# Cultivating communities of practice
## a quick start-up guide
### *by Etienne Wenger*

## What are communities of practice?

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.

## What elements to develop?

**Domain**: the definition of the area of shared inquiry and of the key issues

**Community**: the relationships among members and the sense of belonging

**Practice**: the body of knowledge, methods, stories, cases, tools, documents

## Where to start?

## set strategic context

A strategic context lets communities find a legitimate place in the organization

- Articulate a strategic value proposition
- Identify critical business problems
- Articulate need to leverage knowledge

## educate

Communities of practice are a familiar experience, but people need to understand how they fit in their work.

- Conduct workshops to educate management and potential members about the approach
- Help people appreciate how communities of practice are inherently self-defined and self-managed
- Establish a language to legitimize communities and establish their place in the organization

## support

Communities of practice can use some light-handed guidance and technology infrastructure.

- Provide some process support, coaching, and logistic assistance
- Identify needs and define adequate infrastructure without undue emphasis on fancy technology

## get going

Starting to cultivate communities of practice as early as possible creates early examples that allow people to learn by doing.

- Have a few pilot communities going as soon as possible
- Find communities to start with by identifying areas where there is potential and readiness
- Interview some prospective members to understand issues, start discussing a community, and identify potential leaders
- Gather a core group to prepare and initiate a launch process
- Help members organize an initial series of value-adding activities
- Encourage them to take increasing responsibility for stewarding their knowledge

## encourage

Practitioners usually see the value of working as a community but may feel the organization is not aligned with their understanding.

- Find sponsors to encourage participation
- Value the work of communities
- Publicize successes

## integrate

The formal organization must have processes and structure to include these communities while honoring their root in personal passion and engagement.

- Integrate communities in the way the organization works
- Identify and remove obvious barriers
- Align key structural and cultural elements

## Why focus on communities of practice?

| | short-term value | long-term value |
|---|---|---|
| **members** | • help with challenges<br>• access to expertise<br>• confidence<br>• fun with colleagues<br>• meaningful work | • personal development<br>• reputation<br>• professional identity<br>• network<br>• marketability |
| **organization** | • problem solving<br>• time saving<br>• knowledge sharing<br>• synergies across units<br>• reuse of resources | • strategic capabilities<br>• keeping abreast<br>• innovation<br>• retention of talents<br>• new strategies |

## What are some critical success factors?

| community | organization |
|---|---|
| • Domain that energizes a core group<br>• Skillful and reputable coordinator<br>• Involvement of experts<br>• Address details of practice<br>• Right rhythm and mix of activities | • Strategic relevance of domain<br>• Visible management sponsorship, but without micro-management<br>• Dance of formal and informal structures<br>• Adequate resources<br>• Consistent attitude |