

Communities of Practice

"Top companies have learned that technology is the easy part of supporting knowledge creation and sharing. The really hard part is working with people to improve knowledge sharing and collaboration."

OD Practitioner Journal of the Organization Network

INTRODUCTION

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups of people bound by a shared interest, purpose, or practice who often collaborate via established Web sites. These community Web spaces are designed to allow community members to share ideas and knowledge in several ways.

In the context of addressing organizational needs, CoPs are groups of people connected to each other by a need to solve business problems and sharpen skills by sharing common practices and experiences. CoPs form and share knowledge by pulling information from individual members, as opposed to a centralized push or information from higher authorities. In CoPs, the processes of learning and membership are inseparable. People organize around common needs and interests that give members a sense of joint enterprise.

EXAMPLES

Example 1: To capitalize on the expertise of employees in developing new products in more productive ways, a leading semiconductor company established groups of engineers who share knowledge, tools, design methodologies, successes, and mistakes to develop their design engineering competence.

Example 2: A research company brought researchers together to explore, share, and identify new solutions to satisfy customer needs.

Communities of Practice (continued)

EXAMPLES (CONTINUED)

Example 3: The Air Force Materiel Command has developed its Knowledge Now site to apply the lessons learned from past experience to current and future projects in order to avoid the repetition of past failures and mishaps. This extensive site provides links to over 350 communities of practice—web-based collaborative workspaces where members of a group use shared information and administrative and communications tools such as document sharing/posting, calendar, etc., to conduct business, manage projects, keep abreast of important group issues, and solve group problems around such areas as:

- Acquisition
- Education and training
- Human Systems Integration
- Joint test and evaluation
- E-learning for knowledge management

Users can access virtual library course links; policy directives, forms, FARs and supplements; common practices and sample formats; expert wisdom, advice, and guides; management support tools; "knowledge nuggets"; and can search over 180,000 documents from AFMC, DoD, and government web sites.

BENEFITS

CoPs, as a knowledge management strategy, provide benefits to organizations as well as the individuals who participate.

For the Organization

CoPs benefit organizations by:

- Helping build a common language, methods, and models around specific topics
- Increasing access to expertise across the organization
- Aiding retention of knowledge when employees leave the organization
- Acting as a means of developing and maintaining long-term organizational memory
- Connecting practitioners with a common interest and need who may be co-located

Communities of Practice (continued)

For the Organization (continued)

- Decreasing the learning curve of new employees
- Responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries
- Building core capabilities and knowledge competence
- Cross-fertilizing ideas and increasing opportunities for innovation
- Supporting faster problem solving, both locally and organization-wide.

For the Individual

CoPs benefit individuals by:

- Helping individuals do their work
- Fostering a stable sense of community with other peers and with the organization
- Helping build individual knowledge and skill
- Providing challenges and opportunities to contribute.

CoP STRATEGIES

There are a wide range of strategies used by CoPs to share information and develop knowledge. Some of these include:

- Newsletters and calendar events
- Community announcements
- Content publishing
- Links to other community-related sites or content sources
- Threaded discussions
- Real-time collaborative sessions
- Captured experiences of retired practitioners
- Internal list serves to post comments
- Email-based expert access/question-and-answer system to post and distribute inquiries
- CD production of relevant intellectual capital.

The Web as the primary vehicle for communication can be complemented by other forums (e.g., seminars, conferences).

Communities of Practice (continued)



The following is the CoPs section of the Gov Online Learning Center. It is designed to allow Community Members to share ideas and knowledge in several ways.

<http://www.golearn.gov/MaestroD/index.cfm?room=communities&roomaction=communities>

The following is the main Web site for accessing Federal CoPs examples.

http://km.gov/QuickPlace/km/PageLibrary85256C6B00609AA0.nsf/h_Toc/1ba2c70bc8a0465085256e780053d154/?OpenDocument

This site is sponsored by [Federalconnections.org](http://federalconnections.org), which connects everyone who works with CoPs in government. The CoPs listed on this site are at various stages of maturity and represent various types of communities.

http://kmpro.tomoye.com/ev_en.php?ID=1310_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC

This site, sponsored by the Federal Consulting Group (a franchise of the U.S. Department of Treasury), provides information about CoPs and refers to the groups as Communities of Learning.

<http://www.fcg.gov/partner.html>