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Best practices, case studies and strategy

Many companies have found that communities of practice require more care to sustain than originally thought. Here, Richard McDermott examines some of the reasons communities die, what successful communities do to keep vibrant and how the role of communities evolves over time.

HOW TO AVOID A MID-LIFE CRISIS IN YOUR CoPs

Uncovering six keys to sustaining communities

By Richard McDermott, McDermott Consulting



Richard McDermott is a CoP specialist and member of the *KM Review* editorial board. He has 19 years experience consulting on organizational design and change.

A few years ago communities of practice were the darling of knowledge management. While software vendors promised to make the brains of corporate staff available to everyone online, communities of practice offered a viable way for people across the globe to share ideas and collaborate. They were seen as informal, mostly volunteer structures through which employees in different parts of the company or globe could help each other solve problems, share their expertise, think together and develop best practices. They were also seen as an inexpensive way to improve performance and help companies become truly global by linking front-line professional staff together in a web of shared knowledge.

Five years later, many companies have realized communities of practice are more difficult to sustain than originally thought. This article describes the results of a study of six global companies with relatively mature community development initiatives in the pharmaceutical, oil, defense, telecommunications and technical consulting industries. We interviewed community leaders and core members from a cross-section of communities in each company. We found that communities of practice are, indeed, a viable way to connect scientists, engineers and other professional staff across both geography and business units. But shepherding communities along after they've been going for three to five years (their early mid-life) is far more complex than we originally imagined. (Of course, the true

mid-life of many communities is likely to be much later than three to five years. But we will use the term mid-life as a convenience.)

The shifting landscape of communities

When starting, communities often need to build momentum as they discover what knowledge is useful to share. (See "Community development as a natural step," *KM Review*, Nov./Dec. 2000.) Once they've been going for a few years, three other problems often inhibit communities' ability to maintain the spark they had during their early years – loss of momentum, loss of attention and localism.

1. Loss of momentum

Driven by the passion of a leader and core members, it seems communities of practice could maintain momentum on their own. This is sometimes true. But sometimes domain shifts make the community no longer viable. At the defense contractor, an IT community became a strong and influential advisor to senior management. Over the years, IT gained importance in defense systems but the focus of IT shifted to another focal area and another group. As a result, this community lost its importance, even though its members were senior IT professionals. The members weren't able to shift both the focus and relationships to keep up with the changing IT landscape. Because knowledge is key to the legitimacy of a community, when the IT group slipped from the

cutting edge, they also lost their voice and influence. Communities lose momentum, not only when the topic shifts, but also when the landscape of their domain has been fully explored.

2. Loss of attention

Even when the domain remains relevant, communities sometimes simply wind down from lack of attention. The configuration management community at the telecommunications company lost momentum when priorities shifted. Of course, other things can turn community members' attention, too. Some members of a manufacturing community withdrew when a manager said to make sure community participation did not interfere with important projects. Because communities often rely on volunteer energy, loss of members' attention can be devastating. In companies where community participation is voluntary, most community leaders and active members feel they do not have enough time to devote to the community. Other more urgent project work pushes it aside.

3. Localism

Even though communities do connect people in different parts of the globe, they tend to be dominated by the site that hosts them or where the largest concentrations of members reside. Even though the oil company's communities had many members around the globe, the communities, like the company, were Houston-centric – most of the community leaders, members and contributions came from there. People from other parts of the world felt part of, but somewhat marginal to, the community. In the pharmaceutical company, communities took care to include people from smaller sites, but people at the smaller sites often felt more like customers of the groups at the major sites. Simply because they had so many more staff, the central sites ran studies for the smaller sites and took the lead in testing new technology.

Rather than equalizing the size differences between sites, the communities often reflect them. In fact, because most communities rely greatly on volunteer time, they can even exacerbate size differences. At the smaller sites in the pharmaceutical company, some scientists were members of three or four communities because they covered many different domains for the site. But involvement in so many domains limited their ability to be active contributors.

The voluntary dimension of communities inhibits their ability to be as effective a globally unifying mechanism as the organization hoped. And when the community shifts from global to local, members sometimes wonder what makes them a community

KEYPOINTS

- Shepherding communities along after they've been going for three to five years, their early mid-life, is far more complex than originally imagined. This article describes the results of a study of six global companies with relatively mature community development initiatives.
- Three problems often inhibit communities' ability to maintain the spark they had during their early years – loss of momentum, loss of attention and localism.
- The most vital of the communities we reviewed shared six characteristics – clear purpose, active leadership, critical mass of engaged members, sense of accomplishment, high management expectations and real time.
- Healthy communities have also changed their own expectations about the role they can play in organizations, wanting more influence on the organization as a whole.

after all, rather than just a personal network. As a result, they become less engaged in community activities.

The six characteristics of keeping fit

Not all communities at mid-life suffer these limitations. Some are vital, full of energy and add value to both their members and the company. The most vital of the communities we reviewed shared six characteristics – clear purpose, active leadership, critical mass of engaged members, sense of accomplishment, high management expectations and real time.

1. Clear purpose

Some of the healthy communities we found have adopted an annual goal-setting process. The Chemistry community in the consulting company holds annual round-robin discussions among the three leaders of the community and the leaders of the sub-communities within it. Through those discussions they assess how well they did in achieving their last year's goals and develop new ones for the current year. One of the healthy communities in the pharmaceutical company does not establish annual

What makes a community "mature"?

How do mature communities differ from other structures? Among the healthy communities we observed, there are three distinct characteristics:

1. Communities of practice are peer relationships. Community leaders and senior members don't have authority over other members.
2. They focus on sharing and/or developing knowledge, ideas, tips and practices around a topic. Even when they collectively research a topic or develop guidelines or procedures, it's in the service of developing a body of knowledge.
3. They run on influence, both internally and in their relationship with the organization. Of course, there are distinctions between the members of communities. Some are leading experts in a field, others are specialists in a particular topic, some are newcomers to the field, and many are generalists but with different degrees of experience. While some members have greater influence, it is their expertise, creativity and knowledgeability that legitimates their influence.

goals. But its members are engaged by comparing enough data from studies they have run at their different sites to understand the biological mechanism they are researching. “Understanding the mechanism” enlivens the community. Whether through formal goals or simply a clearly articulated

core group of members who regularly attend meetings, contribute ideas and help other members. These members often see participation as an important part of their job and/or career. This core group typically emerges early in the life of the community and is fairly stable throughout. Over time members of this core group can get to know each other quite well and build enough trust to not only share ideas, but ask for help and share insights from projects or activities that didn’t go so well.

NETWORKING IS THE KEY SKILL FOR LEADERS OF COMMUNITIES AT MID-LIFE. ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE LEADERS SPENDS 25 PERCENT OF HER TIME (50 PERCENT IN THE BEGINNING) ON LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES.

purpose, communities that remain healthy through mid-life have a clear and relatively short-term purpose around which members can focus their attention.

When we first started using the concept of communities of practice, we thought having goals would tend to turn communities into task teams, reducing member focus on building the capability of the community. But none of the communities with annual goals lost sight of their long-term purpose of building the organization’s knowledge and capability.

2. Active leadership

Active, engaging, passionate leaders are key to both starting and sustaining communities. Leaders of healthy communities spend real time leading them, 25 percent or more of their work week. Some leaders of healthy communities said they were able to do this because community leadership integrates well into their job. For example, part of the leader of the Chemistry community’s job was to develop newer people to the field. To do this he travels extensively throughout the world. It’s easy for him to build visiting community members into those travels.

Networking continues to be the key skill for leaders of communities at mid-life. One of the most effective community leaders in our study said she spent 25 percent of her time (50 percent in the beginning) on community leadership. Of that she devotes 10 percent to logistics such as arranging meetings, 20 percent to facilitating meetings, 30 percent on networking with the stakeholders of the community and 40 percent on networking among members. Throughout a community’s life, active engaged leaders link members to the organization’s key players.

3. Critical mass of engaged members

Getting a large percentage of members to actively participate remains difficult throughout a community’s life. But healthy communities do have a

4. Sense of accomplishment

Since helping each other solve everyday work problems is one of the main activities of communities, particularly early in their lives, we thought the strength of relationships built from that knowledge sharing would be the key to sustaining them. However, healthy communities often have a clear sense that they are making progress in advancing their purpose. For example, a community in the pharmaceutical company held a face-to-face meeting in which they made sense of the data shared over the last two years, identifying trends and thinking through the implications for compounds the company is developing. They were excited about finally understanding the broader implications of the data. Many communities at mid-life share this desire to identify best practices, develop a common insight or create a common approach.

5. High management expectations

Senior managers’ expectations about a community’s level of contribution over time can also dramatically engage the community. When senior management asked a new-hire community to participate in the company’s orientation program, help redesign it and use it as way to recruit new community members, the new-hire community was enthralled. Rather than inhibit the community, high management expectations for results usually engage the community.

6. Real time

In the most successful communities, not only the leaders, but some of the core members found time for community activities by making community participation part of their job. For a community of facilitators of lean manufacturing, using the community to learn and share tips on improving their facilitation was directly helpful for their individual job performance. In one organization, core members of some select communities were expected to devote 10 percent of their time to community activities. Contributing to the community was part of their performance appraisal. They felt that this did not motivate them to sustain their involvement, but it did

make involvement “count” in the organization.

Seeking influence and integration

Healthy communities have also changed their own expectations about the role they can play in organizations, wanting more influence on the organization as a whole.

In the technical consulting firm, a number of the communities asked their KM team to help them formalize a process for them to give input to the R&D strategy. Each of the communities already had a senior management sponsor who they could use to communicate with the senior management team. But that was not enough for the communities. They wanted a more concrete way to communicate their insights about emerging issues in their discipline and its technology directly into to the company’s R&D strategy. In response, the company did create a process for communities to officially give input to the R&D strategy and, with some help from the KM team, a feedback loop was created through which the communities could find out management’s reactions to their suggestions. As communities mature, their attention seems to shift from simply helping each other to shaping the organization.

Another way communities influence organizations is by the way they impact operations. When first started, communities typically influence operations through the insights they provide to their members. Community members then carry those insights to the projects or operating teams on which they serve. If the operating teams decided not to implement the approach the community recommended, it was a difference between the operating team leader and community member who served on that team.

But more mature communities often want a stronger, more direct influence on operating teams. In one company, several of the communities wanted to have policy or governance level authority to force operating teams to abide by its recommendations. While the company did not give communities governance authority, they did create an escalation process through which communities could object to an operating group’s failure to abide by their recommendations. Though the process was never used, the fact that the executive team put it in place gave the communities considerably greater influence. Communities at mid-life often want to have this high-impact governance relationship to operating teams.

Communities integrate horizontally


As both consumer and resource markets become more global, more companies realize they need better horizontal integration across divisions and geography. It also makes it possible to offer products and services

Asking for more from communities

The concept of communities of practice as applied in business emerged from research on spontaneous communities, ones that simply emerged from people’s everyday interaction. We felt that you could intentionally seed and develop communities, but that they needed the informal, open-ended, peer-oriented character of natural communities to survive.

However, we found communities survive well with goals, formal roles, structures, action items and many of the traditional characteristics of teams without any concern about losing their long-term community identity. We also found as healthy communities have become more common, organizations have begun asking them to do more than the sharing and help that spontaneous communities ever do. This can include:

- developing and validating large, complex best practices;
- harmonizing procedures between labs;
- trading projects to balance workload among sites;
- advising management about strategic direction.

based on common platforms, even when they require local customization. Horizontal integration makes it possible to find and use expert resources on local projects, wherever they’re located. Since many companies don’t want to sacrifice local customization or local control to a centralized office, they need structures that complement traditional authority-based hierarchies. Communities are one of those structures. Because they don’t have authority, they don’t clash with traditional organization structures. But because they can be very influential, they still have the power to shape how local groups apply that knowledge. In the oil company, whenever there was a question about an approach or procedure operations groups were expected by management to consult the community. Although it had no formal governance authority, its influence was very strong – because communities are influence structures rather than authority structures. But to play this role effectively, communities need to be more than informal discussion groups. They need to be empowered to be full-fledged elements of the organization, legitimately exercising influence without formal authority. 

A series of articles on leveraging knowledge is available from the author, who can be contacted at the e-mail below.

Contact

Richard McDermott
McDermott Consulting

E-mail: richard@mcdermottconsulting.com

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