Networks *Digest*

A spotlight on network-related resources

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Community of Practice Design Guide: A step-by-step guide for creating collaborative communities of practice

iCohere - iCohere is a division of the Kaplan Consulting Group that provides collaborative software and consulting services to business, organizations, and government.

This clearly structured guide presents a generalized "how to" approach to creating communities of practice (CoPs). It is based on experiences with corporations, non-profits, and associations, in addition to government and educational institutions.

The guide details the lifecycle phases of CoPs and presents a "menu" of technical features CoPs use to support their four primary areas of activity: relationships, learning, knowledge, and action. In the authors' words, the guide was created to "help CoP facilitators understand the questions, issues, and options involved in designing and cultivating communities."

CoPs: Lifecycle phases, questions, and activities

The guide begins by clarifying important design elements that go into creating and growing CoPs. For each of the six phases of the CoP lifecycle—inquire, design, prototype, launch, grow, and sustain—the authors identify key questions to explore and supporting activities to conduct.

Phase 1: Inquire - Identify the audience, purpose, goals, and vision for the community.

Sample key question: Given the intended audience, what are the key issues and tasks the community will steward?

Some supporting activities: Conduct a needs assessment, define stakeholder benefits, and create a mission statement.

Phase 2: Design - Define the community's activities, technologies, group processes, and roles.

Sample key question: What activities will generate energy and support the emergence of the community?

Key messages

- Communities of practice (CoPs) evolve through six phases: inquire, design, prototype, launch, grow, and sustain.
- The emergence and growth of CoPs are "cultivated" more than "built."
- This guide offers key questions and specific design, facilitation, and support strategies for each lifecycle phase that can help communities move through each stage of development in the successful pursuit of their goals.
- The four primary areas of CoP activity (relationships, learning, knowledge, and action) vary in importance from phase to phase.

Some supporting activities: Identify community-based tasks; develop scenarios needed to fulfill these tasks; create a schedule and timetable for implementation.

Phase 3: Prototype - Pilot the CoP with a select group of stakeholders to test assumptions and establish a success story.

Sample key question: What "brand image" does the community wish to project?

Some supporting activities: Select technological features, decide on the community metaphor, and measure the prototype's success.

Phase 4: Launch - Roll out the community to a broader audience in ways that engage new members and deliver immediate benefits.

Sample key question: How will new members learn about the community?

Some supporting activities: Design and implement the community environment based on prototype results, and establish a community charter.

Phase 5: Grow - Engage members in collaborative learning and knowledge sharing activities that create an increasing cycle of participation and

...making research work

contribution.

Sample key question: How are members recognized and rewarded for their contributions?

Some supporting activities: Share success stories, create sub-groups, and facilitate meta-community discussions.

Phase 6: Sustain - Cultivate and assess the learning, knowledge, and "products" of the community with a view to the future.

Sample key question: How will potential community leaders be identified, chosen, developed, and supported by the community?

*Some supporting activitie*s: Create new member roles and opportunities for feedback, and develop a support infrastructure.

Emphasizing the right technical features

The guide contains a menu of technical features CoPs can use to support their four primary areas of activity (relationships, learning, knowledge, and action). Examples of these technical features include creating networking profiles to help build relationships, online discussions to facilitate learning, idea banks to share knowledge, and web conferencing to promote action. Readers are encouraged to use the menu to identify the mix of features appropriate for their CoP and its phase of development.

Summary

CoPs connect people, provide a shared context, enable dialogue between members, introduce collaborative processes, stimulate learning, capture and diffuse knowledge, and help get people organized. This design guide can get people interested in forming a CoP past "writers' block" and through the phases of creating and sustaining.

Community of Practice Design Guide: A step-by-step guide for creating collaborative communities of practice (www.icohere.com/CoPDesignGuide.pdf)