

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO THEIR SUCCESS

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In today's professional and organisational environment, collaboration and knowledge exchange play a fundamental role. In this context, Communities of Practice (CoPs) have emerged as an effective tool for fostering these dynamics, helping organisations to overcome silo mentalities and harness collective intelligence.

What Is a Community of Practice?

The European Commission's "Communities of Practice Playbook" defines CoPs as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn to do it better as they interact regularly."

Unlike working groups, which are formed to achieve a specific goal and have a predefined limited duration, CoPs are defined by their members' willingness to share their praxis — i.e. to learn together from one another's experiences — without a fixed time limitation. Their existence therefore depends on the interest and commitment of their members.

The concept of CoPs was developed in the early 1990s by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave. Based on ethnographic studies conducted at Xerox, it was observed that workers would meet informally to share experiences and solve problems, thereby creating collective knowledge not captured in formal manuals.

Though the term is modern, we can look back to historical examples of similar practices such as medieval guilds. In those guilds, master craftsmen (bakers, shoemakers, blacksmiths) shared their knowledge not only vertically with apprentices but also horizontally among fellow masters.

Thus, CoPs are applicable in any sphere where continuous learning and collective improvement are sought. There are many examples in educational communities or among health professionals, but their potential extends far beyond. CoPs also prove particularly useful among science communicators, public managers, or innovation networks.

For example, in the field of sustainability and ecological transition, public, private and social agents can share lessons on climate policy, energy management or circular economy, generating collaborative solutions.

Five Keys to the Success of a Community of Practice

While there is no magical formula for success, analysis of the existing literature highlights the following actions as increasing the probability of success:

- **Shared Vision:** It is essential to co-create and align a Vision and Purpose (the *raison d'être*) that resonates with members and contributes to organisational objectives. This translates into SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely).
- **Flexible Leadership Structure and Governance:** Success does not depend on rigid hierarchical structures, but rather on self-organisation and facilitating leadership.

- **Risk-free Environment:** Creating a “risk-free environment” is key to building trust. Members must feel safe admitting gaps in knowledge and sharing failures without fear of judgement or sanction.
- **Technology as an Enabler:** Technology should support flow and user experience. In other words, tools should be easy to use, adaptable to members’ needs, and serve to connect interactions both in real life and online (synchronously and asynchronously).
- **Measurement for Improvement:** Continuous monitoring of the vitality and impact of the community allows identification of what works, what doesn’t, and what can be improved. This guides constant adaptation of the operational model.

In summary, Communities of Practice are living ecosystems of people who, much like the ancient medieval guilds, connect to learn collaboratively. Their success depends on fostering autonomy, trust and genuine collaboration.

In a future marked by continuous learning, CoPs can become key spaces to tackle complex challenges such as climate change with collective solutions.

Bibliografía

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