## Networks and Communities

**Tips for recognizing the importance of networks and identifying practices to identify, measure and support the stimulation of these structures**

### Networks and communities

Networks and communities offer a way of working across traditional vertical structures to support cross-boundary learning and increase knowledge flow. Networks and communities of practice (CoP) are similar in that they are less formal than vertical structures; they tend to span boundaries; they are voluntary and structured from within; and they are closely tied to individuals’ work. CoPs are simpler to recognize than networks, because CoP members regularly connect around a common domain. Networks focus largely on “go-to” people.

Networks operate at many levels: technological, human, social and business. According to value networks expert Allee (2003), organizations need to better understand (by key area of learning):

- **Strategically**: our organizations [or ministries] as participants in multiple networks where intangible assets & relationships are key;
- **Tactically**: networks and CoPs as ways of leveraging knowledge and innovation;
- **Operationally**: how digital networks support people in creating, organizing and accessing important knowledge;
- **Integrity**: new ethical underpinnings for networked organizations; and
- **Communication**: how to facilitate and engage in conversations that matter.

### When?

- Learn about existing networks.
- Identify how new networks can fit with the overall knowledge strategy.
- Reflect on surprises.
- Carefully probe potential challenges to knowledge flow and monitor results.

### Networks can be measured and stimulated

- Learning about existing networks is a good starting point. You can do this through deliberate research. Social network analysis (SNA) is one way to identify networks in and across organizations.
- Through understanding existing networks, you may identify a need to enhance an existing network or stimulate a new network.
- You can deliberately stimulate a network by bringing people together using tools such as Open Space Technology and CoPs.

### Benefits:

- Knowledge and trust develops through conversations amongst citizens, companies and public servants
- Relationships build across boundaries
- Knowledge is shared across vertical structures
- Tacit knowledge that cannot be codified and stored no longer only sits with a few specialists
- Social networks and social capital is strengthened
- Potential for knowledge generation and innovation increases

### Pitfalls to avoid:

- Trying to control, manage and measure as one would a project team
- Assuming you understand the organization’s networks
- Trying to constrain the network to match your span of control
- Assuming networks cannot be influenced because they are driven by factors such as workload and personalities
- Assuming that lots of communication will optimize networks
- Assuming that everyone needs to be connected to everyone
- Being unaware of how much organizations can learn from networks.
To learn more:


