

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?

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

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

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

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

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

Why focus on communities of practice?

short-term value

- help with challenges
- access to expertise
- confidence
- fun with colleagues
- meaningful work

long-term value

- personal development
- reputation
- professional identity
- network
- marketability

- problem solving
- time saving
- knowledge sharing
- synergies across units
- reuse of resources

- strategic capabilities
- keeping abreast
- innovation
- retention of talents
- new strategies

What are some critical success factors?

community

- Domain that energizes a core group
- Skillful and reputable coordinator
- Involvement of experts
- Address details of practice
- Right rhythm and mix of activities

organization

- Strategic relevance of domain
- Visible management sponsorship, but without micro-management
- Dance of formal and informal structures
- Adequate resources
- Consistent attitude