

Selecting Communities of Practice

White Paper

Communities of practice are one of the main building blocks of a Knowledge Management system, and many organizations will seek to create, launch and sustain a number of networks, as a pilot within Knowledge Management Implementation. The communities need to be chosen wisely. Choosing the wrong networks – those without the conditions for success – invalidates the pilot. Choosing the correct networks allows a test of the efficiency of this component in delivering knowledge sharing. This document seeks to give guidance in the choice of Communities.

Four types of community

It should be recognized that there is more than one type of community. These operate in different ways, are different sizes, have different areas of focus, and address knowledge in different levels of maturity. Four types of community are described below. The company needs to be clear on community type

Innovation community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loose anarchic pool of thinkers • Pooling disparate knowledge to look for new ideas • Small community of company experts – assigned membership • Action learning group • Covers new knowledge with low levels of in-house capability • Seeks to create in-house capability
Exploring Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning in parallel • Constantly exchanging experience • Knowledge largely kept tacit • Lots of discussion and dialogue • Small community of learners, assigned or voluntary • Covers rapidly evolving knowledge with low to medium levels of capability • Seeks to develop effective practice
Best practice community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparing approaches • Deciding the best • Building knowledge assets • Defining standards • Core of experts, assigned to the community • Wide community of “users” – voluntary members • Covers reasonably well established knowledge • Seeks to define and embed best practice
Stewardship community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining the standards • Updating if required • Monitoring the way the standards are applied • Training, inducting and coaching • A few experts, assigned to the community • Many users, voluntary members • Covers established knowledge • Seeks to maintain standard practice

Formal or informal

Communities can be formal or informal. The differences between the two are shown below. Often a formal community can work as the core group for a larger informal

community of “users”.

Formal	Informal
<p>A group with defined leaders and community membership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formally structured with a business sponsor • Small (less than 20 people) • May have a performance contract • Drive change • Share best practice, emerging technology, and knowledge • Build strong relationships 	<p>A group who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possess an informal structure • May lack a business sponsor or performance contract • Large (more than 100 people) • Share knowledge and learn from others • May influence change • Represent a common practice or interest • Have open membership

Top down or bottom up?

The company also needs to make a strategic choice – whether to launch communities top-down or bottom-up. In general terms, formal communities are launched top-down, informal communities bottom-up.

In top down selection , the company decides on strategic knowledge areas, and deliberately selects communities to support these, assigning leadership and core members and securing resources. These communities are often treated as formal networks, holding performance contracts with the organization, and contracting to deliver against these.

In bottom-up selection, the company enables the organizations with community tools, and watches for communities that form spontaneously around an area of business need.

Both approaches are valid. Communities must be chosen carefully in the top-down approach, as there is a higher risk of lack of engagement among community members.

Choosing top down communities.

There are several critical success factors for top-down community choice. These include

- The chosen topic area must be an area of strategic knowledge for the company. It must be an area of new knowledge which has the potential to improve company performance, or an area of established knowledge where best practice sharing has the potential to add significant value, or an area of established knowledge where adherence to standards is crucial for company delivery.
- For the assigned community members, the chosen topic area must be their full time job – full time procurement staff for a procurement community, full time HSE staff for an HSE community, full time Geoscientists for a Geosciences community. They need to identify with the task, and thus with the success of the community. Communities covering additional, peripheral or non-full time

tasks often fail.

- The chosen core members need to be recognized and experienced in the field.
- There needs to be a topic sponsor or mentor for the chosen topic. This would be the functional manager, eg head of procurement. This person would set the direction for the community and agree performance goals and deliverables.
- There needs to be a community leader, also recognized and experienced in the field, but not the functional manager. A procurement community would be run by an established procurement officer, but not by the head of procurement. The community leader and members should not work directly for the sponsor (if they all do, then this becomes a work team and not a community).
- The chosen community members must collectively cover the main areas of operations. They need to represent different business silos. If they all work in the same unit, division or department, they are a team and not a community.

Supporting systems and enabling factors

For communities to operate well, they need some enabling factors

- The community members need the freedom to attend community events, both face to face and virtual, as frequently as needed.
- They need to be empowered to make decisions, and define best practice, on behalf of the community, to be presented to the topic sponsor.
- They should not be over-managed – over-managing can kill a community.
- They need support in Knowledge Management, and Community operation. They need access to in-house mentoring in community operation, as well as to external expertise
- They need communication technology. Unless they can meet easily face to face, they need the ability to email, and to hold telephone conferences
- They need access to a common IT solution where they can store and exchange community files. Sharepoint is an example of this, and there are online examples such as Google-groups.
- They need critical mass. For top-down community core groups, this can be small. For bottom-up communities operating entirely remotely, this may be large.

Given these selection criteria and enabling factors, communities can be a powerful mechanism for supporting Knowledge Management and delivering performance improvement.

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