

Community service

Many organisations have made extensive investment in hardware to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their field staff. While many have been pleased with the results, some are still looking for the elusive key that unlocks the full potential of their investment.

The annals of knowledge management contain a story which possibly provides some guidance on how to unlock that potential. The story concerns some field repair guys who would meet every Friday afternoon in one of their local coffee shops. The story recalls how they would spend this in sharing stories of repair work that they had conducted in the last week. These meetings were totally informal, but provided the colleagues with the opportunity to make notes in their field manuals

The benefits of creating professional communities to share experiences and add to the collective pool of knowledge within a business are explained by Tom Young

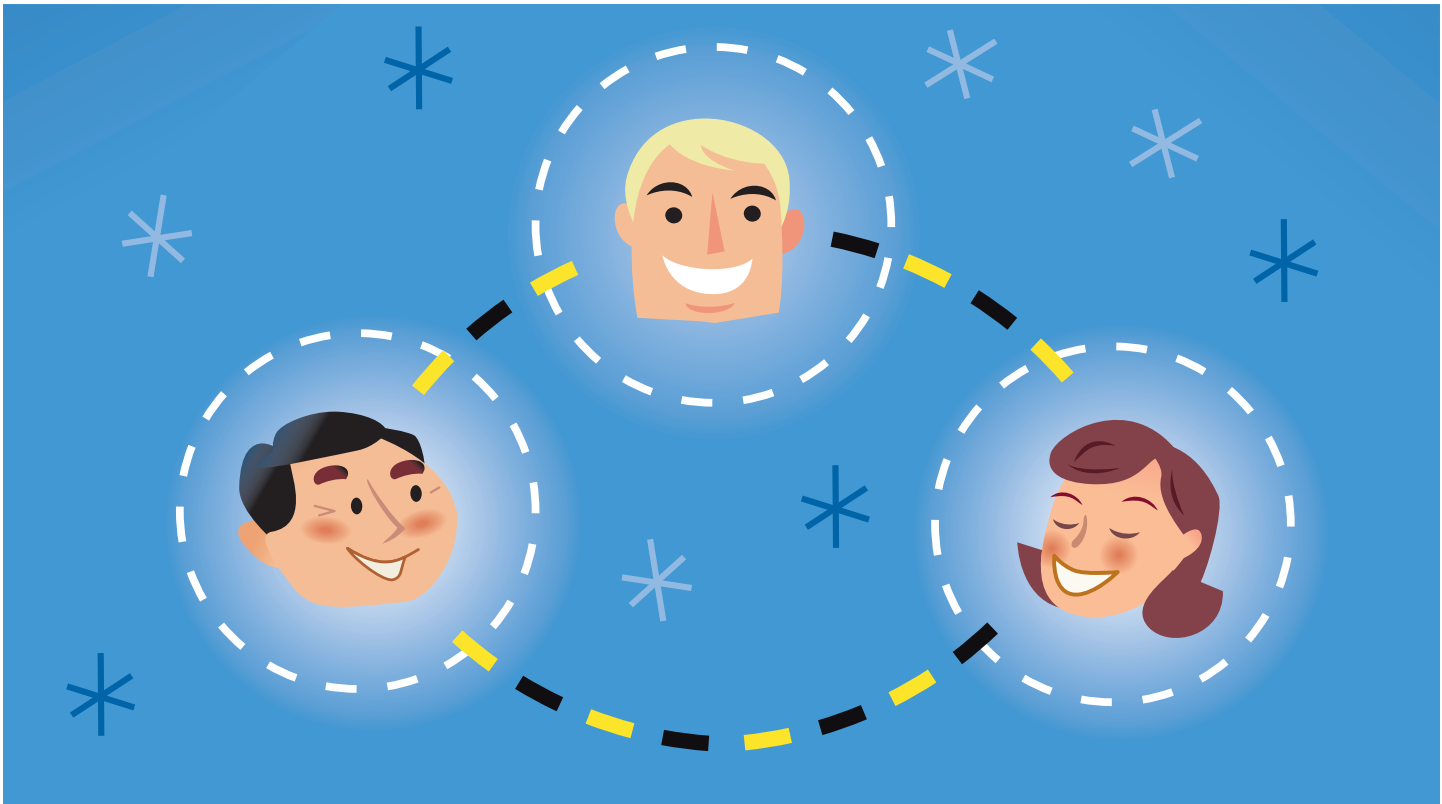
of 'work arounds', short cuts and hints to solve the problems they were finding. They were sharing their knowledge and know-how.

This went on for a considerable period, until a new operations manager was appointed. The story tells of how he found out about these meetings and banned them for being an unproductive use of employees' time. After all, they should be in front of the customer repairing equipment that was defective, instead of in the coffee shop, chatting.

It quickly emerged that the productivity of

the workforce dropped dramatically. The only thing that seemed to have changed, however, was the banning of the Friday afternoon coffee session. As a result of the ban, each of the field repair technicians was now having to rely on their own knowledge to fix defective equipment on customer premises.

The story closes with the manager reinstating the Friday afternoon sessions and even paying for the coffee. He had discovered the repair technicians had formed a 'community of practice' and the relationships generated



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► through their face to face conversations led to them being willing to trust each other to share and re-use valuable operational knowledge. Once these relationships and trust are in place, sharing will happen. Without them, it won't.

The above story is an example of a community of practice in action. In this example the community had a purpose: to give the members access to knowledge that will make their own lives easier. Why should they have to struggle with a fault that someone had already learned how to diagnose and repair? In today's recession-threatened world, the 'bond of trust' these communities generate will be even more vital to allow knowledge and know-how to be shared.

Conversations over coffee are not the only way to provide operational knowledge. Your organisation will almost certainly have written procedures and manuals describing how to do a task. One company used to boast that their 'technical instructions' were so detailed that someone with average manual dexterity would be able to complete any task in the company,

provided they followed the instructions.

But how can such procedures be kept fully up to date and relevant? Communities can be used to supplement the existing written documentation and ensure that the experience of one is shared with many. In order to do this, two components need to be in place.

The first component is a process that collects what is being learned, shared and implemented within the community and uses this to update the written procedures and standards of the organisation. While some of the knowledge being created by the community will be captured via laptops and PDA's, the high value stuff might well be shared verbally. A process is required to harvest and distil these conversations to provide the material that will be used to update the written documentation and drawings.

The second component is a process that provides assurance to the management that these updated procedures are routinely used within the organisation. What is the point of creating an environment that encourages and allows

sharing and learning, if that learning is only applied in an ad hoc or unstructured way? Once something has been learned and embedded in the procedures and documentation of the organisation, it should be applied routinely. Management needs a process to measure and report that this is indeed the case.

In conclusion, where relationships and trust exists, the culture is right for knowledge and experience to be shared and re-used. Communities are an excellent vehicle to create those relationships and trust and can help to unlock the investment that has been made in your organisation's infrastructure, provided they are augmented with a process to link community knowledge to updated procedures and standards. **SM**

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