

How to make a CoP fly?

I'd like to share with you some ideas we have developed within Siemens ICN in order to "make a CoP fly".

First, we have identified 10 actions items to create a successful Community of Practice. There are 10 fundamental questions you need to ask before starting a CoP:

1- Which Output do you want to achieve?

Communities are not an end in itself but can be a very effective means to some ends - therefore think clearly on the aims of your community - they are the basis for further actions:

- What (financial) impact on your business should the community have?
- Here are some typical benefits a CoP can bring:

- Solutions for daily problems
- Transfer of successful practices
- Focused collaboration of experts
- Faster learning, high knowledge level
- Identification of experts
- Development of new knowledge
- Coordination of cross-BU activities and projects
- Synergy effects
- Independence of temporary and geographic boundaries

2- Why do you want to start a community?

- What do you miss in your current work / information flow?
- Do you have a business relevant task?
- Is there a need for refreshing the special knowledge permanently?
- Probably you have encountered one of the following situations. If so, we think a community could help you:

- you run a very virtual team and need a suitable room for effective collaboration
- you are working in a special field and need expert input
- you have constant trouble in keeping experience knowledge alive
- you have innovative ideas in a specific area and cannot believe you're the only one
- you want to approach a topic of great future importance and think there is still much brainwork to be done
- it all works too slow or, even worse, nothing really seems to work

3- Is there already a community that deals with your topic?

- Check out the CoP Landscape
- Check CoPs with similar topics
- maybe you could participate in it or found a sub-CoP
- Contact potential key members

4- Are you willing to invest time and money?

- Depending on the community design parameters you should invest at least 50 per cent of your time to make the community fly.
- You must not save at the wrong ends (training, consulting, trust building, etc.)
- Cost and/or time factors are: knowledge management system, initial consulting, workshops, community meetings, content management and structure, moderation, motivation, training, identity building (layout, logo)

5- What is your topic and your scope?

- The core of a CoP is common interest, common topics.
- Define your topic exactly and communicate it.
- Assure relevance and importance of the topic
- Set the scope narrow enough to interest most members and wide enough to bring in new ideas
- Involve core members to define the scope
- Let the scope change with time

6- Do you know enough potential members?

A community is only interesting when enough people actively participate. You must break the critical mass, which differs. It can be expressed in number of participants or, even better, in the frequency of valuable contributions.

As a clue: Engage at least 5-10 people and ensure at least 1 valuable contribution a day.

Notice: Value is relative. The announcement of a new coffee machine can be even more valuable for the members than an complex market analysis.

7- Are you able to provide „magnet content“?

- Remember the critical mass problem: In the beginning, you need at least one unexpected value for the members every day.
 - Keep it simple: Involve your team assistants to feed the community with common interest topics: meetings, training offers, etc.
 - Rely on the fun factor: polls and fancy stuff can be motivating and reduce anxieties, especially in the beginning (Imagine a ballroom situation: Who will be the first to enter the dance floor? Nobody may laugh at them - only with them.)
 - Content must provide direct and fast benefit for the members
 - Make use of the professional content suppliers
- Examples: current news, high quality research, general interest (new members, coffee machine, meetings), gossip
- Can you assure the quality of the content?

8- What are the benefits for the members?

Members invest time and energy in the CoP, so they want to see benefits. Possible benefits are:

- They get information faster or exclusive
- They learn things and prepare themselves for future jobs
- It makes their job easier
- They are involved in „something big“
- They become members of something like an exclusive club
- They enhance their CV and speed up their career
- They make themselves a good reputation as experts
- They meet interesting people and widen their personal network
- They have fun

- They may get incentives additionally

9- How are you going to manage your community?

- Define member activities and roles. Basic roles are: Sponsor, Moderator, Supporter, Member
- Be prepared to recruit new members on the run to recruit new members, but prefer quality to quantity
- Let the community evolve

10- Can you secure management support?

- Can you?
- Who will pay?
- Who will support your CoP and why?

Then, we formulated 10 tricks to help managing successfully a CoP:

1- Actively generate content: You have to achieve a critical mass of content and news. Involve professional information services to provide news and high quality content.

2- Don't be too strict in judging: New members often hesitate to post requests and upload documents because of the fear of outing themselves as non-experts. Accept their contributions and honor them - they will get better!

3- Create Executive awareness: Convince relevant executives of the necessity of your Community. If there is no necessity you should rethink your idea.

4- Use your own personal network: Check your contacts to find potential members. (Close your eyes, say the CoP's topic loudly - then call the first 3 persons that come into your mind).

5- Support the snowball principle: Encourage the members to recruit new members by usage of their personal networks and contacts.

6- Provoke voluntaries: Active contribution seems more a matter of choice than of imperative. Some people contribute simply because it's in their nature. Personal attributes like passion, a desire for recognition, and a sense of obligation that comes from past experience as a "taker" make some people want to give something back to the community.

7- Keep it simple: Start with easy structures and easy tools. Don't overload!

8- Keep it fresh (first in community): Publish information in the community one day before you publish it on other channels. People will use the community as their first information base.

9- Let it grow before structuring: Don't waste too much energy on structure - only offer a good frame. People are afraid of „being fitted“ into a narrow role and prefer positioning themselves - but also need a certain guidance in doing so.

10- Rely on the fun factor: High quality content is crucial for the success of a community. But you should also offer „fancy“ stuff like jokes or polls in order to kill reservations and minimize contribution barriers.

Finally, we identified 10 classic pitfalls you have to be aware of:

1-Ignore moods and demands of members: People participate primarily for themselves, not for you or an executive demanding certain results.

Therefore always have an open ear for the members, motivate them to shape their community.

2- Not enough content: You have to reach a critical mass which differs. If there is not enough interesting content, people will work less in the community, contribute less. That's a real vicious circle!

3- Too strict or too loose: People need leadership but don't want to be cramped. Due to the voluntary character of communities, finding the right way is a challenging task.

4- No scope: People need room for innovation and creation but also noticeable landmarks for orientation.

5- No aims: Communicate your estimated aims and outputs and be open to discuss.

6- Only technical platform: „First invest in travel and in beer, then in information technology“ (from EFQM Benchmark KM).

7- No Admin response: Assure that people are heard when they have problems and get useful answers.

8- No support (help and training): Effectiveness needs constant support and trainings - especially for the key members.

9- Only extrinsic motivation: It is impossible to achieve quality results when the members don't have a natural interest and need for these.

10- Bad moderation: Even the best experts need qualified moderation and facilitation.

So, that's our lessons learned anyway.
I do hope you find it useful!

Kind regards
Diane Le Mout

KnowledgeBoard 6-Dec-2002