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PROFESSIONALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE PROVIDING HISTORICAL REENACTMENT SERVICES

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to present the concept of professionalization as a key process that shapes the development of communities of practitioners within organizations providing educational-reenactment services.
Design/methodology/approach: The study applied methodological triangulation, combining in-depth interviews with purposive sampling—where the criterion was that respondents belonged to groups with expert knowledge in the area under study with desk research method.
Findings: Historical reenactment communities can be interpreted as a specific type of community of practitioners, in which professionalization is the result of organizational processes based on participation, networked relationships, and the collective development and institutionalization of operational standards.
Research limitations/implications: The data obtained should be regarded as the results of pilot studies aimed at providing a preliminary assessment of the area under analysis. To ensure greater methodological reliability and strengthen the basis for analytical generalization, it is recommended that the research be continued using a larger and more diverse sample.
Practical implications: The collaborative learning model and inter-organizational cooperation promote the transfer of hidden knowledge, the standardization of practices, and continuous improvement, generating tangible organizational and economic benefits, as well as stabilizing organizational culture, all of which can help build a competitive advantage for modern organizations.
Social implications: The active efforts of reenactment groups help to strengthen local identity, social capital, and the intergenerational transmission of values. Thus, the practices under study can serve as a tool to support the long-term preservation of heritage while improving the quality of social life.
Originality/value: The obtained results open new interpretative directions by proposing an interdisciplinary approach to the organization from the perspective of communities of practitioners operating within it, which constitute an informal mechanism of knowledge management and professionalization. The article offers a non-standard conceptualization of the analyzed phenomena, as well as the development of interesting and original conclusions and recommendations.
Keywords: professionalization, organizational development, competencies, communities of practioners.
Category of the paper: Viewpoint, case studies.

1. Introduction

The reality in which today's organizations operate is a world dominated by dynamic technological progress. Automation, digitalization, and the development of AI have radically influenced the growth of their potential on many levels, thereby contributing to increased efficiency, expansion, and enhanced adaptability. At the same time, like any revolution, this technological one has also contributed to the deepening of negative phenomena, which have manifested themselves, among other things, in interpersonal relationships. Organizations operate more efficiently, while people become increasingly alienated. They lose their sense of agency as well as their professional identity. More and more often, teams are connected solely by networks of collaboration, by passing social bonds. And yet, as E. Wenger noted - learning occurs through participation in relationships, not through access to information (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). This problem, linked to the loss of the ability to practically build lasting networks of relationships founded on experience developed through knowledge transfer, commitment, trust, and deepening social interactions is today one of the challenges facing most organizations. It should be added that the principle of these interactions is a topic of significant value to the participants. The attention and time devoted to it contribute to building a community of identity, in which they feel not merely a member of the group through certification, but a full-fledged member—an integral part of group, whose sense of belonging was forged through work on behalf of the team and the relationships that formed, developed, and solidified in the course of that work. This led to the formation of bonds, a strong sense of belonging, and a sense of responsibility for the team, based on the certainty of the importance and significance of one's contribution to the organization's development.

Communities of practitioners – for that is what we are talking about, must undeniably be recognized as one of the key sources of social capital in contemporary organizations and professional communities. We define them as groups of people informally connected by shared skills and interests, which are realized through a common endeavor. These communities exist not only within organizations but also outside them; examples include various thematic groups that jointly carry out tasks within their sphere of interest. These activities are not profit-driven but rather aimed at development or enhancing reputation (Kłak, 2022, p. 44). E. Wenger described them as unstructured groups of people bound by informal ties and a shared passion, which is reflected in their joint activities. By striving to expand their knowledge, these groups bring together people with shared interests, similar or consistent views, who perform similar work, and represent various social groups (Wenger, 2002, pp. 4-5). With regard to organizations, M. Kłak proposed several references to definitions drawn from the literature on the subject; among these, it is worth noting the one he cites from McKinsey & Company, which defines a community of practice as: "a group of people who are informally connected by their engagement with similar problems. Employees typically belong to more than one community of practitioners, both within and outside the organization" (Kłak, 2022, citing: McKinsey & Company).

2. Objective and research gaps

The prevalence of the topic of communities of practitioners in organizations and in academic studies (see, e.g., Lesser, Storck, 2001; Gach, 2007; Choi, Ahn, Jung, Kim, 2020; Bolisani, Scarso, 2014; Meyer et al., 2025; Mierzejewska, 2005) has prompted us to examine the issue from the perspective of providers of educational-reenactment services. These organizations serve as an ideal example of building formal groups from scratch, based on the implementation of a series of activities that support the development of members belonging to reenactment groups, for whom the main catalyst for success is the pursuit of professionalizing their activities. This need stems from the desire to meet the requirements related to the importance of preserving an element of identity through: fidelity to historical sources (many people come from the environment of historians, art historians, archaeologists, etc.); maintaining credibility primarily for the sake of an educational mission (belonging to a specific community entails attention to the ethical issues of the profession and a mission focused on popularizing science); self-fulfillment by transcending the boundaries of a hobby (for many people, reenactment eventually becomes part of their professional and private lives), a sense of community, and adherence to internal norms (mentoring, acceptance, and the formation of emotional bonds). Professionalization is the factor that should be considered key in the process of the evolution of communities of practitioners originating from the reenactment community toward formal organizations, as indicated by the content of studies on this topic; see, e.g., (Wojnarowicz, Małysiak, 2018; Matuszak, 2022; Wypych, 2018; Chańko, Daszyńska, 2006). To date, however, these groups have not been the focus of Polish researchers addressing the topic of communities of practitioners. This is most likely due to the fact that, within the field of management and quality sciences, the topic of historical reconstruction is primarily present in the area of marketing activities, specifically the analysis of tourism marketing tools. The topic of communities of practitioners relevant to the discussed environment has been indirectly addressed in the foreign literature, where authors have highlighted behaviors characteristic of these groups; see, e.g., (Johnson, 2015; McCalman, Pickering, 2004). However, it should be noted, that there is still a lack of publications that focus directly and in a fully analytical manner on the topic discussed in this article. Hence, the idea of utilizing this current research gap to introduce a new interdisciplinary perspective on organizational development, which would allow for the inclusion of social research on providers of educational and reenactment services into the discourse of management and quality sciences, thereby expanding the range of scientific exploration.

The reenactment community in Poland has been active for over three decades it's a period of dynamic change, especially in the area of professionalization in the most general sense. Today, events organized by reenactment groups that take place in public spaces are no longer merely small-scale gatherings intended for the local community or to promote specific historical

sites. The Polish reenactment community can take pride in organizing spectacular historical spectacles that are recognized on the European and international stage, such as the event: Vivat Vasa! Battle of the Two Vases 1626, or that rank among the largest reenactment events in Europe, e.g., the Slavs and Vikings Festival or the Grunwald Days. Reenactment constitutes a significant sector of the events and cultural tourism economy. The community's activities include commercial performances, participation in film productions, the organization of workshops and educational events, and the development of historical crafts. Accurate reenactment contributes to building a strong tourism product – a form of destination marketing—and, as a result, increases the recognition of historic sites, towns, and the region. This recognition, along with the extension of the tourist season due to numerous events, contributes to the creation of new jobs, often making the community one of the region's main employers. In addition, high-budget events that attract large audiences provide an excellent advertising platform for numerous sponsors. Collaboration with them opens up opportunities for business development, often spanning many years, which is very important for local governments, typically operating on limited budgets, in the context of social initiatives aimed at promoting culture and supporting programs that engage local residents.

What is particularly significant is the fact that historical reenactment is a unique social phenomenon, originating in grassroots, spontaneous activities that, for a long time, largely lacked any aspiration to form cohesive, profit-driven business organizations. The driving forces behind their formation into groups are diverse, typically revolving around hobbies, an enthusiasm for history, the search for interesting ways to spend free time, and similar interests. From the very beginning, these groups differ from one another in terms of human capital, expertise, resources, social status, and motivation. This is reflected not only in the direction of their activities but also in their effectiveness, pace of development, flexibility, and ability to commercialize. Combining passion with organizational and marketing competencies holds the potential to transform into a profitable business. However, not every group wants to or is able to utilize the resources it possesses. Despite their business capabilities, many of them remain at the level of organized groups, often operating merely as a hobby for many years after their inception. There are, however, some that evolve into professional business entities, efficiently run organizations that can provide a stable and profitable market for services, despite serving a niche audience.

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of active historical reenactment groups in Poland, as many of them are formed on a seasonal basis, operate informally as hobby groups, and eventually disband after a certain period of time. According to a report prepared by the Question Mark Social Research Bureau, funded by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and conducted in 2016, there were 458 active reenactment groups in Poland at that time. However, according to information provided by the report's authors, their actual number could have been twice as high, due to the fact that information about their activities was not posted on websites and social media platforms (Question Mark, 2016, p. 113). Desk research

conducted by the author of this article between March and September 2023 allowed for the collection of data on 524 groups operating throughout Poland. Based on these analyses, it can be assumed that currently, these numbers will oscillate around similar values.

3. Methodology

According to the opinion expressed in the Report by the Question Mark Social Research Office, "the historical reenactment movement is one of the largest social movements to emerge in Poland after 1989" (Question Mark, 2016, p. 3). However, this opinion was not supported by official comparative data on other movements. It must be acknowledged, however, that reenactment is a social movement characterized by durability and dynamic development. Over the past thirty years, it has undergone a visible professionalization, engaging a wide audience, including both participants and visitors. The transformation of groups of enthusiasts into mature organizations is not a homogeneous and constant process. What is monogenic, however, are the beginnings of group formation, which usually arise on the foundation of enthusiasm and shared interests. Based on definitions proposed by authors of scholarly studies on communities of practitioners, such as, among others:

1. „Communities of practitioners form organically and naturally identify their own leaders, who typically possess a combination of social skills and strong professional competence. They also often require support from senior management and financial assistance" (Smith, Kempster, Wenger-Trayner, 2019, pp. 62-88).
2. „The essence of a community of practitioners is mutual learning, the exchange of information, and the sharing of inspiration, best practices, standards, and approaches" (Dach, 2006, p. 4).

it must be acknowledged that, in the process of fostering interest, historical reenactment groups spontaneously trigger a mechanism of social learning. This is clearly evident, for example, in the two phases of the process related to recruiting new members and establishing a development path for them – 1. Admitting a new member to the group, whose marginal participation gradually evolves into a phase of deep involvement, reflected in increasingly frequent attendance at meetings and a strong desire to acquire specialized knowledge (it should be noted here that this specialization often literally means – elite status, through the uniqueness of the specialization, e.g., learning a craft based on standards derived from source materials, an example might be the technique of preparing fabrics based on original iconography, using hand embroidery and materials characterizing a given historical period. Or testing equipment, clothing, and analyzing lifestyle during several days or months of hiking in open terrain, during which only equipment available in that era is used. 2. Professionalization that enables one to meet the standards set by the group, thereby gaining experience and earning the recognition of

both group members and external audiences, and eventually establishing authority within the reenactment community.

Authors of scientific studies in the humanities and social sciences propose, above all, the level of substantive knowledge as a criterion of professionalism (Bogacki, 2010, p. 54). The criteria proposed by the author in a study conducted in 2023 included a number of others, focused not only on the level of knowledge but also on their business potential. The criteria used in the assessment of the professionalization of groups consisted of:

- organizational activities in Poland and abroad (organizing activities and events, particularly those that are well-known, popular, and recognized within the reenactment community),
- participation in events and activities that are well-known, popular, and recognized within the reenactment community,
- the group's recognition among reenactors,
- the group's visibility on social media,
- the group's social media activity, brand building, marketing,
- the group's activities in the field of education,
- the group's entrepreneurial spirit, the uniqueness of its development path, and its ability to assimilate new members,
- the number of active members and their level of preparation,
- initiatives aimed at promoting cultural heritage,
- collaboration with cultural institutions, businesses, and museums,
- external funding secured for business development,

The analysis covered all historical reenactment groups, broken down by province.

These data are not essential to this article; their sole purpose is to provide an overview of the number of active groups in Poland and their level of professionalism. Two administrative units were selected for the sample: the Pomeranian and Lower Silesian voivodships, based on the comparable number of reenactment groups operating within their territorial boundaries. In the Pomeranian Voivodship, out of the 31 groups analyzed, 10 were rated as very advanced, 6 as advanced, 13 as intermediate, and 2 as basic. In the Lower Silesian Voivodship, out of 33 groups analyzed, 3 were rated as very advanced, 10 as advanced, 15 as intermediate, and 5 as basic. When analyzing nationwide data, it was concluded that there is no single dominant factor influencing the development of the potential for professionalization of the groups. This was not determined by the size of the group, its specific characteristics, or its level of expertise. However, attention was drawn to the high level of activity among these groups on social media and online interest groups for reenactors. This observation prompted a more in-depth analysis focused on examining intra-group relationships. The qualitative IDI method was selected as the research tool. The survey was sent to representatives of reenactment groups from across Poland, including:

1. The Legio XXI Rapax Association – one of the largest groups in the world reenacting Roman military units.
2. The Opole Knights Brotherhood – the largest historical reenactment group in the Opole Voivodeship.
3. St. Nicholas Company – the group's activities focus, among other things, on the castle it acquired in Janowiec-Bobrzany.
4. The Excalibur Knights Brotherhood – which includes many members of the Polish Knights' Squad, among whom are medalists from the International Medieval Combat Federation, one of Europe's largest events dedicated to knightly combat.
5. The Knights Brotherhood of Bolków Castle – active since 1995, the oldest in Poland, and a member of the Chapter of Polish Knights – the largest Polish organization bringing together groups involved in historical reenactment.

The interviews were conducted at the turn of 2023-2024. The sample comprised 30 groups representing all provinces in Poland. The study targeted representatives of groups with an advanced or highly advanced level of professionalization. The respondents were group founders or members with very long tenure (minimum 10 years). The interviews focused on issues related to the professionalization of organizations providing educational and reenactment services, as well as topics related to teal management. The interviews addressed issues of competence, organizational development, adaptation and development of group members, responsible leadership, and managing a diverse team. One of the secondary findings was the conclusion regarding the presence of key elements characterizing communities of practice within the studied groups. This prompted the author to supplement the interviews with questions concerning factors influencing the development of the studied organizations, which were based on processes related to relationship building, knowledge transfer within the organization, and the creation of a shared group identity. The groups studied proved to be an ideal setting for research, serving as an example of organisms that naturally form an ecosystem of practitioner communities.

The first research tool consisted of thirty-one open-ended questions. The second tool consisted of seven additional open-ended questions. The interview was structured, based on a pre-prepared set of questions asked of all respondents in a similar order. At the same time, the interview design allowed for extensive, free-flowing responses from the participants, with the aim of obtaining in-depth information by having respondents elaborate on the topics raised. This made it possible to maintain the comparability of the data while capturing the broader context of the participants' experiences and opinions. The interviews were supplemented by participant observation, which involved the researcher's direct participation in selected group activities. Observation allowed for the verification of information obtained during the interviews and for capturing aspects of the community's functioning that are not always explicitly articulated by the respondents.

4. Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from the interviews suggest that reenactors do not view professionalization in terms of business skills, but rather as the ability to gain visibility – that is, recognition within the community – through, among other things: organizing events that bring together the largest groups of reenactors, creating initiatives that promote the community and attract the interest of other groups, and substantive preparation that reflects the most perfect and faithful historical reenactment, expressed through: clothing, makeup, and the depiction of the daily life of a chosen historical figure, taking into account their social status, gender, role, etc., as well as meticulous craftsmanship. For example, members of Legio XXI Rapax use only handmade materials. During organized outdoor marches, they live in tents, cook in camp, and even run a field hospital. They communicate in Latin, using the pronunciation which is as close as possible to original Roman.

In every case, the interlocutors pointed out the need for a high degree of determination among newcomers, which initially involves acquiring substantive knowledge and, subsequently, preparing their first costume and equipment under the guidance of experienced members of the group. In their opinion, two factors influence the level of this commitment: 1. Internal motivation, reflecting a desire to become a professional – the image of a reenactor, combined with an interest in history and a desire to draw the audience into the reenactor's closed-off world, ensures that a person joining the group is highly motivated from the very beginning to perform activities that will bring them closer to this goal. Already during the recruitment interviews, the person is partially informed about the development path and the standards imposed by the group, the fulfillment of which will contribute to long-term cooperation, resulting in the achievement of this goal. Sometimes these standards are very high; for example, they require active engagement in the form of independent analysis of historical sources. According to a source interviewed by Legio XXI Rapax, this high bar helps assess the genuine commitment of newcomers and serves as proof of their actual dedication. 2. Support from group members – this factor should be considered key to ensuring that initial motivation is not only sustained but also developed. The success of new members' adaptation is undoubtedly an indicator of the effectiveness of reenactment group development. It is precisely this human capital, absorbed by the organization, that serves as its primary „fuel", enabling the expansion of its scope of operations. The faster and more efficiently the adaptation process proceeds, the faster the organization gains the necessary resources. All interviewees unanimously stated that this support is not limited to substantive leadership or the sharing of practical knowledge (procedures, best practices, experiences, etc.). Phrases such as „family", „brothers", „bond", „father", and „friendship" appear in the interviews. These communities foster strong, deep social bonds that extend beyond mere social gatherings in one's free time to include organized mutual aid (e.g., fundraisers for the families of group members, support in the fight against cancer, etc.), involving group members in one's personal life, and even integrating one's own life into the group's activities (e.g., by permanently residing at the facility

that serves as the group's headquarters). According to the respondents' statements, it appears that the foundation for building these bonds consists of factors such as: 1. mentoring (within groups, this role is assumed either by the longest-standing members, those assigned this function within the group, or individuals specifically delegated to this task). For example, the Opole Knights Brotherhood assigns a "guide" to each novice—a member of the Brotherhood who helps them adjust. 2. Regular, high-quality communication based on respect and focused on inclusivity (professionalization is based on fostering appropriate attitudes and communication styles). The interviewees noted that the trainees come from diverse backgrounds, represent different values, and have contrasting personalities. Therefore, in their opinion, behaviors based on „openness", „promoting and embracing attitudes that encourage the exchange of views", „collegiality", and „maintaining high personal standards" are important.

Importantly, professionalization takes on another significant dimension: the transfer of these outcomes beyond the internal group. As mentioned earlier, historical reenactment groups learn and develop through practice, the exchange of experiences, and, above all, coexistence. Each group is distinguished by its own internal community, practices, and domain. However, reaching a high level of reenactment requires a communal form of activity. Otherwise, it would be impossible to organize large scale events such as spectacular historical festivals or battle reenactments. It would also be impossible to maintain a high level of historical accuracy without expert consultations and the exchange of experiences among reenactors representing different groups.

The internal group's interactions with external groups are responsible for standardization and quality improvement. Through these interactions, common criteria for authenticity are developed, and a mechanism for learning through criticism and observation is set in motion. It is worth noting that the know-how involved in reenactment is, to some extent, tacit knowledge, refined through practice and feedback. Through participation in major events, visibility in the media and on social media, pro-social activities, or the community's opinion of the group—gained through the purchase of their handcrafted products—reenactors learn about the strengths of their fellow creators and thus learn to emulate best practices. This collaboration has many dimensions. For example, the Saint Nicholas Company, as a group focused on, among other things, the reconstruction of liturgical vestments and liturgical equipment from the medieval era, prepares designs for vestments or fabrics for other reenactors. Another example is the Bolków Castle Knights Brotherhood, whose activities have resulted in the organization of prestigious knightly tournaments held at the Castle, as well as given rise to many new, currently active, reenactment groups in Lower Silesia. This continuous transfer of knowledge between reenactment groups is a process of ongoing improvement through participation in social practice and interaction with other participants in the field. Professionalization therefore takes on a normative and quality oriented character, and its measure is recognition within the profession and a reputation built through the consistent application of high standards.

5. Discussion

The empirical data collected were of a pilot nature and constituted an early stage of exploration of the researched phenomenon. This means that they do not allow for generalizations; therefore, to enhance the reliability of the research, it is advisable to conduct further studies using a larger sample of respondents. The presented results can, however, be considered promising. Perhaps an interdisciplinary perspective will be helpful in deepening our understanding of complex social phenomena, especially when we recognize that organizations function simultaneously as social, cultural, economic, and technological systems. Including the communities of educational and reenactment service providers within the scope of management and quality science will broaden the discipline's research focus, which has primarily centered on formal organizations, to include organizations established primarily through grassroots initiatives. Observing the processes within these organizations has provided insight into an alternative model of professionalization, serving as a valuable research laboratory. Historical reenactment communities can be viewed as a model example of how communities of practitioners function, where professionalization occurs through participation, relationality, and the collective negotiation of standards. This is a promising field for research on this topic, and the findings may open new perspectives for researchers studying contemporary organizations. It should be however noted, that a limitation of this study is the inability to fully and directly apply the findings to formal organizations, primarily because the organizations studied represent groups with specific characteristics. Nevertheless, in the final assessment, it can be concluded that a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon from a broader representative perspective could lead to the development of broader practical implications than those currently available in the theoretical discourse presented thus far.

6. Summary

In conclusion, the research findings presented here lead to the following findings regarding their potential applications in the field of management:

- the collaborative learning model facilitates the transfer of tacit knowledge, which is difficult to formalize in procedures,
- mentoring and inclusive communication enhance the effectiveness of new members onboarding in organizations,
- inter-organizational collaboration and environmental benchmarking lead to natural standardization and continuous quality improvement through networked learning,

- professionalism can be built through reputation and maintaining quality, rather than solely through formal performance metrics,
- communities of practitioners build strong, deep social bonds, which can be leveraged, for example, in managing diverse teams.

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