

## Leveraging communities of practice

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This is third in a series on KM implementation techniques.

We began developing our KM blueprint (described in our first article) while helping the Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC) establish its KM program. Our task was to “define and develop an integrated knowledge-sharing environment for AFMC to manage and exploit its intellectual assets in support of its mission and business strategy.” Because it was a new initiative, we first conducted a cultural and technical baseline assessment to develop a “snapshot” of the Command’s KM posture and to formulate an improvement strategy.

Throughout the baseline assessment, we were focused on developing an enterprise solution and fully expected to engage in a Command-wide improvement program. However, once faced with the size and diversity of the Command, we quickly realized that with such a focus, it was almost impossible for us to articulate a clear implementation plan. That determination made us look to the community of practice (CoP) as the medium for defining the KM infrastructure and for implementing change. Our strategy was to formalize AFMC’s CoPs one by one with a goal to effectively bridge all of the Command’s business activities. To date, AFMC has recognized more than 100 CoPs. A formal CoP combines the self-governance inherent in informal communities with the explicit management support and assistance needed for a community to properly develop, grow and mature. For the AFMC, formal CoPs are proving to be the most effective organizational unit for defining the KM infrastructure and for implementing meaningful change.

The formal CoP, by definition, is united by a common purpose, values and vocabulary. Its knowledge needs can be easily identified. The CoP, being a microcosm of the organizational system, has the same three basic components: physical structure, processes and practices, and enabling technology. To achieve enduring change, those three components must be balanced and mutually supporting. Wenger states in his book "Cultivating Communities of Practice" (Harvard Business School Press, 2000) that companies have found that the most used, and useful, knowledgebases are integrated into the work of one or more communities. To tap into and capture that valuable corporate asset, communities must learn how they contribute to strategic objectives, value and trust one another, and begin sharing knowledge. Because CoPs are united by common values, vocabulary and purpose, needed cultural change can be targeted at the community level. Hence, the CoP is an effective implementation vehicle for the KM system. Our KM blueprint can be applied repetitively for all CoPs regardless of their specific knowledge content.

Most organizations are an amalgamation of a variety of groups to include line organizations, support organizations, teams, focus groups, communities of interest and CoPs in different stages of the development cycle. For example, The World Bank has more than 100 thematic groups, two of which are

Rural Development and Urban, each of which functions as a CoP. Additionally, they have Advisory Services serving as cross-sectoral communities, and external communities, such as investigative journalism, water and sanitation. The objective that we present to our clients is to develop those groups into business relevant, value-adding, formally recognized CoPs.

However, we are not suggesting that every organizational group is a prospective CoP. In fact, one benefit of our CoP validation process is the ability to clearly distinguish between groups that are able to become true communities and those that are best suited to remain teams, informal communities, often referred to as communities of interest. When we begin working with an organization, we do not recognize any group as being a legitimate CoP, even though some may exist. Part of the discipline of our process is for client organizations to identify all of the groups that are candidates to become CoPs and then to engage each group in a series of defining and validation activities. Those activities are focused around a validation workshop with clearly defined pre- and post-workshop components. (Figure 1) One of the objectives of that activity is to establish that the community does, in fact, produce products and/or services that are linked to the organization's business objectives.

In the pre-workshop activities, the organization selects a community champion to lead the subsequent activities and a set of core members who are subject matter experts (SMEs) on the community's domain. We provide the core team with an orientation on basic KM concepts and how to build a formal CoP. We work with them to identify the community's purpose and objectives, which are linked to the organization's strategic goals and objectives, and we help them develop a charter that documents community objectives and the roles and responsibilities of the core team members. Finally, we provide them with a basic collaborative workspace (to be described in a subsequent article) to facilitate the group's activities. This approach has been applied successfully in more than 20 organizations including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), The World Bank, Defense Logistics Agency, Navy Marine Corp Intranet (NMCI), and the Center for Excellence in Education (CEE).

The workshop is a two-day event in which the core team officially changes from being a community of interest with a common knowledgebase and skill set to an acknowledged formal community of practice that employs those knowledge and skills in a shared practice to support the organization's mission. We employ seven steps in this transformation process:

- State the purpose of the group (the reason the group exists).;
- List its distinguishing characteristics (attributes such as training and education, magazines and journals, conferences and affiliations, skills and knowledge, and values).;
- Identify the distinct set of products and services.;
- Identify the CoP's distinct set of business activities. ;
- Identify the knowledge areas and the policies and guidelines the CoP needs to do its work.;
- Identify the CoP's performance drivers (tangible, such as people, processes or technology, or intangible, such as attitudes, behavior, or motivation, which can either enhance performance or impede it). ;
- Identify the current technology framework;

### **Transition plan**

**Once a CoP has been validated, we work with the core team to construct a transition plan for moving it from its current operating level to an enhanced knowledge-enabled capability. The**

**transition plan is built in three steps:**

- **Construct a CoP value chain.;**
- **Conduct a knowledge gap analysis.;**
- **Develop a CoP strategic plan.;**

**The value chain is a visual representation of the organization mission that shows how its business activities interact to produce its products and services. That device is an excellent mechanism for demonstrating how the CoP supports the organization and the differences between the CoP's current and desired states.**

**The knowledge gap analysis evaluates the viability of the CoP's performance drivers against eight gap categories: knowledge content, work process model, formal structure, policy/processes, training, roles and responsibilities, culture, and incentives/rewards. The gaps in those eight categories drive the development of gap-closing strategies in the next step of the transition plan.**

**The CoP strategic plan, like any other plan, is the mechanism by which the community describes the actions that it intends to take to become a more knowledge-enhanced asset to its organization. The plan declares what the community intends to do, who is responsible for doing it, when it will be accomplished and what resources are needed to complete the action.**

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