COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
Learning as a Social System

What it is

- Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of people who share a specific area of work, interest, or passion, in a knowledge domain.
- CoPs share knowledge, learn from each other and interact regularly with peers in an enabling networked environment.
- Organizations use CoPs to share knowledge based on specific themes and areas, to break down organizational silos, and stimulate interdisciplinary teamwork.

Communities of practice are:
- Driven by the willing participation of their members (principle of self-selection)
- Focused on learning, sharing knowledge and strengthening capacity
- Engaged in developing expertise and solving problems.

“CoPs are not about bringing knowledge into the organisation but about helping to grow the knowledge that we need internally within our organisations.” (Steve Dale, 2009. Communities of practice: turning conversations into collaboration. Presentation available at http://www.slideshare.net/stephendale/cop-conversations-to-collaboration-presentation).

When to use it

- Sharing and learning about practices in which colleagues are interested
- Encouraging professional development and accelerating learning
- Strengthening connections between headquarters and field presences (and among field presences as well)

- Responding more rapidly to stakeholders’ needs and inquiries
- Learning by doing (action learning)
- Identifying, documenting and sharing best practices
- Collective problem-solving
- Reducing duplication and avoiding re-inventing the wheel
- Connecting “islands of knowledge”, fostering cross-functional and cross-divisional collaboration.

How to go about it

Steve Dale summarizes the five steps to building a successful CoP as follows:

1. Establish or identify a purpose (What problem am I trying to solve?)
2. Identify your community (Who can be part of it?)
3. Understand the culture and behaviour
4. Develop the practice
5. Monitor and measure everything.

Dale describes the stages in more detail in the following presentation: http://www.slideshare.net/stephendale/cop-conversations-to-collaboration-presentation
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
Learning as a Social System

Some crucial questions to ask your CoP

Key questions on strategy:
- What change(s) in our work will take place in the next three to six months because of the CoP? What impact will it generate?
- Why is the community the best way of bringing about this change?
- What is the one thing that I need to do next week to facilitate or contribute to the community?

Key questions on the specific knowledge domain (the shared area of enquiry and key issues):
- What specific topics do we want to address in the CoP in the next three to six months?
- Why are these topics relevant to our organization?
- What kind of influence do we want to have on our organization?
- Who will assume leadership in promoting our domain?

Key community-related questions:
- Who will be members of the community in the next three to six months?
- How can ownership and management of the community be fostered?
- How often will the community meet? How will the members connect?
- How can the community balance the needs of the various members?
- How will members deal with conflict?
- How will new members be introduced in the community?

Key practice-related questions:
- How should we identify, create, store, share and use knowledge?
- How should we evaluate the effectiveness of our CoP in the next three to six months?
- How should we ensure ongoing connection between the members?
- How should we deal with conflicts between our own work and our community work?

Key support-related question:
- What support do we need in order to be successful in achieving changes to our work through the CoP?

How to adapt it

These questions can also be used for interaction purposes between members of a community of practice:
1. What challenges do you face?
2. Are the challenges you face the same as mine or different?
3. What resources do you have that can be shared?
4. What ideas do you have about how to move ahead?
5. How can we be mutually supportive?

What to consider

- CoPs can be excellent enablers to break up organizational and divisional boundaries
- The strategic importance of the knowledge domain should have a legitimate place in the organization
- Involve experts in your CoP
- Look for a good balance of activities which are relevant for your members
- Involve a well respected, skilful and dedicated moderator
- Highlight some of the incentives for participating in the CoP
- Make sure members allocate time in their daily duties to participate in the CoP
- Define from the outset how you are going to measure the success of this CoP.
What about technology?

Technologies can support communities of practice. They can range from the simple use of a mailing list to the more expanded use of online social networks, combing discussion forums, blogs and wikis. The use of technology needs to support the overall goal of the community of practice and must bring added value.

Two tips on reviewing technology for your CoP:

1. Have a look at the Technologies section of the Share, learn, innovate! toolkit

Examples in OHCHR

UN Human Rights Policy network – HuriTALK
http://hrbaportal.org/

The UN Human Rights Policy Network (HuriTALK) is a virtual network which facilitates dialogue among UN practitioners on how best to integrate human rights in their work. Through the exchange of information, good practice and lessons learned, members develop their knowledge on human rights-related issues as well as their capacity to integrate human rights-based approaches (HRBA) in their work.

The network currently has a membership of over 1600 practitioners from more than 15 UN entities across 100 countries, and serves as a valuable practical tool for translating the UN’s commitment to mainstream human rights into all aspects of its work.

HuriTALK provides members with a virtual forum in which to:

- Pose questions and start discussions on substantive issues related to human rights in development programming and practice
- Share comparative experience, case studies and “good practice”
- Discuss lessons learned and formulate strategies and policies rooted in experience
- Share information on upcoming events, relevant training, significant publications and resources through a monthly resource update.

Many OHCHR staff are members of HuriTALK. They use it to advertise consultancies, to invite replies to surveys, or to share their newsletters, bulletins and information about events with a large and interested audience. They also launch queries to learn about experiences related to a task or a project they are working on. Some examples include:

- Experiences in opening and managing local human rights centres
- Experiences in conducting a public survey on human rights awareness
- Guidance and experiences in implementing a human rights based approach in national planning processes
- Good practices in prison inspection
- Materials and advice to organize training on the rights of persons with disabilities
- Awareness-raising materials on stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS
- Good practices on legislation and policies on evictions and resettlement.

Where to learn more

- Learning and Technology blog: http://itcilo.wordpress.com/2010/03/30/community-of-practice/
- KS toolkit: http://www.kstoolkit.org/Communities+of+Practice
- Digital Habitats: http://technologyforcommunities.com/
- Communities of practice:
  - http://tinyurl.com/3rw524q
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
Learning as a Social System

Cultivating communities of practice
a quick start-up guide
by Elanne Wangler

Where to start?

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.

Why focus on communities of practice?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short-term value</th>
<th>Long-term value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>help with challenges</td>
<td>personal development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>access to expertise</td>
<td>reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confidence</td>
<td>professional identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fun with colleagues</td>
<td>network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meaningful work</td>
<td>marketability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem solving</td>
<td>strategic capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time saving</td>
<td>keeping abreast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge sharing</td>
<td>innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synergies across units</td>
<td>retention of talents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reuse of resources</td>
<td>new strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are some critical success factors?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domain that energizes a core group</td>
<td>Strategic relevance of domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled and reputable coordinator</td>
<td>Visible management sponsorship, but without micro-management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement of experts</td>
<td>Distance of formal and informal structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address details of practice</td>
<td>Adequate resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right rhythm and mix of activities</td>
<td>Consistent attitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What elements to develop?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the definition of the area of shared inquiry and of the key issues</td>
<td>the relationships among members and the sense of belonging</td>
<td>the body of knowledge, methods, stories, cases, tools, documents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

set strategic context

A strategic context sets communities on a legitimate place in the organization.

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

support

Communities of practice are communities of practice as early as possible needs early examples that allows people to learn by doing.

- 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 goes as soon as possible.

- Have a few pilot communities going as soon as possible
- Find communities to start with by identifying areas where there is potential and readiness
- Intervene 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 into initial series of value-adding activities
- Encourage there to take increasing responsibility for stewarding their knowledge

encourage

Practitioners usually use 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 roots in personal passion and engagement.

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

involve stakeholders

Design, learn and train
Generate and share knowledge
Assess, reflect and evaluate
Support communities and networks of practice
Advocate