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## Communities of Practice

### What are Communities of Practice?

The concept of communities of practice is said to “provide a useful perspective on knowing and learning”. The idea that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community of practice has gained significant ground in recent years. As such, there are a growing number of organisations across various sectors which are employing and focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance.

The concept of communities of practice is defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. It is a group of people who are informally bound together to engage in the process of collective learning in a shared domain, through the sharing of expertise and passion for a joint enterprise.

### Benefits of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice is hoped to “radically galvanise knowledge sharing, learning and change”. They can drive strategy, generate new lines of business, solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, develop people’s professional skills and even help organisation in recruiting and retaining talent.

Other benefits include;

- Improving business outcomes
  - It is an arena for problem solving
  - Ability to obtain quick answers to questions
  - Reduces time and costs of information search
  - Improve quality of decisions
  - Provides more perspective on problems
  - Coordinates and find synergies across organisation
  - Promotes risks taking in trying out new things

- Develop organisational capabilities
  - Executes a strategic plan
  - Provides authority with clients
  - Increases retention of talent
  - Capacity for knowledge management projects
  - Ability to innovate
  - Ability to foresee technological developments/advancements
  - Ability to take advantage of emerging markets
- Improve experience of work
  - Helps with challenges
  - Provides access to expertise
  - Better able to contribute to team tasks
  - Boosts confidence in one's approach to problem
  - Provides fun of being with colleagues
  - More meaningful participation
  - Provides sense of belonging
- Foster professional development
  - Provides a forum of expanding skills and expertise
  - Provides a network for keeping abreast of a field
  - Enhances professional reputation
  - Increases marketability and employability
  - Provides strong sense of professional identity

## Where is the Concept Being Applied?

The concept of community of practice is being applied in various practical applications in business, organisation design, governments, education, professional associations, and development projects.

The government sector adopts communities of practice to face knowledge challenges of increasing complexity and scale. Knowledge sharing is employed to address problems such as education, health and security. Mean while, the education sector employs communities of practice in the teacher training, and in providing isolated administrators with access to colleagues.

## Characteristics of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice come in various forms; small, large, local, across the globe, face-to-face meeting, online meeting, etc. For some communities of practice, regular meetings may be held during lunch, while others are connected primarily by e-mail

networks. People in communities of practice share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems.

There are three crucial characteristics of communities of practice that distinguish a community of practice from other groups and communities.

The three elements are;

- the domain
- the community
- the practice

### **The Domain**

A community of practice is more than just a club of friends or a network of connections between people. “a shared domain of interest” defines its identity, where membership implies a commitment to the domain, and hence a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

### **The Community**

While pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other and share information. They foster relationships, which enable them to learn from each other. Often, interactions are essential in making them a community of practice.

### **The Practice**

Members of community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources such as experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems, etc. Often, this takes time and sustained interaction.

### **How Do Communities of Practice Differ From Other Forms of Organisation?**

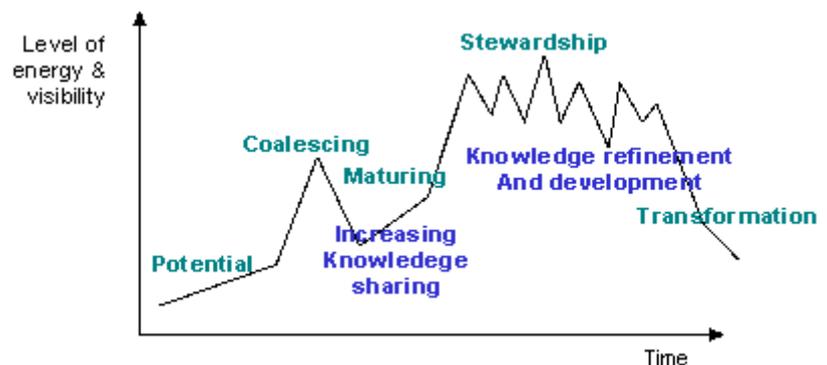
Communities of practice, formal work groups, teams and informal networks are useful in complementary ways. Below is a summary of their characteristics.

	What's the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
<b>Community of practice</b>	To develop members' capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is an interest in maintaining the group
<b>Formal work</b>	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganisation
<b>Project team</b>	To accomplish a task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
<b>Informal network</b>	To collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

Source: Wenger, E. C., & Snyder, W. M. (2000, February 22). *Communities of practice: The organizational frontier*. Retrieved January 25, 2010, from <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/1317.html>

## Development Stages of Communities of Practice

Community of practice goes through a cycle where it starts as a mere potential, develops progressively into a mature state, continues to evolve until it no longer become relevant. Community of practice evolves continually, with some distinct stages. However, the stages and their sequence are merely typical. There can be wide variations in the ways each community experience them. While some advances from one stage to another very quickly, others may spend a little more time on some stages, or even skip a stage altogether.



Source: van Winkelen, C. (2003, May 20). *Inter-organizational communities of practice*. Retrieved January 25, 2010, from [http://www.elearningeuropa.info/directory/index.php?page=doc&doc\\_id=1483&doclng=6](http://www.elearningeuropa.info/directory/index.php?page=doc&doc_id=1483&doclng=6)

### Stage 1: Potential

At this stage, the community is not quite established yet. It is rather a "loose network of people who interact occasionally around a situation or interest". However, the "community" already comprises some basic elements of a community and the potential

to become one. The idea of forming a community is often introduced into this loose network. They will discover common ground and prepare for a community. This will trigger the redirection of people's attention. As soon as the sense of a shared domain develops, the need for more "systematic interactions emerges and generates interests". Hence, someone from the "community" will step up to undertake some responsibility to start the community. While some would conduct a round of interviews with potential members, others would have a preliminary meeting to discuss the formation of a community.

Community must build on existing interests and relationships. The success of a community is dependant on "the initiative of people who have a connection to the domain, recognise the potential for the community and are in the position to build on it".

### **Stage 2: Coalescing**

At this stage, the community is still in its infancy. While members have had their hopes raised by the discovery of the potential of their community and their commitment to get it going, the value of the community still has to become a reality in their lives. A community is only convinced of its value after members started solving problems together.

This stage is a "particularly fragile time" in community development. It is crucial to understand the needs of this transitional stage. It is equally important to shepherd the members of the community to start building the momentum in building relationships, helping each other, and discovering what knowledge is really useful to share. A stronger bond must be fostered among community members and "create enough energy and momentum to sustain members through this initial work".

The interplay of public and private spaces starts to function once this stage is successful. Discussions that draw in potential community members become public. The community will begin to establish the schedule for weekly meetings, documents, web sites, etc. Members will begin to connect more, and finding more common ground, before finding opportunities to help each other and start sharing tools, templates and tips. The community begins to take shape and have a presence in the experience of members.

### **Stage 3: Maturing**

At this point, the community needs to go "one step deeper into the domain and develop a more focused communal identity". With the community now coalesced, people will be aware and know

that they do have useful things to share, and that relationships between community members are enduring. They will also realise that the community has enough resilience to survive. Hence, the community is not ready to develop a self-conscious identity as a community.

The building of a communal identity is a “significant departure from merely generating value for participants and for the organisation” by addressing problems that arise or sharing ideas that have worked well. It requires self-awareness, focus and alignment, and by being intentional about establishing a shared practice, requires greater commitment and in-dept discussions. The activities undertaken by the community will become “more focused and systematic about establishing standards for recurring problems and routine operations, finding gaps in its knowledge, and undertaking projects to close them”. Additional resources from the organisation are often needed. The community also needs to become more systematic about involving all the relevant participants, which can disrupt the informal intimacy of the initial group. These steps, however, is recognised to make the community “ready to take increasing responsibility for stewarding knowledge in its domain”.

#### **Stage 4: Stewardship**

The community by now would have established its identity as a community. However, this is only the beginning of its active life. Communities of practice will continue to change after they have reached maturity. This is in response to their environment, at the same time, shaping the environment. They expand their focus, address new problems and undertake new projects, and become a complex set of activities, relationships and subgroups with special interests. The communities will continue to grow, “accommodating successive generations of members”. With new members on board, new issues will arise, and thus, they will need to redirect their focus to meet the needs of its changing membership. Often, community leaders will leave, either because they burn out or the desire to move on. As members settle into a routine, they soon need to find new sources of inspirations. All these changes bring new challenges and opportunities that keep mature communities on their toes. Hence, it is recommended to have renewal events, to “allow community members to reflect together on their achievements, their lessons learned, and the value they produce, and to outline a path forward”.

Maturity is not the end of community-development efforts. Taking explicit responsibility for stewarding expertise in its domain means developing its practice to its full potential. The community need to start thinking strategically about the knowledge it has accumulated and the knowledge it needs to create. It also has to

maintain energy and explore the leading edge of its practice, apart from looking more systematically for sources of expertise it can tap on. It may even involve seeking relationships with related groups outside its direct organisational context.

During the stewardship stage, communities of practice often divert their attention to their relationships with the organisation and other groups. They seek to influence the organisations, and hope to have a voice that reflects the authority they have achieved with respect to their domain. “Thinking strategically about developing their knowledge, the communities will also start thinking strategically about what their domain means to the organisation”.

### **Stage 5: Legacy**

Communities of practice will eventually meet their end. Their domain may no longer be relevant and members will move on to other interests and activities. In some instances, mergers take place between communities. Alternatively, a domain may have become so complex that results in the community splitting into a series of distinct ones.

## **Communities of Practice in Organisations**

Communities of practice enhance networking. They connect people in different units around knowledge topics and increase trust and motivation. Communities of practice also promote cooperation, apart from connecting personal and professional development of practitioners to the strategy of the organisation.

Diverse approaches to supporting communities of practice have been adopted by different organisations. While some see them as “largely emergent phenomena, others have adopted more deliberate strategies to design and manage their shape and purpose”. As mentioned earlier, communities of practice are different from organisation groups such as formal work group, project teams, etc. and communities of interest, where people tend to gather around a particular issue or sharing a common domain. “Communities of practice involve people jointly developing a shared collection of resources to support work in a specific field”.

The main driver for organisations in developing communities of practice is “deeply rooted” in the value as ways of transferring knowledge between their employees. Organisation such as IBM and HP for example, named their communities of practice as “knowledge networks”. With the current knowledge economy, organisations are driven to ensure that their employees become “knowledge workers”; “individuals who constantly draw on a

wealth of knowledge to devise new responses and solutions for a rapidly changing market place". Employees should be able to participate in a flow of knowledge, which includes the exchange of ideas with others, who have experience, expertise and skill related to the area of work.

Communities of practice are also known to offer the opportunity in increasing job satisfaction among employees and hence, reducing staff turnover. This is evident as individuals develop greater awareness of their own worth in the knowledge economy, and recognising that they must take responsibility for their own career. Hence, employees will increasingly add into their own decision-making process consideration of the opportunity a potential work experience offers to learn and allow them to retain their own market value in the future. With this, organisations which are able to offer opportunity in participating in a leading community of practice in the professional knowledge domains of their employees are now appearing particularly attractive.

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Articles may be delivered to clients, upon request.

Books are available at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library.

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