

# Facilitation of Technology-Supported Communities of Practice

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## INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice (CoP) has gained on prominence since it emerged as a concept in early 1990s, introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) as situated learning. They argue that knowledge is acquired through active participation in a community as a new member moves from peripheral to full participation in the community. Since then, the CoP concept has evolved (Kimble & Hildreth, 2004), as Wenger (2004) defined CoP as “groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do, and who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better” (p. 2).

While the original concept of CoP is based on face-to-face interaction (e.g., in traditional apprenticeship) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the advancement in information and communication technology (ICT) has widened this concept as space and time barriers collapsed. Establishing and sustaining CoPs then becomes the key challenge for those individuals involved in CoPs development and operation (e.g., members and sponsors). The introduction of a facilitator role is believed to help CoPs in overcoming some of the challenges and in achieving their goals. However, what roles and tasks a facilitator would face in a CoP is an important question to be addressed. In this article, we identify those potential roles and tasks that a CoP facilitator can face in a community.

## THE NATURE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

CoPs can serve several purposes within organizations, including providing a forum for sharing ideas, solving problems, disseminating best practices, and organizing knowledge (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

A defining feature of a CoP is that they, more or less, emerge spontaneously (“bottom-up”) from the informal networking among groups of individuals who share similar interests or passions (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In recent years, however, CoPs are increasingly initiated by a sponsor in senior management level (“top-down”) (Fontaine, 2001) and get full organizational support in terms of human resources, policy, and technology. The price drop in information and communication technology, combined with the advancement of e-collaboration technologies, and the Internet has resulted in an increasing number of CoPs going virtual with minimal or no face-to-face interaction. This in turn creates new challenges in building and sustaining CoPs. Virtual environments increase interaction barriers. These barriers hinder effective coordination and communication (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998), make people less attentive and less receptive to contextual cues (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), and hinder the creation of trust (van House, Butler, & Schiff, 1998).

As a community, a CoP has a different nature than a team. Ferran-Urdaneta (1999) highlighted some of those characteristic differences (see Table 1).

These characteristics, especially the large number of members, less clear goals, and low levels of coordination; increase the challenges in sustaining a CoP. Large numbers of members could become a threat when members start forming splinter cells, which could lead to the break down of the CoP. A large number of members could also endanger the sense of identity and members’ commitment toward the community (Wenger et al., 2002). Low coordination and unclear goals within a community could effect members’ “sense of community” feeling, which in turn has direct relation to members’ participation (Yoo, Suh, & Lee, 2002). Low member interdependency, i.e. no member is crucial for community survival, could be seen as an

*Table 1. Characteristic differences between community and team*

CHARACTERISTICS	COMMUNITY	TEAM
Member	Large	Small and identifiable
Coordination	Low	High
Member interdependency	Low	High
Lifespan	Infinite	Finite / short
Goal	less clear	Clear and measurable

advantage. However, this low member interdependency could increase the effect of social loafing (Steiner, 1972); that is, reduction in individual effort that often occurs in groups. This effort reduction could stem from member’s belief that community could survive without his or her contribution (Comer 1995). If this belief is adopted by most of the members, then the survival of the community would be questionable.

A CoP may have synchronous and asynchronous interactions among its members, utilizing various available e-collaboration technologies, such as bulletin board, email, online chat, phone, or video conference. Those technologies could facilitate communication and overcome time and/or distance barriers inherent in distributed CoP. Johnson (2001) argues that establishing discussion should be one of the main functions of a community because it is a means to expand knowledge (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Expanding the knowledge of employees, which in turn expands the knowledge of organization, is the ultimate goal of the organization in establishing a CoP.

However, a community’s characteristics, as described earlier, create a challenge for both sustaining a CoP over time and establishing a successful fully participatory discussion. The key issue for sustaining a CoP is maintaining the participation of its members. This is also one of the indicators as to whether the approach used in developing a community is effective (Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001). The greater the number of participating members, i.e., members that are enthusiastic participants in activities and topics created by others, the higher the chance that the community will thrive. Hildreth et al. argue: “participation is central to the evolution of the community and to the creation of relationships that help develop the sense of trust and identity that defines the community” (2000, p. 30). One

of the supporting CoP roles, that has the potential to play crucial role in reaching this goal, is the facilitator role. A CoP facilitator could help the community and its members navigate through existing obstacles (Fontaine, 2001) and keep the community flourishing. The importance of facilitator in helping groups or meetings to move forward and meet their goals more effectively has been researched and proven, especially in group support systems (GSS) field. Extensive research has been done and published (e.g., Anson et al., 1995; Dickson et al. 1996; Hayne, 1999).

### **CoP AND GSS FACILITATION**

Despite the potential of facilitation as a way to overcome some of the challenges in a CoP, little is known about facilitator tasks within CoP. Hardly any research addressing facilitation issues in CoPs has been published (Tarmizi & de Vreede, 2005). Therefore, learning from other fields, i.e., the GSS field, could enhance our understanding regarding the facilitator role in CoPs. In order to apply those findings into a CoP, we have to consider existing processes within CoPs and understand differences between processes used in CoPs and GSS meetings. By understanding those differences, we are in position to develop a base for research into CoPs facilitation.

Facilitation used in GSS meetings help structure the process of a meeting, so that participants are able to reach optimal outcomes in an efficient manner. A traditional GSS session (i.e., a face-to-face interaction), usually takes relatively shorter time than CoP interaction, since in CoP communication is mostly asynchronous and the content is fragmented, so that members have to devote more concentration, time

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