

**Research Brief: Communities of Practice  
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**Updated May 2007**

When I started researching this topic, I was intending to answer the question: “Have communities of practice been used successfully for performance improvement projects?” I learned that I would find answers if I changed my research question to: “Have communities of practice resulted in performance improvement within companies?”

Communities of practice offer a structured place for participants to learn and become leaders in an area of expertise, to grow from novice to expert. Most references to communities of practice that I found use Wenger and Snyder’s definition: “...groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise.” (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 139).

Communities of practice are usually informally formed, and members decide when and whether they should join the community. As described in *Handbook of Human Performance Technology*, “Communities of practice are found in all aspects of life. They include both explicit and implicit structures and practice. Because communities of practice are based on joint learning, rather than on tasks with formal beginnings and endings, they tend to emerge and linger rather than sharply form and disband” (Winer, Rushby and Vazquez-Abad, 1999, p. 882).

Most of the case studies that I found were published by members of the knowledge management community rather than the human performance technology (HPT) or training community. Although the focus was not on performance improvement or learning, key business outcomes from these case studies show that performance often improved for one or more of these levels of performance: individual, group or team, and organization.

By nature, communities of practice “...tend to be emergent, informal organizations that are not explicitly designed. Communities of practice cannot be mandated, but they can and should be supported...” (Winer, Rushby and Vazquez-Abad, 1999, p. 882). That’s probably why management is unlikely to create a community of practice to support a performance improvement project.

### **Case Study: *Formula One***

Jay Reay studied an informal Formula One (F1) community and how this community manages its knowledge. In the article *Why motor racing is driven by knowledge*, Reay states that “The role of this CoP was to understand problems arising from an event and to find and test effective solutions in time for the next race in the season” (Reay, 2000, p. 22). Solutions must be found quickly, communicated quickly, and must be based on the most recent innovations if the race car team is going to win. Group/team performance results were improved through community interaction.

### **Case Study: *Witches***

First, we will consider individual results that can be achieved through communities of practice. In *Building the Learning Organization*, Marquardt defines individual learning as "...changes in skills, insights, knowledge, attitudes, and values acquired through self-study, technology-based instruction, and observation" (Marquardt, 2000, p. 25).

Membership in the appropriate community of practice makes us better able to perform individually. We learn from each other, share ideas with each other, and solve problems as they come up with our colleagues. We are part of a social network, not just people who are working alone. "You cannot do your job without learning about the skills, the knowledge, and the social context that surrounds that job because the context, to a large degree, defines the nature of the job" (Jonassen, Peck, and Wilson, 1999, p. 117).

An interesting example of individual learning and performance improvement can be found in the research paper *On becoming a witch: learning in a marginalized community of practice*. The goal of a witch apprentice is to learn how to practice the craft, to move from newcomer to full membership (or from novice to expert). Joining a marginalized group involves some effort, sometimes just to know how to find the group and to gain entry as a novice. Learning is definitely hands on, involves both explicit and tacit knowledge, and is shared with novices by those who are expert. What makes this a community of practice is that "...the knowledge learned within each coven or each tradition is meant to be shared and in so doing contributes to the larger body of work." (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003, p. 180).

### **What benefits do CoPs provide?**

Communities of practice are set up by people who all want to develop specific capabilities and exchange knowledge, and are disbanded when there is no more interest. What's important to note here is the difference between the groups, not necessarily the name given to a group by an organization. These benefits were identified through multiple research books and resources:

- **Improving experience of work:** help with challenges, access to expertise, better able to contribute to team, confidence in one's approach to problems, fun of being with colleagues, more meaningful participation, and sense of belonging.
- **Decreasing the learning curve of new employees:** integrating new employees into the "organizational memory," understanding the rules of the company, identifying subject matter experts, providing mentoring opportunities, and story telling.
- **Fostering professional development:** forum for expanding skills and expertise, network for keeping abreast of a field, enhanced professional reputation, increased marketability and employability, and strong sense of professional identity.
- **Improving tacit knowledge:** Explicit knowledge is what we typically learn in formal training; tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is the big advantage that we gain in a community of practice. Tacit knowledge is easier to share with other individuals in a social context, and it affects our individual performance.

- **Developing knowledge and interaction of teams:** Tacit knowledge can be shared through socialization between individuals, or through planned storytelling. Increases satisfaction in, and compensation for, successful collaborative action and its results. Enhances capability to initiate, collaborate on, and complete actions.
- **Responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries:** finding subject matter experts to provide the best answer, developing willingness to respond to random questions, and recording historical knowledge electronically for later reference.
- **Reducing rework and preventing “reinvention of the wheel:”** retaining “organizational memory” through knowledge stores (artifacts) and member knowledge, and understanding the context of the history.
- **Spawning new ideas for products and services:** brainstorming and testing new ideas, providing a safe environment, and using others as a sounding board.
- **Strategic communities can be started by management to:** accelerate the rate of introducing successful disruptive innovation, facilitate culture change, or enter a new market. Communities can be nurtured and supported by management, and on rare occasions may be initiated by management.

**Current trends and buzzwords**

Trends	Phrases and words
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Knowledge management seems to “own” communities of practice. Lots of references exist in the field’s literature.</li> <li>▪ Need for online and electronic tools to store information and facilitate discussion and collaboration</li> <li>▪ Applying to learning in corporate world</li> <li>▪ Expanding globally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CoP</li> <li>▪ knowledge management</li> <li>▪ learning organization</li> <li>▪ action learning teams</li> <li>▪ organizational memory</li> <li>▪ storytelling</li> <li>▪ learning communities</li> <li>▪ thematic groups</li> <li>▪ peer groups</li> <li>▪ knowledge networks</li> <li>▪ tech clubs</li> <li>▪ tacit knowledge</li> <li>▪ situated cognition, learning theory</li> </ul>

### Primary consultants, researchers, and writers

- **George Pór** is known for his research connecting innovation to communities and collaboration.
- **Etienne Wenger** (<http://www.ewenger.com/>) is a key researcher and writer specializing in communities of practice. Along with Jean Lave, they coined the term “community of practice.” The section on his website outlining communities of practice is a great introduction.
- **Jean Lave** is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, a social anthropologist with a strong interest in social theory. Much of her work, both in ethnography and in social theory, concentrates on the re-conceiving of learning, learners, and educational institutions in terms of social practice.

### Organizations and other sources for help and information

- Community Intelligence Labs, <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/index.shtml>: Founded by George Pór.
- AskMe solutions for managing knowledge networks <http://www.askmecorp.com/solutions/default.asp>.
- IBM <http://www.research.ibm.com>.
- CPsquare <http://www.cpsquare.org/>: “The community of practice on communities of practice.”
- Knowledge Café <http://www.theworldcafe.com>: “The World Café is both a simple methodology and a powerful metaphor for understanding and working with the complex process by which we collectively construct our world.”

### Key books and resources

- Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott & William M. Snyder. *Cultivating communities of practice*. (Harvard Business School Press, 2002)
- Hubert Saint-Onge and Debra Wallace. *Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advantage* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2002)
- Michael J. Marquardt. *Building the learning organization*. (Davies-Black Publishing, 2002)
- *IBM Systems Journal*, <http://www.research.ibm.com>.

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