

What Are Communities of Practice?

NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE DISSEMINATION OF DISABILITY RESEARCH

Advancing Research, Improving Education



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Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.

Not everything called a "community" is a community of practice. A neighborhood, for instance, is often called a community but is usually not a community of practice. Three characteristics are crucial:

1. **The domain:** A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.
2. **The community:** In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.
3. **The practice:** A community of practice is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community.

Where Is the Concept Being Applied?

The concept of community of practice has found a number of practical applications in business, organizational design, government, education, professional associations, development projects, and

civic life.

The concept has been adopted most readily by people in business because of the recognition that knowledge is a critical asset that needs to be managed strategically. Initial efforts at managing knowledge had focused on information systems with disappointing results. Communities of practice provided a new approach, which focused on people and on the social structures that enable them to learn with and from each other.

A number of characteristics explain this rush of interest in communities of practice as a vehicle for developing strategic capabilities in organizations:

- Communities of practice enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognizing that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this.
- Communities among practitioners create a direct link between learning and performance because the same people participate in communities of practice and in teams and business units.
- Practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects.
- Communities are not limited by formal structures; they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries.

The concept of community of practice is influencing theory and practice in many domains. It has now become the foundation of a perspective on knowing and learning that informs efforts to create learning systems in various sectors and at various levels of scale, from local communities to single organizations, partnerships, cities, regions, and the entire world.

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