

## **Communities of practice— leveraging expertise for organisational learning**

### **Introduction**

It's probably fair to say that “community” is an over used word. Ambiguous and value laden as it is, the word conjures many inferences and connotations. Politicians, journalists and lobby groups are among the more obvious groups who have co-opted and used its somewhat nebulous quality to appeal in a subtle yet sophisticated manner, to our very human desire to belong to and be associated however loosely or tightly, with a larger entity.

This desire to belong to a larger group is often latent and understated and only comes to a fuller expression when we are faced with a crisis or urgent need necessitating some sort of collective response. This latent and quiet expression of community is uniquely Australian for it captures an interesting and paradoxical mix of individualism and mateship. Amongst other things this idea of community has come to mean for many people; a source of help, of comfort, and of humour, through which community members are helped to learn to deal with the harshness of the land or of coping with life's many difficulties.

It is this quality which allows the “community” to become a powerful and effective form of social and intellectual capital. The recent tragic fires in Canberra for example saw the surface of these forms of capital which were inspiring as they were effective in providing concrete, sometimes specialist help and assistance for affected individuals and families, beyond that provided by Government and other agencies.

This sense of coming together to help, is a core purpose of communities of practice and is a construct which recognises and capitalises on the strength of a group of people who come together to help individuals with practical challenges. Communities of practice are thus a real source of practical knowledge and problem based learning.

### **A definition**

We can define a community of practice as a group of people who share a desire to deepen their knowledge and skills and ability to solve work-based problems within specific areas of specialist knowledge and practice by interacting with and learning from each other on a regular basis.

Within organisations, communities of practice are stewards of specialist knowledge and expertise and serve to deepen the organisation's ability to respond to technical or operational challenges swiftly, effectively and economically.

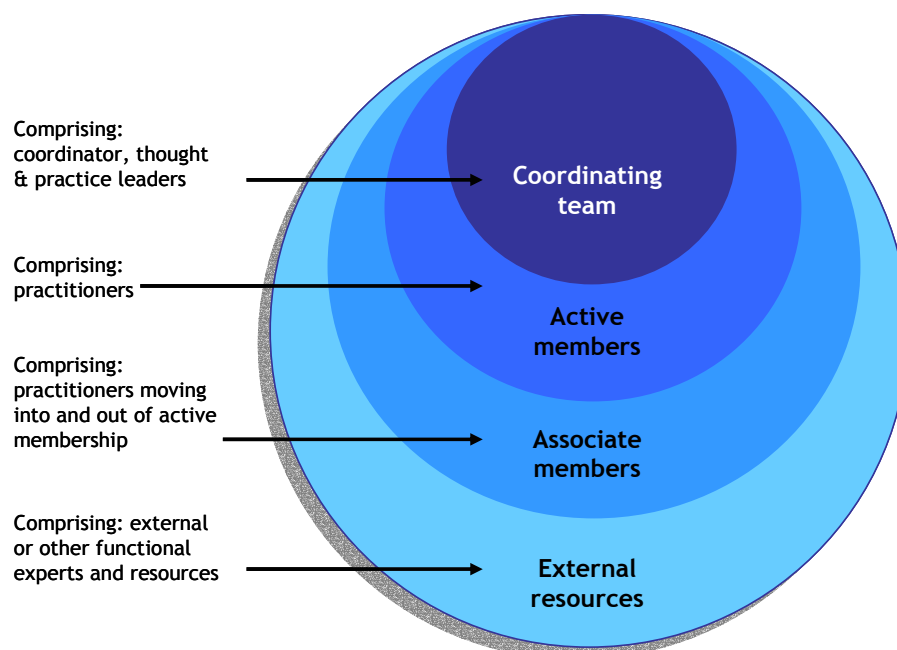
## Key Features of the Community of Practice

According Etienne Wenger (2002) a researcher and writer in the field, communities of practice are characterised by the following elements:

- **Domain.** That is, communities of practice have a defined area of knowledge and practice. Examples might include software engineering in a military environment or viticulture or satellite imaging.
- **Membership.** That is, communities of practice comprise an identifiable group of practitioners and experts who share the similar experience of working in a specific domain of practice and knowledge.
- **Practice.** That is, communities of practice are concerned with the learning, promulgation and application of thought, practices, methodologies and tools within the work environment.

It is the integration of these three elements and the tight, some would say narrow focus that results, which differentiate communities of practice from other types of similar groupings such as networks and special interest groups where agendas may be broader and less problem based. In addition, whilst these other more familiar groupings or communities tend to be less formal and somewhat egalitarian in their make up and in the way learning is carried out, communities of practice thrive on a subtle but distinguishable emphasis on learning from and interacting with expert practitioners, making it a useful learning strategy for highly technical areas and functions. Software user groups which often come together through the web because of their shared passion are examples.

**Diagram 1: Possible structure for a community of practice.**



This is but one possible way of structuring a community of practice. As the diagram tries to show, the coordinating team is pivotal to the community and is generally responsible for the smooth functioning of the community and for the quality of the expertise and knowledge resources which the community uses for its learning and problem solving. Knowledge resources could include:

- Community Home Page on the organisation's Intranet
- Intranet based repository for documents, reports, better practices guides, lessons learned documents and other community documents
- FAQ database
- Membership and expertise directory and e-mail list
- Threaded discussions or listservs

Internet based collaborative knowledge tools such as video streaming, e-whiteboards, webinars and document management systems also extend the reach of communities beyond physical proximity, enable a wider active membership and more diverse infusion and transfer of knowledge and experience.

The active membership is generally made up of recognised organisational experts and practitioners in a particular field. Meetings are generally organised around these practitioners presenting their work, breakthrough ideas, hypotheses, better practices and lessons learned. Meetings are also organised around the presentation of significant problems which members are invited to present solutions to. Occasionally, if the problem or issue warrants, external resources such as other domain or functional experts, may be invited to participate, to provide specialist input, analysis and commentary.

As with any group, levels of membership, participation and engagement will rise and fall over time as members grapple with changing needs, conflicting demands for their time, attention and energy. Associate membership is a relatively simple way of facilitating movement into and out of the responsibilities of active membership.

### **Some final thoughts**

Learning from being a member of a group of practitioners is obviously not a new concept. The medieval guilds were, and their modern successors the professional associations continue, to be organised around and for practitioners and their interests (and not necessarily the interest of the organisation). Yet, the collective, intellectual capital of practitioners available within organisations remains relatively untapped and under leveraged organisationally, although the rise of technology based knowledge management as a managerial response is an example of a somewhat clumsy, technological driven attempt at leverage. For thinking organisations though, communities of practice represents one socially driven way in which our latent desire to be a part of a larger entity, our affinity to fellow professionals and our collective intellectual capital can be combined and leveraged, to not only benefit the individual practitioner, but to help the organisation excel as well.

### **Reference**

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. and Snyder, W.M. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Harvard Business School Press. Boston.

### **Further reading**

Lesser, E.L. and Storck, J. (2001) *Communities of practice and organisational performance*. IBM Systems Journal Vol. 40 No 4.