

Enabling virtual communities of practice. A study of Swedish-Indian collaboration

Minna Salminen-Karlsson

Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

This paper uses the 'communities of practice' and 'situated learning' (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger, 1998) approach to understand knowledge building in transnational collaborations in ICT development. It is based on around 70 interviews in two companies where offshoring of qualified IT work from Sweden to India is done in virtual teams. The aim was to see whether the communities of practice approach can be applicable to work which transcends the limitations of distance and engages employees with vastly different cultural and educational backgrounds, such as in Sweden and India.

A basic prerequisite is an aim to create a community consisting of both Swedish and Indian employees, for example expressed by the transnational team having one team leader, responsible for both offshore and onsite employees. However, a community of practice cannot be created, but needs to evolve, and learning only happens when the old-timers accept the newcomers as members of the community, peripheral in the beginning but on a trajectory to become full members.

In offshoring relations this is often disturbed by the resistance of the onshore employees to offshoring as a phenomenon. Prejudices about foreign cultures may play a part as well as detecting that the cultural and educational differences actually are large.

The life of the community of practice evolves through two processes: participation and reification. Participation refers to interaction with one's colleagues, and in ordinary teams it is affected by who is included in and excluded from different interactions. In virtual teams, access to and use of communication technology is crucial for enabling the participation of all members of the team. Language problems can obstruct participation in Swedish-Indian virtual teams. The concept participation also covers the everyday talk that establishes the members as not only carriers of professional knowledge but also human beings for each other. Giving space to this kind of talk is essential for situated learning in virtual teams. Reification refers to codifying the life of the community in artifacts, often in documents - in IT work the products and all the documentation around them, as well as other documents which concern the life of the community. Documentation plays different roles in Swedish and Indian IT organizations, and this complicates the creation of a community of practice and situated learning.

However, with evidence from different teams, the results of the study show that these obstacles can be, if not removed, at least moved to different degrees. When this happens, the Indian newcomers not only learn about the technology, but different kinds of organizational learning also takes place. The paper discusses the possibilities and limitations of the situated learning approach to study learning in transnational virtual teams.