

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

The Mid-Life of Communities: Influence as an Integrating Mechanism

by
Richard McDermott, Ph.D.¹

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 on-line, communities of practice offered a viable way for people across the globe to share ideas and collaborate. As informal, mostly volunteer structures through which employees in different parts of the company or the globe could help each other solve problems, share their expertise, think together, and develop best practices, communities of practice were seen as an inexpensive way to both improve performance and help companies become more truly global by linking front-line professional staff together in a web of shared knowledge.

Five years later many companies have realized that communities of practice are more difficult to sustain than they'd originally thought. This article describes the results of a study of 6 global companies with relatively mature community development initiatives in the pharmaceutical, oil, defense, telecommunications and technical consulting industries. We interviewed community leaders and core member 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-life², is far more complex than we'd originally imagined.

The Shifting Landscape of Communities in Mid-Life

When starting, communities often need to build momentum as they discover what knowledge is useful to share. Once they have been going for a few years, three other problems often inhibit communities' ability to maintain the spark they had during their early years.

Lose of momentum. Driven by the passion of a leader and core members, it seems that communities of practice would maintain their momentum on their own. This is sometimes true. But sometimes shifts in the domain make the community no longer viable. At the defense

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2. Of course, the true mid-life of many communities is likely to be much later than 3 to 5 years. But we will use the term mid-life as a convenience.

A series of articles on leveraging knowledge is available from the author at McDermott Consulting., 712 Allen Drive, Longmont CO 80503 (303) 545-6030. Richard@McDermottConsulting.com

contractor, an IT community had become 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 were not 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 and the topic is no longer new.

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 other very pressing priorities took their attention. Of course, other things can turn community members' attention, too. Some members of a manufacturing community withdrew when a manager said to make sure that 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 leader and active members feel they do not have enough time to devote to the community. Others, more urgent project work pushes it aside.

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, with most of the community leaders, members and contributions coming from Houston. 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 many 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 to a great degree 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 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 after all, rather than just a personal network and become less engaged in community activities.

Any of these problems can result in a community losing energy, focus and membership. Any can result in the death of the community, or more often, like the IT professionals, shifting into becoming a personal network.

Keeping Fit

Not all communities at mid-life suffer these limitations. Some are vital, full of energy, and adding value to both their members and the company. The most vital of the communities we reviewed shared 6 characteristics.

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 the leaders of the sub-communities within it. Through those discussions they assess how well they did in achieving their last years' goals and develop new ones for the current year. One of the healthy communities in the pharmaceutical company does not establish annual 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 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 that having goals would tend to turn communities into task teams, reducing members 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 organizations knowledge and capability.

Active leadership. Active, engaging, passionate leaders are key to both starting and sustaining communities. Leaders of healthy communities spend real time leading them, 25% or more of their work week. Some leaders of healthy communities said that 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 is 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% of her time (50% in the beginning) on community leadership. Of that she devotes 10% to logistics, like arranging meetings, 20% facilitating meetings, 30% to networking with the stakeholders of the community and 40% to networking among members. Throughout a community's life, active engaged leaders link members with each other and key players in the organization.

Critical mass of engaged members. Getting a large percentage of members to actively participate remains difficult throughout a community's life. Many members join to learn or stay in touch with a field they are only marginally interested in, and have neither time nor intention to participate to any great extent. But healthy communities do have a core group of members who regularly attend meetings, contribute ideas and help other members. But healthy communities develop a proportionately small group of people who see participation as important for their job and/or career. This core group typically emerges early in the life of the community and is fairly stable throughout. It is the core resource for community activities and leadership. Over time members of this core group can get to know each other quite well and build enough trust in each other that they can not only easily share ideas, but also ask for help and share insights from projects or activities that didn't go so well.

Sense of accomplishment and value. Since helping each other solve everyday work problems is one of the main activities of communities, particularly early in their lives, we thought that the strength of relationship 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. A community of lean manufacturing facilitators felt that they were collectively learning what makes a lead event really work. For example, a community in the pharmaceutical company held a face-to-face meeting in which they made sense of the data they had been sharing 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 they had been sharing. Many communities at mid-life share this desire to identify best practices, develop a common insight, or create a common approach.

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 engages the community.

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 the lean facilitators, 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% 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.

The Evolving Role of 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 that communities survive well with goals, formal roles, structures, action items, many of the traditional characteristics of teams, without any concern about losing their long-term community identity. We also found that 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; developing and validating large, complex best practices; harmonizing procedures between labs; trading projects to balance workload among sites, or advising management about strategic direction. In addition, senior managers in companies that have had active communities for two to four years, often begin asking for a demonstration of the communities' value, even when they instinctively believe in them. Like other organizational elements they expect communities of practice to add tangible value.

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

Influence. 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.

Integration. Another way communities influence organizations is by the way they impact operations. When first started, communities typically influence operations simply 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 the oil company, several of the communities wanted to have policy or governance level authority to force operating teams to abide by its recommendations. While the oil 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.

Spontaneous communities of practice are part of the invisible and unmanaged way work gets done in most organization. As they mature they often want greater official recognition and influence over other parts of the organization. But as they gain that recognition and influence, communities move from the shadow side of the organization into visibility and become another structure the company can use to organize and coordination action, like teams, task forces, committees and functional departments. As they mature, communities, and the organization in which they operate, both raise their expectations of what communities can and should do.

Peer Relationship

So what makes mature communities different from other structures? Among the healthy communities we observed, there are three distinct characteristics. First, communities of practice are peer relationships. Community leaders and senior members don't have authority over other members. Second, communities of practice 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 is in the service of developing a body of knowledge. Third, communities of practice 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 knowledge ability that legitimates their influence. As communities of practice move from the shadow side into the mainstream of the organization, they show the potential role organization structures based on influence, rather than governance authority, can be an effective way to horizontally integrate across division and geography.

Communities Integrate Horizontally

As both consumer and resource markets become more global, more companies realize that they need better integration horizontally across divisions and geography. Horizontal integration makes it possible to offer products and services based on common platforms, even when they require local customization. Horizontal integration makes it possible to find and use expert resources, wherever they are located, on local projects. Since many companies do not 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.