

Documents and Communities of Practice in Business

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Business Communities of Practice (COP) working on a defined, regularly repeating project organize documents in a way that permit the team to retrieve the documents for continued work on the project. The document organization is normally not made explicit even among the team—there may be a "housekeeper" or a "policeman"—usually self-appointed due to budget exigencies—who ensures documents are properly handled. By investigating the various COP teams within a project-based organization such as a law firm, an architecture or accounting firm, or a commercial loan company, using interviews, the organization of documents can be clearly articulated. That organization can then be used to: create proprietary business processes, ensure security, privacy and confidentiality, ensure appropriate controls on draft, version, signature, and copies, and protect vital records.

The records management process, used to determine what will work for people actually creating, receiving, and using the documents, is markedly different from methods currently popular within Information Science, namely, the study of “genres.” The primary difference is that the latter are “emic” and the former “etic,” meaning that “genre” studies examines the literature of business documents from the outside, whereas records management, a business practice extending back more than 100 years, works primarily within the confines of the users needs.

The “etic” element of records management, the knowledge brought in rather than discovered include standard consulting techniques such as running a project, interview and communication skills. That knowledge also includes a rudimentary understanding of the document architectures within the COP as well as a strong knowledge of the potential file structures, the Document for Action, and the processes used to create the document as well as the “file.”

The goal of every activity in records management is to make the documents, the file structure, and the processes meaningful for the COP. This is in stark contrast to the method of “genre” studies, where relevance, such as Bhatia’s strong correlation between product introductions and resume cover letters, is questionable for the participants.