

For more information contact:



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Contributors

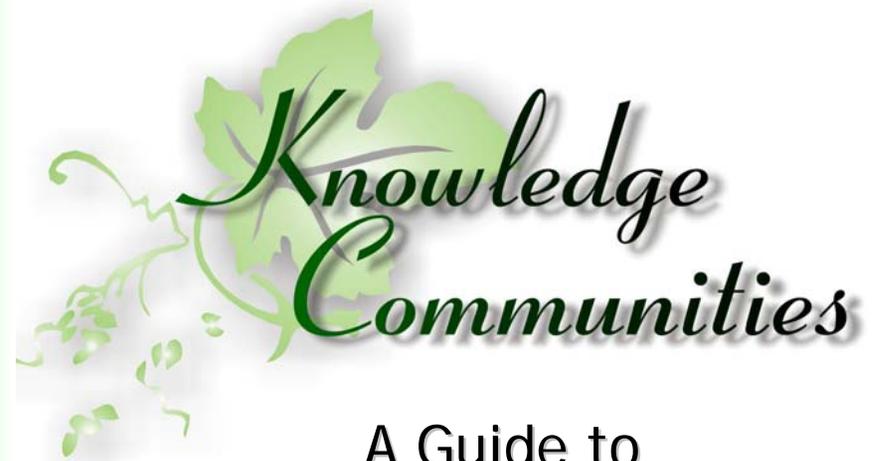
Deb Hanlon
Guillermo 'Willy' Almada
Joanne Harper-Tam
Tom Novak

Publishing Editors

Chris Werlhof
Deb Hanlon

Graphics

Chris Werlhof



A Guide to
Virtual *Communities of Practice*



This guide will promote the understanding of basic concepts relating to the creation of nurturing environments for the support of *Knowledge Communities*.

"In the knowledge society the most probable assumption for organizations, and certainly the assumption on which they have to conduct their affairs, is that they need knowledge workers far more than knowledge workers need them."

- Peter Drucker

What is a Community of Practice?

- /// Group of people informally bound together by shared experience and passion for joint enterprise
- /// Naturally present in all organizations
- /// Emerging in importance as an organization convention
- /// Complement existing structures & galvanize knowledge sharing, learning, & change

Types of CoPs

- /// Self-Organized
 - Informal
 - Tenuous
 - Resilient
 - Self-directing
- /// Sponsored
 - More formal roles & responsibilities
 - Produce measurable results for the company
 - Established, chartered, supported by management



Common Organizing Focal Points

- /// A topic
- /// An industry
- /// A profession
- /// A recurring or nagging problem
- /// A work related work function or process

CoPs join together groups of people in ways that...

- /// enable colleagues to learn from each other by the sharing of issues, ideas, lessons learned, research findings and other relevant aspects of their mutual interest
- /// more broadly communicate and better leverage the learning that occur in the COP with other colleagues
- /// generate tangible, measurable and value added benefits to the business

Notes...





a place for your notes.

Ways CoPs provide intellectual *growth* and *benefit*

- /// Foster Learning
- /// Stimulate Interaction
- /// Create New Knowledge
- /// Socialize New Members
- /// Identify & Share Best Practices

Reasons for sponsoring a CoP

- /// A unresolved matter or setback
- /// A work related function or process
- /// A topic of significance requiring action
- /// A practice itself that is not fully captured in formal procedures; people learn how to do what they do and are seen as competent by doing it in concert with others.

Guidelines for sponsoring or starting a CoP

- /// Use a light hand; mandates to launch can create resistance, drive people underground
- /// Keep things simple and as informal as possible
- /// Stay focused on the primary purpose of the CoP...to learn through sharing and collaborating
- /// Resist the urge to focus on the technology. Create a space that fosters relationship and builds community
- /// Start small & grow



"Gardens, scholars say, are the first sign of commitment to a community. When people plant they are saying, let's stay here.

And by their connection to the land, they are connected to one another."

- Anne Raver

Though a virtual community can be a loosely defined term, the distinction between a *virtual community of practice* and other organizational structures can be shown in comparison to various *organizational forms*.

CoPs are not new - Communities of Practice, like community gardens are held together by people that care about and are committed to the community.



Community of Practice

What is the Function?

Build and exchange knowledge; Develop members' skills and ability

How members come together?

Self Selection; Interest/Passion about a topic; Need to resolve a nagging problem

What is the glue holding it together?

Passion, Commitment, and Identification to the expertise that forms the basis of the practice

How long does it last?

As long as members have an interest in improving the practice and maintaining the Community

Find those people who have a passion for the practice and are well-respected community members. Encourage them to fulfill the job of coordinating and holding the community together.

consult with each other during future engagements, or they may choose to learn from each other in future conferences. Others may choose to do both simultaneously by forming Learning-Consulting Networks. Still others may organize a new community of practice around a slightly different topic or interest. Metaphorically, these efforts could be considered "re-seeding."

How does one measure success in a community of practice? When should someone measure that success? Who should measure it? And what does one measure? These are some of the questions a community of practice might want to examine on a cyclical basis.

Is this approach to developing and supporting a community of practice working? The literature is replete with evidence that can support the claim that communities of practice are successful.



"The best way for a senior executive to assess the value of a community of practice is by listening to member's stories in a systemic way."

- E.C. Wenger

Strategies for Senior Managers & CoP Sponsors

- /// Identify key business issues and encourage the appropriate professionals to form CoPs around them
- /// Find out where successful CoPs exist and invest time seeing how they operate
- /// Provide the necessary infrastructure & support
- /// Seek out and promote exceptional CoPs
- /// Talk up the value of CoPs
- /// Educate others about CoPs



"For man, autumn is a time of harvest, of gathering together. For nature, it is a time of sowing, of scattering abroad."
 - Edwin Way Teale

Early fall is the season for harvesting the products of the community garden. Likewise, this time in the life cycle of a virtual community of practice gives members the products of their commitment.

Community members can now take time to reflect on the products of their work. As a joint enterprise, they have been up to something. They have come to the point where they can reflect on what they've been up to. In some cases, this reflection can lead to appreciation of the product as well as the relationships.

"Not so long ago, companies were reinvented by teams. Communities of practice may reinvent them yet again - if managers learn to cultivate these fertile organizational forms without destroying them."
 - E.C.Wenger

Learning Consulting Networks

The metaphor of late autumn in a community garden finds members composting the leaves and stalks in preparation for the next planting season. In the virtual community of practice, members glean the ideas they have generated to form the conceptual framework that buttresses their joint enterprise.

Some members of the virtual community of practice can build on the relationships they have developed to form other networks. For example, some members may choose to

"Communities of Practice have always been a part of the informal structure of organizations. They are organic. They grow and thrive as their focus and dynamics engage community members. To make them really valuable, inclusive and vibrant, they need to be nurtured, cared for, and legitimated. They need a very human touch...Too much support and loose their appeal to community members. To little and they wither."

Table 1. Comparison of Organizational Forms

Formal Work Group	Task Force & Project Team	Informal Networks
Perform ongoing work; Deliver a product or service	Accomplish a specific task or assignment	Collect and pass on information of common interest
Everyone who is assigned to a specific organizational unit and reports to the same manager	Selected and assigned by management	Friendships and business relationships
Common work goals; job and performance requirements	Goals and milestones of the project; usually time limited	Mutual needs; perception that belonging adds value
Until the work is completed, or the organization is reorganized	Until the project or task is completed	As long as people have a reason to connect and share information

- Richard McDermott, PhD.

Communities of Practice is the key to leveraging tacit knowledge in organizations.



"My winter garden,
Resting you see,
For the cold,
Has made it still,
Yet deep within,
The roots still live,
Waiting for the chill,
To leave..."

- Kimberlee Jones

Winter is the ideal time for carrying out the preparation of the garden, cleaning the site, developing the design, gathering the resources and tools, organizing the volunteers, and planning the work ahead. So too CoPs have a time of preparation before they launch.

Define your Purpose

This does not necessarily mean, "*start with the end in mind.*" It is important to have a general sense of direction, the actual destination will be agreed by the community itself. In fact, direction and speed might be changed several times during their journey. For the sponsoring organization, however, the innovation and business impact expected from the development of the Virtual Community of Practice needs to be clear.

What's in it for me, my organization?

As a member of the Virtual Community of Practice, my objective will be to share stories and generate new knowledge. It is this knowledge creation that attracts me to the Community.

Stakeholders / Corporate Sponsorship

Together with the users and the gardener, senior management plays a very important role in the success of the Virtual Communities of Practice. It is by providing explicit and implicit support that they can make it or break it.

Motivated Moderator/ Facilitator/Coach

The role of a moderator is to focus the dialogue of the community so that it doesn't wander aimlessly. The moderator encourages all participants to have a voice in discussions while keeping an eye on who is participating actively, silently, or not at all. They help the leader and members create a space that is nourishing. They create a space where plants can take root, by pulling weeds and insuring drainage. In other words, if conflict or unproductive behavior erupts, they help resolution. They ask opening questions and encourage conversation. They resuscitate dying dialogues and officially close/bury conversations that have come to an end. They handle side conversations and open spaces for new dialogue to emerge when the energy requires.

A good moderator works with a light touch, gently guiding, intervening only when necessary. They will challenge groundless criticism and encourage people to look for deeper meaning. They will intervene when they see rude or hurtful behavior, helping members to understand each other and treat each other with respect.

What is "participation"?

People participate in different ways. Typically there is a core group of active participants that provide the core of activity, they are active in all aspects of the garden and key to maintaining the communities health. Others may participate less frequently and only when they are passionate about a particular subject. They maybe most active in the planning, planting or harvesting stages. They may only participate actively in one part of the garden, preferring growing vegetables to flowers. Others may come to the garden look and provide input more passively. Some participants have become distinguished in their fields and come to the CoP to share that knowledge, others come primarily to learn or ask for help. The roles may change frequently depending on the topic.



"All the flowers of
all the tomorrow's
are in the seeds of
today and
yesterday."
- Chinese Proverb

Just like a garden needs a gardener, so too, a community of practice needs leadership and a moderator. Group leaders need to model an enthusiasm and help members learn how the CoP runs and what are the expectations/norms for the CoP. They will also be receptive to individual problems and work to resolve them.

Enthusiastic Leadership

A Community garden needs someone that is passionate about gardening and building and maintaining a community garden. Likewise a CoP needs someone that is passionate about the subject or practice and determined to maintain the CoP's energy and culture.

A community needs someone that can anticipate its needs. *Do we need more fertilizer, water, shade, helping hands?* This isn't easy to do. The best leaders will lead by example and seek to make the garden thrive. They will actively participate in all aspects gardening; planning, preparing the soil, planting, maintaining, harvesting, and evolving.

A good leader will seek out new members and help them to understand how the garden runs and how to find support. They will encourage others to seek out and invite new members.

The leader will be open to individual's problems and help in resolving them. They may plan special events to keep the excitement and enthusiasm high. Perhaps scheduling a guest speaker on a topic that the community has expressed interest in learning more about. The leader will keep the group informed of what is happening with the garden.

What Tools do we need?

When you start a garden you need a basic set of tools to prepare the soil, plant the seeds and maintain the garden patch. You need to have a shovel, rake, hose, and perhaps a hoe to get you started. Similarly, when you start a virtual CoP it helps to have a basic set of tools. Some of the basic CoP tools include:

Table 2. Basic CoP Tools

An address book or locator	<i>Provides contact and other useful information. Can be the beginning of you interest, skill, knowledge bank. Needs to have a search capacity.</i>
Discussion Space	<i>Facilitates communication between people that are <u>not</u> co-located. Several types of spaces are important. Space for large group discussions, space for guest speaker or expert forums, and private spaces where two or a few people can talk confidentially.</i>
Document Management	<i>Participants can share and have access to a set of documents. Members can provide comments and learn from each other in the process.</i>
Events Calendar/ Scheduling	<i>This tool can provide two functions. It can serve as an internal CoP scheduling tool and it can provide a space to let community members know of special events that are coming up.</i>
Glossary	<i>Each practice has a unique set of terms that have a special meaning to them because of the practice in which they are involved. This allows the virtual COP a point of reference to terms that may be unique to their group, new or still forming. It also provides a place for new members to pick up language that is peculiar to the COP. You feel more like part of the community when you can speak the language.</i>
Decision Support	<i>Decision support tools allow participants to identify issues, brainstorm, and select from a number of options, virtually.</i>



"Spring makes its own statement, so loud and clear that the gardener seems to be only one of the instruments, not the composer."

- Geoffrey B. Charlesworth

As interaction increases, the opportunity for disagreement or weeds to sprout increases. With the growth of weeds, the importance of self-management and perhaps intervention to sustain the health of the garden increases.

Relationships are Key

Community is about building relationships and at the core of all relationships is trust. If one does not feel one is in a safe place to share one's thoughts and emotions (not only what's in one's head but also what's in one's heart) then it is unlikely that a community that honors and utilizes the talents of all of its members will develop.

It is very important to develop norms and clarify the core values of the community from the very beginning. A face-2-face meeting is an ideal time to initiate such a discussion. To insure that the group adheres to its purpose and honors the norms, it is very useful to have an online facilitator or moderator.

At the core of gardening is the gardener, the space for the garden, the soil, the seed and the weather. All these variables come into play in creating a flower or plant. So too, in a community, many variables exist at its core. A place to gather, a common interest, the knowledge base of each of its members, their values, language, culture, education, gender, all come into play in creating not only a viable community but one where everyone feels valued and included.

Setting Group Norms

Besides discussing purpose, other themes and issues must be raised and discussed:

- /// *Who do we want to play with and where do we want to play?*
- /// *How will we play?*
- /// *How often will we meet?*
- /// *How will we deal with differences?*
- /// *How will we support and collaborate with one another?*
- /// *What really matters to us?*

Often in the group, the focus becomes on defending one's point of view rather than seeking to suspend assumptions and understand the other's differing point of view.

Keeping things simple and informal is ideal. Communities flourish through the commitment and thirst for learning of its members as a result of honoring a spirit of sharing and working together for the common good.

There are two ways in which people will come to a Community Garden. Some you will invite because they have a specific skill or share an interest, and you know it. Some others will learn about your Community Garden as they pass by and smell the aroma or see the colors, if they like what they see and smell they may be tempted to enter. If they enjoy the Garden, they may stay and participate.

People must want to be in the Garden on their own. It would not be appropriate, in fact it would be detrimental, to force them to go. It is about letting them come, not getting them to come. It is about letting them stay, not getting them to stay.

Once the soil has been tilled and the seeds planted, then taking the time to care and nurture the garden are keys to helping the garden grow and flourish.