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# Communities and collaboration

Keith De La Rue\*

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*We know all about explicit knowledge – it is visible and tactile, and has been recorded in libraries since Sumerian times. Tacit knowledge, however, is somewhat harder to tie down. This is the knowledge inside peoples' heads. We often attempt – with varying degrees of success – to convert it into an explicit form so we can better measure and account for it. However, one of the best ways to handle tacit knowledge is for people to simply work together with it, and talk about it. This article investigates one of the most effective ways of dealing with tacit knowledge in organisations – Communities of Practice – and why helping them to grow and flourish requires a better understanding of the words “community” and “practice”, as well as an understanding of the place of technology.*

## THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY

Communities are living organisms and require gardeners, not mechanics, to provide them with leadership.<sup>1</sup>

The term “community” is a very familiar one. It can refer to a group of people living in a specific area, or a group with some common cultural or ethnic characteristics. A community can also be a group of people working in a common discipline or occupation, which is closer to the definition relevant to this article. The word is derived from the Latin: “common, public, shared by many”.

Another term that has become common within organisations recently is “collaboration”. Reams of articles have been written about collaboration – in fact, a Google search finds over 80 million occurrences of the word on the web

Collaboration may take place *within* work teams under a common management structure. This is commonplace within organisations. These groups are usually motivated to collaborate in direct ways, with defined deliverables within a structure.

It is the more recent appearance of communities of people collaborating *across* the organisation that is the particular focus of this article. This form of collaboration is usually referred to as Communities of Practice (CoPs).

## Communities of Practice

Knowledge can only be volunteered; it cannot be conscripted.<sup>2</sup>

A CoP cuts across the silos of an organisation. It will also quite often be geographically dispersed. It does not report into a single management structure and does not usually have defined business targets to meet (although it can have community goals). It is a group that comes together to share knowledge for mutual benefit. The members of the group are there because they have a common field of interest and share a sense of community.

The purpose of the CoP is for members to learn from each other. This may involve sharing and re-using good ideas, asking questions, personal development, peer support, innovation, solving common problems and the development of the shared discipline. In a strong community, members should be able to feel that they can both learn from the group and contribute to the group.

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\* Keith De La Rue is Principal Consultant at AcKnowledge Consulting, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. He has worked in knowledge management, communication and learning for 10 years at Telstra and other organisations. He is an organiser of the Melbourne Knowledge Management Leadership Forum, and is an author and speaker in knowledge management and related fields. He is currently working with the development and delivery of postgraduate training in communication and social media.

<sup>1</sup> Fred Schoeps, former Director of Learning and Knowledge Management at IBM.

<sup>2</sup> Snowden D, “Complex Acts of Knowing – Paradox and Descriptive Self-awareness” (2002) 6(2) *Journal of Knowledge Management (Special Issue)* 100.

Most importantly, it is a voluntary group. People join the group because they want to – because they can see benefits in taking part in the group. It can also be observed that if an attempt is made to “control” a CoP – to give it a management structure and deliverables as if it were a work team – then the community will evaporate. It is a different type of entity and, to operate at all, it must be allowed to develop in an organic way.

Communities can take on a range of different shapes, and the “gardening” function may also take a number of different forms. There are often leading figures within a community. There may be one or more recognised experts, or people seen to be more senior, who will take a leading role. The role of the “gardener” is that of a coach, or mentor, to the community. This role ensures that the senior members do not dominate the group to the extent that the junior or less experienced members are overwhelmed. A community leader should be a person recognised and respected by the community members, and a person with passion for the community and its area of interest.

It is the case in most communities that not all members are equal – there will usually be a “concentric ring” structure. At the centre, there are the core participants – a small group of members who tend to drive community activities, and keep the community together. Around these, there will be a larger group of active members who are engaged in the community on a regular basis, but who rely on the core group to provide direction. At the edge, the largest group is the peripheral members – those who tend to listen and learn, rather than take an active role in the community. These are sometimes referred to as “lurkers” in an online community. Peripheral members may just dip in and out, but they can still learn from the community. From time to time, they can be sparked to participate. They may need encouragement to do this.

One common principle for the structure of communities is the “1:10:100” rule, roughly reflecting the groups’ proportions. All of the groups are necessary for a successful CoP.

### **Community environment**

Trust comes on foot, but leaves on horseback.<sup>3</sup>

Another critical element for a successful community is trust. Members must know that they can trust their colleagues in order to share openly. They must also feel that they are being treated with appropriate respect. Trust must always be honoured. Once trust is broken, it can be extremely hard – or impossible – to re-establish it, and only at great cost to the effectiveness of the community.

To thrive, the community members should be engaged in regular scheduled activities, and relevant people should be invited to join the community. At least some activities should be face-to-face wherever possible; and regular communication should take place between group activities. It is this flow of contact and communication that helps to build a trusting environment, as people will get to know each other better. It can be helpful for the CoP to agree on community goals, such as desirable frequency of meetings or other activities, and levels of participation.

Rewards and recognition can also be important elements in a strong community. These may not necessarily be monetary in nature, but should be in whatever form is valued by the community and its members. This may be as simple as ensuring that contributors to the community have their names (and contributions) published in community newsletters. Appropriate public recognition will promote high-quality contributions.

The nature of any more substantial rewards should be linked to the importance of the contribution. Providing monetary awards for unqualified contributions will tend to promote a high volume of low-quality contributions, and degrade the value of the community.

Recent research has highlighted that financial rewards alone can in fact work to *decrease* performance in people undertaking cognitive work. The approach found to be most effective in this field is to provide people with autonomy, promote mastery and ensure a clear sense of purpose.<sup>4</sup> These are all factors that can be supported within a CoP environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Johan Thorbecke, mid-19th century Dutch statesman.

<sup>4</sup> RSA Animate, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2010) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFjJc> viewed 12 October 2010.

As highlighted above, a direct “command and control” management approach is anathema to a community. Any attempt to impose autocratic leadership on a community violates trust. It gives the message to the members of the community that their knowledge is not important – that only the leaders’ ideas matter and should be followed regardless of any alternative views. This immediately stifles sharing within the community and can completely destroy the community.

The community serves a vital role in learning. It is increasingly being realised that learning takes place much more in a peer-to-peer situation than it does in a lecture theatre environment. Thus, an effective CoP may be a more effective learning environment than traditional organisational training courses or e-learning tools.

We are moving away from the industrial mode of learning, where you leave your identity at the door. Learning-based communities provide more meaning than traditional structures.

## **PRACTICE**

However, the community itself is not the whole story. The important thing for a CoP to be successful is, in fact, the shared, common practice. There are two aspects to this. The first is the shared identity of the community.

### **Group identity**

A successful community must have a reason to come together. Members will only come together as a group in order to share and learn from one another about their common practice. Without this, you will not have a community.

To feel a common identity, the members of the group need to feel an affinity for each other. This provides a reason and a motivation for meeting. Unlike a normal work team, the members of a CoP do not usually see each other or work with each other every day.

Shawn Callahan<sup>5</sup> has described a simple “identity test”. When establishing a new CoP, ask the question: “Can you describe the potential members by completing the following sentence? I am a ...” If all of the potential community participants can complete this sentence in the same way, and can passionately identify with that identity, then an effective community is likely to emerge.

This affinity must be sufficiently tight for the members to understand each other. If the practice is too broad, the community will be too diffuse, and the benefits and motivation less tangible. For example, a group of engineers may not function as an effective CoP if the group includes mechanical engineers, civil engineers and electronics engineers.

A group of electronics engineers may form an effective CoP if they all work at a similar level of generality or have some common thread in their expertise or work that enables mutual understanding. However, if these engineers all work in different specialities of electronics, they will have less common language, and thus less affinity.

There must be sufficient common ground to enable each member to feel part of the group. Each member must also be able to participate in group activities with some confidence that he or she will learn something or be able to contribute something that others will appreciate.

### **Group utility**

The second aspect of practice is the utility of the community – how the function of the community relates to the day-to-day work of the members of the community.

It is not enough that the community is drawn from people with similar job roles. For a CoP to be successful, the community must become part of the practice itself. Community members need to be able to easily see a direct benefit from being a member of the CoP; in fact, the community needs to become part of how they do their job, or even something that they find they are unable to function in their job without.

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<sup>5</sup> Callahan S, “Will the Community of Practice Get Started? A Test and the Effect of Titles”, *Anecdote Blog* (9 February 2006), [http://www.anecdote.com.au/archives/2006/02/will\\_the\\_commun.html](http://www.anecdote.com.au/archives/2006/02/will_the_commun.html) viewed 12 October 2010.

If the community does not take on a sufficient level of importance, it becomes easy for members to lose interest in contributing. The “what’s in it for me” factor is lost, and the pressure of day-to-day business pushes out any altruistic reasons for contributing.

Members of successful communities rely on the community for assistance with work-related issues, problem-solving and professional support. This is nothing new. Many professions have long depended on formal associations for mutual support. Historically, guilds provided the basis for this. CoPs are able to extend this into any of today’s disciplines – many of which have been developed long after the professions with formal guilds or associations developed.

**A metaphor for group utility**

I work from my home office, a small study off our family room, with a window on the sunny side. Our cat tends to like to sit with me in the study when I work.

On warm days, sitting on the window sill in the sun is one of her favourite places. At times, she likes to sit on the desk beside me or on top of the PC monitor – a nice, warm spot! This blocks the cooling vents, of course, and she will only stay here for so long before getting too hot, so she migrates from one spot to another.

When I am the only one in the house during the day in the cooler months, I turn down the central heating, turn on a small heater in the study, and close the door.

The door, however, doesn’t latch properly. So, if the cat is outside the study, she will simply push the door open, walk in and take up one of her accustomed places. This exposes me to a draught of cold air, and I need to get up and close the door. (She is happy enough to go to the door and wait for me to open it when she wants to leave the room.)

Here is the point of this story. The cat is quite happy opening the door for herself, but she never closes it again.

Why not? *Because it is not part of her practice.* There is no way that it will ever be in her interest to close the door, thus – even though she would be physically capable of it – there is no way that I could ever teach her to do it. She would be incapable of even comprehending a need to close the door.

If you are ever trying to encourage your community to do something, just think about what you are expecting of it, and how the community would view the task you are asking it to perform.

**TECHNOLOGY CONSIDERATIONS**

Most work in organisations today is supported by technology. It is, however, possible to have a CoP without *any* technology. Certainly, any attempt to establish a community that begins with technology alone has a high risk of failure, as people will not engage if the human factors of a community are not in place first. A community is first and foremost a group of people with certain characteristics in common.

Many things can be done to bring a community together that require very little in the way of technology. It has been said that it may even be worth initially depriving a new community of technology until the members of the community express a need for it.

However, there are many ways in which the correct application of technology is invaluable to a CoP. Community members will most likely be geographically dispersed. In this case, there are many benefits to be gained from communications and IT technologies in bringing people together. Where it is possible, communities always benefit from face-to-face meetings, but these can always be augmented by online tools.

Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0 technologies are now greatly assisting community development. They can be low cost and easy to set up, making for a very low-risk investment. Certainly the fundamental social media principles of openness and trust apply to CoPs.

An important element with choosing technologies for a CoP is to be very clear on exactly how the technologies will serve the community. Even though a particular platform is either popular or easily available, it may not necessarily be the best solution for all communities.

A critical element for any technology to be effective in a CoP environment is that the barriers to use must be as low as possible. It should be easy (or completely transparent) to install and use. As CoP members are volunteering their time, it must be as easy – and as personally rewarding – as possible to engage with the community.

## The building blocks

Stan Garfield<sup>6</sup> has described five basic functions that are required for supporting member interaction within a CoP. He has used the acronym “SCENT” to describe these, as follows

- *Site*: Home page, for community information.
- *Calendar*: Online schedule of community events.
- *Events*: Face-to-face meetings, conference calls or webinars.
- *News*: A newsletter or blog, for communication, updates and publicity.
- *Threads*: An online discussion board for virtual interaction.

These five tools – some requiring more technology than others – can provide all the required ingredients for a successful CoP.

A home page – which could also be built on a blog platform – provides a community anchor point. This is the place that potential new members can be directed to in order to understand if a particular CoP would suit their role.

Both the calendar and the news feed could be built within the same site structure as the home page, provided that a separate mechanism (such as email) is used to draw members’ attention to new announcements and updates.

A schedule of forthcoming events highlights the activity of the CoP – it is important for members to get a feeling for what is happening, and to know what they should be involved in to maintain and benefit from their membership.

Some form of online threaded discussion is important for group interaction between other meetings and activities. This should be open to all members, so that members can see the topics being discussed, and choose their own level of interaction.

Traditional bulletin board or online forum technology can provide this function, but newer technologies are also available now that can augment this function.

## Networking

A number of tools can be used to augment communication and discussions within a CoP.

Instant messaging services can provide more immediate interaction, and can also provide a form of “ambient awareness” - an understanding of what other group members are doing from time to time. As CoP members are usually geographically dispersed, this can provide some of the interaction that takes place in a normal face-to-face office environment.

More recently, “microblogging” technology has taken us a step beyond the messaging service. Microblogging is most evident in the public web platform Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>). Twitter is based on 140-character messages that are composed as answers to the question: “What’s happening?” Each member chooses which other members’ messages they wish to view – this is known as “following”.

More recently, other platforms have become available that offer similar functionality within organisations. One popular service is Yammer (<http://www.yammer.com>), which automatically caters to individual organisations based on common email address domains. The organisational focus of Yammer is highlighted by the prompting question: “What are you working on?”

Yammer extends microblogging functionality by allowing longer messages and file attachments, and by assembling messages into threads. It can thus support the SCENT threaded discussion requirement. It is now used by many organisations, and many are finding its conversational style and immediacy to be more compelling than conventional bulletin boards. While it can be used to support discrete groups within an organisation, it can also be used to locate and interact with others across the whole organisation.

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<sup>6</sup> Garfield S, *Communities Manifesto* (2010), [http://www.docs.google.com/View?id=ddj598qm\\_44fx54rbg5](http://www.docs.google.com/View?id=ddj598qm_44fx54rbg5) viewed 12 October 2010.

Another useful function is a member directory, which can list expertise and specific areas of interest within the CoP, as well as personal details that can assist in building rapport within the CoP. Social networking tools such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) can provide both messaging and networking functions, and private groups can be set up in these tools.

### **Building a body of knowledge**

Even though CoPs are about working with tacit knowledge, nevertheless explicit knowledge does emerge from community interaction.

While bulletin boards and forums can enable threaded conversations, they do not normally provide any easy way to summarise the outcomes of discussions. This means that checking back on the outcome of the earlier discussions requires sifting through a whole thread of conversations.

This is where wiki technology can be important to a CoP. A wiki supports multiple authors working together to build pages of information, such as is visible in the public Wikipedia. It also supports conversations between the authors of each page. This conversation is usually accessible via a “discussion” tab on each wiki page. In this way, a wiki can provide a constantly-evolving, agreed version of a body of knowledge that emerges as a summary of community conversations.

### **MEASURING OUTCOMES**

While a CoP is not driven to be accountable in the same way as a work group or project team, it is still important that a business benefit can be demonstrated. As this cannot be done by measuring against key performance indicators, other approaches must be used.

One way to do this is by capturing testimonials and anecdotes from CoP members of how membership has benefited them in their day-to-day work. Ideally, the CoP provides a form of development for the members that will improve their capabilities. This can be demonstrated in improved job performance.

The expertise of CoP members will often be called upon to solve common business problems. All such successes arising from CoP interaction should be broadcast to relevant organisational stakeholders. These solutions may be in the form of improved production techniques that increase output, simplified processes that reduce waste and cost, or higher quality products that increase sales revenue. Where these developments have quantifiable benefits, these should be highlighted.

All of these results should be clearly communicated to both the management of the organisation, and to the CoP members themselves. This will both highlight the value of CoPs to those outside, and reinforce the value to the members.

### **GETTING STARTED**

Nine key steps to developing a successful Community of Practice can be summarised as follows:

- Remember that the CoP is voluntary.
- Ensure that a high level of trust is developed and nurtured.
- Tend to the community “garden” with encouragement, coaching and recognition.
- Be aware of how community structure develops, and be comfortable with it.
- Form the CoP around a recognised identity that all members can feel part of.
- Make the community so important that it becomes a critical part of day-to-day work.
- Use only the technology you need to develop and support community interaction.
- Ensure that all technology used is simple, effective and as transparent as possible.
- Celebrate and report on successes.