

Communities of Practice 101

By Leah Arboleda and Olivier Serrat

- **CoPs are groups of like-minded, interacting people defined by what their community is about, how it functions, and what capabilities it produces.**
- **The establishment of CoPs requires readiness in their host organization, sound structure, and the delivery of quick steps. Their management can usefully follow the 5D model: discover, dream, design, document, and disseminate.**
- **To succeed, CoPs should monitor relevance and performance in their domain, membership, norms and rules, structure and processes, flow of energy, results, resources, and values.**

Key Features of CoPs

Definition. Communities of practice (CoPs) gather people who share a common passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better. They are peer-to-peer collaborative networks driven by the willingness of their members to share work-related knowledge, further develop expertise, and solve problems in a specific domain.

Functions. CoPs filter information; amplify innovative ideas; and invest and provide resources to implement activities. They convene different, distinct people or groups of people; promote and sustain community building; and help members complete activities more efficiently and effectively.

Capabilities. CoPs identify, create, store, share, and use knowledge; reduce rework and reinvention of the wheel; and permit faster problem solving and response time to needs and inquiries. They illuminate good practice, spawn new ideas for products and services, enable accelerated learning, connect learning to action, and improve organizational performance.

Key Attributes. Six key attributes characterize CoPs:

- *Domain* refers to the shared area of inquiry or sector and thematic orientation.

- *Community* refers to the relationships among the active members and the sense of belonging the group provides.
- *Structure* refers to the balance of formal and informal relationships within the CoP.
- *Mandate* refers to the priority that management of the host organization ascribes to the CoP.
- *Motivation* refers to the personal interest and priority that members assign to the CoP in their daily work.
- *Practice* refers to the body of methods, stories, cases, tools, documents, and associated know-how of a CoP's member that others recognize.

Setting up CoPs

Readiness. An organization is ready to host a CoP and allocate resources to it if the CoP's domain is relevant and the organization values knowledge management and learning. The parties must share common values and the outcome of establishment must be relevant and beneficial to the organization and its personnel.

Structure. Most CoPs comprise a core group, an inner circle, and an outer circle. The core group manages the CoP based on an agreed coordination mandate and provides secretarial support as necessary. The inner circle serves as a steering committee and comprises active members and contributors. The outer circle comprises interested members, contributors, and readers in a loose network.



Quick Steps. To find its legitimate place in an organization, a CoP must

- Set the strategic context to rationalize its value, identify critical development challenges, and articulate the need to leverage knowledge.
- Educate the host organization's personnel on the value and benefits of CoPs and how the CoP fits in their work.
- Use technology infrastructure and sufficient business process support, coaching, and logistical assistance.
- Quickly create early examples of practice to enable the host organization's personnel to learn by doing.
- Encourage the participation of members, value accomplishments, and publicize successful work.
- Integrate well in the host organization's structures and processes.

Managing CoPs

The management of a CoP typically follows a 5D model. The *Discover* stage encourages members to explore relationships. The *Dream* stage allows members to synthesize individual narratives. The *Design* stage enables members to develop operational processes. The *Document* stage engages members in learning and documenting knowledge. The *Disseminate* stage facilitates knowledge dissemination and reconnects with the community's learning.

Critical Success Factors of CoPs

CoPs can maintain relevance and improve performance through self-evaluation in eight areas:

- **Domain.** Is the area of shared inquiry, the key issues that relate to it, and the functions of the CoP strategically relevant to the host organization? Are the topics of interest to all members? Do all members have their own practice in the domain?
- **Membership.** Is the relevant experience on board? Is heterogeneity of members assured? Is the CoP open to new members and advertised as such?
- **Norms and rules.** Are roles and accountabilities defined in a common agreement? Are both distant contacts and face-to-face meetings possible? What is the balance between giving and taking among members?
- **Structure and processes.** Is the chosen structure clear and flexible enough? Are key roles (e.g., manager, facilitator, and back-stopper) in the core group defined? Is the step-by-step work planning process open and transparent?

- **Flow of energy.** Do members care about common interests, commitment, and trust? Are there regular face-to-face events? Are social moments celebrated? Is the history of the CoP alive and shared with new members?
- **Results.** Is delivery and reporting on tangible results a common concern? Do members draw direct and practical benefits from their involvement? Are results officially recognized by the host organization?
- **Resources.** Do members have sufficient time for the CoP? Is the host organization willing to provide time, space, and incentives? Is CoP facilitation attractive and stimulating?
- **Values.** Is listening to others a cardinal virtue? Are members willing to give without immediate return? Is diversity in thinking and practice validated?

Progressing CoPs

While some host organizations prefer to appoint chairs and co-chairs of CoPs, some communities opt to elect convenors. They also aim to strengthen partnerships with other CoPs and establish working relationships with alliances or networks outside the host organization. In the 21st century, all should intensify their use of the internet, social media, e-learning systems, and other novel technology platforms to improve knowledge sharing and learning without borders. How they choose to evolve depends of course on the commitment and willingness of their members to share knowledge and learn and to exert influence in the practice of their domain.



For further information

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