



## Community of Practice



## Introduction

Organizations are becoming more dispersed, complex and competitive. To address these, there is a growing need for an organization to capture and utilize its tacit knowledge as a competitive advantage. Tacit knowledge refers to the knowledge which is known by an individual but difficult to communicate to the rest of the organization. It is critical for an organization to harness tacit knowledge and make it accessible to other members to increase overall performance in the organization. This white paper describes how to deploy Communities of Practice to discover and capture tacit knowledge within an organization.

## Community of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoP) are an essential ingredient for knowledge management to discover and capture tacit knowledge within an organization. CoPs are formed to facilitate knowledge sharing among practitioners who share a common interest or experience and face issues on a specific subject-matter. According to the Delphi Consulting Group, 80% of an organization's knowledge is stored in people's minds and 20% is recorded in documents or databases.

Characteristics of a CoP are:

- All community members share a common interest or goal.
- Knowledge is shared in the form of discussions, ideas, experiences, lessons learned, insights, and best practices.
- It exists indefinitely to promote knowledge sharing around a subject-matter area.
- It is defined by knowledge rather than by task and exists because members derive personal value by way of participation.

## Managing Tacit Knowledge Using CoP

Communities of Practice help organizations manage its tacit knowledge by:

- Providing a platform to develop a network of individuals who have similar interests and expertise.
- Providing virtual communities for individuals to locate and interact with subject-matter experts by overcoming divisional or geographical barriers hence enabling them to respond to new and unpredictable questions.
- Enabling community members to enrich the context around their area of interests. The individuals interact and collaborate to enhance existing artifacts or create new artifacts to solve problems — creating more tacit knowledge.
- Providing a deeper and wider pool of expertise which is shared among the community members ensuring the tacit knowledge is not locked up in one individual.
- Enabling new members to interact and learn from more experienced and senior members of the community — discovering tacit knowledge.

### How to Launch a CoP

Launching a CoP requires careful planning and good understanding of the deployment process of knowledge management solution in an organization. The deployment process should employ a comprehensive launch plan that is designed to impact core CoP goals within the organization. The launch plan should take a holistic approach in understanding knowledge management requirements, historical knowledge, objectives, short-term and long-term goals for the CoP. The launch plan should be agile in nature that can be revised to introduce new tactics based on the outcome of previous steps.

Some of the startup activities to launch CoP include:

- Identify CoPs that need to be mapped and community members who will participate in the communities based on their interests, experience, or technical area. This can be achieved by conducting focus groups or interviews with the practitioners.
- Survey or Interview employees to understand their knowledge sharing culture and use-case scenarios.
- Identify community champions who are experts in the subject-matter and are passionate to use and drive the community.
- Create and set up a CoP while incorporating corporate security protocols for community content and users.
- Configure escalation procedures and business approval loops to ensure that critical information is approved by administrators before it is shared with other members of the community.
- Identify and integrate external databases and file shares allowing community members to search for internal and external information from within the community.
- Design and execute on a pre-population plan that ensures relevant and useful information available for community members in the beginning to jump start the community.

- Design and execute on a communication plan to communicate the launch of CoP, its objectives and benefits to the participants.
- Create a post-launch plan which ensures that the CoP sustains good usage and adoption for the long run.

The tasks for starting up a CoP may vary depending upon the CoP objectives, characteristics of the community and members who are participating in the community.

Some of the common challenges that organizations face in launching a CoP:

- Identifying what kind of users will participate and map right CoPs that represent participant's common interests.
- Understanding how the CoP will impact existing knowledge sharing culture in the organization.
- Understanding the current and historical usage barriers.
- Identifying use-case scenarios and how CoP members will use this community to share information, and what changes need to be made to accommodate these use-case scenarios.
- How to achieve and sustain good usage and adoption throughout the lifespan of the CoP?
- It is important to consider the above listed challenges while designing a launch plan for a successful deployment of CoP.



## How to Sustain a Community of Practice

Since CoP involves voluntary contribution from its members, it is important that CoP provides personal benefit to members and adds value to itself and to the organization. CoPs are subject to dying a slow death if participation reduces. Some critical factors to sustain good usage and adoption for a CoP include:

- The community members should find personal benefit in using the CoP.
- The CoP tool should be intuitive and easily accessible to the community members.
- The champions must possess good expertise in subject-matter area and set good examples for others to follow.
- Community members should participate actively in discussions and exchange useful and critical knowledge that can be of interest to other community members.
- A good reward and recognition program should be in place to recognize top contributors in the community.
- Support from senior managers and executive team to encourage community members to contribute in the community.

## Example of CoP in a Large Organization

Stryker Corporation is the world leader for the orthopedic medical products market and one of the largest producers of medical instruments and devices. Stryker has 14 sub divisions operating independently with little or no communication between them. SharePoint is a common tool used within Stryker divisions for project teams' collaboration and document management purposes. Stryker realized that project team members often need expert advice from outside their teams to solve problems on regular basis and that is not possible by using tools that focus on team spaces like SharePoint. For example the project team members need to know a quality vendor for a component they need to use for their product development and must seek help from someone outside of their team or division who have experience working with such vendors and can provide expert advice and rating for the vendors. Stryker used a knowledge management solution to deploy CoPs across the organization. It enabled Stryker engineers to develop connections with subject-matter experts based on their expertise and past experiences. It offered an effective way for engineers to ask and answer questions and disseminate key information in the form of Q&As and FAQs. By using CoPs, Stryker significantly reduced project timelines by capturing and sharing tacit knowledge within the organization.

## Conclusion

CoP offer an effective and flexible approach to harness tacit knowledge within an organization. CoP is fundamentally different from project teams that exist temporarily for time-bound work objective where as CoPs exists indefinitely to promote knowledge sharing on subject-matter area around which the community is formed. For a successful CoP deployment, it is critical to understand the existing knowledge sharing culture, the participating audience, their interests and goals, the short-term and long-term plan to sustain healthy usage and adoption throughout the lifespan of the community.

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