What is a Community of Practice (CoP) and how it can be established

Abstract

This white paper discusses what a Community of Practices (CoP) is and how to form a successful CoP.

The term "community of practice" is a relatively new term, even though it is an age-old practice. The concept has turned out to provide a useful approach for knowledge sharing and learning. A growing number of people and organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance.

It will also cover how to select the key members to a CoP and what the driving reasons are and the value proposition for forming a Community of Practices (CoP) as well as a high-level illustration and the characteristics of a well-established CoP.

It further describes the guidelines to form a CoP, how a CoP looks like after fully formed, benefits of the CoP and the initial agenda and further meting directions.

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What is a community of Practice?

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a craft or a profession to improve expertise in a certain area, address a set of problems, they have a common passion and work together to find best practices and to disseminate them within the organization. The Community of Practice will deepen the individuals and the organizations' overall knowledge and expertise in a certain area by interacting on an on-going basis.

A CoP can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created deliberately with the goal of gaining knowledge related to a specific field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that members learn from each other and have an opportunity to develop personally and professionally.

The overall purpose of a Community of Practice is to:

- Supporting the organization by providing research and guidance
- Identify and set the strategic direction of the area the CoP operates in
- Provide training, best practices and knowledge to the staff within the organization
- Propose policies and standards for the organization
- Continuous innovation and improvement of the topic and area of the CoP

A Community of Practice adds value to an organization through recommendations based on experience, knowledge, best practices and research.

For example, self-governance practices, standards (processes and technology), operations and other foundational principles to support an Agile-DevOps way of working.

A CoP is accountable for championing recommendations to conclusion.

Benefits of a CoP

Communities of Practice offer a wealth of benefits for both individuals and organizations. They create a collaborative environment that fosters continuous learning, innovation, and improved problem-solving.

Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration: CoPs create a platform where individuals can share knowledge, insights and experiences which help avoid knowledge silos within an organization. This leads to faster problem-solving, innovative ideas and the efficient dissemination of best practices across the organization.

Skill Development and Professional Growth: CoPs offer a collaborative environment where participants can learn from each other, develop new skills, and stay updated on industry trends. Through interactions with peers, members have access to learning resources, workshops, and mentoring.

Enhanced Innovation and Creativity: By bringing together individuals with varied backgrounds and expertise, CoPs foster creativity and new ways of thinking. Members can discuss challenges, brainstorm solutions, and experiment with novel ideas. This collaborative environment accelerates innovation, allowing the organization to adapt to changes more quickly and come up with innovative solutions to complex problems.

Improved Organizational Efficiency: CoPs help eliminate redundant efforts by encouraging knowledge sharing and collaboration across departments. Problems can be solved more efficiently as people can quickly find and consult experts within the community. This leads to reduced duplication of work, better use of resources, and more streamlined processes, ultimately enhancing organizational efficiency.

Building a Strong Organizational Culture: CoPs contribute to creating a strong culture of collaboration, continuous learning, and innovation. As members collaborate and share knowledge, they build stronger relationships, trust, and a sense of community. This sense of community enhances employee engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty, contributing to a positive work environment.

Better Problem-Solving and Decision-Making: Communities of Practice provide a space where individuals can collaborate on solving complex problems. The collective knowledge and diverse perspectives within the community allow for better-informed decisions and more effective solutions. This leads to quicker and more accurate decision-making, as challenges are addressed through a shared understanding and collective expertise.

Scalability of Knowledge: CoPs allow organizations to scale knowledge more effectively. As the community grows, knowledge and expertise are distributed across more people, making it easier to transfer skills and insights to new employees or different teams. This scaling of knowledge ensures that valuable information and best practices are not confined to just a few individuals, leading to broader organizational growth.

Challenges of a CoP

While Communities of Practice offer many benefits, they also present challenges, such as the risk of knowledge silos, time and resource constraints, and the potential for uneven participation or groupthink.

Time and Resource Constraints: Participating in or managing a Community of Practice requires a significant investment of time and resources. Employees need time to engage in community activities, and organizing events, discussions, or knowledge-sharing sessions can divert focus from their primary job responsibilities. This can lead to decreased productivity for individuals who are already overloaded with work or for organizations that struggle to allocate time and resources for CoP participation.

Risk of Knowledge Silos: While CoPs are designed to foster knowledge sharing, they can sometimes result in the creation of "subcultures" within the organization. Members of a CoP may become too insular or focused on their own interests, limiting the flow of knowledge to other areas of the organization. This can result in knowledge silos, where the benefits of knowledge-sharing do not extend to the wider organization, reducing the overall impact of the CoP.

Lack of Formal Accountability: CoPs are often informal structures without clear lines of accountability or governance. Without a formal framework, there can be a lack of leadership, direction, or consistent participation, leading to uneven engagement and outcomes. This may result in low engagement from members, inconsistent quality of knowledge sharing, and difficulty in measuring the success or impact of the community.

Unequal Participation: In many CoPs, a small group of highly engaged individuals tends to dominate discussions, while others may participate less or not at all. This uneven participation can limit the diversity of ideas and contributions, undermining the effectiveness of the community. The CoP may become less inclusive, with only a subset of voices being heard, which can lead to a lack of broader perspective or stifle new contributions from less vocal members.

Overemphasis on Knowledge Sharing, Underemphasis on Action: CoPs often focus heavily on the exchange of knowledge and discussions, but there can be a lack of emphasis on applying this knowledge to practical action. If discussions do not translate into tangible outcomes or improvements, the community may fail to deliver real business value. This can lead to frustration among participants, as the community becomes more of a social gathering rather than a driving force for change or progress.

Cultural Barriers: In organizations with diverse cultural backgrounds, members of a CoP may struggle with differences in communication styles, working approaches, or attitudes toward collaboration. This can create friction or misunderstandings within the community. If not managed properly, these cultural barriers can limit the effectiveness of the CoP, causing misunderstandings or a lack of meaningful collaboration among members.

Inconsistent Quality of Contributions: In some CoPs, the quality of contributions can vary greatly, with some members providing valuable insights while others offer less meaningful input. Without a structured approach or guidelines, the quality of knowledge shared may be inconsistent. This can undermine the CoP's credibility and usefulness, as members may become frustrated with receiving low-quality or irrelevant information.

Characteristics of a Community of Practice

Key characteristics of a CoP: Domain (what we care about), Community (who supports the CoP) and Practice (what we do together).

1. The 'domain' is the shared area of interest
   o This is the domain of Knowledge (Release Train Engineer (RTE), Scrum Master (SM), Product Owner (PO), & Product Manager (PM)) that brings the community together
   o It gives it an identity and defines the key issues, problems and opportunities for improvements that members need to address
   o Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain/field of interest
   o Members have a shared competence and learn from each other

2. A 'community' of concerned people from bonds in the process of their shared learning activities
   o Interrelationships developed through sustained mutual engagement
   o In pursuing their interest in their domain/shared field of interest, members engage in joint activities, discussions, help each other and share information
   o Members build relationships that enable them to interact and learn from each other
   o Members of a CoP do not necessarily work together daily
   o A CoP may have its origin in an outside mandate, this friendship and/or affection are neither a requirement nor necessarily a result

3. A 'practice' anchors the learning in what people do
   o Members of a CoP are practitioners
   o Overtime, sustained mutual engagement results in the development of a set of communal resources that allow members to more effectively pursue their joint enterprise
   o They develop a shared repository/range of resources: experiences, stories, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice
   o The development of a shared practice may be either structured or planned or informal and conscious

Guidelines for Forming and Strengthening Communities of Practice

As mentioned previously, a CoP can evolve naturally, or it can be created deliberately of an organization. An organization can establish multiple CoPs depending on the members different interests or skillset.

These are a few guidelines when forming a CoP:

Identify or recruit core members:

- Recruit members willing to co-lead and serve as ambassadors for the community.

- Look for people who are extremely engaged, credible and community oriented (these may be people you already know or people you notice in a meeting or when interacting online).

- Part of the role of the facilitators of a community of practice is to create sustainability by continually working to identify and support members who can take on leadership roles.

Establish a collective identity and clear purpose:

- Identity common interests, needs and concerns through a well-designed needs assessment process.

- Come to agreement about group goals and state them clearly and publicly. A charter document developed by the members that everyone would agree to.

- Ensure that members understand how they can contribute and how the CoP relates to their daily work.

- Work with members to determine whether the group will be public, private or a mix (e.g., private online forum with some public online meetings or presentations).

Provide a range of opportunities for participating at varying levels:

- Opportunities for participation include:

  o Synchronous events (e.g., webinars, face-to-face meetings, conference calls).
  o Moderated asynchronous interactions (e.g. forums, email lists, resource sharing, social media).
  o Mentorship opportunities, both formal (two members are paired up by a facilitator) and informal (members spontaneously connect to share advice).
  o Group problem solving (e.g., each member can bring a problem on which to receive feedback from the group, or the group focuses on a problem common to most or all members).

- Be realistic when planning the activities of the CoP so it is sustainable for moderators and logical and doable for participants.

- Accept that CoP members will participate at different levels, ranging from simply reading and observing to active potentially more sustainable community.

Maintain a welcoming atmosphere where social interaction is encouraged:

- Ensure that all forum posts and group emails receive responses.

- Show appreciation (e.g., after a person post to a forum several times, sends an email saying. "Thanks for Participating"). The more people feel valued and important, the more they will want to participate.

- Highlight members' contributions to the group as well as their outside achievements.

Conduct periodic evaluations and respond accordingly:

- Assess the group's progress toward established goals.

- Monitor the community's level of engagement (e.g., via web analytics if available) as well as subjectively assessing the quality of interactions.

- Conduct community needs assessments.

- Make changes to the group's structure, processes and activities in response to needs assessment and evaluation results.

What do Communities of Practices look like?

Communities develop their practices through a variety of activities. The following table provide a few examples:

Topic / Activity	Example
Request for information	Where can I find the agile playbook link? How do I request the Jira instance?
Seeking experience	How did we build the program plan? How do the approval process work on unpaid leaves?
Problem solving	Can we work on this design and brainstorm some ideas? Simplify the hiring process for the new candidate selection
Knowledge sharing	Can you show me how to use Microsoft MS Project?
Reusing assets	I developed the Training plans for IT Operations. Can we use it for DevOps? Can we re-use the SOW created for insurance industry to Airline industry?
Discussing Developments	What do you think about dashboard reports? Any progress on new dashboard development?
Coordination and Synergy	Can all Business Units PMs work together and produce a standardized Project Charter?
Visits or Gemba walks	Can we attend your planning sessions to learn how you are running the sessions?
Mapping knowledge and Identify gaps	Who knows what, and what are we missing?

Suggested Agenda for community of Practice session

First Session:

- Ice breakers
- Chairperson reviews guidelines and Rules of the Road
- Members Introductions
- Areas of Focus
- Charter establishment (guidelines how to operate the CoP)
- Next session topics
- Capture key points and action items: assign owners
- Rotate chairperson and agree on next session focus prior to closing
- Guidelines: Keep CoP session duration to 1 hours and timebox topics

Subsequent session:

- Icebreakers / group activity
- Update on action items from previous meeting
- Reviewed on last week agreed focus area
- Agree on next session focus area
- Agree on next session facilitator
- Q&A

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