

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communities of Practice - Key Components of Knowledge Management

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The Community of Practice has a right to be considered both a founding knowledge management technique and a tracer for the health of KM practice through the last thirty years. It is so resilient a source of knowledge and intelligible an idea, that this year a major European financial institution commissioned a year-long pilot knowledge management system with a network of CoPs as its sole infrastructure and key source of corporate knowledge.

They have not been without their challenges. Along with many other aspects of human-focussed knowledge management, CoPs have had to adapt to the new working environment now most often called the Digital Workplace. Here are a couple of the challenges and how well CoPs have adapted.

## **Classic Rule #1: A successful Community of Practice must be a physical community at heart**

This is based on the origins of “Communities of Practice” as a term for a key way in which individuals learn socially. Etienne Wenger, one of the founding fathers of the study of Communities of Practice, and certainly its most recognised by knowledge managers, can be heard expounding this social learning context as part of the [Festival of Research](#) at Brighton University in May 2013.

As part of this context, it was observed by knowledge managers in the 1990s and early 2000s that Communities of Practice in the work environment often originated with physical communities of like-minded workers who then used IT to continue their knowledge sharing and problem solving between meetings. For early work adopters of electronic discussion forums (almost synonymous with CoPs), the physical contact was paramount, and the IT environment an increasingly necessary adjunct.

## **And yet...**

Anyone who has worked through the 1990s - 2010s will be aware how much that has changed. In most office buildings now, the worker’s key relationship is with his or her digital workstation: meeting space has reduced to near zero, the water-cooler/coffee

machine is less a knowledge sharing node than it was, and many key contacts are outside the office - as contractors, or working from home offices or as outward facing staff constantly on the move. And yet in my consulting practice and observations of non-work and permeable work environments, Communities of Practice - which cannot now hope to always originate in strong, sustaining face to face environments - continue to be created and maintain their value.

The two strongest reasons for this are, I believe:

1. In many workplaces (though not all - parts of health and education are counter-examples) the digital workplace is no longer a simulacrum for “real” working environments - it is the working environment itself. A significant part of the workforce and its customers are digital natives, who are as comfortable, creating, sharing and communicating in electronic environments as they are face to face.
2. The rising “gig” economy (in which temporary positions are common and organisations contract with independent workers for short-term engagements), pressures on office space and the increasing desire to balance challenging home and work lives, converge to produce a fractionalised staffing environment where knowledge workers are less likely to find themselves in physical proximity with each other.

### **Classic Rule #2: Management must not set the agenda for discussion in Communities of Practice**

This was based on the twin observations that it was hard to get people to take the time and effort to enter a CoP, and that any feeling of coercion when there put people off using them. The model CoP was a largely self-governing and self-inspiring community where people asked for what they wanted, or contributed what they thought would be useful. So once the broad parameters were established by the organisers of the CoP, the agenda would emerge from the needs of the participants.

From about 2007, as organisations got tougher on demonstrating a return for the time and money invested, and before suspicion of “freewheeling” communities began to ebb, the best examples of CoPs were outside work - such as the Community Care magazine’s CareSpace forum (abandoned at the end of 2013 because the user interface became out-of-date and the publishers declined to update it.) Now the best outside work examples of self-governing CoPs are often found in the health sector. The Motor Neurone Disease Association’s [forum](#) still thrives after at least thirteen years and people with MND, their carers and occasionally professionals share tips and solutions regularly.

### **And yet...**

The argument from a resourcer’s point of view is clear: without an agenda how can the organisation countenance the time and effort people devote to CoPs?

Research in 2003 helped to defend CoPs: it was clear at Shell (as reported by Andy Boyd) and in health charities (as reported by me), that when workers were given the choice

between databases of solutions and forums where they could seek answers from their peers, they overwhelmingly chose the latter, even where they knew there was a high chance the databases had the solutions. Boyd, then Knowledge Manager at Bassell Polyolefins, Shell Group presented his findings on Shell's Communities of Practice at the KM Connect Conference in May 2003. I published an internal report to senior management of the Motor Neurone Disease Association Forum in February 2003. Remarkably the figures we came up with independently were very similar. Users of suites of CoPs and solution databases assessed that 85% of the solving value lay in the CoPs!

Now the CoP world is beginning to see it the resourcers' way, and the dictum that CoPs must be safe places where discussions can thrive and die, as the needs of the moment dictate, is at least being matched by technology-enabled work on extracting value. There are two trends:

1. Savvy Communications and HR departments are beginning to systematise the discussion threads, and to the extent this is happening, parts of Communities of Practice are turning into Communities of Commitment. Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell formulated this distinction in [Learning to Fly](#) and it is one that makes it possible for traditional Communities of Practice practitioners and ROI-orientated managers to work creatively side by side.
2. Participants in CoPs are well aware that the results of discussions are often valuable outside the forum, and are increasingly keen to ensure that lessons learned and the green shoots of innovation are successfully transplanted from the forum into formal work channels.

What paradoxically makes it easier for Communities of Practice to thrive is that collaborative working, of which they are a part, is often undertaken pragmatically, with organisers and participants less interested in distinctions and turf wars than they are at getting at usable knowledge and effective action.

It is often left to the knowledge managers to sensitively ensure that whatever their organisation might call them, Communities of Practice are run according to the principles that make them such an effective technique for knowledge sharing, organisational learning and problem solving. Until an opportunity arises to illustrate those principles further, the two best books I know on the subject are still [Cultivating Communities of Practice](#) and [Learning to Fly](#).

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