

Communities of Practice

Lessons from Leading Collaborative Enterprises

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Profiles



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Prior to taking up his current role, Simon was editor of *Knowledge Management* magazine for almost four years. Widely regarded as the leading journal in its field, *Knowledge Management* is the only industry publication to feature in-depth case studies from leading blue-chip companies, together with interviews with KM luminaries, industry news and analysis. The magazine is read by more than 20,000 KM professional and practitioners from both the public and the private sector and in countries throughout the world.

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Executive summary

FEW CONCEPTS in the field of knowledge management (KM) have generated such sustained interest as that of communities of practice (CoP). The word 'community' itself connotes so many of the ideals that KM practitioners hold dear: collective strength, openness and trust, a predication towards mutual support and collaboration. Little wonder, then, that those charged with building a culture that encourages collaborative working have latched on to the concept with such enthusiasm. For many, communities of practice are the bedrock of the knowledge-enabled enterprise, and rightly so.

Through a mix of case studies – in turn either written exclusively for this report, drawn from the archives of *Knowledge Management* magazine or taken from Ark Group's extremely successful series of events dedicated to communities of practice – and interviews with leading CoP and KM experts, *Communities of Practice: Lessons from Leading Collaborative Enterprises* uncovers what communities of practice are, why they are important, and how organisations can look to derive maximum benefit from them. Rather than a step-by-step guide to community development, this report explores the opportunities presented by communities of practice in a real-world context, through the successes and failures of organisations that have first-hand experience putting theory into practice.

Defining the concept

Communities of practice are, to use a commonly referred to definition, groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. They are a unique form of association, consisting of three core elements: a domain,

which creates a common ground and a sense of identity; a community, which fosters interaction and the development of relationships; and a practice, the specific knowledge that the community develops, shares and maintains.

To these central components, it is possible to add a number of common characteristics. Thus, communities of practice:

- Utilise productive enquiry;
- Self-manage and self-govern;
- Generate knowledge in support of their practice;
- Assume accountability for supporting their members;
- Collaborate via multiple channels;
- Receive support from the organisation, to varying degrees.

The business case

Communities of practice have the capacity to contribute right across the knowledge lifecycle – from innovation, learning and knowledge creation, to sharing and re-use, to knowledge retention and protection. Free from constraints that govern other organisational units, for instance departments or teams, their ability to deliver value to the individual and to the organisation stems from the unique role they fulfil in the modern organisation, and the centrality of knowledge and intellectual capital in the modern business environment.

To the organisation, communities of practice offer a means to reduce costs through the re-use of existing knowledge and good practice, to increase quality and consistency, to build an environment conducive to the development of expertise and innovative solutions, to become more responsive to market developments, and to prepare for participation in the networked economy. Individual community members, in turn, benefit from rapid orienta-

tion and networking, assistance in the performance of daily tasks and therefore improved results, access to experts and colleagues where this might normally be prevented, and the opportunity to participate and influence developments in the organisation as a whole.

Such returns are by no means inevitable, however. Active measurement is therefore important in allowing an organisation to assess both the health and the success of a community in achieving its goals. It is critical, though, to use measure that mean something in the context of the organisation as a whole. These measures should also relate to the original purpose of the community – without a clear idea about what a community is meant to achieve, it is impossible to tell whether it is on course to deliver against these goals.

Having established what constitutes a healthy community and how success will be defined, it is possible to gauge performance in a number of ways. A financial ROI may be calculated based on a community's effect on productivity, for example, or in its ability to solve potentially costly business problems. Non-financial indicators include usage statistics, number of problems posed/solved and the growth or decline in membership. Surveys and questionnaires offer a way of collating qualitative evidence of community health, while anecdotal evidence can be a powerful indicator of the value a community offers, particularly when combined with quantitative data.

The foundations for success and advanced interventions

In order to give every community the best chance of success, those charged with fostering a community's development should look to provide certain conditions and levels of care. However, any intervention or attempt to change the status of a community of practice (for instance, to become more accountable in line with organisational goals, or to create

a more formal community where only a loose association existed before) should be handled carefully. Managing without managing is key, and community-programme leaders need to focus on building consensus among community participants. A community's right to self-govern should not be compromised.

That said, the success of a community of practice will depend on certain factors:

- A strong sense of purpose, understood and agreed upon by all stakeholders;
- Senior-management support;
- A climate of trust, reciprocity and openness;
- Behavioural guidelines and a system of governance;
- A suitably diverse membership and an openness to new ideas and challenges;
- Dedicated and passionate individuals who are willing to take on key roles, especially that of community facilitator;
- A suitable technological infrastructure.

The provision of external support structures and the use of such techniques as social-network analysis and storytelling can also make a powerful contribution to a community's development.

Pitfalls and possibilities

An understanding of the importance of context is a theme that runs throughout this report; when it comes to communities, best practice is impossible to define. That said, there are elements of good practice that organisations should not ignore, just as there are many common pitfalls that communities and community programmes fall into. By learning from the experiences of others, borrowing what works and sidestepping avoidable mistakes, practitioners should be in a position to offer the communities that exist within their organisation every chance of success.