

Knoco news

Welcome to the Communities of Practice issue of the Knoco newsletter. In this issue we explore Communities of Practice – a well-established component of Knowledge Management that adds value to thousands of organisations.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are one of the main building blocks of a Knowledge Management-sharing system, and many organizations will seek to create, launch and sustain a number of networks, as a pilot within a wider Knowledge Management approach. Communities of Practice are peer networks of practitioners within an organization, who help each other perform better by sharing their knowledge.

A community of practice is a network of people (practitioners) working within a particular knowledge topic, who help each other perform better by sharing their knowledge.

We have seen this happen in many different contexts and at many different scales.

We have worked with **face to face meetings of practitioners** from different departments within the same organization, who met

together over a period of months and years, to explore how the others tackled problems, and to look for solutions which could be re-used. Over time, these individuals developed strong bonds, and exchanged many practices with each other, saving time and money for the organization.

At the other end of the scale we have worked with **huge global communities** of practice with over 1000 members, who interact almost exclusively online. By asking questions and offering solutions, they use the community as a bank of advisors who are prepared to share their knowledge to solve each other's problems.

And we have also worked with **small communities of experts** that have been set up by management for the purposes of collaborating across an organisation. They have a task to do, and the task is one of creating and



building best practice for the company, by using the best of the best of what is currently available.

All these communities have delivered value, sometimes huge value. If set up and managed well, then communities will work for your company too.

We can help you to develop your community strategy, we can provide community launch services, and we can train and coach your community leaders, facilitators and sponsors.

[Contact us](#) for further details of our Community of Practice support.

The four types of Community

The term "Community" is one we hear often in the KM world, usually with little qualification. However there is more than one type of community, and problems start to arise when management models for one type are misapplied to another type. Here are the four types.

Communities of practice are the KM standard. A community of practice is, as you might expect, a community of practitioners; practitioners within a single area or discipline of practice. They may be a community of geologists, of lawyers, of gardeners, of chefs. Their conversation is about practice, and the purpose of the community is primarily to help each other to improve their practice, by using the tacit knowledge of the community as a shared resource.. Communities of practice generally are voluntary, and often have little or no funding from the host company.

Communities of purpose are different. Here the



community is funded by a company or by a host organisation, and in return, commit to deliverables. They have a performance contract, a budget, and agreed KPIs. This sort of community will have an identified set of members, rather than being totally voluntary. They will have joint objectives. They act often as a virtual team.

Communities of interest are different again. These consist of people who are interested in a particular topic (such as a fan club for a particular pop star, or supporters of a rugby team), but they are not practitioners. Their purpose is to receive and share information, but this information doesn't help them in their work as practitioners. Membership is entirely voluntary.

Social communities are communities of friends. Their purpose is not to share information or knowledge - their purpose is creating and strengthening social bonds.

Where community strategies go wrong, is when members of one type of community are treated as if they are members of another type of community.

For example, we have seen one organisation give deliverables to the community, despite the voluntary nature of the community. They have treated them as a community of purpose, though they are a community of practice. The community members did not sign up for delivering products to the company, and rapidly lost enthusiasm.

We have seen another organisation treat a community of interest as a community of practice, trying to engage them in conversation and exchange of knowledge, when all they were interested in was receiving information.

Community is a wide term, and before introducing any sort of community strategy to your organisation, get very clear about what sort of communities you need.

Conditions for large-org CoP success
A snippet from Peter Stoyko of the Com-Prac Yahoo group

- a) high tolerance for disagreement
- b) well-supported professional/ learning networks
- c) organizational knowledge centre
- d) frequent face-to-face interaction
- e) investment in employee development
- f) realistic expectations
- g) employee autonomy
- h) discretionary time
- i) common communities

Community Launch

The fastest way to get a community going is to hold a launch meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to build some of the key relationships that will be needed for the community to operate, to help the participants understand the value of knowledge sharing, and to gain community ownership in some of the basic principles of the community, such as the appointment of the coordinator and the design of the knowledge sharing process.

The primary outcomes from the launch meeting are a sense of community among the attendees, a commitment to exchange knowledge with each other in future, an agreed process for seeking and sharing knowledge, and a draft community charter. It is also important at the launch to identify some early wins that the community can work on.

The Community Charter

A draft community charter may be created at the launch meeting, and this will need to be refined through dialogue within the community. This community charter is a key document in developing community identity, and in setting up the ground rules for the community.

The Community charter should address some or all of the following items;

- Purpose - what the community is about
- Objectives - what the community is trying to achieve
- Principles and Behaviours - which underpin the community
- Processes - the ways in which the community will operate.
- Tools and content - what knowledge should be shared, and how
- Roles - who does what

Community Roles

There are a few key roles to be played in a community. These main roles can include

The community leader - the person who is accountable for ensuring the community functions as a knowledge sharing mechanism and best practice is identified and shared.

The community facilitator this is the person who facilitates community interaction. This role could also be taken by the community leader.

Community knowledge owners or skills owners - a person, or several people, who take accountability for managing some or all of the aspects of community knowledge. They gather and maintain current best practice, they create Knowledge Assets and keep them up to date, they act as custodians of the company's core competencies.

Community Sponsor

This is a manager or senior manager to act as champion and sponsor for the community; someone who will support the community at a high level, and also provide a strategic steer, for example a functional head.



Community core members at a launch meeting, in front of their charter

Are communities always the answer?

Communities of practice are one of the cornerstone concepts of Knowledge Management, and a tool that many KM strategists or implementers reach for when looking to start a KM program.

However a community is not always the tool you need, and just because they are a successful component of KM, doesn't mean they are the answer to every KM problem.

Here's what John Keeble of Enterprise Oil says about communities

"We have had some people come to us saying they want to launch a community, and we have ended up encouraging them just to have a workshop. Invite the same people you would have invited to the launch of the community, and just see what level of interest there is. I think the one advantage of that is that it avoids overloading the community with excessive expectations early on. It is much easier to say "we had a workshop; we covered the subject and that's it", whereas if you launch a community, people expect to have a lifecycle of at least 2 years, and you may discover that's not what you need"

Sometimes you don't need a community of practice; sometimes you need a workshop, or a training course, or better

communication within a team or a department.

So when do you need communities of practice? You need them where they can address issues which are not otherwise easily addressed by any other group. You need them where they can cross the organisational boundaries and the organisational silos. You need them where they are multilocational and multi-departmental. Have a look at the Boston square below, and the four situations it paints

- Where the knowledge needs to be shared across locations and across organisational boundaries between departments, then communities are ideal.
- Where the knowledge needs to be shared across a single location and within a single department, then you don't need a community of practice. The community would merely duplicate the existing organisational structure. You don't need new structures or new community leaders or

community sponsors - what you need is a better way of sharing knowledge within that department.

- Where the knowledge needs to be shared across locations within the same department (i.e. you have an organisational department with geographic spread), then communities are useful when tied into the departmental structure.
- Where the knowledge needs to be shared across departments within the same location, then you need a better system for sharing knowledge at that location. This may be a community of practice (which can meet face to face), or it may be a series of problem-solving workshops, or it may be a single conference. Communities are an option, but not the only option.

So think before you reach into the KM toolbox for that community tool. Make sure it's the right one for the job.





Knoco Gulf states – a new addition to the Knoco global family.

We are very pleased to welcome to the worldwide Knoco family, Dr. Abdulhameed Alhosani, the director of Knowledge Consultants; Knoco’s franchisee in the Gulf States (GCC countries). Abdulhameed has over 25 years of experience on various fields spanning from quality assurance to training programs and lately change management and knowledge management. He holds a PhD in chemistry from the University of Glasgow, has research experience and published scientific papers and authored two books.

Abdulhameed has also conducted numerous training workshops and has taught in universities and colleges as a visiting lecturer. His main interest now is helping organizations around the Gulf States to establish knowledge management programs and assist in spreading education on this vital field

Welcome to Dr Abdulhameed.

The Community Toolkit

Tools don’t make a community, but they can help it work, help people to cooperate and collaborate, and help a community to build a shared knowledge base.

Some of the most important community tools include the following

A discussion forum, where community members can ask questions of each other, and receive answers, is one of the core tools of a community of practice.

A community knowledge store such as a **wiki**, provides somewhere where the community can build their collective knowledge base

A community notification tool, such as a community **blog**, (together with a “subscribe and publish” facility in the knowledge base) allows new knowledge to be pushed out to community members

A community membership list, with members details, is also vital to a community, so the members know who else is in the community.



Community of Practice: Metrics and Health Check

When a community program has been running for 1-2 years it is important to perform a health check on the individual communities and the program as a whole. Performing this type of review ensures that both are providing value to the participants and the organization.

Examples of metrics that assess the health of individual communities include calculations for number of problems solved by the community and related income increases or expense decreases. There are also usefulness surveys where users evaluate how useful the community has been in helping them accomplish their objectives. These surveys can include anecdotes from users describing (in quantitative terms) how the community has contributed to organizational objectives. The metrics used may change over time and may be customized for the length of time a community has been in operation.

Overall community metrics may include calculations for the overall impact of the community program; better learning curves, increased customer satisfaction, reduced rework, increased innovation or decreased attrition rates. Collecting these types of metrics on an annual basis helps to remind staff of the value of the community program and ensure that it continues to add value to the organization.

Visit our website

at www.knoco.com for ideas, resources, publications and free downloads such as newsletters, slide sets, white papers, self-assessment tools, and video

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