

# Communities of Practice in the Workplace

Lessons from industry leaders • BY JEANNE C. MEISTER



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Implementing communities of practice seems to have replaced the buzz that has surrounded knowledge management during the past decade. Etienne Wenger, an authority on communities of practice, defines them as: "Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."

I am hearing the following questions regarding communities of practice:

1. How do I launch and sustain an online community of practice?
2. How do I market and communicate benefits of joining a community of practice?
3. How do I create a holistic experience?

Gian Jagai, program manager for knowledge management in global services at Hitachi Data Systems (HDS), and Nicole Jones, director of organization development and learning at RTI, have planned and launched online communities of practice at their respective firms in a 90-day period. How did they do it? Here are some lessons from them:

## 1. Organize communities of practice around strategic initiatives.

This is key since many folks start by organizing by role and find out there is little ongoing participation. One of the reasons may be that communities organized by role have members with many similar opinions and little need for knowledge sharing. But if you focus on launching some pilot communities of practice around your organization's broad strategic initiatives, it is easier to have a robust dialogue that includes many opinions and often is global in nature.

2. **Define clear roles and responsibilities.** Essentially, there are three major roles: community facilitators, community team members and you, as the overall sponsor of the community. Be clear about roles and responsibilities for each. These include:

### *Community facilitator:*

- Identifying important issues in the community.
- Seeding the community with content.
- Planning and facilitating community events.

- Informally linking community members, crossing boundaries between organizational units.
- Assessing the health of the community and evaluating its contribution to members and the organization.

### *Community team members:*

- Identifying issues of importance in the community.
- Informally linking community members.
- Posting questions and content and keeping a dialogue going about the topic.

### *Community sponsor:*

- Assessing the ongoing health of the community via surveys and feedback on how to make the community more robust and better meet the needs of its members.

3. **Communicate benefits.** You must remember life in the 24x7 workplace. Keep in mind you're competing with various ways to collaborate, and employees always are selecting what adds value to their on-the-job performance. Below is a small part of the HDS Starter-Kit that Jagai is developing as a way to provide quick training on how members can become involved in and start up communities of practice.

### *Short term:*

- Access to expertise.
- Better able to contribute to the team.
- Confidence in one's approach to problems.

### *Long term:*

- Forum for expanding skills and expertise.
- Way to build one's digital identity.
- Network for keeping abreast of field developments.
- Increased marketability and employability.

4. **Schedule promotional events.** While participating in communities of practice should be spontaneous, one of the first steps in building buzz around the community can be to hold an online webcast that officially launches the community initiative. Once you have the webcast, you can repurpose it into a podcast, thereby providing flexibility in delivery.

5. **Be holistic in your approach.** Communities of practice should ideally be part of a holistic talent management initiative at your organization. That means thinking about how participation in a community of practice can be built into job descriptions and then into management objectives. **CLO**

## CLO SYMPOSIUM

Jeanne C. Meister will be leading a Power Hour at the Fall 2008 CLO Symposium. For more information, see [www.clomedia.com/events/symposiums](http://www.clomedia.com/events/symposiums).