

Thinking about...

Communities of Practice

The idea of communities of practice (CoP) stems from the anthropological work of Lave and Wenger (1991). It has been applied to contemporary societies and practices and relates particularly to the nature of learning and of groups. In relation to various forms of apprenticeships, Lave and Wenger emphasised the social aspect of learning and focused on contexts in which learning is part of participation in a social activity rather than on educational contexts which are set up with learning in mind. For a community of practice to function it needs to generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. It also needs to develop various resources such as tools, documents, routines and vocabulary that carry the accumulated knowledge of the community (Smith, 2003, 2009). The concept does not just refer to a group of people doing similar things but to a group which has a shared domain of interest. Three characteristics of communities of practice are crucial:

The domain: A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

The community: In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.

The practice: A community of practice is not merely a community of interest – people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

Key success factors

Identification: CoPs thrive on the energy of the group. Passion for the shared area of focus is key.

Leadership: You will need the commitment and skill of people who take the initiative to nurture the community.

Time: Because time is at such a premium, members need to feel there is a value or benefit to their participation.

Other factors:

Self-governance; sense of ownership; level of trust; recognition for contributions; high expectations for value creation; organisational voice; connection to a broader field; interactions with other communities.

How to create a successful Community of Practice

1. Talk to colleagues about issues and challenges they are facing.
2. Ensure you have buy-in or 'sponsorship' from management.
3. Identify a group of people who share your vision of a community of practice and would invest their time and experience in participating.
4. From this group, gather a core who can help design a process to get the group going.
5. Think about how you will educate and support management and potential members about the approach.
6. Identify what resources you will need and how will you get them.
7. Value the work of the group and celebrate and publicise its successes.