

Building Communities of Practice

by Olivier Serrat

Communities of practice are groups of like-minded, interacting people who filter, amplify, invest and provide, convene, build, and learn and facilitate to ensure more effective creation and sharing of knowledge in their domain.

What are They?

According to Etienne Wenger, communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better. Communities of practice define themselves along three dimensions: what they are about, how they function, and what capabilities they produce. Table 1 summarizes their principal attributes. Each community of practice has a unique domain, community, and practice (and the support it requires).¹ But, in connecting and collecting, communities of practice share the following common characteristics:

- They are peer-to-peer collaborative networks.
- They are driven by the willing participation of their members.
- They are focused on learning and building capacity.
- They are engaged in sharing knowledge, developing expertise, and solving problems.

Table 1: Communities of Practice—What are They?

What are Communities of Practice?	What Do Communities of Practice Do?	How Do Communities of Practice Operate?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities of practice share a domain • They have a desire to share work-related knowledge • They have a passion for learning • They are self-selected and gain value from their membership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities of practice provide a means to exchange data, information, and knowledge freely • They break down communication barriers • They provide an informal, welcoming social environment • They provide a means for relationship-building and networking • They populate and reference their knowledge network workspace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities of practice are in continuous communication • They hold annual and quarterly gatherings • They arrange monthly teleconferences • They have daily or weekly informal interaction • They regularly access their communication platform

¹ The *domain* defines the area of shared inquiry. The *community* comprises the relationships among members and the sense of belonging. The *practice* is the body of knowledge, methods, stories, cases, tools, and documents. The goal of community design is to bring out the community's own internal direction, character, and energy.

What is the Value of Communities of Practice?	Community of Practice Success Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities of practice identify, create, store, share, and use knowledge • They decrease the learning curve of new employees • They enable professional development • They reduce rework and prevent reinvention of the wheel • They permit faster problem solving and response time to needs and inquiries • They illuminate good practice • They spawn new ideas for products and services • They enable accelerated learning • They connect learning to action • They make for organizational performance improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic relevance—the strategic relevance of the domain, which lets the community find a legitimate place in the organization • Domain—directly related to real work • Membership—experts are involved • Activities—relevant to the members and the domain, with the right rhythm and mix • Governance—clear roles and expectations • Facilitation—a dedicated, passionate, skillful, and well-respected coordinator • Culture—a consistent attitude to sharing and collaboration • Incentives—a desire to participate • Reward and recognition—the organizational environment is adapted to support participation • Information technology—an appropriate medium of communication that adds value and helps deliver work programs • Time—members are given time and encouraged to participate • Longevity—needed both for communication and to build up trust, rapport, and a true sense of community • Measurement—how do we know a community of practice is successful?

Topics, Focal Areas, and Sample Technical Features of a Hypothetical Community of Practice

Table 2 lists the topics for interaction of a hypothetical community of practice in monitoring and evaluation and the areas that it might focus on in each case. On each topic for interaction, the members of a community of practice would ask one another

- What challenges do you face?
- Are the challenges you face the same or different from mine?
- What resources do you have that can be shared?
- What ideas do you have about how to move ahead?
- How can we be mutually supportive?

Table 2: A Community of Practice in Monitoring and Evaluation—Topics and Focal Areas

	Formulating Monitoring and Evaluation Policy	Putting in Place a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework	Planning and Designing an Evaluation	Conducting an Evaluation	Using Evaluation Findings
Relationship Building					
Collaboration Mechanisms					
Knowledge Sharing and Learning					
Knowledge Capture and Storage					

Table 3 is the menu of combinations of some technical features that might support specific goals of that community.

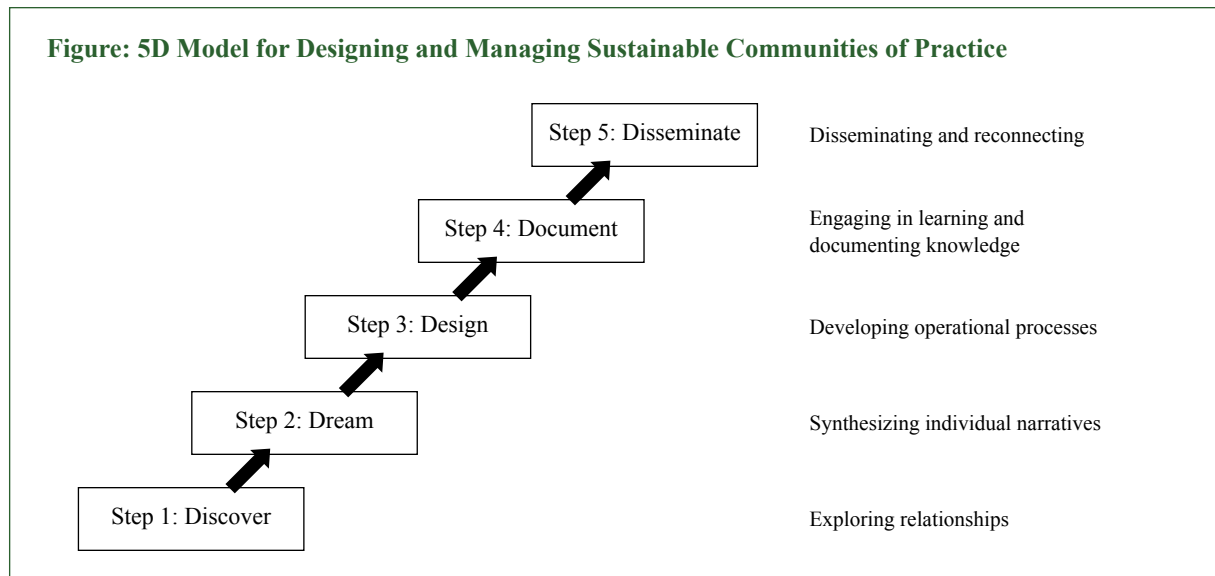
Table 3: A Community of Practice in Monitoring and Evaluation—Sample Technical Features

Relationship Building	Collaboration Mechanisms	Knowledge Sharing and Learning	Knowledge Capture and Storage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships Member networking profiles Member directory with “relationship-focused” data fields Subgroups defined by administrators or that allow members to self-join Online meetings Online discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action learning sets Project management Task management Document collaboration File version tracking Instant messaging Individual and group calendaring Web conferencing Online meetings Online discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stories Peer assists After-action reviews and retrospects Structured databases Idea banks Visiting speakers Expert database and search tools Announcements Web conferencing Online meetings Online discussions Website links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exit interviews Member profiles How-to guides Slideshows E-learning tools Visiting speakers Assessments Web logs Web conferencing Online meetings Online discussions Website links

Design and Management

To continuously design and manage a community of practice, members typically follow the 5D model depicted in the figure below.² It involves

- **Discovering**—exploring relationships to the community through individual narratives.
- **Dreaming**—synthesizing individual narratives into a community story centered on joint purpose and mutual engagement.
- **Designing**—developing operational processes for the community.
- **Documenting**—engaging in learning and documenting knowledge.
- **Disseminating**—disseminating and reconnecting the community’s learning.



² See Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Building a Community of Practice

The members of a community of practice will need to plan and ask themselves key questions on *strategy*

- What change(s) in the work we do will take place in the next 3–6 months because of the community of practice?
- Why is the community the best way of bringing about this change?
- What is the one thing that I need to do next week to facilitate the community?

Sample *domain-related* questions will include

- What specific topics do we want to address in the community of practice in the next 3–6 months?
- Why are these topics relevant to our organization?
- What kind of influence do we want to have on our organization?
- Who will assume leadership in promoting our domain?

Sample *community-related* questions will include

- Who will be the members of the community of practice in the next 3–6 months?
- How can ownership and management of the community be fostered?
- How often will the community meet?³ How will the members connect?
- How can the community balance the needs of various members?
- How will members deal with conflict?
- How will new members be introduced into the community?

Sample *practice-related* questions will include

- How should we identify, create, store, share, and use knowledge?
- How should we evaluate the effectiveness of our community of practice in the next 3–6 months?
- How should we ensure ongoing connection between the members?
- How should we deal with conflicts between our own work and community work?

A sample *support-related* question will be

- What support do we need to be successful in achieving changes to our work through the community of practice?

Communication Platforms

An appropriate medium of communication is critical to the success of communities of practice.⁴ It should be monitored continuously. The box below suggests what its main attributes might be. Specifically, the communication platform would

- Serve as an ongoing learning venue for practitioners who share similar goals, interests, and concerns.
- Help connect members to the right people and provide a platform for rapid responses to individual inquiries from members.
- Provide news of community activities and events to members.
- Develop, capture, and transfer good practices on specific topics by stimulating active sharing of knowledge.
- Promote partnership arrangements with interested knowledge hubs and other networks.
- Influence development outcomes by promoting greater and better-informed dialogue.
- Promote innovative approaches to address specific challenges.

³ The initial members could plan an inaugural physical meeting, to be followed by annual meetings. Physical meetings for a virtual platform seem counter-intuitive but the experience of many communities of practice shows that to be a key success factor.

⁴ Needless to say, the medium of communication must have connectivity. Members should not experience technical difficulties. Queries should be addressed by a secretariat. The communication platform should also provide a simple user manual and other help tools.

Box: Communication Platforms for Communities of Practice—Architecture

Contents

- Home page: relevant information and news, latest news on the progress of related activities and projects, ongoing activities and online discussions
 - About the community: background information, expected outcomes and impact
 - News and announcements: news archives, email newsletter archives
 - Library (repository of relevant documents and tools)
 - Discussions (online discussions on particular topics of interest)
 - Members: list of members with background information and email addresses
 - Photo gallery
 - Links to other websites
 - Help (information on how to use the site and how to get assistance)
 - Contact us
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Tools

- Search facility
 - Email this page/notify members of this page
 - Download and print this page
 - Optional: online chat facility, an events calendar
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Look-and-Feel

- Lively and dynamic
 - Friendly and accessible
 - Professional and credible
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Tagline

- A memorable phrase to brand the communication platform and strengthen awareness of it
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Optional Orientations

- Rooms for working groups, face-to-face events, or special-interest topics
 - Business opportunities and advertisements
 - Podcasts/webcasts
 - Web logs
 - Wikis
 - Enhanced member profiles including an individual member's website bookmarks and web log
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For further information

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Asian Development Bank

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