How to Build a Communities of Practice on the Knowledge Hub

Local and Central Government are being challenged to take a more innovative and efficient approach to learning and sharing, and the concept of "Communities of Practice" are emerging and gaining momentum.

Through peer-to-peer collaborative activities, officers and councillors are coming together willingly across government to share information, build knowledge, develop expertise, and solve problems.

This brief guide is based on the Knowledge Management Team at the Local Government Association experiences over the last six years of cultivating online communities of practice and supporting teams in local and central government in building and developing those communities.
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The intention of this guide is to provide a summary and practical advice on building Communities of Practice, and how to go about cultivating them effectively.

What are Communities of Practice?

A community of practice is a network of individuals with common problems or interests who get together to:
- explore ways of working
- identify common solutions
- share good practice and ideas.

Communities of practice pool resources related to a specific area of knowledge.

Informal communities exist in some form in every organisation. The challenge is to support them so they can create and share organisational knowledge.

Communities of practice are organic and self-organising, and should ideally emerge naturally. They usually evolve from the recognition of a specific need or problem.

The Knowledge Hub provides the virtual part of the community of practice that connects people and encourages the development and sharing of new ideas and strategies.

This environment supports faster problem solving, cuts down on duplication of effort, and provides potentially unlimited access to expertise.

Technology now allows people to network, share and develop practice entirely online. Virtual communities overcome the challenges of geographical boundaries.

They encourage the flow of knowledge across government and enable sustainable self-improvement.

All Communities will be unique with individual structure depending on their context.

Community Characteristics

There is no single 'recipe' for creating an active and vibrant community but some similar characteristics may emerge within each community. Equally, a community will evolve over time.

There are four basic characteristics within communities:
- **Helping** - providing a forum for members to help each other solve day to day problems
- **Best practice** - developing and disseminating best practices, guidelines and procedures
- **Knowledge stewarding** - organising, managing and stewarding a body of knowledge from which members can draw
- **Innovation** - create breakthrough ideas, knowledge and practices

Ingredients for an active and vibrant Community

There are 5 key ingredients for most Communities of Practice (although these do not constitute a full recipe).

- **Purpose:** a Community needs a clear purpose which is relevant and meaningful to its members. It should specify exactly what the community is for and what will be gained from being part of it.
- **Facilitation:** every Community should begin with a team of three facilitators as a minimum, they will work together to ensure that the purpose of the community and the needs of the members are being met through a variety of online activities and discussions. They welcome new members and keep the community vibrant and focused.
- **Activities:** within each Community there are a variety of activities, tools and techniques employed to aid and enhance conversations and the transfer of knowledge.
- **Active membership:** each community will have active members with a lively interest in sharing knowledge with each other.
- **Promotion:** ensure high levels of management buy in and promote the Communities ability to help solve daily work challenges

What makes Communites of Practice different?

The table below looks at the differences between communities of practice compared to project teams and informal networks.

	Community of Practice	Project Teams	Informal networks
Purpose	Learning Sharing Creating Knowledge	Accomplish specific task	Communication flows
Boundary	Particular area of knowledge, i.e. Knowledge domain	Assigned project charter	Extent of relationships
Connections	Common application of a skill	Commitment to goal	Interpersonal acquaintances
Membership	Semi – permanent Voluntary basis	Constant for a fixed period	Links made based on needs of the individual
Time scale	As long as it adds value to the business and its members	Fixed ends when project deliverables have been accomplished	Long – term, no pre-engineered end

The Communities lifecycle

Communities of Practice have a lifecycle. For communites in the public sector, the lifecycle is likely to display the following stages

Stage 1 - **Inception** stage of the lifecycle begins when individual begins interacting with their target audience and ends with the community achieving activity.

Stage 2 - **Growth** stage begins when activity has been achieved and ends when close to 90% of growth and activity is being consistently generated by members, and when there is a limited sense of community amongst members.

Stage 3 - **Maturity** stage begins when a high number of activity/growth is being generated by members of the community and ends when activity/growth is self-sustaining and there is a very highly developed sense of community.

Stage 4 - **Mitosis** stage begins when the community is almost entirely self-sustaining and ends when it has broken into smaller more focused communities or has met its purpose and closes. Not all communities progress to this phase. Many are fine in the maturity phase.

What are the benefits of Communities of Practice?

Over the last few years we have conducted surveys and interviewed member of different communities of practice to identify the benefits they have gained. The following are examples of cost reduction and value gained by councils as a result of being part of a community of practice.

The 8 are:
1. Value through saving time
2. Keeping up to date with current thinking
3. Innovations
4. Sharing Good Practice / avoiding duplication of work
5. Developing Ideas
6. Carbon footprint reduction / environmental savings
7. Induction to new roles / staff development
8. Relationship Building

What are the key roles in making a community successful?

The vibrancy of a community comes from the people who comprise it. The commitment and enthusiasm begins with those who play various rolls in supporting the Community. And the rest of the community will follow their lead.

Sponsor - will nurture and provide top-level recognition for the community while insuring its exposure, support, and strategic importance in the organisation.

Facilitators - will create and host a community; it's their responsibility to ensure that everything runs smoothly and that members' experiences are worthwhile. Any one community should have a team of several facilitators.

Members - who joins and participates in communities to share what they know and learn from others. Members can take on a mix of roles, such as:
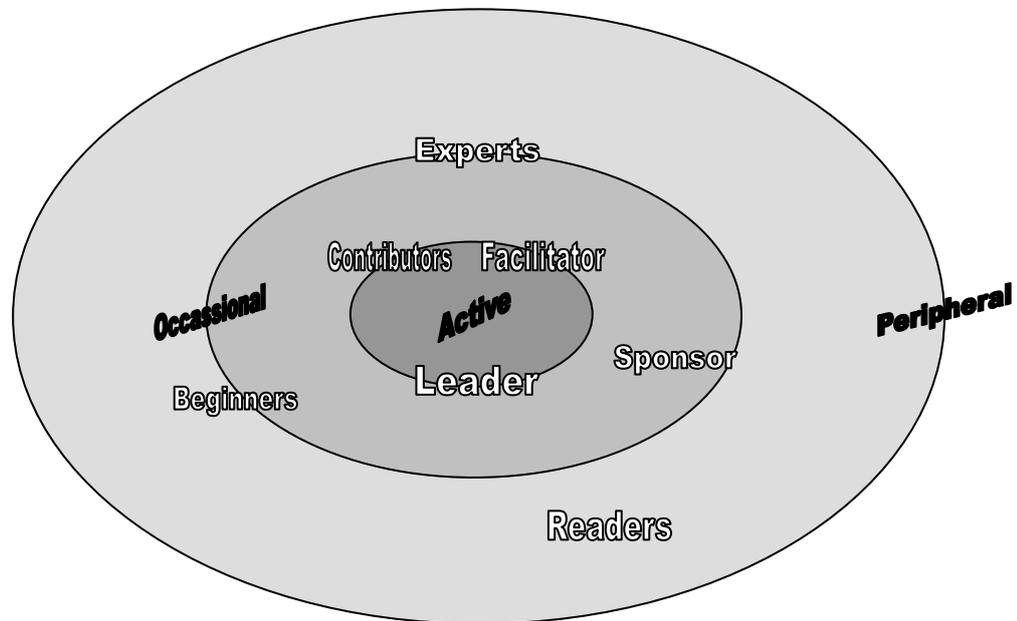- **Experts** - permanent or temporary members of a Community who share their expertise and knowledge.
- **Contributors** - actively participant in the Community by asking or replying to questions in a forum, by posting documents, by writing a blog or in other ways.
- **Readers** - may be less involved but nevertheless are valuable members. They will typically view discussions and documents but won't contribute.

Remember that one person can play more than one role, and one role can be shared by more than one person.

Each role in the community will participate in a different way. The diagram below shows a quick overview of how they will participate.
Note: the smallest group at the centre of the ellipse is the most active section.

Despite their informal and often spontaneous nature, communities of practice have been nurtured and encouraged by many organisations.

Etienne Wenger said "Organisations and communities have always coexisted, but in the past, they have lived parallel lives, as it were. Today, they need to learn to recognise each other and function together in ways that let each do better what each does best."

Organisations that recognise the key role of communities of practice have seen transferring of good practice, efficient problem solving, professional skills developed, strategies influenced, and retaining of talented employees.

So how do you go about creating the right environment for commmunities of practice?
- Recognition of time and effort needed by members and facilitators
- Willingness to listen to the members needs not just your needs
- Clear tasks and expectations of the community
- Sponsors providing support, encouragement and credibility for the community,
- Selecting the right tools to support the members
- Physical meeting to create the trust
- Skilled facilitation
- Alignment the community in assisting with impact measurement

Cultivation, not Management

Communities are cultivated, not managed. They require active engagement without control.

Here are a few tips for cultivating and community:
- Stay focused on the primary purpose of the community
- Enable members to formulate their own questions and to access each other for answers
- Invite members to express their interests and learning needs
- Build relationships of trust and knowledge-sharing across the community
- Provide infrastructure and resources that enable learning and collaboration
- Keep members energised through stimulating, quality discussion and real dialogue around issues for them
- Keep feeding the Community useful material, share information and relevant events
- Remind members by messages and newsletters of upcoming meetings to help them prioritise the Community activities
- Assess the success of the Community by level of participation, diversity of participation, member development, member satisfaction, and stories of problems and challenges solved through the work of the Community
- Pay attention to participation of members – if people leave or join, try to find out why

Tools available for communication and activities

- **Forums** - ask questions and post information. The best way in for new members
- **Events** - promote relevant upcoming events or meetings.
- **Library** - upload, share, and track documents.
- **Wikis** - add and edit content collectively. Post a document for others' input or amend existing documents.
- **Blog** - your online journal or diary.
- **Ideas –** simple voting tools to suggest ideas and ask for comments.
- **Search facility** - search for documents, wikis, blogs, people, and events.
- **Alerts** - daily and weekly summaries of activity from your communities, direct to your e-mail inbox
- **Messaging – Instant message connections who are**

The guidelines below set out a number of 4 steps towards building, launching facilitating and cultivating a community of practice. They are drawn from experienced facilitators and influenced by the books Cultivating Communities of Practice and Learning to Fly. And is heavily influnced by Blogs such as Feverbee and Community Spark.

Step 1 - Building

Identify the purpose, potential members and core group
- Identify and establish a core group of community stakeholders/subject matter experts. Form a team that will serve as the catalyst for standing up the community
- Gather together a list of potential participants. Ask individuals if they can recommend others who should participate. Consider a broader membership to introduce diversity.
- Check for duplication or overlap with other communities, verify the need and make a clear yes/no decision
- Is the purpose realistic, or is the subject area too broad for a single community?

Develop a community charter – a document that sets out:
- Types of problems the community is trying to solve
- Key roles (facilitator, sponsor etc.),
- Membership criteria e.g who are the members and what are the expectations in terms of people's time commitment
- code of conduct" - how members will work together, and key processes/tools,
- sense of "what success looks like", and any appropriate impact measures

Appoint facilitators who are responsible for encouraging the formation of relationships between community members by
- organising community events;
- owning and ensuring the maintenance of shared information/knowledge resources;
- monitoring the effectiveness of the community, and stimulating and prodding community members when appropriate;
- acting as a focal point for the community, both internally and externally

Note - a Community facilitator need not be the "subject expert".But will need to know enough, especially the key people who are the subject experts. They must have the skills to involve and include others, and to work behind the scenes to keep the community alive. It is also recommended to have at least three facilitators to cover leave and to spread the workload.

Step 2 - Launch

Prepare for the launch of the communtiy online of offline by
- Gathering knowledge, information and content to populate the community site; identify knowledge gaps or areas where further content that would be beneficial
- Decide on the collaborative tools that are best suited for the objectives of the community
- Ensure that there is some social activity to build relationships and trust. If most of the interactions are likely to be online, it is important to build relationships try a face-to-face event or phone conference.
- Promote the launch of the community, e.g. send a launch e-mail for your community to the potential members. This should facilitate further communication and a regular newsletter can assist the community's momentum. The community facilitators should be identified as the owners of this.

Step 3 – Facilitation
Facilitators are the heart of the community, to keep it beating:

- Seed the forum with some questions. Establish the behaviours by asking a question on behalf of a member with a particular need (have the members do it themselves if possible). In the early stages it is important to demonstrate responsiveness. The facilitator should be prepared to pick up the phone and press for answers behind the scenes.
- Organise content and keep it organised so that members can find the right info at the right time. Continually monitor both existing and new content; review it, feature it and draw attention to it.
- Marketing the community can be accomplished in a variety of ways, from telling a friend, to passing out leaflets at a conference, to writing a short news article in a relevant magazine or website which describes the community and its aims. Every member, and especially those assuming facilitator and sponsor roles, can help as champions for the community. And don't forget tp promote the quick wins. When you get answers to questions, or the transfer of ideas between members, celebrate and make sure that everyone knows.
- Build trust by scheduling regular meetings/events or phone conferences. This will help build trust between the members and allow time for connections and will continue the commitment members will have to the community.
- Keep the focus on the communities' purpose by encouraging questions and answers.

Step 4 – Cultivation

Cultivating the community allows you to understand how fertile the community is and identify ways of improving or harvesting it.

Monitor activity.
- Monitor the forum, events, library and wikis:
- Number of registered members.
- Registered member's growth per month.
- Number of members active in the month (writing or otherwise measurably participating).
- Number of members visiting in the last 6 months.
- Percentage of members contributing to the community.
- Number of unanswered questions
- For larger communities - number of joiners/leavers

Refine membership:
As part of your communication with members, remind them about particpanting in the community and if they no longer wish to particpate how to leave. You can also send messages to members who have not returned over a set period. Better to have a smaller group of committed members, than a larger group with variable commitment.

Impact measures At some point, each community must take time to re-evaluate what has been accomplished. Does it meet the community's stated purpose and objectives? Some of the things to look at are:
- Intellectual assets produced - specifically, tracking those produced (or significantly updated) and published via the community
- Number of "anecdotes" captured from community members - capturing some of the softer aspects of community value
- Number of knowledge sharing events held - many communities commonly host virtual and face to face events and track attendance

Switch off. Don't be afraid to threaten to "switch off" the community and test the response of members. People will soon object if they strongly believe in it! Consider these options:
- Continue?
- Celebrate & close?
- Celebrate, close and provide a legacy?
- Redefine the purpose?
- Divide into sub-networks?

For more information see…

Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge by Etienne Wegner, Richard Mcdermott, and William Snyder

Learning to Fly: Practical Knowledge Management from Leading and Learning Organizations by Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell