

4.0 Practice Guide – Capability Area #2: Networks and Communities

Communities of Practice

Tips for developing an effective community of practice (CoP)

What is a community of practice?

Leading expert Etienne Wenger defines communities of practice as “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.” Communities of practice operate through trust, reciprocity and recognition. They are unlike other groups and require a different style of support and leadership. They are voluntary, structured from within and closely tied to individuals’ identities.

Why have a community of practice?

- Traditional, vertical government structures are good for some purposes, but can be cumbersome for cross-boundary learning, complex problem-solving and innovation. Communities of practice can help to mobilize, share and generate tacit knowledge, increase social networks and improve the quality of information in a repository. They support learning that is embedded in work and provide a forum for people to generate knowledge through conversation. As networks and communities flourish in an organization, they are often the glue that ties things together to accelerate learning.

Tips on developing an effective CoP:

Using light touch support in terms of space, time and minimal resources is a good first step.

Many communities quickly work out codes of conduct about what can be shared and how.

CoPs that span boundaries (e.g., across all of government or across several firms in similar fields) tend to be more vibrant and valuable than those more confined.

CoPs have three main components: domain (content), community- and relationship-building, and work with practice. Start-up activities involve setting strategic context, education, support, pilots, encouragement and integration with member organizations.

Benefits:

- Builds on formal training but also supports learning within a work context
- Knowledge shared across boundaries mitigates against silos
- Tacit knowledge that cannot be codified no longer sits with one or two specialists; risks are reduced
- Potential for greatly improved repository in some fields
- Social networks and social capital strengthened
- Potential increased for knowledge creation and innovation
- Relationships with colleagues and client groups improved
- Potential for retirees to remain in communities and support newer staff
- Individual's sense of identity and value supported in an organization

Pitfalls to avoid:

- Trying to control, manage and measure like a project team
- Trying to force boundaries around the community that match your area of control or responsibility
- Never providing support or recognition
- Being unaware of how much an organization can learn from CoPs or resisting learning from them
- Unnecessarily isolating or confining a CoP

To learn more:

Wenger, E. (n.d.). *Etienne Wenger Publications*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Books: <http://www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm>

Rumzien, M. (2002). *The Complete Idiots Guide to Knowledge Management*. Madison: CWL Publishing Enterprises.

Greenes, K., & Piktailis, D. (2008, July). *Bridging the Gaps: How to Transfer Knowledge in Today's Multigenerational Workplace*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from The Conference Board of Canada