



PHIN CoPs Resource Kit

Introduction to Communities of Practice

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A community of practice (CoP) is defined as “a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis.” (Wenger) The three distinct elements that compose a CoP are a *community* that enables interaction (such as discussions, collaborative activities, and relationship building), a shared *domain* of interest (such as Vocabulary Standards or Outbreak Management), and a shared *practice* of experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems. This approach is enabling the PHIN Community to grow and mature while focusing on efforts in sharing knowledge and problem solving.

Although not formally termed “communities of practice,” CoPs exist across disciplines and in many domains of your personal and professional world. You may already be a member of a CoP through a professional affiliation, by geographical community ties, or in an educational endeavor. Your level of involvement in a community is up to you; you may be an occasional participant in some and a leader or core member in others. For instance, many departments of education build CoPs around domains such as curricula and teacher best practices. Medical practices form CoPs around innovations in delivery of care or maximizing existing resources. An example of an informal, unnamed CoP is a residential homeowner’s association.

“CoPs embody a store of knowledge... CoPs knit people together with peers (e.g., CDC informatics specialist, state and local public health partners, nationally recognized thought leaders, IT specialists). They represent colleagues committed to jointly developing better practices through focused collaboration and solution building.... Outputs can include leading practices, guidelines, knowledge repositories, technical problem and solution discussions, working papers, and strategy.”

Nicole Fehrenbach,
NCPHI, 2008

CoP Approach

The concept of learning through CoPs is presented and developed by Etienne Wenger in his book *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (1998).³ According to Wenger, CoPs use communal learning, expertise, and knowledge to achieve shared goals. CoPs are not a new concept. Although largely unnamed and unrecognized as such, people have always gathered in groups to discuss ways to learn, improve, or address issues, problems, or situations.

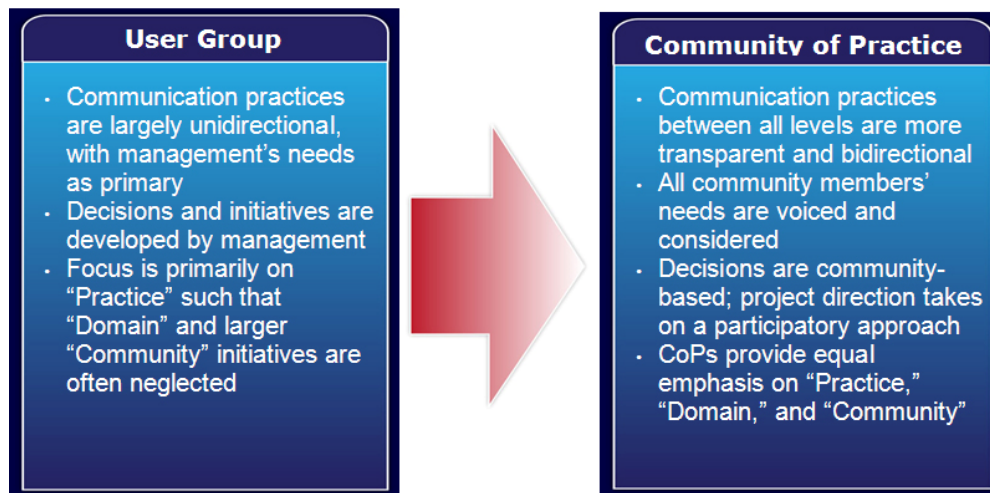
According to Wenger, CoPs must have the following three crucial elements:

1. **Domain** — the shared interest that provides the incentive and passion for the group to come together. Because CoPs are autonomous, the scope of the domain is agreed upon by the CoP members, thus ensuring that the group focuses on what is important to the community.
2. **Community** — the group of people who come together with a common interest, who share their perspectives and knowledge with one another. The community fosters a sense of belonging and collaboration.
3. **Practice** — the agreed upon ways of formalizing and implementing the collectively developed knowledge and solutions that further the community’s mission. This includes developing and implementing new technology or best practices, innovation and problem solving, conducting research, and developing standards.



CoPs are autonomous, self-organizing, and operate with varying degrees of formality; they focus on a domain, which is defined collaboratively and reflect the interests of the group. Members may enter and leave a CoP at any time, and CoPs remain active as long as the members benefit from participation and there is a need for a CoP in the domain.

There is often a lack of understanding around the distinctions between a CoP and other similar groups. A CoP is not simply a network of people who have a common interest. Nor is a CoP a group of people whose focus on the use of a common tool, as this more commonly defines a user group. CoPs grow organically with a specific purpose in mind, whereas a user group typically works toward a common assigned goal and a certain level of participation is largely required. The defining characteristic of CoPs is that members have a *shared practice* and are *mutually engaged* with one another in that practice.⁴ CoPs are more participatory, focus on all members' needs, and make community-based decisions. The following illustration shows how CoPs go a step further than a user group.



Benefits of a CoP

Members, organizations, and the public health community can benefit from working together in a CoP. Below are some of the benefits to each group:

Members	Organizations	Public Health
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continual learning / professional development • Access to expertise • Improved communication with peers • Increased productivity and quality of work • Network for keeping current in field • Sense of professional identity • Enhanced professional reputation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced time / cost to retrieve information • Reduced learning curves • Knowledge sharing and distribution • Coordination, standardization, and synergies across organizational units • Reduced rework and reinvention • Innovation • Benchmarking against industry standards • Alliance building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent communication and reporting • Improved analytic capability • Promotion of standards • Support and promotion of key national initiatives • Advancement of domain-specific capabilities • Link geographically dispersed practitioners • Increased government efficiency

Adapted from: Etienne Wenger. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.1998.

Responsibilities within CoPs

Although CoP membership is voluntary and CoPs function based on community input, there are several leadership responsibilities necessary for a CoP to be successful. Two primary roles should be filled at the initial kickoff of a community: the Community Leader and the Community Sponsor. The **Community Leader** guides the community and helps keep the focus on the goals, while the **Community Sponsor** serves as the group's champion, internally and externally.

Other responsibilities, listed below, are also important to a CoP's success.

- **Knowledge Management** — managing the CoP's repository of information, ensuring all members have access to information created or referenced by the community.
- **Meeting Facilitation** — ensuring meetings stay on track, that each member has an opportunity to speak, and that the group is working towards meeting the goals of the community.
- **Relationship Management** — building relationships between the CoP's members to strengthen the group's membership.
- **Subject Matter Expertise** — conducting research and providing expertise to ensure the group doesn't get stalled or stray from its focus and that the community continues to seek out new and innovative solutions.
- **Technology Management** — selecting, managing, and maintaining the right technology to ensure members, regardless of geographical location, have the opportunity to interact, participate, and benefit from the community.

These responsibilities do not have to be managed by single individuals. One or more members may be accountable for multiple responsibilities, which is likely in the early stages of community development. For more details about how to select members to fill these roles, refer to the [Launch and Sustain a Community of Practice](#) section.

Examples of Communities of Practice

CoPs exist in all aspects of society and have enabled many advances and innovations across a wide variety of fields. For example, the Federal Highway Administration's Highway Community Exchange CoP is largely responsible for many innovations that make our roads safer, like rumble strips and standards for warning.⁸



The Safe Cities CoP is another example of a CoP that benefits society through innovation. This CoP's goal is to make cities safer through focusing on reducing gun violence, preventing youth violence, decreasing crime rates, and fighting drug and alcohol abuse.⁸

Two examples of CoPs sponsored by the National Center for Public Health and Informatics (NCPHI), CDC are described in the following tables.

Public Health Vocabulary	
Date of Inception	December, 2005
Number of Members	300
Domain / Goal / Objective	Promotes the use of standard vocabulary to aid in the electronic exchange of data. Provides education about vocabulary standards and helps state and local partners attain compliance with the PHIN standards for vocabulary.
PHIN CoP	Yes
Quotes	"We needed to break down the silos of vocabulary development and usage within CDC and across public health-- the Vocabulary CoP has allowed us to begin to do that." —PHVCoP Lead
Tips/Tricks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss challenges faced by PHIN and state/local public health. • Connect geographically dispersed people by teleconference to ensure all members feel included. • Use a collaboration tool and other dissemination methods to publicize events, distribute information, and post documentation to ensure everyone is on the same page. • Engage and encourage early participation from Subject Matter Experts to help create practical knowledge products.

Project Management	
Date of Inception	July, 2006
Number of Members	400
Domain /Goal / Objective	Internally-focused CoP formed to advance the discipline of project management and develop a single methodology for project management that will work across all CDC. Works toward helping members attain PMI certification and focuses on the process of project management.
PHIN CoP	No
Quotes	<p>"This CoP is like a channel for information about the industry." —PM CoP Lead</p> <p>"CoP meetings are about food, fun, education, and networking." —PM CoP Lead</p> <p>"It's important for us to educate new members on what a CoP is and what they have to contribute." —PM CoP Lead</p>
Tips/Tricks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with a core group to develop the charter, then expand • Conduct monthly meetings and have an educational component • Recognize and engage new members at each meeting • Educate members on what a CoP is and expect them to contribute

Access the PHIN CoPs Resource Kit [Resources](#), [Glossary](#), and [References](#) on the web.