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# **Liminal Roles as a Source of Creative Agency in Management: The Case of Knowledge-Sharing Communities**

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# **Liminal Roles as a Source of Creative Agency in Management: The Case of Knowledge-Sharing Communities**

## **Abstract**

Studies suggest that the experience of liminality – of being in an ambiguous, ‘betwixt and between’ position – has creative potential for organizations. We contribute to theory on the link between liminality and creative agency through a study of the coordinators of ‘knowledge-sharing communities’; one of the latest examples of a ‘neo-bureaucratic’ practice that seeks to elicit innovative responses from employees while intensifying control by the organization. Through a role-centred perspective, our study found that both the structural and interpretive aspects of coordinators’ role enactments promoted a degree of creative agency. ‘Front-stage’ and ‘back-stage’ activities were developed to meet the divergent expectations posed by senior management and community members, and the ambiguity of their roles prompted an array of different role interpretations. Our findings contribute to theory by showing how the link between liminality and creative agency is not confined to roles and spaces (consultancy work, professional expertise) that are positioned across organizational boundaries, or free from norms and expectations, but may also apply to roles that are ambiguously situated *within* organizational contexts and which are subject to divergent expectations. This shows how neo-bureaucratic forms may be both reproduced and renewed through the creative responses of individual managers.

**Keywords:** Liminal, managerial practice, role enactment, knowledge-sharing community, neo-bureaucracy

## Introduction

The notion of ‘liminality’ has proven to be a powerful concept for addressing the experience of individuals who find themselves ‘betwixt and between’; at the limits of existing structures (Turner, 1995). From a construct developed in the field of anthropology (Gennep, 1960), this notion has also begun to be applied to individuals working within conventional organizational settings (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Garsten, 1999). In these latter studies, researchers have found liminality to be a source of ‘creative/ learning potential’ (Sturdy et al., 2009). Such potential is attributed to the suspension of the usual constraints of organizational life – routines, rules, boundaries and the expectations of others (Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Sturdy et al., 2009; Gioia et al., 2010) – and to the ambiguous nature of the positions held by these individuals (Garsten, 1999; Iedema et al., 2004). Liminality in organizational settings has also, however, been associated with negative consequences arising, for example, from lack of affiliation, weakened power and reduced access to opportunities for learning (Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Borg and Soderlund, 2015).

The present study aims to build on this recent work in several ways. While previous work has focused on inter-organizational roles - for example, consultants (Sturdy et al., 2009) or mobile project workers (Borg and Soderlund, 2015) - the primary aim of our study is to apply the notion of liminality to the conduct of certain managerial roles *within* organizations. Specifically, we address the question of liminality’s creative potential (Tempest and Starkey, 2004), through an empirical study of how such liminal roles are *enacted* by the individuals concerned, thus recognizing the scope for creative agency in relation to the structural attributes of a particular role within an organization.

A secondary aim of our work is to situate liminality and its creative potential within a wider debate about the spread of what has been termed ‘neo-bureaucracy’ in contemporary

organizations. Neo-bureaucracy has been defined as a hybrid form in which ‘new and more distributed modes of organization (are) juxtaposed with bureaucratic modes of coordination and control’ (Farrell and Morris, 2013, p. 1389). The notion of liminality has been used to better understand the way certain occupational groups have experienced this shift in organizational life. Liminality is discussed as the ‘modern condition’ for such groups (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). It is seen as reflecting the conflicting demands that neo-bureaucracy places on employees through its combination of the intensified control of work and the pursuit of innovation and creativity (Garsten and Haunschild, 2014). However, while writers have argued that a shift towards neo-bureaucracy is transformative of the work experience deep within corporate organizations and not simply at the periphery (Sturdy et al., 2015), much of the work on liminality to date has focussed either on groups situated outside or at the margins of such organizations (such as temporary workers). Much less is known about the liminality experienced by managerial groups within organizations under the conflicting pressures of neo-bureaucratic conditions.

A focus on managerial roles within organizations thus enables us to relate liminality to the more pervasive spread of neo-bureaucracy. That spread has previously been characterised in terms of the adoption of innovative management practices, such as project-based organizing within large hierarchical organizations (Garsten and Haunschild, 2014; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). We therefore focussed our inquiry empirically on one such practice, namely organizationally-based knowledge-sharing ‘communities’, which has been adopted by a number of large organizations in both public and private sectors. Like project-based forms of organizing, these communities exemplify the neo-bureaucratic attempt to mitigate the rigidities of corporate hierarchies (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). They operate alongside project team and functional structures, and have been developed to improve organizational performance by enabling the sharing of knowledge across functional and geographical

boundaries (Kirkman et al., 2013). As such, they provide an interesting site to study the enactment of liminal roles.

To ground our inquiry empirically, we focus on the managerial role most closely associated with these communities. In broad terms, the role of ‘community coordinator’, as we term it in this paper (other labels include network leader and facilitator), involves developing and directing communities’ knowledge-sharing efforts (Wenger et al., 2002). We identified community coordinators as a suitable group for our study, not only because their role reflects the ‘neo-bureaucratic’ condition identified in previous work, but also because it can be readily characterised as liminal since its occupants are situated ‘betwixt and between’ senior management and the communities that they support.

Our analysis of this group provides us with important insights into the enactment of liminal roles, showing how both the structural and interpretive aspect of such roles may be a source of creative agency within management. This analysis, in turn, contributes to a greater understanding of managers’ capacity to accommodate the conflicting demands created by neo-bureaucracy within their organizations.

### **Liminality and creative agency**

The notion of liminality was originally used to describe the experience of individuals undergoing ‘rites of passage’ (van Gennep, 1960), and was subsequently defined by Turner to encompass activities and people which lie ‘betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony’ (1977: 95). In reviewing the literature that has applied the concept to organizational settings, Beech (2011) makes a helpful distinction between two different uses; one denoting individuals in a transitory state (e.g. Ladge et al.,

2012), and another where it encompasses an enduring ‘experience of ambiguity and in-betweenness within a changeful context’ (p. 288). This latter strand is the focus of this paper, and within this literature we include both those studies which have explicitly used the term ‘liminality’, and other work that has addressed the experience of ambiguity within organizational roles. This inclusive view of liminality thus takes in a variety of occupational groups and organizational settings including the work of consultants, temporary staff and contractors (Garsten, 1999; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2009; Borg and Soderlund, 2015).

Although the primary emphasis in many of these studies is on liminality’s implications for organizational subjectivity and self-identity (Garsten, 1999; Ybema et al., 2009; Ellis and Ybema, 2010), one recurrent theme, which we outline below, is the perceived association between liminality and the creative agency of individuals and organizations. This theme is consistent with Turner’s (1982) argument that actors in a liminal position are ‘temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure’ (p.27). This is seen as being a source of weakness, but also ‘liberates them from structural obligations’ (p.27), hence encouraging playfulness and the exploration of new possibilities (Turner 1982, 1987).

In the management and organization studies literature, this liberating aspect of liminality may be seen as manifesting itself in a number of different ways. It may be the result of individuals’ attachment to radical values and beliefs which makes them ‘outsiders within’ organizations whose ‘enduring ambivalence’ is seen as having creative and transformational potential (Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Meyerson, 2003). In other studies, the liberating effect of liminality is viewed, rather, in terms of temporary or equivocal organizational membership (Garsten, 1999; Wright, 2009), and the ‘spaces’ in which change agents and consultants operate (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al, 2006; Sturdy et al., 2009).

In each of these arenas, liminality's creative potential in overcoming the constraints posed by traditional organizational structures is underlined. One study of temporary workers, for example, argues that 'for organizations, the release from structures that bind too tightly can be positive for organization performance, for example promoting innovation as liminal situations are conducive to transcendence and play' (Tempest and Starkey, 2004: 509). Similarly, Garsten (1999) sees the individual in a temporary work role as 'an ambiguous figure, capable of upsetting normative orders and of transcending institutional boundaries' (p.607). Meanwhile, Howard-Grenville et al. (2011) find that liminality may help insider groups to produce cultural change by 'opening crevices in the everyday for change' (p. 523). This enables them to recombine 'new cultural resources with elements of an organization's existing cultural repertoire' (p.523), such that new management ideas and approaches to sustainability, for example, can be combined with elements of existing managerial practice in this area.

However, there is also evidence in the literature for what Turner terms the 'weakness' of liminal positions, with studies highlighting their negative as well as their positive aspects. Czarniawska and Mazza (2003), for instance, note that liminality may be both exhilarating and frustrating for those experiencing it. Others relate these 'frustrations' to the influence of the wider context on liminality. As Howard-Grenville et al. (2011) note, liminality needs to be viewed relationally, inasmuch as it draws 'from the symbols and meanings that operate in the more structured or routine aspects of cultural life' (p. 525). Similarly, Sturdy et al. (2006) see liminal spaces as existing in parallel to more formal organizational spaces, and conclude that they can be 'highly structured and conservative as well as being creative and unsettling' (p. 931).

This ongoing debate in the literature between the structured and creative, or the frustrating and liberating, aspects of liminality provides the backdrop to the present study. In this we aim

to inform theory on the relationship between liminality and creative agency by showing how liminal roles are enacted within the structured contexts of organizational settings. In doing so, we respond to calls to extend research on liminality to different organizational contexts (Borg and Soderlund, 2015). Following the previous work outlined above, we also set ourselves the broader aim of situating liminality within the emergent phenomenon of ‘neo-bureaucratic’ forms of organizing. Our study therefore focusses on liminal managerial roles situated *within* organizations rather than on their periphery. Here our concern with managerial roles (a primary expression of bureaucracy - Clegg and Courpasson, 2004) is consistent with this broader aim, and is also underlined by studies suggesting that role characteristics may be important in shaping the scope and effects of liminality (Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Sturdy et al., 2009).

### **Liminality and organizational roles**

To address our research aims, our study applies the theoretical lens of organizational roles. Our starting point for this is conventional role theory, where a role is defined as a position occupied by an individual in the context of a social relationship (Merton, 1949). This is seen as shaped by the interactions and expectations of a role incumbent and the groups relevant to their work (Biddle and Thomas, 1966), thereby underlining the point that roles may be a site of tensions and role conflict (Katz and Kahn, 1978). This conventional view thus draws attention to the structural aspect of liminality – the in-betweenness of the role – and the pressures exerted by role expectations and norms.

In this perspective, liminality might be defined in terms of the weak or non-existent influence that existing norms and expectations exert on individuals in liminal positions. Following this line, we would expect the weakness of the norms and expectations given by a particular

structural context to be the primary source of the creative potential in liminal roles (Garsten, 1999; Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Such roles might then be contrasted with individuals occupying more ‘embedded’ (i.e. long-established and structurally central) positions which are seen as more subject to the ‘perceived expectations’ of powerful actors (Cornelissen, 2012).

However, there is another important strand in work on organizational roles which questions this structural emphasis on norms and expectations. This highlights the scope for individuals to make sense of, and ‘enact’ their roles, even within these constraints (Fondas and Stewart, 1994; Mantere, 2008; Borg and Soderlund, 2015). As Lynch puts it, ‘individuals do not simply play the roles that are handed to them; rather, they ‘make’ the roles they enact’ (Lynch, 2007: 384). This emphasis on enactment suggests that the ambiguity of liminal positions may contribute to creative agency by providing individuals with greater flexibility to make sense of their role (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Weber and Glynn, 2006).

### **Liminal roles and the organizational context**

Liminal roles in organizations fall into the category of a more enduring form of liminality (Beech, 2011). Recent studies have helped to shed some light on the characteristics of such roles, albeit with a focus primarily on groups operating outside or across organizational boundaries (Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Borg and Soderlund, 2015). Thus, a study of ‘Inter-Organizational Relationship’ (IOR) managers (Ellis and Ybema, 2010) defined their liminality in terms of the boundary position that they occupied in-between different firms. This ambiguous position – ‘both an insider and an outsider at the same time’ (ibid. p. 301) - is seen as requiring them ‘to navigate between multiple and sometimes contradictory demands, asking them to build relationships with various others across us/them divides’ (ibid.

p. 281). This study thus underlines how role characteristics are important constituents of liminal work in organizations, especially where the work involves responding to expectations from different groups. Borg and Soderlund (2015) show, further, how mobile project workers' differing interpretations of ostensibly similar roles generate variety in their competencies.

At the intra-organizational level, a few studies have been conducted on groups whose roles may involve some experience of liminality. These include 'knowledge brokers' - professionals, scientists and others - whose work can be said to span groups or organizational boundaries (Zabusky and Barley, 1997; Hargadon, 1998; Iedema et al., 2004). One recent example is provided by a study of individuals occupying formally designated roles as knowledge brokers in the English healthcare system (Chew et al., 2013). This found that, while many of these individuals experienced ambiguity and isolation in their roles, some were able to view this ambiguity positively as allowing them freedom to respond to their context.

Compared to the above groups, less attention has been paid to liminality amongst managers. An important exception here, and a useful parallel to the present study, is provided by the work of Wright (2009) on 'internal consultants' within organizations. This group occupy an 'ambiguous organizational location, being permanent employees but also operating outside the traditional activities and structures of the business organization' (Wright, 2009: 310). This study found that individuals operating in this ambiguous location sought to construct a variety of distinct identities for themselves ranging from 'trusted adviser' or 'partner' to 'expert' and 'service provider'. For many internal consultants, the structural ambiguity of their roles was seen as supporting individual agency by promoting 'a strongly positive self-identity, denoting autonomy and an ability to cross internal structural boundaries' (p. 314).

Some individuals, however, felt themselves marginalized, seeing themselves as ‘outcasts’ from the mainstream organization.

In constructing these identities, however, individuals faced constraints on the extent to which a more autonomous, elite identity could be accepted within the organization, as opposed to a more traditional bureaucratic role. They also found it necessary to pursue senior management patronage and organizational legitimacy for their activities. Similar findings emerge from a study of another liminal group; ‘staff professionals’ in the area of Occupational Health and Safety (Daudigeos, 2013). This group also suffered from a lack of hierarchical power and formal authority, but overcame their marginal positions by networking and engaging in ‘unobtrusive influence tactics’. While not the principal focus of the studies described above (which are more concerned with issues of power and identity), such findings do underline the need to address the influence of the structural context if the agency of individuals is to be fully understood.

### ***Liminal roles: the case of the coordinators of knowledge-sharing communities***

In recent decades, organizations across a range of sectors (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011) have ‘translated’ (Gherardi, 2009) the original concept of a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Handley et al., 2006) into a practical mechanism for encouraging knowledge-sharing amongst their members so as to address organizational goals. This has involved host firms providing financial and IT support (McDermott and Archibald, 2010) for what have been termed ‘Organizational Communities of Practice’ (Kirkman et al., 2013).

Our empirical study focusses on the ‘coordinators’ who manage such communities within organizations. Despite some variation in job titles, these individuals carry out broadly similar roles in developing and directing communities’ knowledge-sharing efforts (Wenger et al., 2002). This is a group, then, whose roles encompass many of the aspects of liminality

described in the existing literature (Beech, 2011). Their roles are ambiguous and relatively underspecified, often lacking formal job description. They are also liminal in employment terms, since many coordinators carry out their work as an add-on to a full-time job. In structural terms, these roles are also situated 'betwixt and between' since their work with knowledge-sharing communities typically falls outside the mainstream organization structure (Agterberg et al., 2010), yet they remain accountable (to varying degrees) to higher levels of management for their activities.

These features of the role are a reflection of the uncertain status of the communities which they serve. These communities have been developed to overcome the constraints on collaboration posed by organizational boundaries, and hence are overlaid upon, and juxtaposed with, existing structures and have to operate with, at best, limited organizational support and resources (Wenger et al., 2002). Hence they provide interesting example of neo-bureaucratic organization, as defined by Farrell and Morris (2013). Rather than pursuing specific task objectives, their aim is to promote voluntary knowledge-sharing amongst a dispersed community membership. As a result, they may also conflict with formal job descriptions and reporting relationships (Wenger et al., 2002).

Our empirical study sought to contribute to theory by focussing on the role enactments of this particular managerial group. Our specific aims were to identify how liminality was manifested in these role enactments, and its implications for the creative agency of the individuals concerned. Role enactment was defined in an inclusive way to include; a) the individual's perceptions of the expectations of other relevant groups with respect to his/her role (Cornelissen, 2012; Mantere, 2008), and b) the interpretation and situated practices which individuals creatively developed in their interactions with other groups (Bechky, 2006).

## **Methods**

### *Sample and Context*

Our sample of knowledge-sharing community coordinators had roles with characteristics typical of liminal positions, including a lack of standardized job titles or, in some, cases any formal title whatsoever. Further, these roles were typically (in over 80% of cases) held on a part-time basis, being appended to jobs within an existing department or function, without any formal position in the hierarchy, career or performance evaluation structure. While a few coordinators were relative newcomers, the vast majority had held the position for at least 12 months. Our final sample comprised 43 coordinators, spanning a total of 57 communities and 11 organizations (the norm was one coordinator for each community, but in a few cases, the coordinator role was shared between individuals, and in others one individual coordinated multiple communities).

To ensure that group selected for study were indeed coordinating ‘knowledge-sharing’ communities, albeit being given different labels within their organizations, our inclusion criteria were as follows: at least ten active members; some degree of formal recognition by the organization; designated managerial roles; knowledge-sharing centred on organizational goals; and collaboration and dialogue across organizational boundaries (as opposed to within-function groups or activities focused on dissemination only, such as email distribution lists or information posts - Faraj et al., 2011).

To help generalize our findings, we sought a diverse range of communities and host organizations, including different industrial settings and representation from both public and private sectors. The make-up of the sample was also determined by practical issues to do with

access, and the still limited number of organizations which have made serious progress in developing these communities. Of the sample as a whole, 20 of the communities were hosted by public sector bodies (6 in local government and 14 in the health sector) and 37 were hosted by nine private sector multinationals (encompassing petroleum, foodstuffs, pharmaceutical, consultancy, transport, manufacturing and high technology sectors). The median age of the sample of communities was 19 months, underlining their relative novelty within organizational settings. They employed a mix of communication media to support member interactions, including face to face meetings, email, and internet-based platforms of varying levels of sophistication. Details of community characteristics are shown in Table 1.

### **INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE**

#### ***Data Collection***

The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with each community coordinator (n= 43) and, in a few cases, senior managers sponsoring the communities (n=4). For certain communities, this was supplemented with ‘focus group’ interviews comprised of community members (see Table 1). Interview methods were chosen for two main reasons. First, as discussed above, role enactments encompass both the individual’s perceptions of the expectations of other relevant groups (Cornelissen, 2012) and the interpretations and situated practices which individuals creatively develop (Bechky, 2006). Coordinators themselves, then, are key informants on their own role expectations and practices, as well as motivations and understandings that underpin them (Mantere, 2008). The second reason was pragmatic. Whilst other studies (e.g. Bechky, 2006) have used direct observation to study role practices, this would have been very problematic in this setting, where much of the coordinator activity and interaction was on-line, widely dispersed and ad-hoc, often being tagged onto other (more ‘mainstream’) work as and when time permitted or

opportunities presented themselves. Very extensive periods of shadowing would be needed in such a setting if anything other than a small glimpse of role enactments were to be observed. While this might be interesting for future work, it would have severely limited the practicable size of our sample and the generalizability of our findings.

Individual interviews were conducted at the workplace and lasted from approximately forty-five minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes. In the event that a face-to-face interview was not possible, the interview took place via telephone (n=19). The purpose of the interviews was to develop an understanding of the community and, in particular, the community coordinator's role within it. Interview questions focussed on their personal involvement in activities, perceptions of expectations, and challenges encountered. These data were supplemented with the management sponsor interviews and focus-groups, as well as any documented information on the community's development, objectives and achievements, in order to create a rich context for interpreting the coordinators' responses.

### ***Data Analysis***

To address our objectives, we applied a broadly inductive approach to our data analysis, while ensuring that this was informed by relevant theory in our construction of thematic headings. The use of existing themes to inform analysis did not prevent the possibility of new interpretations and theoretical contributions (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), but, rather, helped to generate multiple interpretations for the overall data set. The analysis incorporated three distinct steps. The first sought to examine role expectations as perceived by the coordinators, while the second identified the specific role practices enacted by coordinators. The third step examined the ways coordinators interpreted their roles and their creative agency in enacting them.

#### ***Step 1 - Role Expectations.***

This began by identifying all the statements in the coordinator interviews that related to the outcomes and contributions desired of their community activities via open coding (Locke, 2001). It became clear early on that these statements concerned, on the one hand, the needs and expectations of the community and its members and, on the other, needs and expectations of senior managers, with very little overlap between the two. For this reason, we clustered data around expectations relating to members and managers as different interest groups. For each cluster, we formed provisional categories (first-order codes), using NVIVO software to support the coding process. We then moved to axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), integrating first order categories into higher order, researcher-induced themes pertaining to perceived role expectations. For example, first order categories relating what members hoped to get out of joining the community (e.g. skills development, improved profile, freedom to explore) were grouped together into the theme of ‘motivation’. Although not our primary concern, we did observe that all of the higher order themes identified in interviews were also discussed by other groups in our sample (e.g. senior managers), so lending some corroboration to our categories.

### *Step 2 - Role Practices.*

Again we used open coding on all coordinator interviews to identify any specific practices described by coordinators (i.e. things they ‘did’ in their role). These statements were then grouped into first-order codes (e.g. things they did to identify members) and consolidated into higher order themes (categories of practice in this case - Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For example, first order codes about ‘identifying members’ and ‘managing membership’ became part of the higher order theme ‘developing membership’. We recognize the difficulties of linking statements to themes in this way, not least that some themes overlap or are not mutually exclusive. The whole team then discussed whether there were any underlying dimensions to the themes (role practices) identified, going back and forth between the

categories revealed and existing theory. This led to a further observation that some practices seemed to be oriented internally toward the community itself, whilst others were oriented externally (in the sense of being focussed outside the community) towards the concerns of senior management. Drawing on Goffman (1959) and Faraj et al. (2011), we labelled these role practice orientations as ‘back stage’ and ‘front stage’, respectively. Having determined this as a potential framework, we then re-examined how far the original categories fitted with our emergent theoretical understanding (Locke, 2001).

### *Step 3 - Role Enactments and Creative Agency.*

In this step we wanted to develop a richer account of creative agency in role enactments by analysing narrative accounts given by coordinators of how they experienced their roles and how they developed (or tried to develop) communities in their organizations. We began by identifying larger segments of text where interviewees had given accounts that tried to make sense of their roles, the practices they had engaged in and the challenges they had faced in developing communities. These might entail, for example, stories about of how they came to be in the role, particular examples of success and failure, and hurdles encountered and/or overcome. Thus we focused on the ‘realm of experience’ where speakers laid out how they experienced certain events and conferred their subjective meaning onto these experiences (Bamberg, 2010). Whilst, as our analysis below shows, liminality certainly featured in these accounts and provided opportunities for (and challenges to) creative agency, it was also clear that the coordinators applied their creative agency in diverse ways. Next, we searched across these narrative accounts for patterns in how roles were enacted by coordinators, focussing on the creative agency entailed and the practices (identified in Step 2) that were emphasized. The idea here was not to develop a ‘typology’ of liminal roles but, rather, to identify patterns in terms of how role incumbents creatively enacted their liminal roles. To ensure trustworthiness in our analysis (cf. Lincoln and Guba 1985), we followed the two-fold

approach based on ‘peer debriefings’ and ‘intercoder agreement assessments’ (see Gioia et al, 2010).

## **Findings**

### ***Role Expectations***

Figure 1 shows the structure and ordering of the data on coordinators’ perceived expectations of their roles (step 1) moving from first order categories to researcher-induced second order themes. Table 2 provides data (in the form of illustrative quotes) on the major themes that emerged from our analysis of role expectations.

### **INSERT FIGURE 1 AND TABLE 2 NEAR HERE**

Coordinators generally saw the role expectations arising from senior management as rather stable, clearly defined (hence measurable), and explicitly normative in relation to tangible outputs and benefits for the organization (hence the focus on justification and alignment). They provided a tightly defined frame for the coordinators’ role performance; namely, to add financial value to the business. In contrast, expectations of community members were viewed as less explicitly normative, more ambiguous and more changeable. These focused more on the need to develop the community and grow participation organically (hence the emphasis on emergence), and to provide mutually supportive, ‘open’ spaces where individuals were motivated to share ideas that would be helpful to them in their work and careers.

### ***Role Practices***

Figure 2 shows the structure and ordering of data on coordinator practices (step 2). We found here that, despite diverse organizational settings, coordinators had developed five broadly similar practices in enacting their roles. These we labelled as follows: developing membership, facilitating engagement, stewarding the purpose, advocating the community,

and documenting outcomes. 74% of informants discussed all five practices in some capacity during the interview, and 94% discussed at least four of the five. Data on these practices is illustrated in Table 3.

### **INSERT FIGURE 2 AND TABLE 3 NEAR HERE**

This analysis revealed some practices as entailing interactions with community members and others as entailing interactions with senior managers of the host organization, mirroring the divergence in coordinators' perceived expectations of these groups, seen above. In labelling these practices as 'front-stage' and 'backstage' we find a useful analogy with Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation. Here, front stages are where individuals produce a managed presentation for an audience, often in pursuit of financial gain. The back stage area, however, is hidden from the audience, and behaviour is more informal and unstructured. We acknowledge that our use of these terms does not fully convey some aspects of Goffman's original theorizing, but we found them helpful as a shorthand way of highlighting the division between 'externally' and 'internally'-facing practices, and of distinguishing between activities which are more visible and formally accountable, and those which are more opaque to the organization. In their account of on-line communities, Faraj et al. (2011) similarly draw on Goffman's terms to differentiate between an outward, public facing narrative produced by a community and the 'back narrative' where the informal and emergent aspects of a community can assert itself.

In our case, front-stage practices (*advocating the community* and *documenting outcomes*) were carefully designed to appeal to an audience of senior managers. Here, the appropriate norms of the performance seem to have been strongly shaped by coordinators' perceptions of the expectations of senior managers described above. Advocating sought to elicit senior management support and resources by promoting a compelling justification for the

community in terms of its contribution to organizational goals, often in the form of a ‘business case’, using financial metrics to dramatize potential gains. As Justin (CarbonCo) observed; ‘If I just said to some executive manager I have a way to save a hundred million dollars, as kooky as I may look... a hundred million dollars doesn’t cost them a cent to listen and hear what I have to say. You’ve woken them up’. Documenting entailed quantifying evidence of community usage, successes and organizational gains. The many different measures developed for this purpose are testimony to the scale of the challenge coordinators faced in creating justifications of their communities’ existence.

In contrast, back stage practices were opaque to the senior management group, and aimed instead at creatively *developing membership* and *facilitating engagement* among members. As seen in Table 3, developing membership involved such activities as identifying potential members, ‘selling’ the community to members and determining membership standards. Facilitating engagement encompassed, both contributing content to the community (for example, producing on-line posts, newsletters, themed events, topic reports) and encouraging others to contribute. Coordinators also sought to build an infrastructure for community interactions and reduce obstacles to engagement via their scheduling of meetings and the community’s portal and intranet.

Finally, the practice of *stewardship* was centred on establishing the community’s purpose and was directed towards reconciling the expectations of both groups of stakeholders. Most coordinators were charged with composing an official mandate or objective for their community. Given the differing expectations involved, this was a very delicate affair, as objectives agreed on the front-stage with senior management had to be reconciled with the expectations of community members.

### ***Role Enactments and Creative Agency***

*Experiencing liminality - It's not part of my (or their) day job*

When coordinators were asked to describe their role enactments (step 3), they were quick to mention the vague nature of their jobs with such statements as, 'My job description is really quite vague' (Alex, ProfCo) and 'In the beginning no one could really tell what a community was let alone a leader of it' (Katherine, PharmaCo). Given that roles were only loosely, if at all, defined, coordinators stressed their efforts in constructing the role for themselves, which included balancing this role against their full-time role. As one explained, 'It's not part of my day job. It's something I do in addition. So it's not, you know, a focussed or dedicated role. So for me the knowledge champion role is something I have to do in evenings and weekends' (Aubrey, HealthOrg). Another joked, 'If you count phone calls at 7 in the morning or ten at night as just a normal day then yes its part of my day job (laughter)' (Steve, FoodCo).

Some coordinators found it difficult to cope with a lack of clarity in the role, 'I don't think we have a clear idea of how to work with a community of practice. It's not like before when I had a long term project which had a very clear focus' (Esther, LocalGov). Many also struggled to gain organizational support. One commented; 'A number of members were interested to join but it wasn't a priority in their day job so their managers didn't support them' (John, FoodCo).

*Creative Agency in Role Enactments*

While the liminality of the role, and lack of fit with formal processes and budget lines, was often cast in negative terms, it was also seen as an opportunity for creative agency. For one, it afforded coordinators greater flexibility; 'In terms of hierarchy it's kind of vague unlike other parts of the organization, which is why we have a lot of flexibility in the things we do... it's actually one of the less negative things about working in this job (laughs)' (Arthur, ProfCo). This meant they could engage more creatively with their work: 'Chaotic freedom is a good

way to describe it because you can go after specific strategic things but you also need to create the space to communicate and unlock potential areas' (Pauline, FoodCo). The liminality of the role was also seen by some as politically advantageous, allowing them to work 'under the radar' of senior management. As one explained, 'In the beginning our steering committee said 'A nice idea but don't do it officially please' [*laughs*]. So we did it unofficially. We are working underground... To be honest I don't think a formal position would be a good idea. Then the bosses would expect countable results' (Aubrey, HealthOrg).

Our analysis also suggested differences across coordinators in terms of how they interpreted and enacted their roles in the face of the opportunities for creative agency that these role afforded. In particular, we identified five distinct patterns of role enactments, discussed next. These are summarised in Table 4 (together with additional illustrative quotes to those below). While these patterns were somewhat aligned with organizational affiliations, there were also variations in enactments within organizations, reflecting individuals' interpretations of their role.

*(i) Knowledge Broker.*

Around a third (15/43) of coordinators enacted their roles in a way that we term 'Knowledge Broker'; i.e. as facilitators and nurturers (rather than leaders) of others' knowledge-sharing practices, including organizing community activities and acting as a point of contact for forging new relationships across otherwise disconnected areas. As one coordinator put it, 'I am not a leader or guider of it. I organize it. I started the community but a community in my opinion doesn't need a real leader...It's more a contact or broker than someone that just organizes meetings' (Jean, VisionCo).

Knowledge Brokers often, but not always, assumed these roles because they were subject experts. They had few or no resources in terms of formal time allocation or budget. However,

lack of resources was seen as a non-issue, even sometimes as beneficial for securing engagement: ‘So that’s why we worked out it is not going to cost you anything, no budget,...and here’s how we will contribute to the bottom line’ (Ralph, FoodCo). Rather than seek their own resources, they found creative ways to ‘piggyback’ on mainstream work: “I just hop on the back of our monthly meetings with our community stuff. Then I can say ‘it doesn’t cost you anything and you get extra value from these boring meetings’. What’s not to like?” (Steve, FoodCo).

Back-stage, community-facing practices aimed at developing membership and securing engagement by brokering relationships dominated the accounts of Knowledge Brokers: ‘It’s about engagement, it’s about getting the right people supporting the right activities’ (Pauline, FoodCo). Knowledge Brokers aimed such engagement activities clearly at current business problems: ‘I deliberately set out with a doable objective of, not just creating a network of awareness, but also to physically do a project on a community-wide basis to show people that this is what we need’ (Steve, FoodCo). They often emphasised a ‘bottom up’ approach – ‘It came bottom-up and I think that approach has maintained its way’ (Tim, LocalGov) – with an emphasis on ‘doing things behind the scenes’ (Mark, Local Gov) in order to get *others* to lead on community activities.

Positioning their role as ‘central conduits’, however, created its own challenges, especially in terms of juggling this with other demands: ‘I call my job like spinning plates. You can look away and start a new area and then a plate can fall’. Many expressed anxiety about the benefits that their community *actually* offered to their organization, given that this was often not directly measured: ‘It’s a platform of opportunity. I don’t know if it’s worked or not in terms of benefits for the organization’ (Mark, Local Gov) and were worried that, without their ongoing brokerage, communities could quickly collapse.

*(ii) Internal Consultant*

Other coordinators (11 in total) constructed their roles as ‘Internal Consultants’, responsible for the strategic leadership of their communities and accountable to senior management. One coordinator explained, ‘You’ve got to really put on your consulting hat and understand, sit down and do a lot of listening about what their business challenges are’ (Dale, BankCo).

Another commented, ‘In our team we try to function as a kind of start-up consultancy within a large company, and that’s not easy to do’ (Grant, CarbonCo). Others described their work as business change agents, commenting, for instance, that; ‘For me that’s interesting, to work like a change agent, so I see an opportunity and I try and aggressively go out for it’ (David, BankCo).

Creative agency in this group included convincing senior management to allocate resource to support the community in the form of dedicated time and a small budget from central funds.

In order to do this, these coordinators emphasised a strategic approach, centred on establishing a convincing business case for the community and measuring its success in hard economic terms and/or against key performance indicators. One put the case like this; ‘You will see increased participation and you will see increased human productivity gains and business value. And we’ve clearly documented the linkage between the two with our success story programme’ (Grant, CarbonCo).

Strategic rhetoric, emphasising ‘excellence’, ‘vision’, and ‘critical success factors’, was very evident in their descriptions of role enactment, with such comments as, ‘We’ve got a vision and there are a number of objectives in there that ...will take the whole community forward and increase its contribution to the organization’ (Betty, BankCo). Front stage practices were thus very much at the forefront, in particular compiling and documenting success stories and metrics of community benefits and benchmarking community performance. As one coordinator explained, ‘So last year we had 1286 success stories that had a great business

result' (David, BankCo). These front stage practices were seen as key to actually generating participation in the community: 'So I try to push the most realistic key performance indicators on everything we do to measure the benefits of collaboration that's going on. We would never be able to have as many people working in this area and to be as successful as we've been without right from the beginning documenting success' (Brad, CarbonCo).

Enacting their roles as Internal Consultants brought with it, however, pressures to deliver in return for allocated resources; 'I must demonstrate change improvement in quality so programme managers can see' (Thomas, BankCo). Coordinators felt vulnerable if they failed to deliver added value from the community vision: 'So if we don't get this right the senior people that look to us could quite easily look elsewhere' (Brad CarbonCo). This kind of role enactment also generated challenges in terms of securing trust and participation from community members sometimes suspicious of these coordinators' apparent alignment with senior management. As Brad further explained; 'So we are in communication with Big Brother, but we are not here as a big stick, we just want to help and that's the tactic we are taking. But convincing them is not easy'.

*(iii) Avant-Garde.*

A third pattern of role enactment (found among 8 coordinators) is characterised by the words of one coordinator; 'I see this as an avant-garde role. We forge ahead and use this approach ourselves and try to demonstrate what comes out of it. So we hold online conferences to promote the community and ...we use the knowledge that is generated through these events...to share our products and services' (Esther, LocalGov). These coordinators saw themselves as part of an innovative group of self-starters, pushing the boundaries in their organizations by developing a new way of working – 'You know we do innovative stuff. It's a way for us to look good' (Matthew, LocalGov).

There were no specific resources or time allocated to the role among this Avant-Garde group. Rather, it was assumed as part of the ‘day job’ primarily because coordinators saw personal benefit in terms of promoting their own work (products and services) and boosting their careers within (and sometimes beyond) their organization. In the words of one coordinator; ‘Right now the biggest beneficiary of it is me, in the sense that I get to do things that I wouldn’t otherwise get to do. I struggle to think of anyone who has benefitted from it more than I have’ (Esther, LocalGov). Another discussed the benefits of the role for enhancing their own career, ‘So I’ve built it into my day job myself because I can see the benefit I can get from networking. It’s a good way to get known in the region’ (Petra LocalGov). The dominant role practices among this group were hence focussed back-stage on developing engagement, albeit these were performed in a largely opportunistic, ad-hoc, kind of way: ‘Generally, my approach is suck it and see basically’ (Daniel, FreightCo).

Those constructing their roles as avant-garde saw them as providing unique opportunities to do novel and interesting work. However, this approach brought with it challenges, in particular in attaining legitimacy among senior managers. As Matthew (LocalGov) explained; ‘I will be frank here. I think it’s a new way of working and we are kind of bureaucratic and senior management are sort of wary about being too much associated with it’. All spoke, also, of the ongoing challenges of engaging community members with this highly ad-hoc approach – such comments as, ‘I think we’ve got a community of lurkers’ (Petra, LocalGov) – with the general view being that overcoming these challenges ‘ultimately depends on how much extra effort you’re prepared to put in and what I get out of it’ (Daniel, FreightCo).

#### *(iv) Service Provider*

In this pattern (found among 6), coordinators enacted roles as if they were providing a service to customers. One coordinator summed up this pattern; ‘In a broad sense I would say they are my customers. You know, they are choosing this product, in this case a knowledge-sharing

community system, and if there are certain drawbacks of the system, they will let us know and I will gather those requirements, trying to make the system such that it meets their needs' (Alex, ProfCo). Creative agency here entailed developing backstage practices geared toward relevant content for community members and revising objectives on an ongoing basis (stewarding), the latter being seen as crucial if they were to meet 'customer' needs. As one put it; 'I'm giving them visibility of what the community system can offer so if members have any questions or want it to be used in another way, we try and provide for that' (Cecelia, HealthOrg). They involved such activities as gathering information on business requirements, developing standardised processes and systems (including training for new members), gathering metrics on community participation (e.g. numbers participating in events, pages accessed on-line), and feeding back information to senior management.

This group, like Knowledge Brokers, relied on business units for resources, and some had created formalised processes for charging these units. However, this pattern of role enactment was more reactive as, once support for a community was in place, it was left to members to use it; 'So community members need to be really proactive or nothing much happens' (John FoodCo). This left this group vulnerable to lack of engagement and dissatisfaction amongst members and their managers. Creative agency hence meant treading a line between meeting the needs of community members and those of operational/business leaders and senior managers; '...keeping everyone on the same page, keeping everyone happy' (John, FoodCo).

#### *(v) Orphaned Child*

The final pattern, seen among 3 coordinators, we termed the Orphaned Child. As one explained; 'I found myself like an orphaned child without parents and didn't know how to turn and where to turn to. And I think a level of frustration set in because we felt we had some ideas and we wanted to push some stuff forward and we had no mechanism for doing that' (Robert, PharmaCo). These coordinators' role experiences were mainly of being

abandoned, without support or direction. One recounted her experience of organizing community events; 'I thought about organizing another meeting and thought, I will have to do everything and serve it to them on a silver platter. Because I have worked on this stuff like a horse for a full year. I've worked like crazy and 80% of my colleagues wouldn't even recognise what I did because they weren't interested, they are so busy' (Katherine, PharmaCo).

Compared to other patterns, creative agency here was less in evidence. Rather, coordinators gave accounts of how they had been frustrated and disempowered by lack of support and feedback from management; 'So there hasn't been anybody to act as editor for the discussion board and it needs somebody watching it every day or else you start to get some dodgy postings shall we say. So in the end it just became unmanageable so we've had to suspend that'. (Nancy, HealthOrg). Unable to get senior management to attend to their concerns, these coordinators turned mostly to backstage practices, promoting engagement by, for example, asking for member contributions and discussion topics. This, however was not always forthcoming: 'I am so disappointed. I thought, man! I mean I don't mind being the driving force but I want some feedback and I want some help. I am not going to do everything on my own just to serve my colleagues. They come, discuss, have a nice time get rid of their emotions and then there is me, the idiot, who does all the work' Katherine, PharmaCo).

## **Analysis**

As discussed above, the enactment of organizational roles involves responding to the expectations attached to a particular position, while interpreting what the role means both for the organization and for the individual incumbent. Enactment can thus be seen as the product

of the social structure within which a role is embedded, and the agency of the individual who interprets the role within that structure (Mantere, 2008; Whittington, 1992).

As our findings indicate, coordinators experienced both the ‘liberating’ and the ‘frustrating’ aspects of liminality in their roles. Our analysis, however, allows us to distinguish the way in which liminality is manifested through these role enactments. In short, liminality in our study was found to be multi-faceted. It involved not only a structural position of being ‘in-between’ senior managers and community members, but also the related interpretive ambiguity about the nature of the role itself which was enhanced by its relative novelty and marginal status against the mainstream organization (the ‘day job’). The implications for creative agency are therefore discussed, next, in terms of these different facets of role position and role interpretation. Note, however, that this is a strictly analytical distinction, since both positions and interpretations are mutually constituted in role enactments.

### ***Role position***

In structural terms, the positioning of these roles ‘betwixt and between’ between senior management and community members meant that, as outlined in Table 2, coordinators needed to address divergent sets of expectations. As a result, and as summarised in Table 3, this positioning shaped their practices, producing a division between front and back-stage practices, together with ‘stewarding practices’ which sought to reconcile divergent expectations.

The creative agency of individuals emerged through performing on these different stages since it afforded them greater flexibility to improvise responses to emergent communities on the back-stage, and to create new forms of justification in front-stage settings (Fondas and Stewart, 1994). This finding resonates with Zabusky and Barley’s (1997) study of scientists in liminal positions which found that they had to be ‘prepared to make and remake

themselves on the spot for different audiences at different moments' (p. 282). On the back-stage then, this agency manifested itself through new practices, such as the use of blogs, on-line forums and other novel methods designed to increase member engagement. On the front-stage, it often involved a combination of existing and new 'cultural resources' (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). Evidence for this 'recombining' comes from coordinator attempts to develop measures of community performance that would be acceptable within a corporate vocabulary. At CarbonCo, for instance, we noted how the coordinator linked their 'success story programme' with business value.

This structural positioning was also reflected in the discursive accounts of our respondents, where coordinators frequently represented themselves as situated *in-between* the expectations of senior managers and community members. As indicated in our quotes, coordinators typically refer to both community members and senior managers in the third person, as 'them' and 'their' (cf. the references to 'us' and 'our' organization in the Ellis and Ybema (2010) study), implicitly distancing themselves and their roles from both these groups.

The importance of divergent expectations in promoting creative agency can be contrasted with other work which has viewed liminality in terms of relative freedom from norms and expectations (Lynch, 2007; Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Thus, the Zabusky and Barley (1997) study found that the scientists' lack of any allegiance to a particular group allowed them to remain 'constantly adrift' while enabling them to 'safeguard the integrity of the mission itself' (p. 395). Similarly, Ellis and Ybema (2010) in their study conclude that a 'lack of attachments...is critical for providing liminal individuals with room for manoeuvre' (p. 282).

In our study, however, as shown by the close relationship between the expectations outlined in Table 2 and the role practices in Table 3, the agency of coordinators was heavily

influenced by the expectations of others. The resulting contrast with previous work on the liberating effects of liminality may reflect a structural difference between the structural *in-betweenness* of the coordinator roles in our study and liminal roles played out *across* the inter-professional or inter-organizational boundaries seen in other studies (e.g. Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Iedema et al., 2004; Zabusky and Barley, 1997).

### ***Role interpretation***

Role enactments not only reflected the structural aspects of role position but were also closely implicated with individuals' sense-making, both of the role and of their own personal involvement in it (Gotsi et al., 2010; Borg and Soderlund, 2015). As Pratt et al. (2006) note; 'What one does is often compared with expectations about who one is to motivate the construction process' (p. 255). Here, we found that the ambiguity of the coordinator role supported five distinct role interpretations: namely, knowledge broker, internal consultant, avant-garde, service provider and orphaned child. While certain of these roles (for example, 'Internal Consultants' or 'Avant Garde') seem to reflect aspirations to preferred or elite self-identities (as also found in Wright, 2011), in describing their roles, individuals typically drew on language circulating within the wider organizational context. For example, their accounts include references to 'innovation', 'change agents' the 'bottom line', and 'key performance indicators'. This underlines the extent to which individual sense-making, even for liminal roles, draws on the symbols and meanings that circulate within the more structured or routine aspects of organizational life (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). In the case of the Internal Consultants, in particular, it also reinforces recent studies suggesting that managerial roles are increasingly drawing on the discourse and practice of consultancy (Sturdy 2011; Sturdy et al., 2014).

While role positions and expectations informed the division into front and back-stage practices, different interpretations of the role encompassed varying emphases across these

front and back-stage domains. As a result, despite the commonality in many of their practices, coordinators presented themselves in very different guises to their front and back-stage audiences. These ranged from more proactive interpretations (as seen with Knowledge Brokers and Internal Consultants) to more subordinate or even negative ones (the Service Provider and the Orphaned Child). These interpretations closely informed the focus of individuals' creative agency, supporting a wide range of actions aimed at developing communities and improving engagement, as well as defining a strategic rationale and justification for their existence. The Service Provider and Orphaned Child interpretations were, however, the least supportive of the creative agency of coordinators, with the latter providing a striking parallel to the 'outcast' identity described by Wright (2009).

Outlining the importance of these role interpretations for individual agency is not to say that they were unproblematic, or freed individuals from any further constraints. Rather, the coordinators' role enactments were constrained in ways which reflected both their role position (for example, the lack of resources and acceptance within host organizations), and the problems which emerged due to their particular interpretation of it. As detailed in Table 4, the resulting constraints were experienced in both their front and back-stage work. For example, Internal Consultants were under pressure to deliver results from their work, while suffering from a lack of trust and suspicion on the part of community members. The Avant-Garde group not only struggled to achieve legitimacy with senior management, but also found it difficult to achieve member engagement. Such 'frustrations' seen in our study underline the potentially negative psychological consequences which may flow, as Beech (2011) argues, from extended periods in a liminal state.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The principal aim of our study was to better understand the link between liminality and creative agency. We highlighted different aspects of that link seen in previous work, with some studies emphasizing freedom from structural constraints as a source of creative agency, and others the enactment of ambiguous roles. We integrated these different aspects of liminal roles in our analysis of role position and role interpretation. This showed that the structural context is important, with similar role positions being reflected in the development of broadly similar practices. However, we also found that creative agency does not depend on freedom from the expectations given by an organizational context (as has been suggested for some external or peripheral occupational groups), but may actually be enabled by the divergent expectations placed on liminal roles within management. By requiring individuals to perform on different ‘stages’, such expectations stimulated creative agency in the development of novel practices, and the combination of new and existing cultural resources.

Divergent expectations and the ambiguity of liminal roles (Borg and Soderlund, 2015) involved significant sense-making efforts on the part of community coordinators in our setting, producing five distinct patterns of role enactment. These expressed the scope of individuals’ creative agency, but also its limitations since the different enactments drew to a large extent on the existing cultural and discursive resources available within their organizations. At the same time, these enactments helped to define the way in which the constraints on individuals’ agency manifested themselves (the ‘challenges’, outlined in Table 4). Thus our analysis helps to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ‘frustrations’ and negative consequences of liminal positions by suggesting that they are not pre-determined by the role itself, but arise from role-mediated interactions within a wider context.

In helping to unpack the link between liminal roles and creative agency, our analysis also speaks to the wider debate on the extent and implications of neo-bureaucracy. This is seen as creating conflicting demands on employees, subjecting them to greater control but simultaneously seeking to elicit greater creativity from them in the form of novel ideas and solutions (Sturdy et al. 2014; Garsten and Haunschild, 2014). The liminal roles in our study arose from an innovative management practice (knowledge-sharing communities) which sought to overcome the limitations of conventional hierarchical forms. Our analysis of the influence of divergent expectations on these roles suggests that the demands of neo-bureaucratic conditions may be accommodated (if not reconciled) through the creative interpretations and role enactments of individual managers. The potentially negative psychological consequences of doing so, as observed in our study, may thus be seen as the result, in part, of neo-bureaucracy's tendency to place 'particular strain...on employees, who are controlled according to two principles' (Bolin and Härenstam, 2008, p. 559).

Overall, our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we introduced a role-centred perspective to the theorizing of liminality. By encompassing the interplay between role position and role interpretation in the enacted role, our analysis integrated the different aspects of liminality discussed in previous work (that is, structural in-betweenness, and ambiguity) and provided important empirical evidence on their implications for creative agency. This perspective helps to increase our understanding of the importance of role commitments to the experience of liminality (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Weber and Glynn, 2006), and contrasts with previous work which has related liminality to 'spaces' (Sturdy et al., 2006), organizational membership (Garsten, 1999) (Wright, 2009), identities (Ellis and Ybema, 2010), and the values and beliefs of individuals (Meyerson, 2003).

Second, we showed that the concept of liminality is relevant even for management groups subject to the constraints of more structured contexts. Given that many organizations are

hybrid forms, combining flexibility with control, this gives liminality wider purchase as a theoretical lens in organization studies. The structural in-betweenness experienced by this management group can be contrasted with previous work, which has focussed on groups whose liminality is the product of working across the boundaries of organizations. Our findings may thus be more widely relevant to middle management groups, and to boundary-spanning or brokering individuals within organizations (Sturdy and Wright, 2011; Hargadon, 1998).

Third, our study suggests that liminality may be a source of creative agency not only for groups, such as temporary/mobile workers, consultants and staff professionals, situated outside the mainstream organizational hierarchy (Borg and Soderlund, 2015; Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Daudigeos, 2013), but for roles which are ambiguously situated within such contexts. This contributes significantly to our understanding of the scope for change and innovation by liminal groups situated *within* organizations as opposed to external groups of change agents (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011; Meyerson, 2003).

Finally, our focus on organizational roles directly addresses the tension between agency and structure which are seen as key to understanding liminality (Ellis and Ybema, 2010). In broad terms, this contributes to an appreciation of the agency of managerial groups, in particular, in exploiting the contradictions within social structures (Whittington, 1992; Daudigeos, 2013; Weber and Glynn, 2006). More specifically, by showing how liminal roles interact with the conflicting demands of neo-bureaucratic conditions, we help to show how the creative agency of managers may be instrumental in reproducing and renewing such conditions, thereby presenting liminality as related to, and not divorced from, its structural context (Sturdy et al., 2006; Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). This contributes to our understanding of the emergence

of neo-bureaucracy as both a medium and outcome of the practices of managerial groups (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004).

The present work does have some limitations in its approach to liminality. Our reliance on interviews, though supporting a larger sample, lacks the finely detailed observation of practices which ethnographic methods can provide. Likewise, our focus on role enactments across this sample meant that the influence of particular organizational contexts was grasped primarily through the perceptions, and especially the perceived expectations, of the coordinators themselves. Other aspects of context, notably their political and discursive dimensions which have been highlighted in other work on this topic (e.g. Iedema et al., 2004; Daudigeos, 2013) could only be accessed to a limited extent.

In terms of further research, our analysis of liminal roles is relevant to the spread of neo-bureaucracy generally, and especially to its implications for the conditions and agency of an increasing range of managerial groups (Wright, 2009). A greater understanding of the liminality experienced by such groups (e.g. internal change agents) is not only relevant to theory development, but also has practical implications for the effectiveness of wider change efforts. Organizational innovations, as exemplified by the knowledge-sharing communities in our study, create great demands on individuals who have to occupy new and often ambiguous roles. A better understanding of the implications of such roles for managers' creative agency may be an important contributor to their eventual success or failure (Buchanan et al., 2007).

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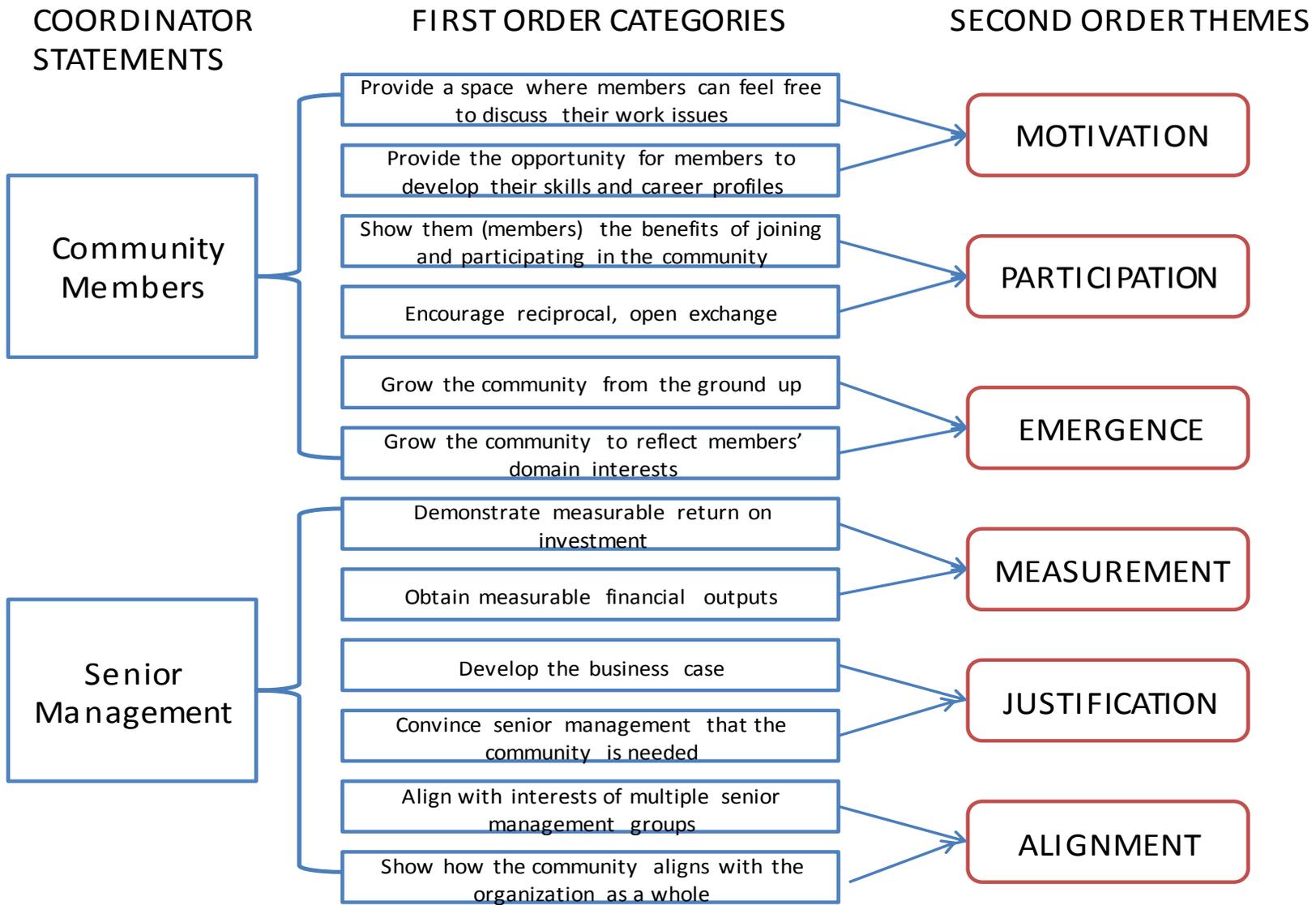
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**Table 1: Community characteristics by organization**

| Sectoral context of host organization and pseudonym | No. of communities | Ave. no. of members/ community | Median age of communities | Community objectives   | Primary forms of community interaction  | Type and number of interviews               |
|---|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--|---|---|
| Food Production – FoodCo                            | 4                  | 14                             | 18 months                 | Process improvement  | Teleconferences<br>Annual face to face meetings<br>Community internet platforms           | 4 coordinator                               |
| Oil and Gas - CarbonCo                              | 5                  | 269                            | 37 months                 | Process improvement<br>Professional development  | Annual face to face meetings<br>Community internet platforms<br>Monthly teleconferences   | 6 coordinator<br>1 sponsor                  |
| Professional Services - ProfCo                      | 8                  | 330                            | 18 months                 | Process/service improvement<br>Professional development  | Community internet platforms  | 2 coordinator                               |
| Local Government – LocalGov                         | 6                  | 404                            | 14 months                 | Sharing best practice<br>Process improvement   | Biannual face to face meetings<br>Community internet platforms<br>Monthly newsletter      | 5 coordinator<br>1 sponsor<br>1 focus group |
| Transport & Shipping - FreightCo                    | 9                  | 48                             | 19 months                 | Sharing best practice<br>Process improvement   | Quarterly face to face meetings   | 4 coordinator<br>1 focus group              |
| Financial Services – BankCo                         | 4                  | 47                             | 12 months                 | Sharing best practice<br>Process standardization   | Biannual face to face meetings<br>Community internet platform<br>Monthly email newsletter | 5 coordinator<br>1 sponsor<br>1 focus group |
| Pharmaceuticals – PharmaCo                          | 3                  | 53                             | 33 months                 | Sharing best practice<br>Development of professional standards   | Monthly on-line meetings and teleconferences  | 3 coordinator                               |
| Optical Products - VisionCo                         | 3                  | 20                             | 37 months                 | Product development  | Monthly face to face meetings   | 5 coordinator                               |
| Engineering - EngineCo                              | 1                  | 150                            | 15 months                 | Product development<br>Development of professional standards   | Community internet platform<br>Annual face to face meetings                               | 1 focus group                               |
| Public Health Services - HealthOrg                  | 14                 | 702                            | 60 months                 | Sharing best practice<br>Service improvement   | Community internet platforms<br>Periodic face to face meetings                            | 9 coordinator                               |
| Computer manufacturing – ComputerCo                 | 1                  | 300                            | 60 months                 | Sharing best practice<br>Codifying knowledge   | Community internet platforms<br>Quarterly face to face meetings                           | 1 sponsor                                   |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                                       | <i>57</i>          | <i>150 median</i>              | <i>19 months median</i>   | <i>47 Total Interviews<br/>(43 coordinator and 4 sponsor) plus 4 focus groups comprised of approximately fifteen members</i> |   |   |

**Figure 1: Data structure on coordinator role expectations**

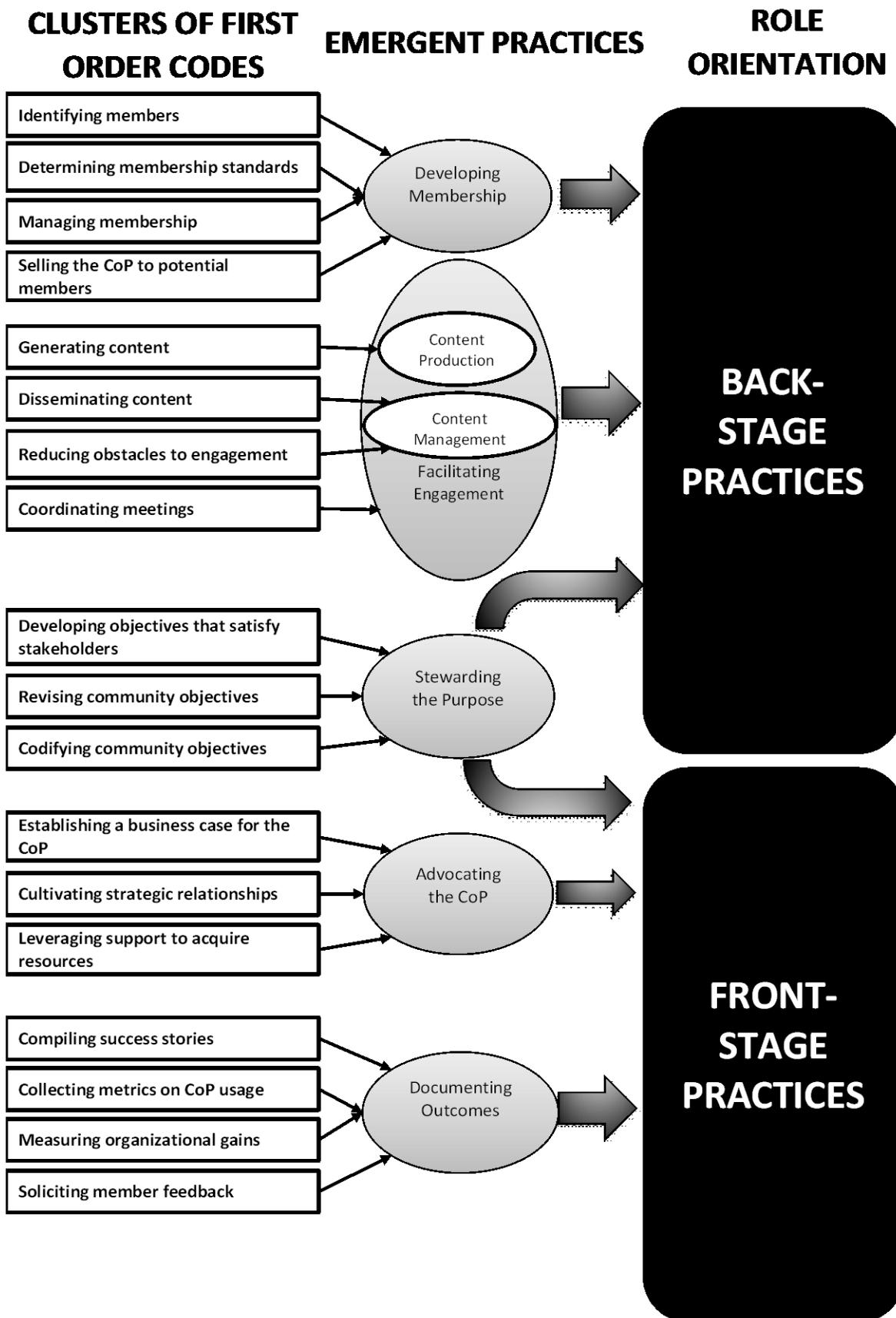


**Table 2: Coordinator Role Expectations: Illustrative Data**

| THEMES   | Representative Quotes Underlying Major themes   |
|--|---|
| <b>COMMUNITY MEMBERS</b>   |   |
| <p><b>Motivation</b></p> <p>Provide space where members are free to discuss their work issues</p> <p>Provide opportunity for members to develop their skills and career profiles</p> | <p>Martin (CarbonCo): ‘It’s actually some sort of honour to be member of all the communities in a way because if you are a specialist in maintenance management system, where is the best place to have the freedom to go and discuss your daily problems, daily issues or read other people’s.’</p> <p>John (FoodCo): ‘My view is that some individuals see joining this global community as an opportunity to...develop some skills. So for example, they may actively help you run the community so they will develop leadership and facilitation skills--their global profile, and because we are a global business, it’s such a big business, they probably get more well-known within the global business...some use that as a vehicle to develop their careers, to show some skills sets that they may not be able to show in their day to day job.’</p> |
| <p><b>Participation</b></p> <p>Show members the benefits of joining /participating in the community</p> <p>Encourage reciprocal, open exchange</p>                                   | <p>Aubrey (HealthOrg): ‘...due to the fact that it’s an extra bit of work on top of our users workload already and in the first instance the benefits are not always apparent. So you have to really find that real reason as to why someone would actually spend their time on their community and that would be a difficult one if the community isn’t set up by their grouping.’</p> <p>Robert (PharmaCo): ‘...you see, you are not dealing with a sub-intelligent bunch here, you are dealing with pretty smart people and they see the writing on the wall very quickly. If they see that nothing is getting done and they are putting some time into a situation where they feel it’s going nowhere, they are not going to put time into it. And that’s part of the problem you face.’</p>  |
| <p><b>Emergence</b></p> <p>Grow the community from the ground up</p> <p>Grow the community to reflect members’ domain</p>  | <p>Aubrey (HealthOrg): ‘Like I’ve got a community at the moment [and we’re trying] to find that group of people who are happy to play the technology or maybe happy that things might not go smoothly to begin with and whose expectations are probably not too high.’</p> <p>Sara (VisionCo): ‘It’s usually that there is somebody who finds that he is interested in a topic and it’s not only he himself or alone that is interested in sharing something about this topic. But it’s usually a core group of some people, of four, five people who say</p>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| interests   | oh, this would be a good idea or somebody who says oh, it would be a good idea and I heard it from this guy, this guy and that guy that he would be interested in something like that too. And then that's one of the things we do in the beginning of the starting phase that we try to get some people together...'  |
| <b>SENIOR MANAGEMENT</b>  |  |
| <b>Measurement</b><br>Demonstrate measurable return on investment<br><br>Obtain measurable financial results  | Arthur (ProfCo): 'It will be more important to have some type of measures to show that we are contributing at least the time and resources that we are putting to the work we are doing. That it's generating some type of, a level of value that's equal to the amount of resources that we are spending. So I think in time that probably has to come.'<br><br>Grant (CarbonCo): 'They have to make [the community outcomes] as measurable as possible. So they have goals but specific to make sure they have objectives that are measurable in financial terms. Well, the way we do our stories is estimated net cash flow. So it's more in line with, I mean, more in line actually with your net profit than total revenue. What are they really doing? How much value do they add?' |
| <b>Justification</b><br>Develop the business case<br><br>Convince senior management that the community is needed                                    | Justin (CarbonCo): 'You set up a business case with deliverables and activities, obviously this person who is a halfway decent manager is going to say how are you doing, how is your progress on that \$50 million going. And you want to have some measurement. We have success stories, we have ways of calculating each little vignette and that of course has to be managed now.'<br><br>David (BankCo): 'I really had the power to create things and take them to the next higher board and get it approved. The thing was I really had to be fact related. I had to come up with extremely good proofs and I had to be very well prepared. And if I was so, my chances to get it approved were really good.'  |
| <b>Alignment</b><br>Show how the community aligns with the organization as a whole<br><br>Align with interests of multiple senior management groups | Alex (ProfCo): '...how will the [community] fit into the entire system, whether it will benefit more than one country, what kind of budget, or what kind of resources will it require, and all of those kinds of considerations play a role in this before they can make a decision on whether the request [to form the community] is going to be some part of future plans for the business.'<br><br>Jim (VisionCo): 'I think if the colleagues in the business unit give their management the information that this community will help them, this is the best way to convince [them to implement it.] If we are organising these communities, and we are always saying we are the best, this is not convincing. Convincing is from those places where the benefits will take place.'    |

Figure 2: Data structure on coordinator role practices



**Table 3: Coordinator Role Practices - Illustrative Data**

| <b>Practice 1: Developing Membership</b>        |   |
|---|---|
| Identifying Members                             | Brad (CarbonCo): We [recruited members] in all kind of different ways. Asking the business units, asking individuals, interviewing people.  |
| Determining Membership Standards                | John (FoodCo): We invited staff members from [this research unit] around the world.   |
| Managing Membership                             | Mark (LocalGov): there is a lot more new people coming on recently...I think my concern at one point [is if] we got bigger and bigger whether the benefits to people will start shrinking away....  |
| Selling the community potential to members      | Pauline (FoodCo): I think the first days we had to phone people around to bring them in, to invite them and then if they didn't turn up, follow up with them why they didn't and explain the value of these communities.  |
| <b>Practice 2: Facilitating Engagement</b>      |   |
| Generating Content                              | Quinn (CarbonCo): I actually went in and answered this [question]... And eventually there is some other folks that will come in and answer it too probably.   |
| Disseminating Content                           | Harry (VisionCo): Because it's quite a new thing ...people are quite tentative. It's important to get that community spirit... you can create a forum post where you kind of call it 'welcome' or something like that.  |
| Reducing obstacles to engagement                | Matthew (LocalGov): [My biggest challenge] is probably quite common, it's converting those people who are just readers into fully contributing members who are engaging in vibrant conversation.  |
| Coordinating meetings                           | Cecilia (HealthOrg): Basically every month I send out a calendar invitation with an agenda. And I follow that up about a week before the meeting with a reminder.   |
| <b>Practice 3: Stewarding the purpose</b>       |   |
| Developing objectives that satisfy stakeholders | Brad (CarbonCo): to make sure that that final compromise quite frankly works for [X] as well as the [other] folk.   |
| Revising community objectives                   | Ralph (FoodCo): now we are into review time, not because we've done anything wrong but just because the organization has changed underneath us so we now need to renew it in order to take it to either the next level or do a different objective<br><br>William (HealthOrg): I wrote a constitution and got us moving in that direction |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Codifying community objectives  |   |
| <b>Practice 4: Advocating</b>   |   |
| <p>Establishing a business case for the community</p> <p>Cultivating strategic relationships</p> <p>Leveraging support to acquire resources</p>       | <p>Brad (CarbonCo): And we spent quite a bit of time aligning what we wanted to do as a network within the [business units]</p> <p>Tim (Local Gov): what I've done for that is actually show what is the business case for actually spending that amount of money</p> <p>John (FoodCo): so I've approached an individual , a senior manager who made sense and who had ultimately the responsibility for this section of the business as well as some other sections and asked him to sponsor it.</p>   |
| <b>Practice 5: Documenting Outcomes</b>   |   |
| <p>Compiling success stories</p> <p>Collecting metrics on community usage</p> <p>Measuring organizational gains</p> <p>Soliciting member feedback</p> | <p>Quinn (CarbonCo): In any case we were able to locate a spare part.....Saved them probably 6 weeks of down time....[that] was probably costing \$50,000 to \$100,000 a day. So that was a huge success story for us</p> <p>Matthew (LocalGov): I think the easiest answer is to look at things like contribution rates within a community in terms of measuring its success</p> <p>Shawn (CarbonCo): So far we've achieved that. 5 million dollars of savings and 17 million dollars of value,</p> <p>Matthew (LocalGov): asking about satisfaction of the members and how they view their individual community, I think, is probably one of the most effective measures as well.</p> |

**Table 4: Role Enactments and Creative Agency**

| <b>Role Enactment</b>      | <b>Creative Agency</b>   | <b>Major Challenges</b>  | <b>Dominant Emphasis</b>        | <b>Representative quotes</b>  |
|----------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|---|
| <b>Knowledge Broker</b>    | Facilitating and nurturing knowledge-sharing among community members.<br><br>Acting as central conduit for forging new relationships and connections                           | Juggling demands/ becoming a 'bottleneck'<br>Over-dependency of communities on coordinator<br>Uncertain benefit of community to organization   | Back Stage                      | 'We can also see what's going on everywhere and so we can combine things. It's not because we are clever it's just we know the people, we know what we can do and we can link that together' (Mike, FreightCo).   |
| <b>Internal Consultant</b> | Strategically leading communities with clear business case, measurable benefits and control over community membership.<br><br>Encouraging engagement via demonstrable results. | Members' lack of trust with top-down approach<br>Delivering ongoing measurable benefits to justify centrally allocated resources   | Front Stage                     | 'I try to act as an influencer and shaker of projects not a facilitator of them. This is really the broader strategy and drive for the community and there is an opportunity for transformational change if we succeed on our vision' (Thomas, BankCo).                                       |
| <b>Avant-Garde</b>         | Self-starting and demonstrating the community as a new way of working, largely for personal benefit and self-promotion.  | Lack of legitimacy with senior managers & members<br>Lack of member engagement   | Back Stage (but largely ad-hoc) | 'You might give some of your knowledge but you can get knowledge back. You know, you learn a lot listening to other people talking and that's part of the aim really of why I've set the group up. Your knowledge increases and ultimately that makes you more saleable' (Sheila, FreightCo). |
| <b>Service Provider</b>    | Developing community processes, content and objectives to meet requirements of internal 'customers' (members, operational/business units and senior management).               | Keeping diverse internal 'customers' (members and leaders of member organizations) satisfied<br>Role vulnerable if not seen to meet 'customer' demands<br>Uncertainty over continuation of budgets | Front and Back Stage            | 'We are providing the community support, trying to improve collaboration. A major component is training and another is the technology. We do also gather priorities of every region and weight these up and then present it back to the leadership for approval.' (Alex, ProfCo).             |

|                       |   |  |            |  |
|-----------------------|---|--|------------|--|
| <b>Orphaned Child</b> | Engaging community members but working alone and abandoned. | Frustration of coordinators leading them to question their own involvement<br>Ideas from community ignored by management | Back Stage | ‘They [community members] need guidance, they need lots of things but for the last couple of months we’ve reorganized and I’ve struggled to get meetings and I feel so lost and there is no-one guiding them. I mean this community has given me the one or two big achievements in my job and I feel it’s going to get lost’ (Katherine, PharmaCo). |
|-----------------------|---|--|------------|--|