Community of Practice — Definition, Best practices, and Examples

A community of practice (CoP) is a **group of people who share a common interest or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly**. CoPs often focus on sharing best practices, creating new knowledge, and advancing a domain of professional practice. CoPs are based on the social and experiential aspects of learning, where members engage in collective learning, knowledge sharing, and networking.

A comprehensive guide on the intricacies of CoPs, covering the definition, benefits, principles behind designing a successful CoP and steps to take to create one.

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Growth doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens inside a community. That's why many organizations create communities of practice (CoP)—powerful, collaborative networks that drive knowledge sharing and learning.

This comprehensive post will guide you through the intricacies of CoPs, starting with the definition, benefits, and purpose. We will also cover the principles behind designing a successful CoP and lay out a step-by-step guide to creating one.

We hope this resource will help you understand not only why you need a community of practice, but also how to build one that remains a vibrant source of learning and growth for your audiences.

What is a community of practice?

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of individuals with shared interests or professions, where members come together to engage in collective learning, knowledge sharing, and networking.

The concept of a CoP, developed by cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, highlights the social and experiential aspects of learning. Members of a CoP interact regularly, discussing challenges, sharing insights, and learning from each other's experiences. (If you'd like to learn more about Lave and Wenger's work, you can read their article in the Harvard Business Review.)

Consider a group of customer service representatives from a company like Amazon. By forming a CoP, they can exchange stories from their daily interactions with customers, share effective resolution strategies, and learn collectively.

This process not only enhances their individual skills but also contributes to effective knowledge management within the organization.

Similarly, a CoP can span beyond one company as individuals form communities around a common professional interest. For example, educators across various institutions might create a CoP to discuss pedagogical innovations, contributing to a broader evolution of teaching practices.

Essentially, communities of practice are powerful tools for fostering continuous learning, enhancing shared understanding, and contributing to collective knowledge in a specific domain.

The three pillars of a community of practice

At the heart of every CoP are three foundational elements, often referred to as the three pillars. These are the domain, community, and practice.

The domain: shared interest

The shared interest, or particular domain, is what brings people together. It could be a specific skill, like Python coding, or an industry, like renewable energy. The domain defines the group's focus, like how a digital marketers' CoP may focus on search engine optimization (SEO).

The community: relationships and interactions

These are the individuals in the CoP who engage in discussions, share information, help each other, and learn together.

The practice: shared body of knowledge

This involves the shared body of knowledge and resources that members of a CoP develop together. In a CoP, practice isn't just about what we traditionally view as 'practical' skills—it encompasses the tools, frameworks, experiences, stories, and documents that the community members share. For example, a CoP of data scientists might develop a shared library of machine learning algorithms, a repository of data cleaning scripts, or a set of best practices for data visualization.

💡 CoPs can be integrated into your overall knowledge management strategy by providing a platform for collaborative learning. You can tap into the expertise and experiences of your teams, encourage continuous learning, and promote innovation within your organization.

Types and purposes of communities of practice

Communities of practice come in various shapes and sizes. These communities have diverse purposes and leverage the concept of situated learning. Here are three common types:

Professional communities of practice

These communities bring together individuals who work in the same profession or field. Think of a group of doctors from different hospitals who meet regularly to discuss the latest medical advancements or challenging patient cases.

💡 The purpose of these communities is to foster continuous professional development, share industry-specific knowledge, and improve standards within the profession. They often facilitate the creation of new knowledge and best practices, thereby enhancing the entire field.

Corporate learning communities of practice

Communities of practice in a workplace adhere to a learning model that emphasizes knowledge sharing and experiential learning. They can be formal or informal communities where employees learn from each other by sharing knowledge and experiences. For instance, a technology company like Microsoft might have a CoP for its software engineers to discuss new coding practices or troubleshoot complex problems.

💡 The main goal here is to enhance organizational learning, increase productivity, and foster innovation. They help companies to adapt quickly to changes and maintain a competitive edge in their industry.

Non-professional communities of practice

These are informal groups of individuals united by a shared hobby or interest. This could be a local gardening club or an online gaming community of practice.

💡 Communities of practice focus on the joy of shared interest, personal growth, and mutual support. For instance, a book club (a CoP for literature enthusiasts) provides a platform for members to explore different genres, understand various perspectives, and enrich their reading experience.

The benefits of a community of practice

A well-run CoP provides many benefits, both to the members and the people who run the community.

Increase their knowledge

Communities of practice encourage professional development. Newcomers can learn from the entire library of previous discussions and resources. While experts can bounce ideas off other people at a similar stage of learning.

Improve their reputation

Being active in a CoP can improve a member's reputation in their industry. All answered questions, discussion contributions, and shared content help build their authority and position them as a thought leader.

Build a bigger network

Communities of practice are ready-made networks of people in a shared field. By joining a community, each member gains access to this network. This is especially helpful if the member lacks networking opportunities. For example, if they live in a remote location or if other commitments affect their ability to network.

Find career or job opportunities

More extensive networks and increased industry authority can lead to better career opportunities. People who see your expertise through your posts may hire you to do a specific job. Many communities of practice actively advertise jobs to community members.

Organizations can also benefit from communities of practice. Here is how:

Build brand awareness

Starting a CoP is an excellent way to build brand awareness among people in your industry. The more value and positive experiences you provide to members, the more people will look positively at your brand.

Access deeper industry insight

You also gain deeper insight into the industry you work in. You'll see the challenges people face and the solutions they are currently using. This can help with everything from product development to marketing.

Improve knowledge management

Internal or employee communities of practice are a valuable way to improve an organization's ability to manage vast amounts of knowledge. Encouraging members to ask questions and share information ensures employees have access to knowledge from throughout your organization.