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Communities of Practice as Enablers of Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Competitive Strategy

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a strategic enabler of exploration and exploitation in influencing competitive strategy and maintaining firm competitive advantage. This paper also conceptualizes, how CoPs as informal, facilitate and serve as crucial micro-foundations for both the creation of new knowledge (exploration) and the refinement of existing knowledge (exploitation). While prior researches and studies have emphasized the tension between exploration and exploitation—often referred to as organizational ambidexterity—this study argues that CoPs provide an enabler that helps organizations balance this duality. Using a qualitative literature review, this proposed paper synthesizes studies on CoPs, organizational learning, and ambidexterity to develop an integrative conceptual framework. The findings highlight how CoPs enhance exploratory capabilities by fostering innovation, and learning, while simultaneously strengthening exploitative capabilities by refining, and applying exixting knowledge, for contributing to sustained competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments. This study contributes to the strategic management literature by positioning CoPs as fundamental underlying drivers that allow organizations to balance exploring new opportunities and exploiting existing capabilities.

Keywords: Communities of Practices, Ambidexterity, Exploration and Exploitation, Competitive Advantage, Organizational Competitive

1. Introduction

Recently, the business environment world becomes more dynamic, caused by rapid technological change, globalization, and intensifying competition. Under such circumstances, achieving and maintaining competitive advantage is no longer solely dependent on the possession of valuable resources, but rather on the organization's ability to continuously learn, adapt, and innovate (Dukhaykh & Alangri, 2026) [7].

This has shifted scholarly attention toward knowledge as a critical strategic asset, as emphasized in the Knowledge-Based View (Arjoun & Boudabbous, 2024) [2], which posits that the creation, integration, and application of knowledge are central to firm performance, and Dynamic capabilities, coined by David Teece, as a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments, (Cavusgil & Deligonul, 2024) [4].

Actually, as the systematic process of creating, organizing, sharing, and utilizing knowledge, the knowledge management can play as intellectual assets to enhance organizational performance and productivity and bridges the gap to enable faster decision-making, and innovation. As well, the context of dynamic capabilities providing useful lens for understanding how firms integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments. However, those two lens highlight *what* organizations need to achieve, less attention has been given to *how* these capabilities are enacted at the micro level (Mushangai, 2023) [14]. Specifically, there is a growing need to explore the social and organizational mechanisms that facilitate the balance between exploration and exploitation in practice (Cavusgil & Deligonul, 2024) [4].

A fundamental challenge within these two knowledge-driven paradigms is how to manage the tension between knowledge exploration and knowledge exploitation. Knowledge exploration refers to activities associated with experimentation, flexibility, innovation, and the pursuit of new knowledge, while knowledge exploitation focuses on the refinement, efficiency, production and the implementation of existing knowledge (Stettner *et al*., 2014) [2]. This duality, often conceptualized as

organizational ambidexterity, is indeed critical for long-term success but inherently difficult to balance (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013) [16].

Excessive focus on exploration, like searching for new knowledge and innovations, may lead to inefficiencies and failure to capitalize on existing competencies and lead to high costs and low efficiency (Nyman, 2024) [15]. Conversely, overemphasis on exploitation, like maximizing current competencies and knowlledge can lead to strategic inertia and failure to adapt to environmental change. Consequently, organizations must develop mechanisms that enable them to simultaneously pursue both dimensions (Nyman, 2024) [15].

One of the mechanisms that can overcome the balancing process between exploration and exploitation of knowledge, namely Communities of Practice (CoPs). It is recognized as critical mechanisms for balancing the exploration (creating new knowledge) and exploitation (using existing knowledge) of knowledge within organizations, and contributing to organizational ambidexterity. They act as a bridge between formal, hierarchical structures and informal, creative networks (Haas *et al*., 2025) [10].

CoPs are informal, self-organizing groups of individuals who share a common interest, expertise, or practice and engage in collective learning through regular interaction (Ostermann, 2015) [17]. Unlike formal organizational structures, CoPs operate through trust, shared identity, and mutual engagement, making them particularly effective in fostering knowledge exchange and learning. They serve as platforms for both the generation of novel ideas and the dissemination of established practices, thereby bridging the gap between exploration and exploitation.

Despite the recognized importance of CoPs in knowledge management and organizational learning, their strategic role in enabling exploration–exploitation balance remains underexplored. Existing studies have largely examined CoPs in isolation, focusing either on their role in knowledge sharing or innovation, without fully integrating these functions into a broader strategic framework (Ostermann, 2015) [17]. As a result, there is limited understanding of how CoPs contribute to competitive strategy and firm-level performance through the simultaneous development of exploratory and exploitative capabilities.

This study seeks to address this gap by conceptualizing CoPs as critical enablers of exploration and exploitation within competitive strategy. By synthesizing insights from organizational learning, knowledge management, and strategic management literature, this paper develops an integrative framework that positions CoPs as a key micro-foundation of organizational ambidexterity. It argues that CoPs facilitate exploration by promoting experimentation, cross-boundary collaboration, and the exchange of diverse perspectives, while also supporting exploitation through the standardization, codification, and refinement of best practices (Anne *et al*., 2009) [1].

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the literature by highlighting the dynamic interplay between exploration and exploitation mediated by CoPs, and how this interplay underpins sustained competitive advantage. In doing so, it extends existing theoretical perspectives by linking informal social structures to strategic outcomes, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how organizations operationalize ambidexterity in practice.

From a managerial perspective, the findings underscore the importance of nurturing and leveraging CoPs as strategic assets rather than merely informal networks (Haas *et al*., 2025) [10]. Organizations that effectively cultivate CoPs can enhance their capacity for continuous learning, adaptability, and innovation, ultimately strengthening their competitive positioning in dynamic environments.

In sum, this study positions CoPs at the intersection of knowledge, learning, and strategy, offering a comprehensive perspective on their role in enabling the balance between exploration and exploitation for sustained competitive advantage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge-Based View and Competitive Advantage

Knowledge is inherently heterogeneous, socially embedded, and difficult to imitate, making it a key source of differentiation (Zhang *et al*., 2026) [27]. The Knowledge-Based View (KBV) conceptualizes knowledge as the most strategically significant resource of the firms, underpinning sustainable competitive advantage (Rezaee & Jafari, 2016) [21]. It posits that a firm's knowledge resources—specifically tacit, complex, and socially complex knowledge—are the primary drivers of sustainable competitive advantage. It is an extension of the Resource-Based View (RBV) that emphasizes integrating and innovating knowledge to create unique, inimitable capabilities (Zhang *et al*., 2026) [27]. As a resource, KBV argue that knowledge is considered the most valuable and strategic asset in creating value and generating increasing returns, and competitive advantage comes from how firm organizes and integrates individual knowledge rather than just possessing knowledge.

Unlike traditional resource-based perspectives, KBV emphasizes the role of knowledge integration, creation, and application in driving firm performance and competitive advantage (Anne *et al*., 2009) [1]. Central to KBV is the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is generally accepted as "know-how" that exists solely in the minds of individuals and is not established in any tangible format. Tacit knowledge is built up over time via personal, hands-on experience, and "learning by doing" (Houessou *et al*., 2023) [11].

Unlike tacit knowledge, which is difficult to transfer, from the "know-what" aspect of explicit knowledge is easily codified, stored, and communicated across an organization, and more closely correlated with information and data (Gamble, 2020) [8]. Explicit knowledge is information that is easily articulated, documented, and shared, taking the form of data, manuals, procedures, and formulas. The roots of explicit knowledge lie primarily in the formalization of tacit knowledge and its subsequent organization into shareable formats (Chilton & Bloodgood, 2008) [5].

Firms that effectively mobilize and leverage tacit and explicit knowledge are better positioned to innovate and respond to environmental changes (Singh, 2018) [22]. However, the challenge lies in developing mechanisms that facilitate knowledge sharing and integration across organizational boundaries.

2.2 Exploration-Exploitation and Organizational Ambidexterity

Organizational ambidexterity is based on theories of dynamic capabilities, organizational learning, and

innovation management. The tension between exploration and exploitation is a foundational concept in organizational learning theory, as described by March in 1991 (Mathias *et al*., 2018) [12]. Exploration involves search, variation, experimentation, and innovation, whereas exploitation focuses on refinement, efficiency, and implementation. While both are essential, they compete for limited organizational resources, creating a fundamental trade-off. Exploration to search for new knowledge and exploitation to refine existing knowledges often compete for resources, creating a mutually exclusive scenario where high levels of one may require low levels of the other.

More research has extended this dichotomy into the organizational ambidexterity, defined as the ability to simultaneously pursue exploration and exploitation (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013) [16]. According to Nyman (2024) [15], ambidextrous organizations are better able to adapt to environmental changes while maintaining operational efficiency, thereby achieving superior performance.

Scholars have identified multiple mechanisms for achieving ambidexterity as the ability to simultaneously explore new opportunities and exploit existing capabilities, through structural separation, temporal cycling, and contextual integration (Prange & Schlegelmilch, 2009) [19]. Recent research in 2026 confirms that while organizational ambidexterity is a critical driver of performance, much of the literature has historically focused on structural solutions, often ignoring the micro-level processes—the "how" of daily, on-the-ground action—where individuals and groups actually balance exploration and exploitation (Pertusa-ortega *et al*., 2021) [18]. Emerging perspectives highlight that this balance is achieved not just through structure, but through social and relational mechanisms (Tarba *et al*., 2020).

2.3 Communities of Practice and Organizational Learning

Communities of Practice (CoPs), as introduced first by Etienne Wenger, defined as groups of people who share a concern, passion, set of problems, or interest in a specific domain and interact regularly to improve their knowledge and expertise (Wenger, 1998) [26]. CoPs facilitate both tacit and explicit knowledge transfer and represent a key social mechanism for knowledge sharing and learning within organizations (Anne *et al*., 2009) [1]. CoPs are characterized by three essential elements: domain, community, and practice (Mohajan, 2017) [13]. The domain refers to the shared area of interest, expertise, or concern that brings people together. The community represents the social structure and relationships among members. The practice dimension refers to the shared repertoire of knowledge, tools, methods, stories, routines, and experiences developed by the community.

Unlike formal organizational structures, CoPs operate through informal networks, trust, and shared identity, making them particularly effective for transferring tacit knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1991) [3]. They facilitate learning-in-practice, where knowledge is co-created through participation rather than merely transmitted (Gherardi, 2019) [9]. This social dimension of learning aligns closely with the KBV emphasis on knowledge as a collective and embedded resource.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that CoPs enhance learning by fostering cross-functional collaboration and knowledge recombination (Brown & Duguid, 1991) [3]. At the same time, they support operational efficiency by promoting best practices and standardization. This dual role suggests that CoPs may serve as an intermediary between exploration and exploitation.

CoPs increase organizational learning by transforming individual expertise into collective intelligence. By connecting people across organizational and geographic boundaries who share a passion or concern, CoPs facilitate knowledge exchange, improve performance, and drive innovation (Mohajan, 2017) [13].

From a strategic perspective, these communities bridge the gap between a company's formal structure and the informal networks where real work gets done. They act as a living repository of best practices, helping organizations adapt quickly to change and shortening the learning curve for new employees. When an organization supports these communities, it fosters a culture of innovation where learning isn't a one-time event, but an ongoing social process that strengthens the company's overall competitive advantage.

3. Discussion

Exploration and exploitation have emerged as the two concepts underpinning organizational learning. Organizations should achieve balance between exploration and exploitation, by ambidexterity strategy. Exploration refers to experimentation with new alternatives; it helps organizations develop new knowledge via activities such as search, variation, risk-taking, and innovation. Whereas, exploitation refers to the refinement and extension of existing competencies; it helps organizations leverage extant knowledge through activities such as selection, implementation, production, and execution (Mathias *et al*., 2018) [12]. Exploration is an important aspect of organizational learning. Firms must find new knowledge, by exploring new opportunities to economic gains, pursuing innovative strategies, or establishing an entrepreneurial culture enhance their competitive advatage (Sun *et al*., 2023) [24]. Exploitation is also a necessary step in creating a successful business, because many exploration capabilities eventually transform into exploitation activities, as firms build routines and repetitive processes that allow for enhanced their competitive advantage (Mathias *et al*., 2018) [12]. Therefore, it suggests that organizations need to pursue ambidexterity, which is defined as a balanced of both exploration and exploitation activities.

Since March in 1991, presented about the idea of organizational learning, many studies have been conducted about the role of ambidexterity and the relationships about exploration and exploitation. Those two main organizational learning activities influence how organizations control and navigate their competitive environments (Haas *et al*., 2025) [10]. While, there are many studies of what organizational learning activities, transferring knowledge remains a challenge in a context characterised by insufficient activities for learning and knowledge exchange.

Communities of practices (CoPs) thus play an important role in facilitating this knowledge transfer, and engaging in participatory approaches to knowledge production (Ostermann, 2015) [17]. CoPs serve as vital microfoundations that enables firms to balance exploration and exploitation to achieve sustained competitive advantage. In rapidly changing business environment, firms must simultaneously

increase their capabilities searching for new knowledge, innovation, and business opportunities. Those two capabilities, known as ambidexterity has become important discussions related to organizational learning in enhancing competitive advantage of firms (Prange & Schlegelmilch, 2009) [19].

There are three fundamental elements of CoPs: domain, community, and practice. These three dimensions are interconnected and collectively determine the strength and sustainability of a CoP (Anne *et al*., 2009) [1]. The domain provides identity and legitimacy to the community because members recognize a common purpose and commitment, and also shapes the boundaries of learning and knowledge creation. The community emphasizes participation and social connection rather than mere membership. Whereas, the practice dimension represents the operationalization of learning into actionable expertise (Ostermann, 2015) [17].

In highly competitive environments characterized by rapid technological change, and market disruption, organizations are increasingly required to balance operational efficiency simultaneously. This challenge is often conceptualized through the tension between exploration and exploitation. Exploration refers to activities associated with experimentation, innovation, discovery, and the pursuit of new knowledge, whereas exploitation emphasizes refinement, implementation, efficiency, and the utilization of existing competencies (Tarba *et al*., 2020) [25]. Organizations that focus more on exploration may struggle with instability and high uncertainty, while those focus more on exploitation risk rigidity and strategic stagnation (Dieguez, 2026) [6]. Therefore, maintaining a balance between these two dimensions becomes central to organizational competitive strategy.

Within this context, CoPs emerge as important organizational mechanisms that facilitate both exploratory and exploitative learning. Unlike formal organizational structures, CoPs operate through social participation, collaborative learning, and experiential knowledge exchange (Ostermann, 2015) [17]. Their informal yet knowledge-intensive nature allows organizations to create adaptive learning systems that support innovation and strategic capability development (Haas *et al*., 2025) [10].

One of the most important contributions of CoPs to organizational competitive strategy lies in their role as facilitators of exploration. Through open dialogue, collaborative experimentation, and knowledge-sharing interactions, CoPs create environments where members can generate new ideas and challenge existing assumptions (Anne *et al*., 2009) [1]. The diversity of experiences and perspectives within communities encourages creativity and collective problem-solving, enabling organizations to identify emerging opportunities and respond to environmental changes more effectively. In technology-driven industries, for example, CoPs often function as innovation networks where employees exchange insights regarding digital transformation, artificial intelligence, or emerging market trends. Such exploratory learning strengthens organizational adaptability and enhances the capacity for strategic renewal (Priyono *et al*., 2020) [20].

At the same time, CoPs significantly contribute to exploitation by supporting the dissemination and refinement of existing knowledge. Through repeated interaction and shared routines, communities facilitate the transfer of tacit knowledge, operational experience, and best practices across organizational units. This process enhances efficiency, consistency, and organizational reliability. Employees learn not only formal procedures but also practical know-how acquired through experience (Ostermann, 2015) [17]. Consequently, CoPs help organizations institutionalize successful practices and improve operational performance. In this sense, CoPs become mechanisms for organizational memory and capability reinforcement, ensuring that valuable knowledge is retained and continuously improved.

The strategic value of CoPs becomes particularly evident when organizations seek to achieve organizational ambidexterity, namely the ability to pursue exploration and exploitation simultaneously (Priyono *et al*., 2020) [20]. CoPs provide the social and cognitive infrastructure necessary to integrate innovative learning with operational excellence. On one hand, they encourage experimentation and knowledge creation; on the other hand, they stabilize organizational routines through knowledge standardization and shared practice. This dual role enables organizations to remain adaptive without sacrificing efficiency. Firms capable of leveraging CoPs effectively are often better positioned to develop dynamic capabilities, sustain innovation, and maintain long-term competitive advantage in highly uncertain business environments (Ostermann, 2015) [17].

Furthermore, the effectiveness of CoPs in enabling exploration and exploitation can be understood through their three foundational dimensions: domain, community, and practice (Mohajan, 2017) [13]. The domain defines the shared area of expertise and strategic focus that guides learning activities. The community dimension fosters trust, collaboration, and social interaction among members, which are essential for knowledge exchange and collective learning. Meanwhile, the practice dimension transforms knowledge into actionable routines, tools, and methods that support organizational performance. The integration of these three dimensions allows CoPs to function as knowledge ecosystems that continuously connect learning, innovation, and strategic execution (Anne *et al*., 2009) [1].

The domain provides the shared knowledge focus and strategic direction of the CoP. In terms of exploration, the domain encourages members to investigate emerging issues, identify new opportunities, and develop innovative ideas within a specific field of expertise. A clearly defined domain stimulates curiosity and motivates members to search for novel knowledge, technologies, and approaches relevant to their professional interests (Brown & Duguid, 1991) [3].

At the same time, the domain also supports exploitation by establishing a common understanding of standards, priorities, and best practices. Members refine and deepen existing expertise within the domain, leading to greater specialization, operational consistency, and knowledge efficiency. Therefore, the domain acts as a cognitive framework that balances the search for new knowledge with the effective utilization of current competencies.

The community dimension emphasizes social interaction, trust, collaboration, and relationship-building among members. Community is particularly important for exploration because innovative ideas often emerge through dialogue, diversity of perspectives, and collaborative experimentation. Open communication and mutual trust create psychological safety, enabling members to share unconventional ideas, challenge assumptions, and engage in collective problem-solving (Ostermann, 2015) [17].

In relation to exploitation, community strengthens knowledge transfer and the diffusion of established practices. Frequent interaction among members facilitates the sharing of tacit knowledge, lessons learned, and operational experiences that improve organizational efficiency and reliability (Mathias *et al*., 2018) [12]. Communities also reinforce routines and collective norms that help institutionalize successful practices across the organization.

Thus, the community dimension functions as the social infrastructure that supports both creativity and operational learning. Strong communities enable organizations to continuously adapt while maintaining coherence and coordination.

The practice dimension refers to the shared tools, methods, routines, experiences, and problem-solving approaches developed within the CoP. In the context of exploration, practice evolves through experimentation and the development of new techniques or innovative solutions. Members collectively create new knowledge by testing ideas, adapting methods, and learning from failures (Ostermann, 2015) [17].

In terms of exploitation, practice contributes to the standardization and replication of successful knowledge. Shared routines and best practices improve efficiency, reduce uncertainty, and enhance organizational performance. Through repeated application, practices become organizational capabilities that strengthen consistency and reliability (Sun *et al*., 2023) [2]. Consequently, practice serves as the operational mechanism through which exploratory learning is transformed into exploitable organizational competence. It bridges innovation and implementation by converting emerging ideas into actionable and repeatable processes.

The interaction between domain, community, and practice enables CoPs to support organizational ambidexterity—the ability to pursue exploration and exploitation simultaneously. The domain directs what knowledge should be explored and exploited, the community facilitates collaborative learning and knowledge exchange, and the practice institutionalizes learning outcomes into organizational routines and innovations (Mathias *et al*., 2018) [12].

Organizations that effectively cultivate CoPs are better positioned to generate innovative ideas and adaptive capabilities (exploration), improve efficiency and knowledge utilization (exploitation), build organizational capabilities, and enhance long-term competitive advantage of firms.

4. Conclusion

Communities of Practice play a strategic role in enabling organizations to balance exploration and exploitation within competitive environments. Through collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and social interaction, CoPs support the creation of new knowledge and innovation while simultaneously strengthening the refinement and utilization of existing organizational capabilities. This dual function allows organizations to become more adaptive, efficient, and sustainable in responding to environmental uncertainty and technological disruption.

The effectiveness of CoPs is rooted in the integration of their three core dimensions: domain, community, and practice. The domain provides strategic focus and shared expertise, the community fosters trust and collaborative engagement, and the practice transforms collective knowledge into actionable organizational routines and competencies. Together, these dimensions create a dynamic learning system that facilitates both creativity and operational excellence.

Consequently, CoPs become important enablers of organizational ambidexterity and competitive strategy. Organizations that successfully cultivate strong CoPs are better positioned to enhance innovation capability, improve knowledge utilization, strengthen dynamic capabilities, and sustain long-term competitive advantage in increasingly complex and knowledge-driven business environments.

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