



## Communities of Practice: Planning and Implementation

*The following is adapted from Wright, K. (2003). Communities of Practice.*

### The Value of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are essential to those that recognize knowledge as a key asset. Knowledge is created, shared, organized, revised, and passed on within and among communities of practice. It is through communities of practice that knowledge is “owned” in practice (Wright, 2003).

Communities of practice fulfill a number of functions with respect to the creation, accumulation, and diffusion of knowledge (Wright, 2003):

- They are nodes for the *exchange and interpretation of information*. Because members have a shared understanding, they know what is relevant to communicate and how to present information in useful ways. In many cases, members belong to many different communities. Such interrelationships and cross-membership can create an ideal channel for moving information, such as best practices, tips or feedback across boundaries;
- They can *retain knowledge* in “living” ways, unlike a database or a manual. Communities possess shared knowledge. This knowledge is highly contextual and responsive to local circumstances. Communities of practice preserve the tacit or “unspoken” aspects of knowledge that formal systems cannot capture;
- They can *steward competencies* for cutting edge knowledge. Members of these groups create new knowledge and understandings as they discuss novel ideas, work together on problems, and keep up with developments inside and outside a firm; and
- They provide *homes for identities*. Communities of practice are not as temporary as teams, and unlike business units, they are organized around what matters to their members. Identity is important because, in a sea of information, it helps us sort out what we pay attention to, what we participate in, and what we stay away from.

### What is a Community of Practice?

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their understanding and knowledge of this area by interacting”. Communities of practice are an effective means of creating and leveraging the collective knowledge of groups.

It is important not to define communities of practice too narrowly. Due to their emergent and fluid nature, there are many different iterations of communities of practice. While communities of practice are noteworthy because of their diversity, they do share some important common traits:

- *Mutual engagement* - involves members who are attracted because they are involved in similar tasks or have similar interests, binding members together;

- A *joint enterprise* - involves a process of continuous negotiation in which members define what they are about, how they will interact, the practices, and nature of discussion;
- A *shared repertoire* - involves the creation of a set of shared resources. These resources may include stories, points of view, myths, symbols, language and history. The purpose of creating this shared repertoire is to enable communication and dialogue;
- *Informality*;
- An emphasis on *social interaction*;
- The presence of *trust and a sense of mutually beneficial relationships* as binding elements; and
- Members attracted by a *sense of proximity and common background*.

Wenger and Snyder (2000) acknowledge that communities of practice often look much like other social structures in organizations. While at times the membership of a community of practice may overlap with the membership of a work team or project group, there is a distinction. The following table distinguishes communities of practice from other entities:

Entity	Purpose	Membership	What holds them together	How long do they last
Community of practice	Develop members' capabilities; build & exchange knowledge	Members elect themselves	Passion, commitment & identification with group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
Formal work group	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the team's manager	Job requirement and common goals	Until the next reorganization
Project team	To accomplish a specific task	Assigned by management	Project's milestones & goals	Until the project is completed
Informal network	To collect & pass on business information	Friends & business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

Communities of practice are everywhere. We belong to a number of them – at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies. Some have a name, others don't. We are core members of some communities and we belong to others in a more peripheral way. Communities emerge of their own accord. In many ways they are responses to natural desire for social interaction. Our sense of who we are and understanding of our world emerges from our social interactions. This is also the case in a work environment where we seek to develop a sense of presence and purpose as well as relationships.

### **Learning is Social**

Learning entails a fundamentally social process in which learners are absorbed and accommodated within a supportive community and learn through assuming responsibility for progressively more complex tasks as well as engaging in observation and interaction with fellow practitioners. Participation in a community of practice provides the opportunity for knowledge creation and transfer as well as exposure to the culture and social norms of the community, which are expressed through common models, shared language, methods, and perceptions.

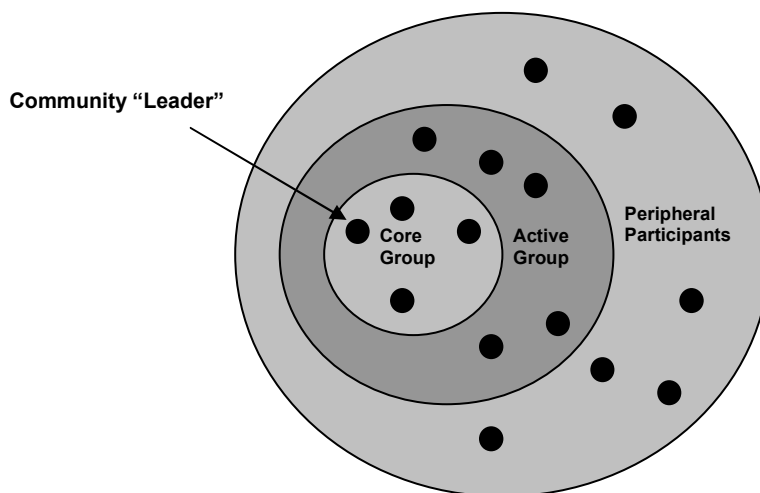
Communities of practice are based on a very specific understanding of how we work and learn. People are social beings. We continuously seek to learn and develop new knowledge. Learning occurs through practice and social participation.

## Community Participation

People participate in communities for different reasons. Some participate because it brings direct value, the personal connection it offers, or because it provides the opportunity to build skills. Due to different levels of interest, community members need not participate equally.

There are three main levels of participation. The first is a small *core* group of people who actively participate in discussions. They typically take on projects, identify topics for the community to address, the community's leadership, and move the community along in its learning agenda. The next level is the *active* group who attend meetings regularly but with less intensity than the core group. A large portion of community members are *peripheral* and rarely participate. Their peripheral involvement is often due to a sense that their involvement is not appropriate or they lack the time to participate more actively. Outside these three levels are *outsiders* who are not members but may have an interest in the community including managers, citizens, and others sharing a knowledge connection. It is important to encourage members to move through these levels.

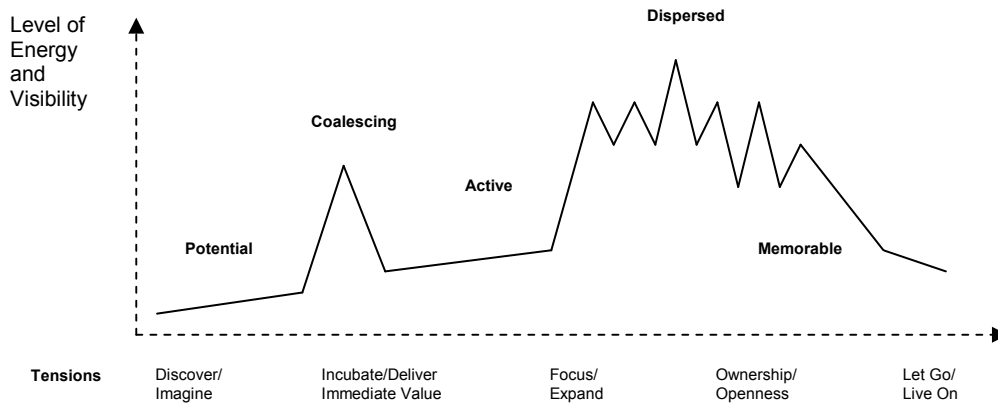
Wenger et al (2002) recommend selecting a community coordinator/champion to coordinate the community's activities. Some traits of effective coordinators/champions include: well-respected, knowledgeable about the community's domain, well-connected to community members, keen to help develop the community's practice, good communication and listening skills, conflict management skills, and interest in community leadership. Coordinators/champions do not need to be leading experts in the chosen domain. A coordinator/champion's primary role is to link people, not to give answers.



Some communities of practice meet regularly face-to-face, some are more ad hoc and connect only periodically, while others are connected via email and technology.

## Community of Practice Lifecycle

A community will begin at whatever stage is appropriate. Wenger (1998) created a model of a possible lifecycle for a community of practice:



As communities move through these stages, specific activities will change. Note that the stages are not necessarily sequential.

Stage	Purpose	Key Activities
Potential	People face similar situations without the benefit of a shared practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find each other; find people who already network in the area; conduct a social network analysis</li> <li>Discover commonalities</li> <li>Define scope of its domain that aligns member interests</li> <li>Identify thought leaders</li> <li>Interview potential members</li> <li>Connect community members</li> <li>Create a preliminary community design</li> <li>Identify a community coordinator/champion</li> </ul>
Coalescing	A community of practice is ready to move to this stage when it has a good understanding of both what already exists and where it wants to go. The main issue at this stage is to generate sufficient energy for the community to coalesce, or join together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore connectedness</li> <li>Define joint enterprise</li> <li>Negotiate community</li> <li>Build a case for membership</li> <li>Launch the community; engage members</li> <li>Hold events and build communication "spaces"</li> <li>Find ideas, insights &amp; practices that are worth sharing; discover what knowledge should be shared and how</li> <li>Develop relationships</li> <li>Build trust</li> <li>Plan and deliver immediate value</li> <li>Legitimize the community coordinator/champion</li> </ul>
Active	Members engage in developing a practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engaging in joint activities</li> <li>Adapting to changing circumstances</li> <li>Renewing interest, commitment &amp; relationships</li> </ul>
Dispersed	Members no longer engage very intensely, but the community is still alive as a force and a centre of knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staying in touch</li> <li>Communicating</li> <li>Holding reunions</li> <li>Calling for advice</li> </ul>

Stage	Purpose	Key Activities
Memorable	The community is no longer central, but people still remember it as a significant part of their identities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Telling stories</li> <li>▪ Preserving artifacts</li> <li>▪ Collecting memorabilia</li> </ul>

## Approach for Getting Started

The informal nature of communities is important. Communities “organize themselves, meaning they set their own agendas and establish their own leadership. And membership in a community is self-selected... people in such communities tend to know when and if they should join. They know if they have something to offer and whether they are likely to take something away” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, 142).

Wenger (1999) suggests a strategic approach to planning and implementing communities of practice:

- *Map knowledge needs*;
- *Find communities* – identify informal networks that already exist;
- *Develop community* – focus on developing a sense of joint enterprise (an understanding of what the community is about), create opportunities for members to interact with each other to build trust, relationships and identities, and developing a shared repertoire of concepts, tools, language, and stories that will embody the distinctive knowledge of the community and become a unique resource for further learning;
- *Connect across boundaries* – diversity is encouraged with communities of practice to avoid becoming insular. Boundaries allow members to focus on common issues but they also represent limits and exclusion. Members will belong to many different communities, thus bringing different perceptions of what matters, different ways of interacting and different repertoires. For example, when researchers, doctors and administrators talk to each other, the difficulties they encounter stem from different practices and repertoires, but also from different identities that entail different ways of being in the world. To create a bridge across practices, you not only need to translate or suspend judgment, you have to suspend who you are and open your identity. Interacting across boundaries can force members to take a look at their assumptions;
- *Foster belonging* – honor the self-organizing character of communities of practice; a sense of belonging amongst members by nurturing their imagination and providing them with opportunities to participate is crucial;
- *Run the business* – communities deserve adequate support, attention and investment. Visible commitment from members’ organizations is necessary. This may include sponsorship, recognition for participation, removing barriers, providing budgets, coaching community leaders, connecting communities with other communities, creating technology platforms that support communities, and even leading a community of practice on communities of practice; and
- *Apply, assess, reflect and renew; build momentum* – communities exist naturally but they can be nurtured, developed, supported, and sustained. Building communities should be seen as a learning process.

## Outside Support

Communities of practice do not require heavy institutional infrastructures but their members do need time, space and a purpose to collaborate. They do not require much management, but they can benefit from leadership and support at all stages. Communities can flourish with outside support to help find resources and connections, as long as outside meddling does not interfere with the community's self-organization.

Targeted support is available for recipients of SEARCH Canada community of practice seed funding. Support may include technological infrastructure, educational and technological assistance, and coaching/consulting support focusing on community development. Such support, at no cost, is available by contacting the SEARCH Custom office by phone at (403) 220-2108 or email at [search.custom@searchca.net](mailto:search.custom@searchca.net).

## Bibliography

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E. (1999). Communities of practice: The key to knowledge strategy. *Knowledge Directions: The Journal of the Institute for Knowledge Management*, 1, 48-63.

Wenger, E. and Snyder, W. (2000). Communities of practice: The organizational frontier. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, 78(1), 139-145.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W.M. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.

### Additional Introductory Resources on Communities of Practice:

Wenger, E. *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*.  
<http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm>

Wenger, E. & Snyder, W. (2000). Communities of practice: The organizational frontier. *Harvard Business Review*.  
<http://procop.du.nl/Bestanden/Basiscontent/Wenger-CoPtheorganizationalfrontier.pdf>

EDUCAUSE. *Community of practice design guide*.  
<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/NLI0531.pdf>

Birdsell, J. & RTNA (2005). *Research Transfer Network of Alberta: Evaluation and planning blueprint*. <http://www.ahfmr.ab.ca/rtna/> (see Communities of Practice section on pp 12-13)

National Electronic Library for Health. *Communities of practice*.  
[http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge\\_management/km2/cop\\_toolkit.asp](http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge_management/km2/cop_toolkit.asp)