TOOL | COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of individuals with a common area of practice, who come together to enable a process of professional self-development through collaboration and sharing of learning-related ideas, skills and experience.

WHY MAKE A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

Communities of Practice are everywhere. Nearly everyone belongs to some form of community of practice, whether it is through our work, our profession or trade, or our leisure interests, such as a book club[1]. CoP's cannot be "built" directly, but are something that must be "cultivated" over time. A successful Community of Practice depends on the purpose and objective of the community as well as the interests and resources of its members. Some benefits of developing a CoP are:

- They can be a great platform for informal learning around commonly shared interests and problems.
- They offer an opportunity to exchange ideas, resources and explore issues and tricks.
- Participants are not usually looking for formal qualifications, but to address issues in their field and to be better at what they do.

ASSEMBLING THE TOOLS AND TALENT

Most CoP's have no formal design and tend to be self-organizing. CoP's are based on relationships and trust, that is built through the meetings. According to research there are three crucial characteristics of a community of practice:

1. **Domain:** a common interest that connects and holds together the community
2. **Community:** a community is bound by the shared activities they pursue (for example: meetings and discussions) around their common domain
3. **Practice:** members of a CoP are practitioners; what they do informs their participation in the community; and what they learn from the community affects what they do.

Research has identified six key design principles for creating effective and self-sustaining CoP's. However, the success of a CoP will be determined by the activities of the members of the community themselves. When you are designing your CoP you should consider the following:

1. **Design for evolution:** ensuring that the community can evolve and shift in focus to meet the interests of the participants without moving too far from the common domain of interest.

2. **Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives:** encourage the introduction and discussion of new perspectives that come or are brought in from outside the CoP.

3. **Encourage and accept different levels of participation**: The strength of participation varies from participant to participant. The 'core' (most active members) are those who participate regularly. There are others who follow the discussions or activities but do not take a leading role in making active contributions. Then there are those (likely the majority) who are on the periphery of the community but may become more active participants if the activities or discussions start to engage them more fully. All these levels of participation need to be accepted and encouraged within the community.

4. **Focus on value:** Attempts should be made to identify, through feedback and discussion, the topics/issues that the community most values, then focus the discussion and activities around these issues.

5. **Combine familiarity and excitement**: Focus both on shared, common concerns and perspectives, but also by introduce challenging perspectives for discussion or action.

6. **Create a rhythm for the community:** There needs to be a regular schedule of activities or focal points that bring participants together on a regular basis, within the constraints of participants' time and interests.

Effective CoP's take time, moves at the speed of trust and take lots of thought and skill to develop. When creating a CoP, you will need to create a Terms of Reference, plan, evaluate and be willing to adapt strategies to what is and is not working.

RESOURCES

1. The role of communities of practice in a digital age: http://www.tonybates.ca/2014/10/01/the-role-of-communities-of-practice-in-a-digital-age/#sthash.mCqjtVzg.dpuf
2. Exploratory research on designing online communities: http://tech.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Exploratory-Research-on-Designing-Online-Communities-FINAL.pdf

ETAMARACK
I N S T I T U T E