

Despite everything that the modern KM practitioner knows about communities, collaboration and technology, communities of practice (CoPs) often fail and collaboration often breaks down. In order to establish an effective CoP, it's necessary first to think about the nature and structure of a community and recognize that it's an entirely different entity from a work group or a project team. As such, it must be treated differently, too. In this article, author Keith De La Rue examines the pitfalls associated with CoPs and why helping them to grow and flourish requires a better understanding of three words: "community", "practice" and "technology".

# THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF COMMUNITIES

## Without clear thinking, valuable work may grind to a halt

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Collaboration is very much a key word in today's environment. It's at the heart of communities of practice (CoPs), it's the goal of any functional team and it's the *raison d'être* of a whole slew of Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0 technologies.

Reams of articles have been written about collaboration; in fact, a Google search finds over 120 million occurrences of the word.

Yet despite all that modern KM practitioners know about communities, collaboration and technology, we also know that CoPs often fail and that collaboration often breaks down. To understand why this is, we need to fully understand the three words: "community", "practice" and "technology".

### So what do we mean by community?

As Fred Schoeps, one-time corporate KM manager at IBM, says: "Communities are living organisms and require gardeners, not mechanics, to provide them with leadership."

To establish an effective CoP, you must first think about the community. A CoP is not a work group or a project team. For a start, work groups are motivated in a totally different way; they exist as an entity within an organization, with a common management structure and defined deliverables within that structure.

A CoP, by contrast, cuts across the silos of an organization and, in some cases, across the borders of the organization itself. It doesn't report into a single management structure and doesn't usually have defined targets to meet.

This kind of community is a group that comes together to share knowledge for mutual benefit. The members of the group participate because they have common interests and share a sense of community. A clear sign of a strong community is seen when members continue to meet or stay in contact, even when the group no longer exists on a formal basis.

It's also a voluntary group. 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's 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 forms and the "gardening" function of which Schoeps speaks may also take a number of different forms. There are often, for example, leading figures within a community; there may be one or more recognized experts, or people seen to be more senior, who will take a leading role.

The role of the "gardener", meanwhile, is that of a coach, or mentor, to the community. This role ensures that senior members do not dominate the group to the extent that junior or less-experienced members are overwhelmed.

However, it's also the case in most communities that not all members are equal. There will usually be a "concentric ring" structure. At the center, 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



## KEYPOINTS

- A CoP should be formed around a recognized identity that all members can relate to and feel part of. Organizers should ensure that the community is so relevant to the members that it becomes a critical part of their day-to-day job.
- A high level of trust should be developed and nurtured, and that trust should always be central to group activities. Remember that the CoP is voluntary and that a “command and control” attitude is likely to destroy it.
- Technology should be applied as needed in order to support key community functions and effective group development, but this technology should be as simple, effective and as transparent as possible.

are engaged in the community on a regular basis, but who rely on the core group to provide direction.

At the edge, meanwhile, the largest group comprises 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. They may just dip in and out, but they can still learn from the community. From time to time, they can be provoked into participation, but they may need encouragement to do so.

A common principle for community structure is the “1:10:100” rule, roughly reflecting the proportions of these three constituent groups, all of which are necessary for a successful CoP.

### Creating a community environment

“Trust comes on foot, but leaves on horseback,” said Johan Thorbecke, a mid-nineteenth century Dutch statesman. That’s still true for communities today, where trust is a critical element for success.

Members of a community need to know that they can trust their colleagues if they are to share openly and they must also feel that they are treated with appropriate respect. Trust must always be honored, because once trust is broken, it can be extremely hard – even impossible – to re-establish it and doing so may come at great cost to the overall effectiveness of the community.

Rewards and recognition, meanwhile, can also be important elements in a strong community. These may not necessarily be monetary in nature, but should take 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 their 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.

What else is important to creating a flourishing community environment? According to the words of KM guru David Snowden: “Knowledge can only ever be volunteered; it cannot be conscripted.”

As a result, a direct “command and control” management approach is an anathema to a community. Any attempt to impose autocratic leadership on a community violates trust and gives the message to 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 should also be a place where learning takes place. It’s increasingly being realized that learning can be achieved far more effectively in a peer-to-peer role than in a lecture theater environment. Thus, a successful CoP may prove a better learning environment than traditional organizational training courses or even today’s e-learning tools. We’re moving away from the “industrial” mode of learning, where participants leave their identities at the door. Learning-based communities provide more meaning and context than traditional structures.

### Practice – group identity

However, the concept and theory of community is not the whole story, by far. The important thing for a CoP to be successful is, in fact, shared, common practice. There are two aspects to this: group identity and group utility.

In considering the role of group identity, we must recognize that a successful community needs a good, solid reason to exist. Members will only come together in order to share and learn from one another about their common practice. Without this, you don’t have a community.

In order to feel a common identity, members of a group need to feel an affinity with each other, providing a reason and a motivation for meeting. Unlike a normal work team, the members of a CoP don’t typically see each other or work together every day. As a result, the affinity felt in a community must be sufficiently tight for members to understand one another. 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 it includes mechanical engineers, civil engineers and electronics engineers. A group of electronics engineers, however, 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.

## “EACH MEMBER MUST 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.”

- If these engineers all work in different specialities of electronics, they won't use a common language and will thus have less affinity. There must be sufficient common ground to enable each member to say: “These are my people”, or, “I'm a member of this 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.

KM assumes that people can better prioritize and allocate knowledge than a knowledge market can.

### **Practice – group utility**

The second aspect of practice is the utility of the

### **A metaphor for group utility**

I work from my home office. It's a small study off our family room with a window on the sunny side. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our cat tends to co-occupy this pleasant location while I work.

On warm days, sitting on the window sill in the sun is one of her favorite places. At times, she likes to sit on the desk beside me or on top of the PC monitor – also a nice, warm spot! This blocks the cooling vents of the monitor, of course, and she'll only stay here for so long before it becomes uncomfortable, forcing her to migrate from one spot to another.

During the cooler months, when I'm the only one in the house during the day, 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, she'll 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, of course, is happy enough to go to the door and wait for me to open it when she wants to leave the room.

But here's 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's not part of her practice. There's 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's no way that I could teach her to do it. She would be incapable of even comprehending a need to close the door.

If you're ever trying to encourage your community to do something, just think about what you're expecting of them, and how they'd view the task you're asking them to perform.

community – how the function of the community relates to the day-to-day work of its members. It's 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, it needs to become a vital part of how they do their job, or even something without which they find themselves unable to function in their job.

If a community doesn't take on a sufficient level of importance to its members, it becomes easy for them 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, by contrast, 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 guilds and trade associations for mutual support and collaboration. CoPs are able to extend this concept into any of today's disciplines – many of which developed long after those professions traditionally associated with formal guilds or associations.

### **Technology considerations**

All of which brings us round to the question of technology. Here, it needs stating that it's quite possible to have a CoP without any technology enabling it. Any attempt to establish a community that begins with technology alone has a high risk of failure, as people won't engage if the human factors of a community aren't in place first.

As we've already said, a community is first and foremost a group of people with certain characteristics in common.

As such, many things can be done to bring a community together that require very little in the way of technology. Indeed, it may even be worth initially depriving a new community of technology, until the members of the community express a need for it to increase group performance.

Having said that, there are many ways in which the appropriate application of technology is invaluable to a CoP – this author, after all, isn't a complete Luddite!

Many communities form not only across organizational lines, but also across geographic lines. In this case, there are many benefits to be gained from using communications and IT technologies to bring people together. Where 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, for example, are now greatly assisting community development. They can be low cost and easy to set up, making for a very low-risk investment.

An important element with choosing technology for a CoP, however, is to be very clear from the start on exactly how the technology will best serve the community. Even though a particular platform is either popular or easily available at a given point in time, it may not necessarily be the best solution for all communities.

This article can't provide detail on all the technologies currently available for communities, but it's appropriate here to make some broad statements about how some key types of technology apply to the basic functions needed in the CoP environment.

### **Knowledge-sharing technologies**

Bulletin board or online forum technology has served many communities well over a number of years. They provide a forum for easy sharing of ideas and suit geographically diverse communities well. However, while such technologies support conversations well, they do not provide any easy way to check back later on the outcome of discussions.

This is where wiki technology – a newer form of collaborative tool – can be critically important to a CoP. A wiki supports conversation (such as with the “discussion” tab on MediaWiki), but the main page is a constantly-evolving, agreed version of the “truth”; in effect, a summary of the conversation to date. Wikis, however, require a certain amount of “gardening” in order to be truly effective; but as Jimmy Wales, the “father” of Wikipedia, has observed, to be sustainable, a wiki only requires as few as five to ten people dedicated to its upkeep.

A critical element for any knowledge-sharing platform to be effective in a CoP environment is that the barriers to sharing must be as low as possible. The platform must be easy (or completely transparent) to install and use and require minimal entry of meta-data. It's vital to remember that contributors are volunteering to share their knowledge, so that process should be made as easy (and as personally rewarding) as possible. Again, a key element is to demonstrate trust in all contributors.

### **Communication and awareness technologies**

Another key technology for communities comes in the form of a huge range of simple messaging services. Distance can be an impediment to good social interaction; when people work together in a single office, you can always tell when somebody is there and you will be more likely to talk to them than to send them an email.

However, when people work remotely from one another (a more likely situation for members of a CoP), it's harder to know whether they are readily available. Instant messaging services allow the exchange of a simple “good morning” when community members arrive at their offices or a quick check to see who's online and likely to be available to speak on the telephone.

More recently, “micro-blogging” technology has taken us a step beyond the messaging service. Services such as Twitter provide this form of “ambient awareness”, but add much more besides. Twitter is based on 140-character messages that are composed as answers to the question: “What are you doing?” Many people are now finding this to be a critically important tool for staying in contact across multiple communities.

It can be effectively used for finding expertise or other resources quickly and easily and is particularly useful for people working remotely to feel part of the broader community. The personal nature and immediacy of this platform, moreover, can make interaction seem much less impersonal than older bulletin board or mailing list technology, with the added benefit that all exchanges can be preserved, creating a record of previous conversations.

A new entrant in this field that's targeted specifically for use within organizations is Yammer, winner of the top prize at the TechCrunch50 start-up conference this year. Yammer defines communities by a common email address domain. A good way to show the stronger focus of Yammer on CoPs is that the question posed for message composition here is: “What are you working on?”

In fact, it's fair to say in conclusion that this is the question that should be on the mind of every member of a successful CoP, along with the adjunct: “...and how can I help?”




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