

Insight and ACTION

A digest linking those who practice knowledge transfer and exchange with evidence-informed resources

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THE TRUTH ABOUT BUILDING AND MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

KEY MESSAGES

- Communities of practice don't run themselves. They take a lot of work to set up and a significant commitment to operate successfully.
- Communities of practice should pay special attention to clarifying goals, determining what they can offer, developing credibility and creating a straightforward structure in which to house information online.
- Communities of practice can help enhance both individual and organizational performance.

This is a summary of an article by Jill Garcia and Michael Dorohovich published in Defense Acquisition Review Journal in 2005.

Starting a community of practice isn't easy. It takes hard work to build one, and many fail if the proper time and effort aren't invested.

When they succeed, however, they make a significant difference to the work lives of people who have been drowning in too much information. They can be powerful resources, housing experts who can help decipher reams of complex material. They can also be useful meeting places where peers can discuss common issues and challenges and test new ideas in a safe environment.

Clarity of purpose, core membership

But setting up a community of practice is not as simple as deciding to do it — leaders need to agree on why the community is being formed, what its goals are and what participants can expect to get from it.

"Core members" have an integral part to play. They agree to take on central roles within the community and are considered subject experts. They also give the community of practice its scope and credibility as they guide discussions and validate or dispute contributions to the community.

Healthy infrastructure

Developing a healthy infrastructure within a community of practice makes a significant difference to how well the community runs. This starts with the people who have decided to get on board in the early

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stages and, more importantly, the roles they take on.

The infrastructure includes a wide range of human resources to support the fledgling community of practice. For example, a sponsor is the foundation of the community, representing a key organization that will act as its champion and broker resources, advise the community leadership and help attract new members. A leader will drive the community forward and guide its strategic goals. Subject matter experts also help the community by using their experience in the field to judge what should be in a community's knowledge base. Content editors review and approve community members' contributions (sometimes with the help of subject matter experts), and facilitators make communication easier between community members and help them come together.

Community-building process

Putting together a community of practice needs to be a flexible process that can change with a community's goals. Nonetheless, there are some basic steps that can be followed during set-up.

A community of practice should kick off with an initial concept meeting to identify and establish a core group of community stakeholders and subject matter experts. These people can then put together a planning workshop so that core members and stakeholders can decide on the community's purpose, resources and roles.

From here, the real bricks-and-mortar work of building the community starts. Participants need to carefully create an online structure to house the community's web-based resources and interactions, with particular attention paid to making it logical and easy to navigate.

Part of creating this structure includes drawing a community "knowledge map" that lists who the knowledge experts are in the community and where different kinds of knowledge can be found. Content should then be organized on the web site, including any new content created to fill information gaps. To make sure the content is appropriate, content editors need to be selected at this stage and trained to use the web site's tools and manage its information.

When the site is up and running, there are still a few more steps to keep in mind, aside from evaluating its success. The content editors and the community leader need to keep on top of everything posted on the site, making sure content is current and relevant. Facilitators should also remain involved to help members develop relationships and run community meetings and discussions. At this point, it's up to all of the community's members to market the community and attract new members.

Better, faster, informed decisions

Today's professionals need all the help they can get to make informed decisions, especially when they feel bombarded by information and competing points of view. While there is no fail-safe prescription for building a community of practice, the payoff is worth it — setting up a community of practice goes a long way towards enhancing both individual and organizational performance.

Reference

Garcia J and Dorohovich M. 2005. "The Truth About Building and Maintaining Successful Communities of Practice." *Defense Acquisition Review Journal*; 10: 18-33.

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