

efios communities of practice

In essence, communities of practice are groups of people who share similar goals and interests. In pursuit of these goals and interests, they employ common practices, work with the same tools and express themselves in a common language. Through such common activity, they come to hold similar beliefs and value systems [Covis]

Examples of virtual communities can be a group of staff members with the same interest or expertise, that share problems and issues within a company. Alternatively, it can be a medical community where certain medical developments are discussed amongst doctors and the pharmaceutical industry.

Reasons for having communities may include:

- **Solve problems**
Communities of practice can allow people to post their issues and problems and receive answers from their peers across business units. The just-in-time question and answer method will enable people to solve problems fast by taking advantage of other member's experience in this area.
- **Learn about other's problems**
One of the most compelling reasons for taking part in a community of practice is not to get problems solved, but to learn about other people's issues and to increase knowledge about things that are going on 'in the business'.
- **Stimulate involvement**
The communities will increase user's awareness and involvement about their business. Working in communities is working with peers, therefore loosing the accountability to higher management, which will stimulate the feeling of belonging, though this is a very intangible and hard to measure concept.
- **Create ideas**
The communities will allow people to get in contact with people outside their common working environment, but in the same practice (for instance with people from other sites) and also allow them to work on a more creative basis sharing ideas, which will finally result in more innovation.
- **Distribute knowledge across the business units**
The communities will provide cross business unit fertilization of ideas and workarounds, because it will be easier to 'reach out' into different parts of the business processes.
- **Develop best practices**
The communities will allow designated people to develop best practice models based on the procedure and problem solving issues that come forward in the communities of practice. Though the communities are not designed to extract automatically best practices, it can deliver important details on what 'common knowledge' and what 'best practices' are in the business, and it will enable people to keep improving existing practices as well.

Virtual communities and communities of practice are not teams, or taskforces. They are - in their most successful forms - based on existing communities of people in or across organizations. And as with virtual teams, virtual communities in organizations do not



"There are many different types of Communities of Practice. Some are very suitable to foster innovation. Or organizational capability development. Others may be considered social movements in organizations with distributed leadership. Key is to find the collective capabilities between groups of individuals."

replace the need to have face to face meetings and do need (mostly) to be facilitated and supported by experts and focal points. One of the key mistakes made by companies implementing virtual communities is that 'it will run by itself'; though highly organic a community needs to be monitored, nourished, fed with expert advice, etc. etc.

Typical ingredients for setting up virtual communities are:

- Create kick-off meetings (face to face) or sessions with the local members of the initial community.
- Find subject matter experts and facilitators, as well as focal points if you are working internationally and in different regions. Define roles, and focus on the Subject Matter Expert (SME).
- Define a schedule of regular recurring face to face or telephone (conference call) meetings to complement the community.
- Make sure that all participants are aware of what information should be shared and what information should not be shared - make sure that the facilitators know how to feed and handle the information and threads discussed in the community. Educate people on the value of the 'virtual' aspect and give indications on responsiveness.
- Find a sponsor and define clearly what 'success' of the community is (and use reasonable assumptions for this). Involve the sponsor regularly.
- Do not try to steer the community too much, but provide support for the platform and the SME's.
- Try to reward contributors / successful communities.

Once the virtual community has been set up and the community members, the facilitator, the SME, and the sponsor feel comfortable with the way of working, there are some benefits that can come out of the community, which might not be as obvious as with a virtual team, but the impact of its success may be greater on the long term.

- Web (and therefore perhaps near-ubiquitous) access
- Work across different time zones.
- Just-in-time questions and answers.
- Practitioners can get in touch with peers and share experience.
- Members will be able to engage in different silo's of the organization.
- Implicit knowledge becomes tacit.

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