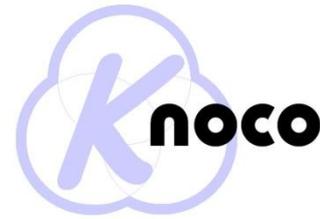


The evolution of communities of practice



White paper

As a knowledge topic evolves, the nature of the community that owns, or looks after, that knowledge will also evolve. Understanding the nature of this evolution, and managing the changes from one stage to the next, is important to the long term success of Knowledge management.

Types of knowledge

New emergent knowledge	Strategic competence	Competitive competence
Old established knowledge	Non-core competence	Core competence
	Low level of in house knowledge	High level of in house knowledge

The knowledge held by a company can be roughly divided into four types. The three most relevant to communities are described below.

Strategic competence. These are areas of new evolving knowledge which the company thinks will be very important in the future, but which currently they still have a lot to learn about. In Mars, knowledge about mass-market entry in the 3rd world would have fitted in this box a couple of years ago. Much of the knowledge coming out of Waltham will fit in this box. Strategic knowledge is managed by setting up knowledge-acquisition programs, such as Action Learning projects or R&D projects, and/or through the creation of Global Practice groups. The KM focus for strategic knowledge is on experimentation and knowledge capture from pilot programs. As more and more knowledge is gained on the topic, it moves from the Strategic Competence box into the next box, Competitive Competence.

Competitive competence. These are areas of new evolving knowledge that the company knows a lot about. This knowledge may well give them a competitive advantage. In areas of evolving knowledge, the company that learns the best and learns the fastest, has the potential to outperform its rivals. However as this knowledge is now held by many, it is dispersed around the organisation. Knowledge on DSO would have fitted in this box a few years ago. Knowledge of marketing probably still sits here, also knowledge of Plant Management. The KM focus for

competitive competence is on the development of best practice through communities of practice. There needs to be a continuous capture of knowledge from practice, comparing of knowledge through communities of practice, and development of best practice. As more and more best practice is gained, the knowledge will mature until the topic area, and its application in the business, is pretty well known and well established. This is when the knowledge area moves into the third box, that of Core Competence.

Core competence. These are areas of established knowledge that the company knows a lot about. This knowledge is likely to be core to their existing business, and needs to be managed well if the business is to perform efficiently and effectively. Knowledge of ROTA probably fits here. The KM focus for core competence is on the development, application and refinement of standards. Best practice is codified into standards and routines, and embedded in the work practices and procedures of the organisation. The KM focus is on ensuring that this becomes routine and standard across the company, but also that the standards are reviewed and updated. Ownership of this type of knowledge lies with the technical functions and in-house experts, who work with user communities (or communities of interest) in the business

Types of community

It has already been suggested above that different types of community are appropriate at different stages of knowledge maturity. The three main generic types of community are as follows

Communities of purpose are groups of peer-recognised strong performers who have an ability to influence change, can share knowledge with and learn from others, be committed to achieving improvements for the Group as a whole, and can build strong relationships. They are formally structured with a business sponsor (and therefore funding), a mentor, committed membership, and a performance contract with well-defined deliverables. Global Practice Groups are Communities of purpose.

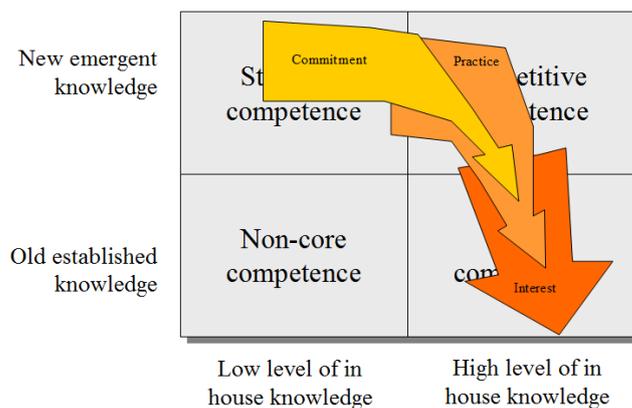
Communities of practice are groups of people who have a common role/activities and the motivation to share experiences, insights, knowledge, best practices and solutions to common problems. They are focused on enhancing their professional capabilities and in the process, strengthening the organisation. Learning communities are Communities of practice.

Communities of interest are groups of people who come together based on a common interest in a specific topic or issue. The level of interest may range from passing to intense and membership may be fixed or transient as people, issues, and events evolve. However the members are mostly users of knowledge rather than sources of knowledge.

The main differences between the three types are shown in the table overleaf.

Purpose	Practice	Interest
Committed to a shared goal Work together Pool skills, time, effort Deliver collectively Assigned membership Formal management	Common issues Work individually Pool knowledge Deliver separately Free membership Informal management	Common interest May not work the topic Pool information May not deliver Free membership No management

It would be wrong to suggest that there is a one-on-one mapping between the three types of community and the three types of knowledge. Indeed, more than one type of community can exist on a given topic, with a community of purpose forming the core steering group for a community of practice, which itself is open to interested parties. However there is a general relationship between the knowledge maturity and the community type, as shown below.



For strategic competence, the user base is relatively small, and knowledge is evolving rapidly. The small number of users can form a community of purpose. For competitive competence, the user base is much larger, and will be too large to form a single group focused on communal delivery. However the knowledge topic is still evolving, and the knowledge users will also be knowledge suppliers, and so need to be linked into a community of practice. For core competence, there will still be a large base of knowledge users, but the topic is far more static, and the focus is more on provision of knowledge resource to the user base, rather than on learning from the user base. A community of interest is more appropriate.

Managing the transition

Managing the transition in community type between the stages is important, and not always easy. If the transition is not managed, then either the community structures are inappropriate (the tools unused, the members frustrated, the knowledge blocked), or the community disbands leaving the knowledge unmanaged.

The transition from Purpose to Practice requires a redefinition of roles, and a deliberate empowerment of the wider community. Instead of GPG leader, the key role will be community coordinator, and this role will be a facilitative role rather than a directive role. GPG members may become core community members, but their roles are now “one among many” rather than “the special few.” The “customer” is now the community rather than the sponsor. The community charter will need to be discussed among the wider community, and renegotiated. Funding is likely to decrease. Ownership of community knowledge topics needs to be clearly defined, with the subject matter experts identified from within the community. Community tools suitable for a virtual community need to be established, and working practices will become increasingly virtual and asynchronous. The main tools will be a community Q&A forum, a database of clearing house for new knowledge, lessons and ideas, and a common store of validated best practice and useful documents and templates. These need to be established, rolled out and maintained. Accountabilities and processes for maintaining these need to be agreed.

The transition from Practice to Interest also requires a redefinition of roles, but also involves a shift in the roles of the community members, who may feel disempowered. The key role will still be that of the community coordinator, but this role will be a role of maintaining resources rather than a facilitative role, and may feel more administrative and less participative. Core community members may be given an “advisory panel” role, and in maintaining FAQs and other documents. Ownership of community knowledge assets needs to be very clear, with a Management of Change process. The main tools at this stage will be the common store of standards, best practice and useful documents and templates, with an ability to offer suggestions for modification, and a query desk, or an “ask the expert” facility.

Other transitions are possible. A Community of interest may be transformed to a Community of Practice if new ideas, new technologies or new approaches are introduced, and are sufficiently radical to re-energise the topic. A community of practice may seek funding and sponsorship and become a community of purpose to pursue a new technology. These transitions are less common.

Summary

Community transitions are to be expected and should be proactively managed. When a Community of Purpose (or GPG) seems to have delivered its goals, and may be struggling to find the next step, perhaps it is time to make the transition to a community of practice. Perhaps the topic has matured enough to require a different structure. The Community of Purpose does not need to be closed down – it needs to evolve. The knowledge topic is still important, but the Community of Purpose structure may be no longer appropriate. Careful attention needs to be given to the transition, so that the good work done by the Community of Purpose is fully deployed, and developed further, by an active, moderated, focused and fully engaged community of practice.

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