

Communities of Practice

An Overview

Fred Nickols

© Fred Nickols 2003
All rights reserved



www.nickols.us
nickols@att.net

Introduction

This overview lays out some basic information about Communities of Practice (CoPs) that is relevant to two audiences:

- For those with a general interest in CoPs, this document provides a good overview. Additional information about CoPs is easily obtained via the recommended readings found at the end of this overview.
- For those who think they might be interested in sponsoring or starting up a CoP, this overview serves as a starting point. More detailed guidance is provided in the accompanying Start Up Kit.

Communities of Practice Defined

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups that form to share what they know and to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work.

Although the term “Community of Practice” is new, CoPs are not. Such groups have been around ever since people in organizations realized they could benefit from sharing their knowledge, insights, and experiences with others who have similar interests or goals.

One of the best-known, early examples of a CoP is one formed by the copy machine repair technicians at Xerox Corporation. Through networking and sharing their experiences, particularly the problems they encountered and the solutions they devised, a core group of these technicians proved extremely effective in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of efforts to diagnose and repair Xerox customers’ copy machines. The impact on customer satisfaction and the business value to Xerox was invaluable. Yet, for the most part, this was a voluntary, informal gathering and sharing of expertise, not a “corporate program” (however, once the company realized the value of the knowledge being created by this CoP, steps were taken to support and enhance the efforts of the group).

The Business Case for CoPs

Ultimately, all companies seek sustainable competitive advantage -- in processes as well as in products and services. Many people see this as tied to a process of continuing innovation. In turn, innovation depends on human qualities such as curiosity, insight, ideas and determination. In the last analysis, innovation depends on people applying knowledge in ways that yield new solutions to old and new problems.

Much of what people do in organizations occurs in the context of Communities of Practice. There is where best practices and innovations first emerge and where the solutions to shared problems are first identified. For this reason, many companies are determined to encourage, promote, and support CoPs, especially in areas, processes and functions where an edge in performance provides a competitive advantage (whether it be financial, operational or in the eyes of the customer).

It takes time for CoPs to emerge, to flourish and to become productive. More important, they can't be mandated or managed in a heavy-handed way. CoPs, then, are an investment in the organization's future, not a quick fix to be applied for the sake of short-term gain. Most important, many will exist whether or not management chooses to encourage and support them; they are a natural part of organizational life. And that means they require a minimal investment on the part of the organization.

The business case for CoPs is this: for a quite modest investment in terms of today's resources, organizations can reap huge rewards in terms of tomorrow's results.

Types of CoPs

There are two types of Communities of Practice:

1. **Self-Organizing**
2. **Sponsored**

Self-Organizing CoPs are self-governing as well. They pursue the shared interests of the group's members. These CoPs add value to a company by sharing lessons learned, acting as distribution points for best and emerging practices, providing forums in which issues and problems can be raised and resolved and, in general, by learning from each other. Owing to their voluntary, informal nature, self-organizing CoPs are fragile yet extremely resilient. They are fragile in that attempts to manage or control them can result in the group members disbanding or going "underground" instead of sharing their expertise and knowledge more broadly. They are extremely resilient in that members come and go as interests and issues shift and evolve. Over time, then, they adapt. They can even evolve into a formal or sponsored CoP. Or, they might disband if enough of the members decide they are no longer deriving any benefit from their membership.

Sponsored CoPs are initiated, chartered, and supported by management. Sponsored CoPs are expected to produce measurable results that benefit the company. They get needed resources and they have more formal roles and responsibilities. Even so, they are much more self-governing and wide-ranging than the typical cross-functional project team.

A CoP (Sponsored or Self-Organizing) might be established to focus on almost any area of interest to the employees or the management of a company. Some of the more common focal points around which CoPs organize are:

- A profession such as engineering, law, medicine or research.
- A work-related function or process such as supplier management, production, distribution, purchasing, customer service or sales.
- A recurring, nagging problem situated in a process or function.
- A topic such as technology, intellectual capital, knowledge management or innovation.
- An industry such as automotive, banking and other financial services, healthcare or travel.

Basic CoP Charter

The basic charter for all Sponsored Communities of Practice (CoPs) has three major objectives:

1. To enable colleagues to learn from one another through the sharing of issues, ideas, lessons learned, problems and their solutions, research findings and other relevant aspects of their mutual interest;
2. To more broadly share and better leverage the learning that occurs in the CoP with others;

3. To generate tangible, measurable, value-added benefits to the business.

Mission & Outcomes

The mission and outcomes of a particular CoP depend upon the issue, process, or practice area around which it is organized and upon which it is focused. In general, however, the Mission/Outcomes encompass:

- stimulating interaction
- fostering learning
- creating new knowledge and
- identifying and sharing best practices

Roles & Responsibilities

The key roles and responsibilities associated with a Sponsored CoP are:

<i>Champion</i>	The <i>Champion</i> provides enthusiasm and energy for organizing meetings and communications. The <i>Champion</i> is the chief organizer of events, and the administrator of communications.
<i>Members</i>	<i>Members</i> interact with each other, sharing information, insights and experiences, participating in discussions and raising issues and concerns regarding common needs and requirements. Their primary responsibility is to participate actively, to learn and to share their learning.
<i>Facilitator</i>	The <i>Facilitator</i> is responsible for clarifying communications, drawing out the reticent, ensuring that dissenting points of view are heard and understood, posing questions to further discussion and keeping discussions on topic—all subject to the will of the group. This can be accomplished during face-to-face sessions or in virtual meetings.
<i>Practice Leader</i>	The <i>Practice Leader</i> is the acknowledged leader of the CoP. His or her leadership is based on competence, not rank or position. Leadership in a CoP can shift as the issues and concerns of the CoP shift. Practice Leaders always emerge; they cannot be appointed.
<i>Sponsor</i>	The <i>Sponsor</i> communicates the company's support for a sponsored community. The <i>Sponsor</i> may help remove barriers that obstruct community progress (e.g., time, funding and other resources). The <i>Sponsor</i> will also be instrumental in establishing the mission and expected outcomes for the community.

Technology Support for CoP Activities

A wide range of technologies is available in support of Communities of Practice and broader KM initiatives. However, commonplace technologies such as telephones, e-mail and fax machines are often all that is required to support a CoP. The use of other, more advanced technologies will depend upon the nature of the specific CoP and issues and problems on which it is focused. The range of possibilities includes:

A Starter Set

- Telephones
- Fax machines
- E-mail (including the public folders in MS Outlook)
- Video conferencing

For More Advanced Uses (and Users)

- Groupware (e.g., Lotus Notes)
- Data or Knowledge Repositories (e.g., a data warehouse)
- Document Management
- Search Engines (special purpose or commercial)
- Intelligent Agents
- Intranets/Web Pages

Note: It is worth emphasizing that neither Communities of Practice (CoPs) nor the larger KM initiative are driven by technology. Although it is true that technology can enable and support a wide variety of KM initiatives, KM should not be equated with technology. People create and apply knowledge. This is especially true of CoPs.

Recommended Readings & Other Resources

Articles & Papers

1. "Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier." Etienne Wenger and William Snyder. *Harvard Business Review* (Jan-Feb 2000).
2. "Organizational Learning and Communities of Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning and Innovation." *Organization Science* (February 1991). Available on the web at <http://www.uio.no/~oleg/newsletter/practice.html>.
3. "The People Are the Company." John Seely Brown and Estee Solomon Gray. *Fast Company* (November 1995). Available on the web at <http://www.fastcompany.com/online/01/people.html>.
4. "Communities of Practice, Learning is Social. Training is Irrelevant?" David Stamps. *Training Magazine* (February 1997). Available on the web at <http://www.co-i-l/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/learnsoc.shtml>.
5. "Communities of Practice: A Review of the Literature." John Sharp (March 1997). Available on the web at <http://www.tfriend.com/cop-lit.htm>.
6. "Key Hypotheses in Supporting Communities of Practice." John Sharp (March 1997). Available on the web at <http://www.tfriend.com/hypothesis.html>.

Books

1. *Communities of Practice, Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Etienne Wenger, Cambridge University Press (1998).

Web Sites

1. <http://www.co-I-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/>
2. <http://www.brint.com/>

Contact the Author

Fred Nickols can be reached by e-mail at nickols@att.net. Other articles of his can be found on his web site at: <http://home.att.net/~nickols/articles.htm>