning in a group and on the job (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Job Sharing

Job sharing is a type of flexible work arrangement proliferating in the United States organizations today. Job Sharing involves two people who are responsible for the duties and responsibilities of one position within an organization (Branine, 2004). This type of flexible work arrangement enables the pair to work a reduced number of hours during the week. At the same time, it provides the organization with full-time coverage for that position.

Factors Driving Utilization of Job Sharing

There are two primary factors driving the increased utilization of job sharing, accessibility to information and computer technology (ICT) and changing demographics in the workforce. Today, how companies tap the brainpower of their workforce has less to do with physical presence 40 hours per week, and more to do with accessibility to ICT (Huff, 2005; Zimmerman, 2004). In addition, businesses' retention strategies are focused on meeting the desire on the part of the current workforce for increased work/life flexibility.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Advances in ICT enable more innovative job designs by providing the tools that enable job share partners to edit and monitor work in an asynchronous manner. ICT examples include email, instant messaging, web portals, databases and multi-user domains (MUD) (Hildreth, Kimble & Wright, 2000; Workman, 2005). A MUD is a virtual space where users can work in a collaborative environment. This can occur asynchronously throughout the work process. ICT is the facilitator and delivery mechanism for the new workforce model (Weekes & Beagrie, 2002).

Demographic Changes in the Workforce

The second factor driving the utilization of job sharing is the changing demographics of the United States workforce. Specifically, workforce trends indicate an increase in generational differences (e.g., retirees or baby-boomers, generation X and Y) and a greater gender balance. Consequently, lifestyle choices, work/life and/or familial needs, and career goals of the workforce will be a central consideration as companies compete for talent (Lobel, Googins, & E. Bankert, 1999).

According to Hankin (2005), a highly blended generational diversity in the workforce is accompanied by a desire for balance between family, lifestyle and career choices. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports that 43% of its members think that the loss of talent associated with the retirement of Baby Boomers is a "potential problem" (Collinson, 2005). Jobs that allow employees to work on a reduced-hours basis are more attractive to this population (Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004). However, organizations are not just targeting older workers when they offer job shares.

Similar to the older workers, Generation X and Y employees tend to place a higher priority on a balance of work and life, and seek out a flexible way to achieve both work and life goals (Hankin, 2005). Polach (2003) suggests that flexible work arrangements are attractive work options for achieving the balance. The younger "Generation Y" employees, also dubbed, "N-Gen," in particular will seek work on their own terms (Weekes & Beagrie, 2002). The multitude of generations will continue to exert influence on the future shape of the U.S. organization and on how organizations attempt to attract and retain employees (Weekes & Beagrie).

Gender has also had an impact on the U.S. workforce. As of 2004, 59% of the U.S. workforce was made up of women (BLS, 2005). In addition, women held 50% of management and professional positions and 33% of women in the workforce held college degrees (BLS). Further, there has been a growth in part-time work; 25% of working women held part time jobs or jobs with reduced schedules (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, 2002). Further, about two-thirds of women work part time by choice, even though 61% of part time jobs often received pro-rated health care and lower pay (Bond, et al.). Further, people working in job share positions, as well as other flexible work arrangements (e.g., compressed work week) still have career goals and want to grow and develop on the job (Polach, 2003). If job sharing is to be successful, learning and development on-the-job will be a critical area of focus.

Developing Intellectual Capital

In addition to retaining talent, Cooper and Spencer (2006) suggest there is an opportunity on the part of organizations to take advantage of the knowledge and skills of two people. Job sharing capitalizes on the notion of intellectual capital. Intellectual capital consists of human capital (people) and social capital (interaction of people). Knowledge that is shared between job share partners and others in the organization is a value-added dimension of a job sharing position. Further, the job share partners will share knowledge with each other, thus they will learn from each other while working together, which further increase each individual's value to the organization.

Human Resource Development (HRD) practitioners have an opportunity to develop and support the intellectual capital latent within the job share partnership. Specifically, those in job share partnerships will require development on-the-job in a way that integrates learning and practice. Learning and practice integration, in the context of job sharing, can be viewed as similar to communities of practice (CoPs).

Communities of Practice & Partners in Practice

CoPs are defined as groups of people who have similar goals and interests, and who employ shared practices and tools (Tu, 2004). Lave and Wenger (1991) originated the term CoPs and viewed it as a condition for sharing knowledge. CoPs share knowledge or group expertise through communication, including electronic forms of communication. CoPs integrate learning and practice as they work through processes such as cooperation, coordination and communication (Telematica, 2000). Further, CoPs create and share knowledge relevant to projects and goals (Lave & Wenger). Cooper and Spencer (2006) state that successful job share partnerships share knowledge and create new knowledge while solving problems on the job (Cooper & Spencer, 2006). In this light, job share partners can be viewed as Partners in Practice (PiPs). For the purpose of this paper, PiPs is used in place of the term, job share partners.

Studies have shown that success in learning on the job is determined by the degree of meaningful participation in work activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Scribner & Sachs, 1991; and Wenger, 1998). Greeno, Eckert, Stucky, Sachs, & Wenger (1999) support this and state, "learning involves becoming more successful in sustained participation in the practices of work..." (p. 4). In PiPs, where the activities are shared, are there implications for how learning and development is best supported? Does this suggest a need to integrate learning and practice as a developmental approach for working in PiPs?

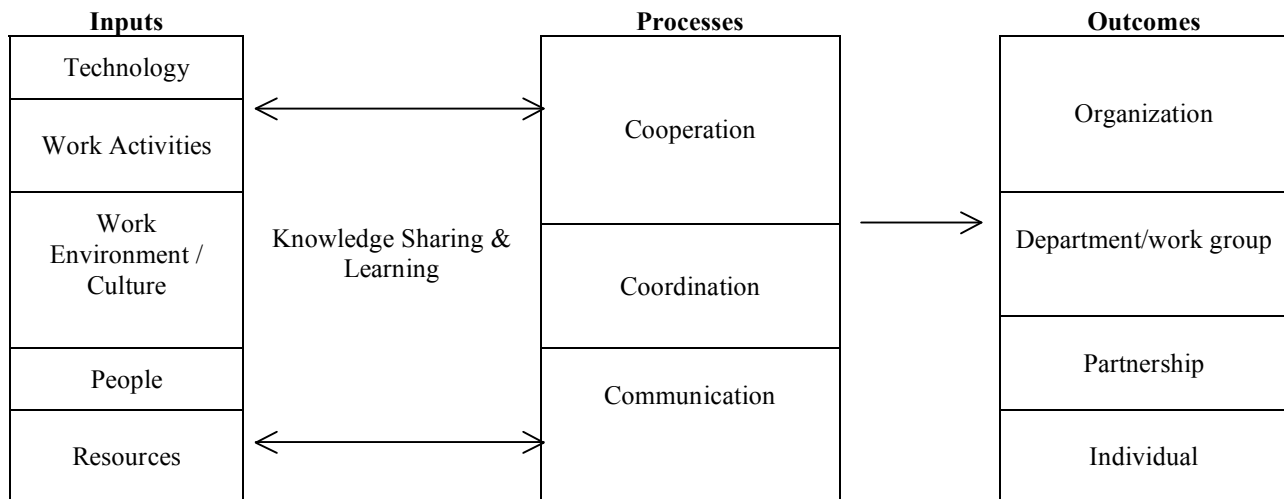
Greeno, et al., (1999) state, "engagement in a joint endeavor involves the construction of individual and community knowledge, both around activity and around the construction of a joint sense of the community" (p. 8). What can be surmised from this statement is that, within the context of learning and practice, there is interdependence between the individual and the community. Can the same be said for learning in the context of PiPs? Can we view learning and development, in the context of PiPs, as having similar principles as communities of practice? In order to understand how PiPs learn and participate fully at work, can we learn from the perspective of individuals learning and participating as part of CoPs? With regard to CoPs, it is essential to consider the conditions in which they have opportunities to learn (Greeno, et al., 1999). According to Greeno, et al., learning in CoPs includes:

....finding out who is knowledgeable about what and knowing how to interact productively with them; and informing activities by finding, interpreting, and using documents, data bases, and other sources of information. An assumption is that success in work activities depends mainly on skills that can be acquired by individuals prior to their employment, given appropriate levels of motivation, and individual potential for learning and training. Analyses of work activity show that learning usually depends on generative abilities to understand situations and solve problems that emerge in activity. (p. 8).

Can it be said that the same holds true for PiPs? In order to explore this notion, a model (Telematica, 2000), which was originally designed to describe the integration of learning and practice in Communities of Practice (CoPs), has been modified and presented below in order to examine the integration of learning and practice for PiPs (Figure 1).

Integration of Learning and Practice in PiPs

The model below depicts successful integration of learning and practice by outlining the inputs, processes, and outcomes derived through PiPs. While the model suggests linearity, in reality the ability to achieve success is not linear. However, for the purposes of this paper, the simplicity of the model will be used to suggest how the integration of learning and practice, originally designed for CoPs, may apply to PiPs.



Source: Group Interaction Model © Telematica Instituut. Delft University of Technology. Copyright © 2000.

Figure 1. Integration of Learning and Practice Model

Inputs

Inputs include technology, or the ICT available to PiPs. Examples include email, instant messaging, and portable digital assistants (PDAs), such as Blackberries. Other inputs include work activities for which the PiPs have shared accountability. The work environment in the work group or department, and the culture of the organization also provide a lens through which information and actions are filtered. This includes working norms, values, and shared attitudes on the part of the employees. In addition, the people in the work group and organization are viewed as inputs. People include management, individuals in the PiPs, co-workers, and internal suppliers and clients. All of these people bring specific competencies, motives, and personalities to the workplace. Further, the individuals who make up the PiPs make an effort to build and maintain a trusting relationship. Similar work styles and compatibility are critical to the success of the partnership. Finally, resources, such as access to information in databases, subject matter experts and documents are inputs that drive the processes involved in PiPs.

Processes

Work processes include cooperation, both between the PiPs, and with other organizational stakeholders such as co-workers, management, internal suppliers and clients. In addition, coordination of work and sharing the duties can be organized temporally or functionally (Lewis, 2001). If organizing the work by dividing time, the pair may work different part-time schedules each week, or alternate the number of hours worked on a monthly basis. Tasks and duties are shared. Where one person leaves off, the other will need to finish. Duties organized functionally consist of the pair taking responsibility for separate tasks. Regardless of how a work plan is executed, work coordination requires a high proficiency in communication skills and access to a variety of communication tools.

There are three primary aspects to communication that enable success in a job share partnership: (a) information sharing between partners, (b) communication with organizational stakeholders (e.g., co-workers, management, clients), and (c) feedback regarding performance. Communication must be managed between the partners so that the coordination of work is transparent and seamless. The pair must know when and what kind of information the other partner will need at any given time. Using a web portal, e-mail, voicemail, daily logs, and maintaining copies of correspondence and meeting minutes will facilitate communication. Further, holding regular update meetings via phone, instant messenger, or face to face is essential for coordination of work, and will help to facilitate relationship building.

Communication with co-workers, management, and clients requires that the pair is providing consistent information and reducing the potential of variations in the messages. Consistency is achieved by ensuring copious notes are completed in a daily log, information and documents are shared between the pair in a timely manner, gaining access to the partner who is not working (i.e., agreeing it is ok to contact the other in cases where clarification is needed), and creating “scripts” for messages that are common in the position. For example, the pair may agree on a script to use when a coworker asks a follow up question to one of the job share partners from a prior interaction they had with the other partner. If the answer to the question is not known, the script may sound like, “I want to make sure I give you accurate information, so I will research it and call you back within the hour.” Scripts lend credibility and consistency to the messages communicated to internal stakeholders.

Knowledge Sharing & Learning

Knowledge sharing and learning is occurring as a dynamic interaction between the input and the work processes. For example, coordinating work activities in PiPs that share the tasks (split their time) involves constant collecting and sharing knowledge within the partnership as well as with other stakeholders. Through the effective execution of inputs, all work processes lead to achievement of outcomes at four levels: individual (e.g., job satisfaction), the partnership (e.g., relationship), achievement of department or work group objectives, and finally achievement of organizational objectives.

The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that integration of learning and practice, in the context of PiPs, may be similar to that of CoPs. However, there is a dearth of information on learning that takes place within PiPs. Given the similarities in how learning and practice are integrated in CoPs and PiPs, can the model presented in figure 1 be further developed and utilized to ensure successful implementation of PiPs in organizations? If so, how does the integration of learning and practice impact the overall effectiveness of PiPs? In other words, does the deliberate integration of learning and practice influence a PiP’s ability to be high performing?

Conclusion

There is a dearth of information on learning and practice-based development, which supports job share partnerships in organizations. At the same time, there are emerging theories and models being developed to support the integration of learning and practice within communities of practice (CoPs). By exploring the similarities and comparable needs in terms of learning and practice between PiPs and CoPs, HRD practitioners will gain insight into how to support the successful implementation and maintenance of job sharing. In addition, HRD practitioners can use the knowledge gained to engage management in reflective and critical discussions regarding the inputs and processes required to sustain job sharing. Further, HRD practitioners will support the development of intellectual capital within the organization by taking advantage of the knowledge and experience of two people serving the capacity of one position.

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