



Building a support structure for your communities

Communities of practice (CoPs) develop naturally as people with common interests share ideas and collaborate. However, transforming a loose network of colleagues into a powerful force for leveraging knowledge requires more support than naturally arises. Here are three organizational support structures to help make CoPs an effective vehicle for knowledge management.

1. A community support team

CoPs are different from other traditional organizational structures. So they usually need the support of a specifically-trained team.

Direct community support. Just like people, CoPs change through their lives. Support teams not only launch communities, they aid them throughout their development. Support teams train community coordinators, develop tools and tips on development, customize IT tools, host forums and assess community health.

Integrate CoPs with the organization. As communities develop, they often stumble on organizational policies, such as compensation. They often take on projects that were previously the domain of other departments. Some CoPs mentor new members. Some take on small research projects. A group of geologists, for example, is redefining some core concepts in their field so they can refine their analytic tools. This impacts their relationship with the research lab. The support team analyzes these relationships and recommends policy changes.

Create a community development strategy. One of the most important roles of the support team is to integrate community development with organizational strategy. This

involves determining key competencies and developing the support resources needed.

2. Community structure

There are several key roles within effective communities.

Community coordinator. The effectiveness of the community coordinator is the single most important predictor of community success. Coordinators host events, build the practice by organizing and upgrading information, manage the community's relationship with teams, and regularly assess community health. Most important, they connect members with each other. As one coordinator put it, "My role is to be a technical gossip." The time this role takes depends on the level of community activity, but less than 25 percent is generally not sufficient.

Librarian/administrative assistant. Much of the day-to-day work of community coordination involves finding, organizing, filing, posting and managing information. A community librarian can free the coordinator to focus on making connections between people and developing the practice. Librarians often also schedule meetings and maintain databases and Web sites.

3. Management support

Senior management support. As with other efforts, using communities to leverage knowledge without general senior management support is impossible. Some communities can survive, but few will make a real impact on the organization.

A Steering Team. Like other knowledge management efforts, CoPs need the support of a management team to guide the

overall development, integrate them with knowledge management and business strategy, and protect communities from the pull of other organizational tensions. The steering team may fund the CoP, ensure that it develops effectively and assess the value it adds.

Senior management champion.

When initiating change, we often expect too much from senior managers. We may even expect them to make every change a priority. However, rarely does any change effort get support from all senior managers. They usually have different levels of belief and understanding, particularly with a new concept like CoPs. Finding one manager who genuinely believes in CoPs – who will make them a priority in management discussions and actively support community development – is often much more credible than seeking universal management support.

First-line management support. To be effective, community members need to take time from other activities. Sometimes, line managers tell members that community participation should not interfere with their regular jobs. Educating line managers about the value of CoPs can make participation much easier for community members.

Because CoPs are organic, nurturing them can be a delicate process. Too much structure and they become bureaucratic. Too little and they fail to grow beyond a circle of professional friends. These structures need to catalyze community development rather than dictate or impose it.

This column invites leading lights to share their knowledge about specific KM disciplines.

S.M.E.



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