

# CHAPTER 1

## Your Organization Is Not “The Web”

*The people who built Silicon Valley were engineers. They learned business, they learned a lot of different things, but they had a real belief that humans, if they worked hard with other creative, smart people, could solve most of humankind's problems. I believe that very much.*

Steve Jobs (1955-2011), late Apple CEO, *Wired Magazine*, 1996

### TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

Most of the terms needed to understand this book are explained alongside discussions of surrounding concepts; however, there are a few terms that are worth spending a bit more time on to make sure there is a common understanding. At the time of this writing, there is a lot of hype surrounding *social media*, and I expect it to be high on the agenda in many organizations for a little while longer. But with so many parties using the term, there is often a range of different understandings and definitions.

*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines social media as:

forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create

online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos).<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of this book, *organizational social media* should be understood as the collection of tools and processes that support social interaction within any type of private or public organization. Social media tools can come as separate applications (e.g., chat, wikis, social book-marking, blogs) or in a more integrated networking platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr). The term that seems to be catching on when specifically describing networking platforms in organizations is *enterprise social network (ESN)*. Since I will focus on launching those types of platforms, I will use that term accordingly.

A few more words in regards to the term *social*. Why are these new technologies called “social,” whereas earlier technologies that also helped people interact (e.g., email, telephone) are not? The difference is in the focus on the lasting social connection. Email lets you interact and engage, but what social media tools and platforms add is a more permanent link between people. A follower relationship on Twitter, a friendship on Facebook, or a connection on LinkedIn, represent more permanent connections that go beyond exchanging information to say, “We have a relationship.”

It is also typical for social media relationships to be kept outside of the participants’ private spheres. The data as well as the relationship link is not kept in your own playpen but in a system outside of it. Nevertheless everybody owns their data themselves. Today’s social networks are different than those that existed in the days of cell phone contact lists because they are actively managed by their participants and can be used to create content and digital cultures. Connections are not built by simply transmitting personal data; they work on a deeper level to include all the defining elements of people as social beings. While people in our network manage their actual social lives, by simply connecting to them we can get very easy access to what is happening in their environment. That makes it quite similar to interacting with friends in real life, where we learn about a wide range of events in their lives by talking with, listening to, and seeing each other. One good example of similar effects in the social media world can be seen on LinkedIn, a business social media network. Users manage simple, individual links between

people. These social media connections replace all those business card collections, phone books, email contact lists, and so forth. The beauty of LinkedIn is that a link can stay current even if a person moves from one city, country, or company to another. She simply updates her data in one single place and everyone in her network will have access to her latest phone number, job description, website, email, and mailing address instantly. This resolves the issue of outdated data that existed with managing traditional social networks.

This same principle is also used in syndication methods. You might have heard of RSS feeds, which are basically streams of headlines that use a standard format to syndicate (or disseminate) web content that is frequently updated. RSS was originally an abbreviation for RDF site summary, though it also is commonly called Really Simple Syndication. The simplicity lies in the way that you can leverage content from one place to another on the web.

The word *network* is also used in many different ways, often as a synonym for *web*. Simply put, a network is the infrastructure that power or data moves on. Networking is a verb that we use to describe how we build a collection of connections to other people—people that we have some type of social interaction with. In many cases, social networks are between those with the *potential* to interact, as one person might link to another so that if he ever needed anything from that person in the future he could act on that link. In this definition, social networks are not really new—but the way we can manage those networks across the globe, creating relationships with a single click, is dramatically different and a lot more powerful. Interestingly (and I am not sure if Facebook did this on purpose), the metaphors we use evoke Stone-Age communications; we write on somebody else's wall to leave a message, as prehistoric humans may have done 50,000 years ago when they found a friend's cave empty but did not have time to wait for his return.

In the preface, I talked about the fact that I prefer the term *knowledge flow management (KFM)* over *knowledge management (KM)*, as it more exactly describes what we can and cannot do with it (i.e., manage knowledge that is in people's head). For a complete discussion of the differences between KM and KFM, and how to enable knowledge flow in organizations, I would like to refer you to my earlier book,

*Mastering Organizational Knowledge Flow: How to Make Knowledge Sharing Work.*<sup>2</sup> (A free download of Chapter 1 is available for on the book's website, [masterknowledgeflow.ch](http://masterknowledgeflow.ch).)

As mentioned, I will not go into deep detail on the different social media tools are out there, as you can easily get that somewhere else. But there are a few terms I want to make sure you have a solid understanding of before you read on. One of those more important terms (mentioned briefly in the preface) is a *tag*. A tag is similar to a label that might be used to identify a piece of merchandise. In social media terms, it is basically a word that you use to describe a piece of information. You could also call it *metadata*, as it is data about data. However, tags have taken on an even more central role in some social media platforms, and to understand the power of them in that sense is an important part of understanding the power of social media in general. Good examples of this are the hashtags, which are denoted using the octothorpe (#) and followed by whatever word the user wants to identify.

Users of Twitter, the microblogging service, rely on hashtags extensively. On Twitter, people communicate via messages of 140 characters or less. As part of those 140 characters, users tag certain terms with hashtags to provide more context without taking up space. For instance, someone tweeting about social media could use #social-media in a message to indicate that they wish to be part of a larger social discussion about the topic. Once a word or phrase (without spaces) is tagged with the #, it is easy for other users to track, find, and connect with related tweets, posts, links, and content. It also facilitates trend following within a particular network, time period, or community.

The interesting part about tags, and what might seem a little odd at first, is that anyone can make one up. After a while, communities drift toward a common hashtag language, either by explicitly established rules or through a more organic fashion. For instance, when we talked about the juggling convention in Paris this month (yes, I'm also a juggler), participants agreed to use #juglparis2012. On a more organic level, if 90 percent of tweets use the tag #kfm to talk about knowledge flow management, it is a good bet that I will follow suit when I tweet about the topic. It is amazing how quickly this process can happen. People want their tweets to be read and see that others are filtering on certain hashtags, so sometimes a tagging convention will be adopted

within minutes. For example, see what happens on Twitter only minutes after some big catastrophe (like an earthquake or tsunami). There might be more than one tag used at first, but very quickly there won't be more than a couple that carry most of the key messages. It is linguistic evolution under a time-lapse camera.

Another way that tags often get pushed is through so-called *tag-clouds*. Tag-clouds are visual tools that show which words are trending in popularity. They are depicted as word collections or clusters where different words appear in different sizes—and sometimes even emphasized using boldface—to show which words are currently generating the most buzz within a particular community. By selecting a word in a tag-cloud, you can view a collection of content in which that particular word has been tagged.

What makes tags so powerful is the way that they can define a virtual context for content without having to draw a fixed link between bits of information themselves. There is no real limit to the number of relationship dimensions being created, and these can change and evolve with extreme speed, especially when compared to fixed taxonomies. I will go more into the power of tags and tagging in later chapters.

For completeness, here are a few more details on blogs and microblogs. *Blog* (short for *weblog*) is a web-based platform that houses content that is created through chunks of text, video, images, and audio that is posted at different time periods. Each entry is usually referred to as a *post*. Blog posts are typically around half a page, but can be longer or shorter as well. The timeline is the key in navigating blogs; usually the latest entry is shown at the top and, as readers scroll down, they can view previous posts. Very old entries are archived away to keep the visible content manageable in size, but they are often accessible through archive browsing and keyword search features.

Twitter is considered a *microblogging* platform, and the shortness of the posts (140 characters or less) means that users create a lot more posts, making the overall platform itself more dynamic. The size limit of tweets is the platform's key feature, and what sets it apart from other social networking sites. While at first one may think it presents a rather large limitation, many Twitter users find that disciplining themselves to stick to 140 characters or less means their posts pack more punch. In addition, users can include a link to an article or blog post that

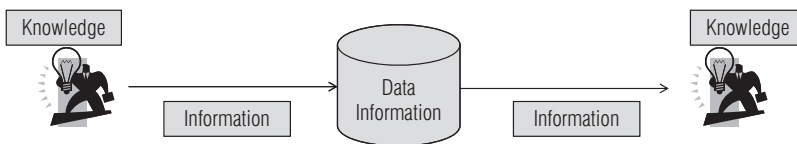
elaborates on a tweet. And to prevent using up too many characters on a single link, one can use a so-called URL shortener (e.g., Bitly, TinyURL, goo.gl) to encode a long URL as a very short one that might not be as readable but will work just as well. URL shorteners are used on many other social media platforms including ESNs, since long URLs may not only eat up valuable characters, but also make text less readable.

## FROM DOCUMENTS TO FLOWS

Over the years I have changed my view on knowledge management and arrived at the notion of knowledge flows. I am convinced that *knowledge* is what exists in people's heads, but once it leaves their heads through speech or other content creation, it becomes *information* that needs to be absorbed and integrated with experience to create new knowledge.

This shift was mainly a result of learning from failed KM initiatives that focused primarily on trying to capture knowledge in documents. In those storage models, technology played the central role, but to develop a successful KM strategy, humans must be responsible for that central role. So I widened my view from managing knowledge to managing the flow of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge can flow as people exchange information that will be used to create new knowledge at the receiving end (see Exhibit 1.1).

There are a number of other ways that knowledge can flow other than providing information via documents. Good examples include apprenticeships, discussions, stories, videos, and many more. The key is that links are created along which the knowledge can flow, and any barriers that hinder that flow (e.g., missing trust, spatial separation, or insufficient priority for knowledge-sharing activities) be reduced to a minimum.



**Exhibit 1.1** Knowledge Flow via Information

Documents can still play an important role, but very often in our dynamically changing organizations we do not always have the time or luxury to create full documentation at the same speed that topics and conditions change. In case there is the time to create proper high-quality documentation, it can be the best and most useful way to store and share information. However, it is dangerous to think that organizations can be agile and swift enough to rely on timely documentation alone. As a result, it is worthwhile to explore other ways in which knowledge can flow, and social media falls into that category.

In the last couple of years I have seen a definite trend among knowledge management experts toward using the knowledge flow paradigm.<sup>4</sup> The approach seems to resonate and, when you look at what happens via social media tools, the notion of flow seems to fit very well. It is often undirected, but can be guided, and it can be hindered or blocked by barriers.

## **SOCIAL SIDE OF KNOWLEDGE FLOWS**

One day in February 2011, only a couple of weeks after launching The Hub,<sup>5</sup> the SAS Enterprise Social Network, I was working from home and wanted to do some work via our virtual private network (VPN)—which is the way that we connect from a home computer to the SAS internal network—but when I started the VPN, it failed. The night before I had installed the latest release of the operating system from Apple (OS X) onto my iMac, and I suspected that had changed something.

Luckily, I had also brought my laptop home and that connected to the VPN just fine. But I wanted to resolve the problem, as I often prefer to leave my laptop in the office and use my personal iMac from home. At first I scanned the external web for a solution, but did not find anything about my specific issue. I tried a few tips that I found online, but none of them helped. Next, I sent a help desk request to our internal IT operation. And finally, I posted a question via the status box in my Hub profile, asking if anyone else had installed the new Apple OS X and found a way to get the VPN working again.

Here is what happened: The IT help desk request was routed to the proper person and about three hours later it was being routed

to the group that would have a look at it, once its turn came in the queue. (Since my request was not mission critical, I had not set it to the highest priority.) My post on The Hub was answered within 30 minutes, with detailed, easy-to-follow instructions about how the VPN worked under the new version of OS X, and where to download the necessary native VPN files to fix the problem. That by itself was a big value, but what really made this answer special was that on top of the first reply pointing out the solution, there were another two replies from colleagues that confirmed that they had used the described method successfully and quickly.

This interaction demonstrates what social media is all about at its core. Through The Hub I received not only a fast solution, but also confirmation from the community on the value of the answer. This built a high level of trust into the answer. It did not hurt that one of the confirmation comments came from a person I know, but even if I had not known him, the comments would still have had their trust-building effect.

Humans are a social species, which means usually we like to interact. For most people, sharing knowledge within the right, trustworthy environment is a positive experience. My experience on The Hub was based on stories from people I trusted who had successfully resolved the same problem I was tackling. Stories are an important element for knowledge flows, but in larger organizations, face-to-face interaction is not always possible, so the stories that transport knowledge in a small environment have to be shared differently in a large environment. That is a challenge that once seemed to indicate a key limitation of digital knowledge sharing, but the participative functions of Web 2.0 provided a whole range of ways for people to interact on a daily basis—not only between different sites in the same company, but also across organizations, between individuals, and across major cultural and geographic borders.

Let us look for a moment at how social media has led to flows of knowledge between individuals across the globe that do not know each other. Where did the trust that is necessary for these interactions come from? Part of it is that information exchanges are often very specific and fairly risk-free. For example, if I want to buy a book on the Internet and rely on recommendations from two or three strangers,



I am not taking a big risk. Over time, and by basing judgment on a critical mass of input, trust rises so that those consumer reviews on Amazon are actually of value for my decision.<sup>6</sup> The majority of people commenting on products, hotel rooms, or services intend to share something of value. They are also able to see the value of the collaborative contributions of the crowd unfold.

Another aspect of social media is the important role that teams and communities play in today's work environments. In any type of knowledge work on complex issues, pulling together different minds or splitting tasks into sensible chunks and combining the results in a smart way is essential. Teamwork is not a new concept; but, especially in dispersed, global organizations, teams are increasingly starting to meet virtually. These virtual teams need a portfolio of tools that can help them mimic real face-to-face communication. So far, not many virtual interactions can really compete with face-to-face interactions, but quality is improving. As long as teams combine virtual meetings with regular face-to-face interactions, collaboration will be effective. A quick video discussion transfers a lot more signals than just a phone discussion, for example.

What role can a social media platform play in helping virtual teams? First of all, it can provide a general meeting place that anyone in an organization can usually get to very easily. So, just like anyone else, teams can agree to meet there to create groups (open or private ones) and organize themselves (around topics or projects). But teams usually do not operate in complete isolation either; they have other parties that they interact with to fulfill their tasks. An ESN provides some very good ways to enable this type of connection. The way that conversations are held on an ESN is usually a lot more visible, especially with the history of arguments and counter-arguments. While this history does usually not go back for years, it does document recent discussions very well for all team members to see and learn from. As a result, learning and decision-making are often faster with more participants—either those that are part of the team or others preliminary to the team.

Later in the book, I will discuss the difference between groups in an ESN and communities of practice (CoPs). Just a few words here on teams and CoPs.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, teams are usually defined entities with a fairly specific membership and project outline. Communities and CoPs,

on the other hand, are usually more fluid—members come and go more flexibly and the focus of discussed topics might change over time with the interest of the community members. With this flexibility, communities often benefit from virtual elements, and the potential target member audience could be a lot bigger than that for a normal team.

The flow of membership and topics in a CoP also needs to provide simple ways for people to join and leave based on self-interest and not (as it is often in teams) due to managerial decision to build a certain team. Depending on the topic, it could also be that certain groups that start out as virtual predefined teams exist later as CoPs. All those aspects of dynamic movement are well supported using a social media platform.

Formal documentation is one element of team communication that will continue to have some importance, but at the same time, ad-hoc discussions, question-and-answer exchanges, and highlights of relevant information have always been an important part of face-to-face communication. With the help of social media the more direct engagements are becoming an ongoing available way of interaction that can be used even if team members are in remote locations.

## **KFM VERSUS SOCIAL MEDIA**

In the preface I talked about the importance of knowledge flows and the management of them. So how does knowledge flow management relate to social media?

Social media is basically a collection of tools and the associated processes to use them. Those processes might be outlined and documented, but very often, they are just understood and resemble shared beliefs in the community using the social media tool or platform. One example is the flexible usage of hashtags, which we discussed earlier in this chapter.

Tags do not represent a predefined taxonomy so much as a folksonomy, where anyone can create and spread a new hashtag. You might be able to trace who has used the tag for the first time, but in the end it does not really matter. It matters more who and how many in the community are using it to describe a common context or term.

The ideas of KFM that I outlined in my first book<sup>8</sup> still apply when using technologies like those usually referred to when we talk about

social media. But social media itself is not KM or KFM, for that matter. It is a supporting element of reducing barriers that would otherwise hinder the flow of knowledge in an organization.

By providing another distributed network channel, social media tools, if used properly, support better knowledge flows. By making it easy to participate and share, social media empowers a wide range of people in an organization to contribute, including those that might be hesitant to participate in more complicated knowledge-sharing efforts (like contributing to a knowledge base in a more structured way).

As a result, social media tools in general, and an ESN specifically, can reduce the number of barriers that might hinder the flow. Typical barriers that can be reduced are:

- Missing trust
- Lack of connectivity
- Regional and divisional borders (e.g., geographic, based on politics or siloed thinking)
- Awareness of what is going on in diverse communities
- Not-invented-here syndrome (i.e., resisting products and ideas from others)

A successful KFM initiative relies on many aspects that go beyond a social media platform, most of all a supporting and driving team that provides strategy and guidance on an ongoing basis, as well as engaged and motivated users. These do not necessarily come with the technology alone. Similar to other KFM initiatives, one driven by social media will need marketing activities to sell the benefits and make sure a critical mass of users start using the platform in a way that provides ongoing business value to them.

Additionally, users will require some training beyond the technical functionality. Equally important is training on how to use the platform efficiently, whether contributing or using things provided by others.

## **CASE STUDY 1: THE HUB (SAS)**

A number of the lessons and observations laid out in the book are based on a couple of case studies that I was fortunate enough to observe.

For the first, I was closely involved, and able to watch every detail of the process unfold; for the second, I was more remote (geographically and organizationally), but still derived valuable insights from the case.

The first case study is The Hub. The Hub is the ESN that SAS launched in 2011 to support its global staff. It offers the key features that people are used to finding on external social media platforms, including:

- Posting messages and comments to other users' posts.
- Evaluating posts by using a "like" button.
- Following other users to subscribe to their stream of posts.
- Sharing links, photographs, and other documents.
- Creating groups and joining those created by others.
- Providing features in a central environment so that others can follow conversations.
- Creating and using descriptive words (tags) to categorize posts and content on the fly.

In order to give some perspective on the case, I will describe the background and environment this ESN was launched into. SAS, a global leader in business analytics software and services, is a privately held software company that employed approximately 12,000 employees in 53 countries at the time The Hub was launched. It is an organization with a considerable number of technically oriented staff and a large group of developers. In 2011, about 24 percent of revenue was spent on research and development (R&D), and total revenue during that year was \$2.725 billion.

Social media and Web 2.0 tools had been in use by employees at SAS since 2005, starting with blogs and wikis, followed by an internal Twitter platform and a social bookmarking site. Upper-management's acceptance of internal employee use of those tools was a process that took time. As in many other organizations, the first reactions, at least by some managers, were cautious. However, it did not take long until some key executives understood the potential and started embracing widespread social media usage.

At the same time, the organization opened up to allow staff to use external platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms,

as long as there was some business benefit to doing so during business hours. The next step was the formation of committees to look more specifically at how to use those tools for extending engagement with customers and prospects.

Based on some benchmarking and lessons learned from other organizations, the shift to a more active role in using social media started to speed up towards the end of 2008, when SAS hired a full-time social media manager to guide activities. The focus was primarily on guiding employees' activities external to SAS; however, since there is overlap on internal and external usage, the social media manager played a role in guiding purely internal activities as well.

Internally, social media was pushed by a range of groups including the web group, R&D, communications and marketing professionals, and last but not least the knowledge office, including me. Apart from some dedicated drivers, a community of users (most of them also experienced on an external level) started to adopt and evangelize the tools as well.

As a result, a number of social media tools were available and in use within SAS. Not all of them were as widely spread as blogs (currently there are 900, of which 700 are active), but they usually had a fairly good-sized user base across multiple countries. In 2010 it became apparent that certain tools were overlapping in their focus and features, and others lacked some integration. As a result, global communications decided to launch an initiative to look into providing the global SAS user base with an internal social media platform that would integrate some of the most common social media communication tools into one common system. The actual planning was done by a relatively large project team consisting of a wide range of divisions and departments and, as a result, in January 2011 The Hub was launched (see Exhibit 1.2).

Adoption of the new platform was very good, and within a week more than 1,000 SAS employees were using it, which grew into almost 3,000 over the next month. After one year, the adoption rate was greater than 65 percent, and for many it has become one of the key communication tools within SAS. It is used to ask questions and share links, findings, quotes, and tips. It is used during webcasts to ask presenters questions and discuss answers long after the actual presentation is over.



**Exhibit 1.2** The Hub at SAS Source: © SAS

Some events are hosted directly on The Hub like a semiannual innovation day that brings together thousands of staff to share their ideas over a fixed timeframe.

Feedback on the platform over the first year has been very positive. Users are especially impressed by how fast they often get answers to questions, and from the wide range of other employees that they would have never thought about contacting. The divisions that are leading activity are research and development (31 percent), marketing (22 percent), and consulting (12.5 percent), with marketing recently showing the highest growth rates. The individuals in those divisions clearly show cross-communication that did not commonly exist before The Hub. We can already say that collaboration between those organizational entities has increased, which also leads to an even more direct flow of knowledge between the producing, marketing, and implementation arms within the company.

The team that launched The Hub was actually surprised by the widespread adoption, which turned out to be about twice as high as what they had hoped they could reach for the first year.

## CASE STUDY 2: REDNET (RED VENTURES)

The second case study concerned a platform that was started at the beginning of 2012. The company that launched it is called Red Ventures and their ESN is called RedNet. Red Ventures is an innovative direct marketing company based in Fort Mill, South Carolina (just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina). When they started the initiative they had about 1,200 employees. The company was founded in 2000 and is therefore a considerably younger company than SAS (founded in 1976).

I learned about Red Venture's plans to launch an ESN in the fall of 2011 during a site visit to their amazing campus and through regular conversations with one of the key drivers of the initiative. I was able to offer some advice and also learn from their experiences launching it.

The initiative was fully supported by the CEO, Ric Elias, who specifically wanted it to be launched to everyone, but in stages. One of the key motivations was to bridge some communication gaps between different campus buildings at their headquarters, but RedNet very quickly offered a lot more than just additional communication channels (see Exhibit 1.3).

One difference in the way the initiative got off the ground at Red Ventures as opposed to SAS was a more careful launch with a pilot group of about 30 users (opposed to the viral spread at SAS). Red Ventures asked 100 people if they would be willing to participate and out of those they selected 30 that represented a good mix for the pilot.

A common element between the SAS and Red Ventures cases was the great excitement of the teams leading the effort (in both cases the effort was sponsored by corporate communications). This positive attitude going into the launch in itself can be seen as a key success factor.

The two companies do have a couple of other things in common, too. They are both known for their employee focus and have been repeatedly acknowledged for their award-winning culture. SAS has been *Fortune* magazine's number-one company to work for in America in 2010 and 2011 (as well as placing in the top 20 several times and also winning similar awards in other countries around the world). Red Ventures won "Charlotte's Best Places to Work for" number-one spot in 2010 and 2011. Agility and speed are high on both companies'



Exhibit 1.3 RedNet at Red Ventures Source: Copyright 2012, Red Ventures

radars, and collaboration and communication are drivers for the type of organizations that make it to those top spots.

The question one might ask, of course, is whether the social media efforts succeeded because these companies have a good and open culture, or because activities similar to deploying social media platforms helped build this great culture.

Both aspects likely play a role. In any case, it should not discourage any organization that does not currently have such an acclaimed culture from looking for ways to open up and go that direction. Deploying a social media platform is a lot about trust and trusting employees to do the right things. While it might be more challenging to go there, it might just be one of those initiatives that help improve



the culture, if done properly. Why not learn from those organizations that are acknowledged for their culture, and at the same time do exceptionally well business-wise over an extended period of time? Red Ventures and SAS definitely fit into that category.

## NOTES

1. *Merriam-Webster's* (online version), “social media.” Available at: [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media), accessed May 29, 2012.
2. Frank Leistner, *Mastering Organizational Knowledge Flow: How to Make Knowledge Sharing Work* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 183.
3. *Ibid.*, Chapter 1.
4. See Carla O’Dell, presentation from KMWorld 2011 conference, November 2, 2011.
5. For more on “The Hub” see the case study on page 11.
6. It can be debated however if that trust is always justified, as there is a tendency to misuse the system. Websites that use evaluation often try to counter this by adding additional levels like “how useful did you find that comment/rating” or creating a rating of the rater system (like eBay).
7. There are some very good books on the nature of CoPs from Etienne Wenger, one of the fathers of CoPs. Refer to the reading list in Appendix B at the end of the book for more information or just search for Etienne on your favorite book order site.
8. Leistner, *Mastering Organizational Knowledge Flow*.

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