



Network Notes III

Communities of Practice

“No organization that is serious about competing in a knowledge economy should overlook the strategic value of Communities of Practice.” ~ Etienne Wenger (www.ewenger.com)

The concept of a community of practice (often abbreviated CoP) refers to a type of network that brings individuals from the same field together. These individuals share a strong passion for what they do and engage in ongoing activities to innovate and create new ideas, find solutions, share knowledge, and validate best practices in their profession.¹ While this way of working is certainly not new, it is increasingly clear that communities of practice are seen as vehicles for effective knowledge sharing and knowledge creation and are becoming more and more predominant in various sectors, including business, education, organizational development, and health services. The ability of communities of practice to cut across hierarchical and geographic boundaries and improve capacity in research, management, and policy-making makes them of special interest to the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation. As a result, the foundation embarked on several initiatives to understand, support, and create communities of practice.²

THE BASIC ELEMENTS

Communities of practice have three essential elements: a shared *domain* or field; a defined *community* of participants; and a goal of improving the *practice* and professional

capacity of the group. The domain encompasses people from the same discipline or area of expertise who share a common passion on a subject or goal that can improve their profession. The concept of community captures the way in which the relationships among members are fostered and developed. Even if the actual learning is applied individually by each member, it is the sustained interactions over time that create the community. For instance, “Impressionists used to meet in cafés and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.”³ The practice links very closely with the domain and community and is about developing “a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems - in short a shared practice.”⁴ It takes time and often creates tools and best practices that can be applied by members.

Communities of practice can be created both within organizations and across organizational boundaries. They range in degree of formality from a group of people discussing a specific topic affecting their domain to formal meetings designed to enhance professional knowledge

exchange mechanisms. A key feature of communities of practice is that members naturally engage in participation, negotiate meaning, and share ideas to develop best practices in their field. Members do so not only because of their common interest but because of the professional and personal value they find in learning as a group and interacting with each other.

A MULTI-PHASED APPROACH FOR GROWTH, SUCCESS, AND EVALUATION

1) Plant the Seed

Communities of practice are organic in the sense they are naturally occurring entities that emerge in response to a need, interest, or range of issues that is affecting the practice or field. Often, the seed for a thriving community of practice can be found in already existing knowledge-sharing relationships such as conferences, symposiums, forums, and journals. They are nurtured by inner motivations and often run counter to rigid organizational structures. That said, sometimes communities of practice need help to get started. In these instances, network co-ordinators or stewards must encourage participation from members while being careful not to over-manage the community and allow it a chance to flourish on its own.

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Ultimately, a community of practice will thrive when members believe in the purpose and goals of the community and their collective ability to build and exchange knowledge.

2) Set the Vision, Value, and Purpose

As with all networks, communities of practice need clear goals and objectives and a vision that is shared by members. This process needs to include clarifying an identity for the community, which can start by mapping out the who, what, why, when, where, and how of the practice. The following questions should be considered:

- Who is eligible to be part of the community?
- Why has the community of practice been formed?
- What do members want to achieve in forming this community of practice?
- When will events and meetings occur?
- Where will the community of practice be housed?
- How will the defined objectives be met?

In addition to answering these questions, it is helpful to define the governance, consider the infrastructure, and identify individual roles for members. Thinking about these things at the outset and throughout the lifespan of your community of practice will not only help guide and direct you in your community's development but will also give you something to evaluate against later. A thriving community of practice addresses a deeply human need to connect, learn, and share with others around the work and practices we are committed to and care about.

3) Cultivate the Environment and the Community

Activities that stewards or leaders can do to nurture the growth of a community of practice include creating a dynamic learning environment, fostering horizontal relationships, and encouraging members to exchange information and test ideas with each other regardless of their institutional status. Stewards

can also engage members in practical and theoretical cutting-edge issues that will naturally enhance the value of membership and intrigue others to become involved. A vital element of the community's growth comes from the recognition of individual and community accomplishments. Like water to a seedling, recognition of important and valuable contributions will stimulate growth. It is essential to organize regular events that set the rhythm of the community and provide a forum where individuals can interact on their own time (for example, organizing teleconferences, hosting a discussion board over the Internet, or providing members with a directory of contacts). Technology is a useful tool for enhancing interaction and can help members stay connected between events; however, it cannot replace face-to-face meetings. Investments in supporting group dynamics, social conferencing skills, and problem-solving techniques will further facilitate knowledge sharing. In the end, every community of practice is distinct and will require unique tools and initiatives to succeed. The key is time to allow the community to evolve and members to build trust through various forms of sustained activity.

In addition to activities, stewards must nurture leadership, trust, and commitment within a community of practice for it to flourish. Strong internal leadership will likely come from a core group of members who will set the direction of the community. As different members take on leadership roles over time, establishing trust, commitment, and open communication will be critical. Trust allows members to depend on each other for information and advice and encourages them to feel free to express ideas openly. Commitment is the glue that holds the community together, encouraging members to contribute their time and remain dedicated to the shared vision for future success. Some of the most important elements

in the process of open communication include listening to all of the voices, allowing members to decide which elements will be applied, and fostering an environment that encourages growth and learning.

4) Harvest the Learning and the Knowledge

The organizational and individual benefits that can be reaped as a result of a community of practice are as diverse as they are numerous. Organizational benefits include a better use of resources, decreased costs of training, and enhanced capabilities in developing, sharing, and managing specialist knowledge. Individual benefits consist of more innovative idea creation, a faster learning curve, easy access to experts and knowledge, and better job satisfaction. Measuring the value of these benefits is instrumental in the success of a community and in allowing it to gain visibility and influence. Although some of these benefits can be quantified through the use of surveys and reports (such as determining the percentage of participants who found the community enhanced collaboration, knowledge, and professional development), one of the best ways to communicate the value of a community of practice is through anecdotes and stories. Good stories not only translate benefits into tangible value, they also serve as motivators and help communities build, share, and apply knowledge. Personal stories on how a

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community helped an individual overcome a professional barrier or enhance his/her knowledge on a perplexing issue will easily resonate with community members and executive sponsors alike. Being systematic in collecting stories from a wide array of participants and ensuring the stories capture the diversity and range of community activities will help add vitality and validity to evaluations.

Along the way, it is important to keep in mind that a community of practice is about more than shared interest. A good conversation may give you all sorts of insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. A community of practice brings together individuals who are committed to developing and validating best practices in their profession over time and through sustained interactions. Through this process, the members become an entity that is stronger as a whole than any one of its parts.

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- 1 For a good list of resources and overview of the history of this concept visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice.
 - 2 For a list of the various communities of practice underway via the foundation visit www.chsrf.ca/knowledge_transfer/networks_inventory_e.php#cop.
 - 3 www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm
 - 4 www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm

Resources

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