

Cultivating communities of practice
a quick start-up guide
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What are communities of practice?

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.

What elements to develop?

Domain: the definition of the area of shared inquiry and of the key issues

Community: the relationships among members and the sense of belonging

Practice: the body of knowledge, methods, stories, cases, tools, documents

Where to start?

set strategic context

A strategic context lets communities find a legitimate place in the organization

- Articulate a strategic value proposition
- Identify critical business problems
- Articulate need to leverage knowledge

educate

Communities of practice are a familiar experience, but people need to understand how they fit in their work.

- Conduct workshops to educate management and potential members about the approach
- Help people appreciate how communities of practice are inherently self-defined and self-managed
- Establish a language to legitimize communities and establish their place in the organization

support

Communities of practice can use some light-handed guidance and technology infrastructure.

- Provide some process support, coaching, and logistic assistance
- Identify needs and define adequate infrastructure without undue emphasis on fancy technology

integrate

The formal organization must have processes and structure to include these communities while honoring their root in personal passion and engagement.

- Integrate communities in the way the organization works
- Identify and remove obvious barriers
- Align key structural and cultural elements

encourage

Practitioners usually see the value of working as a community but may feel the organization is not aligned with their understanding.

- Find sponsors to encourage participation
- Value the work of communities
- Publicize successes

get going

Starting to cultivate communities of practice as early as possible creates early examples that allow people to learn by doing.

- Have a few pilot communities going as soon as possible
- Find communities to start with by identifying areas where there is potential and readiness
- Interview some prospective members to understand issues, start discussing a community, and identify potential leaders
- Gather a core group to prepare and initiate a launch process
- Help members organize an initial series of value-adding activities
- Encourage them to take increasing responsibility for stewarding their knowledge

Why focus on communities of practice?

	short-term value	long-term value
members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help with challenges • access to expertise • confidence • fun with colleagues • meaningful work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal development • reputation • professional identity • network • marketability
organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problem solving • time saving • knowledge sharing • synergies across units • reuse of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strategic capabilities • keeping abreast • innovation • retention of talents • new strategies

What are some critical success factors?

community	organization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domain that energizes a core group • Skillful and reputable coordinator • Involvement of experts • Address details of practice • Right rhythm and mix of activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic relevance of domain • Visible management sponsorship, but without micro-management • Dance of formal and informal structures • Adequate resources • Consistent attitude