

Building a Successful Community of Practice

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A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of individuals within an organisation who band together to share their knowledge and expertise, to learn from each other and to build their capabilities.

Communities of Practice are not new. From medieval guilds through professional associations to online communities in modern corporations, people have always sought out others who share their enthusiasms and interests.

Communities of Practice can be of immense value to an organisation. Making the best use of the knowledge and expertise of people in an organisation brings immediate real benefits to the bottom line.

Shell saved over 200 million dollars in their Exploration and Production division by making sure that project teams across the globe could access the collected experience of the organisation.

Uniqema, a subsidiary of ICI, managed to save 2 percent per annum from supply chain costs by sharing successful ideas across all manufacturing sites.

Buckman Laboratories cut the average time taken to resolve a technical query from a customer from three weeks to three days by posting all technical queries on a bulletin board and allowing their entire population to suggest solutions.

What is a Community of Practice?



Team  Community

- Driven by delivery
- Defined by tasks
- Control
- Driven by value
- Defined by knowledge
- Responsive

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A Community of Practice is different to a team or a task force.

A project team or task force is set up to achieve a specific goal. The members of the team or task force are usually nominated by the line management, and once the objective has been reached, the group disbands.

Similarly, a team grouped around a business process will also be set up by management, and will be defined by the tasks they have to accomplish.

A Community of Practice is driven by the value it brings to the members. People volunteer to be part of the community because it is interesting, and it helps them to be more effective. A CoP normally has a much longer life than a project team or task force. It continues as long as it is useful to its members.

A Community of Practice is defined by an area of knowledge not by specific tasks. A CoP will have knowledge of how to create an effective marketing campaign, but will not develop a campaign for a new product concept.

Where a team manages itself to deliver its goals by specific dates, the community is responsive to the needs of all its members.

In reality it is a continuum, with communities sometimes having the features of teams, and teams sometimes behaving like communities.

Types of community



There are two fundamentally different types of community:

Strategic



Emergent

1. Strategic communities

Strategic communities are created to meet an identified specific need in an organisation. They are the result of a top-down management decision.

For example:

"To be successful we must maintain our leading position in the industry in developing attractive and novel financial products. To do this we must make sure that the knowledge of our best product developers is spread around the organisation. That we learn constantly from every new product launch and that everyone has access to our up-to-date assessment of tax law.

We will set up a Community of Practice on financial product development and we will encourage all our leading experts to participate."

2. Emergent communities

Emergent communities come out of the organisation itself. A group of experts will come together for mutual support. They find it useful to have access to a group who share the same expertise to help them solve problems, and to bounce ideas off.

An emergent community is self-selecting and self managing. It will often be invisible to most of the organisation, but works away in the background helping the community members to be more effective.

In one high-tech organisation, we found evidence of over 50 informal communities using online tools to share and build expertise. Many people knew about one or two of these networks, but nobody was aware how many there were, or how strong they were.

Emergent communities often benefit from a little bit of advertising to raise their profile. At community that everyone knows about can have a much bigger impact on than one that is a secret known only to a few. Many companies monitor the development and emergent communities, selecting those that have the biggest potential impact and encouraging them to grow.

Things communities do



CoP's deliver value in many different ways:

- Identify and spread good practice
- Secure know-how
- Develop capability
 - organisational
 - personal
- Solve problems
- Learn / Teach
- Social network

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- Identify and spread good practice

Communities of Practice are an excellent way to spread good ideas and good practices around an organisation. In many organisations the community chooses and publicises the most successful model practices helping everyone to perform better.

This can cover everything from the best way to set up a piece of manufacturing equipment to how to run a successful marketing campaign.

- Secure know-how

A key problem for many organisations is losing expertise carried in the heads of individuals who retire or leave. A Community of Practice can help to secure that know-how by spreading it to other members of the community, and codifying it in reports, training modules or other knowledge objects.

- Develop capability at an organisational and personal level

By working together the experts in a community can strengthen the capability of the whole organisation by structuring the experience and expertise and making it available. They can build their own capability by working with other experts around the organisation, and they can support newcomers as they build their own expertise.

- Solve problems

CoP's can dramatically improve problem-solving capacity. Anyone with a problem can share it with the rest of the community and get the benefit of their experience and knowledge. As communities mature, more of the expertise can be written down as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's).

- Act as a learning/teaching resource

CoP's can be excellent learning and teaching resources. In many organisations CoP's take on a key role in identifying critical pieces of knowledge and know-how, packaging them, and making them available to the wider organisation.

- Social network

Finally, a CoP is an important social network. It helps an organisation's experts to feel comfortable working with each other, so that when any individual has a problem the whole network helps and supports them. Mutual respect and

recognition amongst your experts helps you to respond more quickly and more effectively.

6 Steps to a Successful Community

Successful communities share common features:

1. They have a clear purpose
2. They fit the culture of the organisation
3. They deliver real benefits to the community members
4. They have leaders
5. They agree ways of working amongst the community
6. Even if they operate mostly on-line, they use face-to-face meetings

Have a purpose



A Community of Practice needs to have a very clear purpose.



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Whether it is about manufacturing excellence, or advanced marketing, the domain of expertise covered needs to be clear to the whole organisation.

People need to know what a community is about so that they can decide whether to participate or not, and whether that particular community

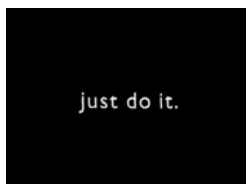
might have an answer to a problem they are struggling with.

In general, the more tightly defined a community is the more effective it is.

Fit the culture



A Community of Practice needs to fit your organisational culture.



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Everybody in your organisation instinctively understands how things work, and what the culture is. If they sense a difference between what they are being asked to do in a CoP and the normal behaviours in your organisation, they will follow the norms every time.

So if you have a decentralised organisation with a lot of individual autonomy, a self-organising network of like-minded individuals can easily form and start adding value to the organisation and each other. If your organisation is more hierarchical and structured, it may be necessary to discuss setting up the community with key

decision makers and to make sure that people have 'permission' to be involved in the community.

This is not to say that one approach or the other is necessarily better, it is just to say that a successful community will work with the grain of your organisation not against it.

Deliver to community members



To be successful a community must offer real value to its participants.

How will this make my life better?

- Many minds
- Peer group support
- Better problem solving
- Be a hero
- Personal development
- Less lonely
- More interesting problems
- Shed routine work

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The value to the organisation will not be the reason for enthusiastic involvement and support from community members. It is the value to them as individuals. How will the community help them to achieve their goals? How will intimate their lives better?

There needs to be a 'personal return on investment'.

You are asking people to change the way that they work, and if you cannot demonstrate the benefits that they will personally receive, they will choose to put their efforts elsewhere.

David Snowden (IBM Cynefin Centre) has argued that to make a community work the individual members need to receive twice as much benefit as the effort they are being asked to put in.

Whatever the benefits are, they need to be things the participants want and they need to be delivered in a clear and transparent way.

Find a leader



CoP's are much easier to set up and maintain with a strong leader.



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Like any social organisation, a Community of Practice is often set up with great enthusiasm and excitement, but as time passes becomes less active, less interesting to members and finally fades away.

A good leader helps to act as a focal point for the community, encouraging participation, ensuring relevance and building capability.

Some organisations have full-time community leaders for CoP's that are strategically important. Others don't have full-time leaders, but ensure that this activity is written into the job description and the performance review for the leader.

Agree ways of working



- What are we going to do?
- What do we hope to achieve?
- How will we treat each other?
- What tools shall we use?
- How will we judge?
- Who can join?
- Privacy?

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Like any club a Community of Practice has to have rules. What is the purpose of the community? Who can join? What are the benefits and obligations of membership? How will we treat each other? And how will disputes and disagreements be resolved?

Far too many CoP's are set up without thinking about ways of working. It seems to be unnecessary in the enthusiasm of starting a community.

Surely there are far more important things to do?

The problem is that without thinking about these issues, different people will go into the community with different agendas and expectations. This can be immensely destructive.

One of the most difficult areas to deal with is the question of who can join the community and how private or open is it going to be?

Some successful communities have had tightly controlled membership where a demonstrated high level of expertise is necessary before you will be invited to join. These communities are often completely private with information only being available to other members of the community. This allows the experts to discuss the debate difficult and contentious issues confident that only other experts can see what is going on.

Other communities have been extremely open, with membership simply being a matter of deciding to participate. Still others have had private meeting spaces for the core members of the community, and a public space for wider dissemination of the knowledge and know-how.

Whichever model you use, you need to make sure that everyone understands it.

Have meetings



Co-ordination

Co-operation

Inspiration

Communities often operate almost entirely online. It means that expertise can be accessed when it is needed, without barriers of space and time.

Despite this convenience, communities should have face-to-face meetings. Not everything can be done on-line, and face-to-face meetings are an important part of strengthening the social side of community or network.

When you are setting up a community is a good time for a face-to-face meeting. Perhaps a launch conference. Members of the community need to know each other and come to trust each other. Building trust is very difficult to do without face-to-face meetings, as we depend so much on non-verbal communication in our dealings with people.

How important meetings are depends on the activities being carried out.

If you have a well-defined series of tasks to carry out with clear milestones and a delivery timetable, you can do a great deal of work on-line. The driving force of the deadlines makes it easier to overcome the inherent problems of working on-line. The problem is one of 'coordination' of activities. This situation is more typical of project teams, but can also be found in more structured communities.

On the other hand, if there is no driving timetable but a need to work collectively, the task is one of creating 'co-operation'. This is where most communities spend most of their time, and although you can still do a great deal on-line, there is more need for face-to-face meetings to help the community to deliver.

However, if you are trying to generate new thinking, to create 'inspiration' then there is no adequate alternative to meeting people. Really successful brainstorming sessions occur in the intensity of face-to-face interaction not in online discussion forums.

So make sure that you do have meetings, and use them for their best purpose. Setting up new activities, solving complex problems and creativity are best done face-to-face. More routine activities can be dealt with on-line.



Finally, managers play a very important role in encouraging the success of Communities of Practice.

“Stand back!”

“Be humble!”

CoP's should not be controlled too closely. Even if they have been set up as a strategic support to an organisation, they need to be given room to breathe. Your experts need a space where they can openly discuss their knowledge and know-how.

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Where they can express uncertainty and dissent, and debate the best way to deliver to the business. If they get the impression that they are being monitored, and that the opinions they express may in some way be used against them, the community will be destroyed.

So managers should stand back from the community, and should be very humble in the presence of the community. Managers can be community members, but only if they are there as experts and not as managers.

Bob Buckman of Buckman Laboratories built CoP's into the provision of technical service to his customers. Problems were constantly being debated in online discussion rooms around the company. Although Bob had a lot of experience and had a lot to contribute, he found that he had to "tread very lightly". As the owner of the company, he found that any suggestion he made was taken as the final answer. His contribution closed down the debate. He had to work very hard to persuade people that he was just another person with an idea, and that it was okay to point out to him publicly any flaws in his ideas.