

## **«This CoP was specially designed for our purposes»**

For the pharmacy and cosmetic producer Weleda, Swiss Distance University of Applied Sciences (FFHS) has conceptualized and built a Community of Practice (CoP). It improves the transfer of know-how and facilitates the registration process worldwide. Dr. Jürgen Blaha, head of the department in charge of the programme at Weleda, looks back on his collaboration with FFHS.



*Jürgen Blaha, head of WIRA at Weleda AG ([www.weleda.com](http://www.weleda.com)), for which FFHS has conceptualized and built a Community of Practice (CoP).*

### **Mr. Blaha, what has moved Weleda to introduce a Community of Practice (CoP)?**

The department «Weleda International Regulatory Affairs» (WIRA) oversees and supports registration processes worldwide in collaboration with local offices. Success depends heavily on an optimal flow of information, and the increasing internationalization of Weleda AG creates new demands on our communication tools. The CoP enables us to collect corresponding knowledge, and to facilitate transfer of know-how and communication between employees.

### **What made you decide to collaborate with FFHS?**

It was the concept of a CoP that raised our interest with the added benefit that we did not have to buy a product off-the-shelf, instead the CoP was specially designed for our purposes. Cost issues constituted an additional interesting factor. With the FFHS, represented by Mr. Bernhard and Mr. Bettoni, we found very competent partners to realize our goals. Collaboration was very trustful, and rewarding, and was based on a sound methodology.

### **What did the CoP create that was new in your department?**

A new way of collaboration. So far there had only been limited exchange with independent country organizations, and there were no project teams on an international level. Now all employees, dealing with the registration of pharmaceutical products, can collaborate worldwide in forums, for example about new legislative requirements. In addition, documents can be viewed worldwide on the platform. Finally the CoP enables transparency: one knows who works on what, and where the expertise lies.

### **Have you already seen the first success?**

In June 2008 we had the kick-off on the occasion of our annual international regulatory conference. The project was appreciated a great deal by the participants. Given the short period since its introduction it is still too early to assess it properly.

### **How are you making sure that your employees use the platform?**

For this we are concentrating on several measures. We capture satisfaction and suggestions for improvement. We offer support for those who are not very familiar with the computer and approach people who are not using the CoP. In addition there is a development team. Employees have to feel they will lose out on something if they do not participate. This means that the content is very important. That's why we have content managers and moderators for our forums and WiKis.

### **What do you consider as the challenges of this project?**

For many employees the concept of a CoP was very abstract and they could not immediately grasp the practical benefit of it. In addition they feared extra work. For the kick-off the project leaders therefore developed a game, which helped employees to deal with it in a playful and competitive way. We also created content in some WiKis to show the benefit of the CoP. To this end we have collected examples, to make it as concrete as possible. Ultimately the CoP still has to stand the test of time, which means that it should be used by employees a great deal. To achieve this, it needs to be supported with concerted actions.

### **What exactly is a CoP?**

According to the Swiss Etienne Wenger ([www.ewenger.com](http://www.ewenger.com)) the term "Community of Practice" (CoP) defines a group of practitioners, who are facing similar tasks in their practice, who voluntarily collaborate as a community with these topics and challenges deriving from these tasks. They also learn through regular interaction and knowledge exchange, to improve what they are doing. Such communities of practice that are informally connected with each other can be used for different application areas in the form of a community of knowledge, learning or interest.

### **The FFHS project team**

The project team consisted of Willi Bernhard (project coordination, technology & creative collaboration), Marco Bettoni (knowledge cooperation & CoP-design) and Gabriele Schiller (social networking & human aspects). After finishing the project the FFHS will continue to consult Weleda AG and keeps supporting the company by growing its CoP with additional new features, maintaining the website and solving problems whenever they arise, as well as any other requests. In the months to come the biggest challenge will be to support the development process of the CoP in the right manner until it is stable enough to be cultivated by the employees on a high level and to be used in an independent way.