

Communities of Practice: Meanings, Benefits and Methodology



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Comunità di pratica: significati, utilità e metodologie applicative

Community of Practice (CoP): Literature

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- E. Wenger, R. McDermott, W. Snyder, „*Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*“, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2002
- Communications of the ACM, April 2002, Vol. 45, Number 4: Special Section "Supporting Community and Building Social Capital", pp. 36-73
- E. Wenger, „Supporting communities of practice: a survey of community-oriented technologies“, Version 1.3, 2001, www.ewenger.com/tech

CoP Examples (1)

- Helping communities
 - *Focused on community relationships*
 - Colleagues help each other solve everyday problems
 - *Schlumberger's* communities of scientists and engineers:
 - Post requests for help on threaded discussion / several people respond

- Best-practice communities
 - *Focused on practice*
 - Develop, validate and disseminate specific practices
 - *Ford Motor Company's* community of operators and engineers:
 - Describe new practice and value, assess effectiveness and benefits, distribute and review worldwide

CoP Examples (2)

- Knowledge-stewarding communities
 - *Focused on explicit knowledge*
 - Organize, upgrade and distribute knowledge used every day
 - *Cap Gemini Ernst & Young's* 150 communities:
 - Focus on finding, organizing and distributing documents from unfiltered repositories, discussion databases and from comprehensive packs on specific topics

- Innovation communities
 - *Focused on tacit knowledge*
 - Foster unexpected ideas and innovations
 - *Daimler Chrysler's* „Austauschgruppe“ community:
 - Encourages engineers to assess new directions in research and provides a channel for their innovations to be realized

Community of Practice: What is it about?

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A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people

- bound to the organisation as an informal structural unit
- with voluntary & reporting-independent participation of members
- who share a concern and a passion about a knowledge domain
- care collectively about this domain (*stewarding*)
- and apply the shared practice in their business processes

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Community of Practice: Where lies its USP?

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- Knowledge Challenge
 - the CoP approach naturally implements a comprehensive understanding of what the Knowledge Challenge is
- Business Processes
 - the CoP approach naturally integrates Knowledge Management activities and Business Processes
- Corporate Strategy (business objectives)
 - the CoP approach aligns Knowledge Management and Business Objectives by promoting in a balanced way benefits for individuals and for the organisation

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What is the Knowledge Challenge? *Understanding Knowledge ...*

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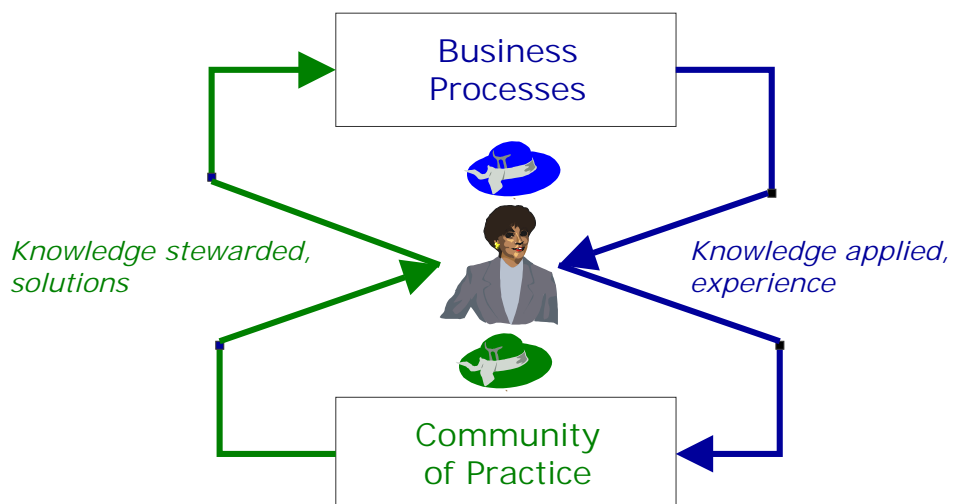
- ... Knowledge lives in the human act of knowing
- ... Knowledge is tacit as well as explicit
- ... Knowledge is social as well as individual
- ... Knowledge is dynamic

- Knowledge cannot be reduced to an „object“ like other assets
- Knowledge must be treated as a „human factor“

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How are Knowledge Management and Business Processes integrated?

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Interactions: What do CoP members?

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- explain their work
- discuss their needs
- discuss their aspirations
- share information
- share hints & tips
- share advices
- share insights
- help each other
- consult each other
- discuss their approaches
- discuss their expectations
- solve problems
- explore common issues
- create tools
- create standards
- create generic designs
- create generic documents
- organize documents
- maintain a Web site
- *develop trust, understanding*
- *develop (negotiate) common perspectives, approaches, practices*

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Community of Practice: Transforming the Organisation

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- *Connect* people in different units around knowledge topics and *increase* trust and motivation (*enhanced networking*)
- *Solve* cooperatively business problems whose root causes cross team boundaries (*cooperation*)
- *Egalise* up to the highest standard performances in similar tasks that are uneven across units
- *Link, coordinate, organise, develop* activities and initiatives by different units in similar knowledge domains
- *Implement* the cycle of global stewarding and local use of knowledge (needs feedback, integration of KM & BP)
- Connect personal and professional development of practitioners to the strategy of the organization

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Benefits to Organization (short-term)



CoP improve business outcomes:

- Arena for problem solving
- Quick answers to questions
- Reduced time and costs of information search
- Improved quality of decisions
- More perspectives on problems
- Coordinate and find synergies across OEs
- More daring in trying new things (risks)
- ...

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 11

Benefits to Organization (long-term)



CoP develop organizational capabilities:

- Execute a strategic plan
- Authority with clients
- Increased retention of talent
- Capacity for KM projects
- Ability to innovate
- Ability to foresee technological developments
- Ability to take advantage of emerging markets
- ...

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 12

Benefits to Members (short-term)

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CoP improve experience of work:

- Help with challenges
- Access to expertise
- Better able to contribute to team tasks
- Confidence in one's approach to problem
- Fun of being with colleagues
- More meaningful participation
- Sense of belonging
- ...

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 13

Benefits to Members (long-term)

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CoP foster professional development:

- Forum for expanding skills and expertise
- Network for keeping abreast of a field
- Enhanced professional reputation
- Increased marketability and employability
- Strong sense of professional identity
- ...

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Community of Practice: How to do it? (1)

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Develop and balance three elements:

- *Knowledge domain*
 - What topics and issues do we really care about? How is this domain connected to the organization's strategy? What are its open questions and the leading edge? What is in it for us?
- *Community*
 - What roles are people going to play? How often will the community meet? How will members connect on an ongoing basis? What will generate energy and develop trust?
- *Practice*
 - What knowledge to share, develop, document? Which models, instruments, *Lessons Learned*, *best practices*, etc. ?

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 15

Community of Practice: How to do it? (2)

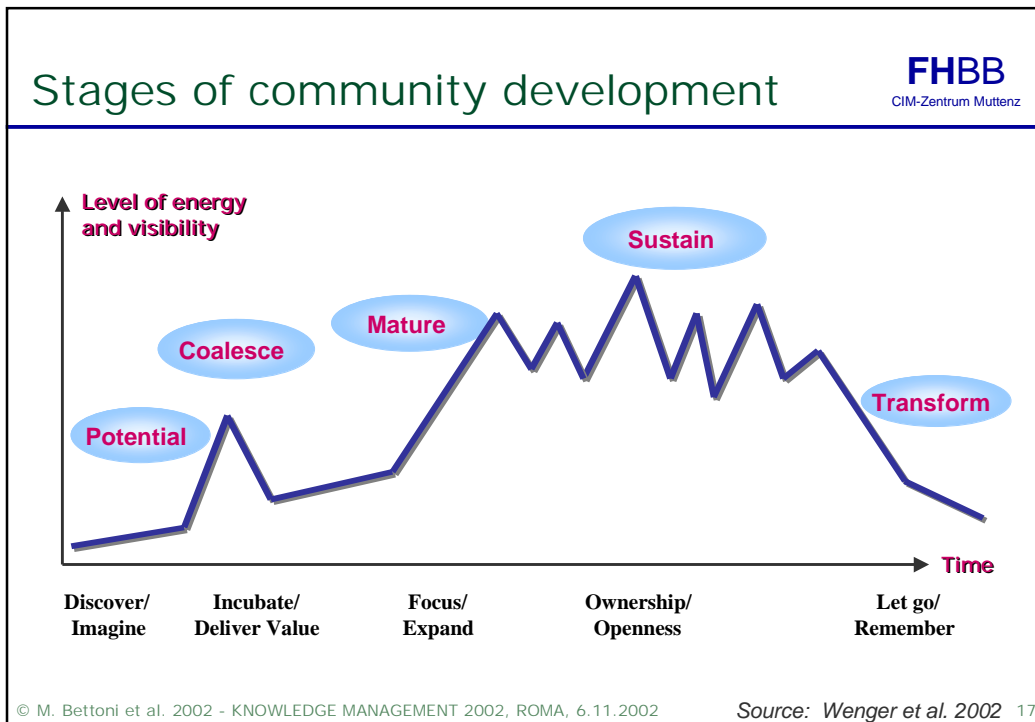
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Recognise and support 3 life phases (*5 stages*):

- *Formation (potential and coalescing)*
 - discover existing networks and common ground & invent new opportunities; build relationships & generate value
- *Integration (maturing, stewardship)*
 - Focus on own topics & admit new members; develop own tools, methods, approaches (instruments) & welcome new ideas
- *Transformation (transformation)*
 - Ending (fading away, officially closing) and/or shifting to new community (new topic, merging with other communities, become institutionalized as formal unit, etc.)

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Adapted from: Wenger et al. 2002¹⁶



- ### Stage 1: CoP is Potential
- #### Task 1: Planning the CoP
- 
- Domain
 - *define* a scope satisfying members & organisation
 - Community
 - *find* people that could profit by networking & sharing
 - Practice
 - *identify* common knowledge needs
 - **Challenge**
 - *discover* extant networks and their issues
 - *imagine* new possibilities (members, issues, etc.)
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Stage 2: CoP is Coalescing

Task 2: Nurturing the CoP

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- Domain
 - *establish* the value of sharing knowledge
- Community
 - *develop* relationships and trust
- Practice
 - *discover* what knowledge should be shared and how
- **Challenge**
 - *incubate* trust (does not appear suddenly, emerges step by step from understanding each other)
 - *deliver* immediate value

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 19

Stage 3: CoP is Maturing

Task 3: Coaching the CoP

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- Domain
 - *define* role in organisation / relation to other domains
- Community
 - *manage* the boundaries (define new, wider)
- Practice
 - *organize* the community's knowledge
- **Challenge**
 - *focus* on internal interests in cutting-edge topics
 - *expand* membership to new members

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 20

Stage 4: CoP assumes Stewardship

Task 4: Sustaining CoP's Momentum

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- Domain
 - *maintain* relevance of domain, institutionalize voice
- Community
 - *keep* tone and focus lively
- Practice
 - *keep* on the cutting edge
- **Challenge**
 - *ownership*: of internally developed tools, methods, ...
 - *openness*: membership to new members

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 21

Stage 5: Transformation

Task 5: Closing and Planning

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- Simply fade away
- Die by turning into a social club
- Split into distinct communities
- Merge with others
- Become institutionalized

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Source: Wenger et al. 2002 22

KMP Methodology:
A Knowledge Perspective for Practice

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Inspired by: KnowNet 2000,
G. Schmidt, 2000;
Wenger et al. 2002

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Conclusion

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„Firms that understand how to translate
the power of communities
into
successful knowledge organizations
will be the architects
of tomorrow“

*Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, William M. Snyder
2002*

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