

Sustaining Effective Communities of Practice

An overview of findings from APQC's Collaborative Research

APQC defines a “community of practice” as a group of people who come together to share and learn from one another both face-to-face and virtually. Such communities are held together by a common interest in a body of knowledge and are driven by a desire and need to share problems, experiences, insights, templates, tools, and best practices. Community of practice (CoPs) may also be referred to as knowledge sharing networks, communities of interest, networks, and/or practice areas.

In our 2001 Collaborative Research report *Building and Sustaining Communities of Practice*, APQC predicted that communities would become the locus for identifying, sharing, and creating valuable knowledge. In 2005, APQC conducted its second in-depth study on communities, *Using Communities of Practice to Drive Organizational Performance and Innovation*, in which we validated our earlier predictions and identified several critical success factors for designing communities to support business performance and innovation. APQC found that, at organizations that were serious about communities, CoPs were viewed as an essential business practice and a key factor for impacting time-to-market, response time, employee development, organizational learning, and change implementation.

Why did we decide, in 2009, to conduct a third study on communities? As organizations' knowledge management (KM) efforts continue to mature, so do their communities. Many organizations now have second- (if not third-) generation CoPs in place and find themselves facing challenges related to sustaining these communities. Potential stumbling blocks include maintaining leadership support, sustaining member engagement/participation, and ensuring ongoing alignment between CoP objectives and overall business needs.

With these challenges in mind, APQC designed its most recent study on communities, *Sustaining Effective Communities of Practice*, to answer the following questions:

- How do some communities become essential to the success of their members and the organization as a whole?
- Why do some communities remain vital and dynamic while others fade away?
- How does one tell if a community is performing to its objectives?
- What practices and approaches do successful communities use to enlist new community members while continuing to engage existing members?
- How do organizations assess the maturity of each community and the impact that communities have on the organization?

As part of the study, APQC performed a detailed analysis of the community programs at three best-practice organizations: ConocoPhillips, Fluor Corporation, and Schlumberger. These organizations,

referred to as best-practice partners, were selected for their innovative performance in one or more of the following study focus areas:

- practices for sustaining community alignment with business strategies/objectives,
- practices for promoting and sustaining community activity,
- cultural enablers for sustaining communities, and
- practices for assessing community maturity and business impact.

The remainder of this article provides an overview of the findings from the study. More detailed information regarding the best practices and partner organizations can be found in [the full report published by APQC](#).

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES

By collecting quantitative and qualitative data from the best-practice organizations, the APQC study team uncovered 18 best practices associated with successful communities, which were then grouped into five themes. These 18 best practices, categorized according to the five themes, are listed below.

Creating a Sustainable Community Strategy

- *Create a single, enterprise approach.* Best-practice organizations emphasize that KM and CoPs should be based around a consistent, enterprise-wide approach—“one vision and one solution.” Moreover, the ability to provide “one-stop shopping” is imperative.
- *Build on existing networks.* Best-practice organizations don’t reinvent the wheel; communities are built on pre-established foundations. Each of the study’s best-practice partners developed its CoPs from existing technical, discipline, or functional communities.
- *Ensure that communities fulfill explicit business objectives.* Communities should clearly articulate business goals and objectives. At the best-practice partner organizations, each community submits a charter, readiness assessment, or business case that outlines community outcomes and is aligned to business objectives.
- *Use a combination of corporate and business-unit funding.* Funding and staff support are distributed between the enterprise level and the business units that benefit from CoPs.
- *Establish clear roles and responsibilities.* Successful communities explicitly define roles and responsibilities for all community participants. Leaders, subject matter experts (SMEs), sponsors, co-leaders, members, and coordinators must understand what is expected of them if a community is to function as intended.

Practices and Approaches for Sustaining Communities

- *Align communities with business needs.* To ensure the ongoing relevance of communities, best-practice organizations make certain that each community’s objectives align with business needs. This alignment is established when a community is deployed and then re-established throughout the community’s life cycle.

- *Connect people to people.* Communities focus on connecting people across business lines, geographies, and functions. To facilitate such connections, each partner organization provides open access to communities, offers member profiles, and enables expertise location.
- *Use community performance plans.* Performance plans, which are incorporated into a community's charter and/or business case, document objectives, actions necessary to achieve them, and the intended results (or goals). Community leaders and members of the core community team often track progress against established goals.
- *Leverage technology thoughtfully.* Technology should focus on connectivity and value. The partners rely on technologies that facilitate more effective personal connections and enhance collaboration. New technology solutions are carefully evaluated based on the potential benefit they would bring to the organization before they are implemented.

Tools and Resources for Community Leaders

- *Define a community leader's role and responsibilities.* A community often falters without strong leadership. Providing clearly articulated roles and responsibilities ensures that leaders fully understand what actions they must take to sustain community effectiveness.
- *Build a distributed support network for community leaders.* While community leaders are critical to success, they do not work alone. Each of the best-practice partners leverages a distributed network of support for community leaders. This network usually consists of the core KM team, community sponsors, co-leaders, community coordinators or managers, SMEs, and community members.
- *Provide training for community leaders.* Each of the best-practice partners agrees that training, especially for community leaders, is critical to community success.

Promoting Awareness and Communicating Value

- *Promote awareness and communicate value.* The best-practice partners constantly communicate the value that CoPs provide to the organization. Each places significant emphasis on elevating CoP awareness and employs various communication techniques to articulate CoP benefits and results.
- *Create meaningful recognition and reward opportunities.* A systematic reward and recognition plan ensures that individuals and communities are recognized for their accomplishments. Moreover, by creating publicity and positive energy around knowledge sharing and collaboration activities, rewards and recognition help drive the desired behaviors that ultimately sustain CoPs.
- *Support and sustain member engagement throughout the community's life cycle.* Each best-practice organization uses communities to provide employees with a sense of identity: CoPs connect like-minded individuals so that they can share and collaborate. This is a strong motivator for community participation and a key to sustaining long-term community health.

Measuring Success

- *Ensure that measures align with business processes.* Measures should be designed to support the needs of the business and should link to the objectives of a particular function, knowledge domain, or business unit.

- *Use both activity measures and measures of effectiveness.* Best-practice organizations use both types of measures to compile a holistic picture of a community's impact on the organization. While community health tends to be easily determined via activity measures, the best-practice partners have devised more innovative measures to assess the business value of their communities.
- *Measure health across the community life cycle.* Best-practice organizations regularly measure communities for vitality and performance. Assessments are used to identify gaps in community performance and to help identify when communities need to be invigorated or retired. Measures are also used to continuously improve community strategy and value.

APQC believes that these best practices provide a road map for sustaining effective communities. If organizations adhere to these practices, they will be well on their way to ensuring that their communities will continue to thrive and provide value over the long term.

OVERVIEW OF BEST-PRACTICE ORGANIZATIONS

Below is a brief description of each best-practice organization that participated in the 2009 study and its approach to communities. Additional information can be found in the case studies published in conjunction with this study.

ConocoPhillips

Although communities of practice existed informally for more than 20 years at ConocoPhillips, the first formalized networks of excellence (NoEs) emerged in 2004. In 2005, the organization increased its efforts to connect people across the enterprise. An upstream network model was implemented to help provide structure for the networks. Today, there are more than 120 networks enterprise-wide. Networks are aligned with business functions in order to promote functional excellence. Portals are open and global, and both contract and full-time employees have access to most network activity.

A corporate-wide knowledge sharing team oversees NoE activities. This team is supported by the Knowledge Sharing Leadership Team, which is comprised of business leaders in different divisions and functional areas around the globe. The Leadership Team helps set direction and strategy for knowledge sharing and the NoEs. The ConocoPhillips knowledge sharing vision is to become "a workplace where employees continuously deliver additional value through global collaboration and expertise sharing."

ConocoPhillips was recently named as one of the 2009 North American Most Admired Knowledge Enterprises (MAKE) by Teleos in association with The KNOW Network.

Fluor

Although Fluor has maintained a focus on informal knowledge sharing for decades, it did not begin its formal, enterprise-wide KM effort until 1999. From the outset, enterprise-wide KM emphasized the implementation of a single technology solution to provide access to communities with integrated content, discussions, and people profiles and to promote a global mindset. Communities enable this vision, serving as a means to maintain and enhance technical excellence, set and maintain standards,

and provide professional adoption of those standards by members. Leveraging CoPs also helps Fluor determine when to consolidate or retire practices, resulting in standardized global practices across the organization.

Today, Fluor maintains 46 established knowledge communities encompassing 24,000 active community members dispersed globally. Virtually all of Fluor's professional employees participate in communities, including more than 3,500 subject matter experts in over 1,000 areas. There is a high volume of ongoing community activity, including more than 10,000 searches per day, 2,600 attachment views or downloads per day, and 10,000 forum reads per week.

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Schlumberger

In 1998, Schlumberger began its Eureka communities with the launch of 12 core communities focused on technical knowledge areas that were critical to the business. Eureka is the community brand—it is the place to go for community interaction, discussion, and news. By 2000, Eureka boasted 16 communities encompassing 3,000 members. There are now 157 communities covering a variety of operational and functional areas. Some technical communities have expanded to include service delivery topics and other evolving business needs. Eureka has also expanded to include functional areas, such as finance, IT, and legal.

Schlumberger held its first election for community leaders in 2000, and this electoral system has proven to be highly successful. Today, 339 elected leaders manage Schlumberger's communities, which boast 23,000 members worldwide from field operations, engineering, research, and manufacturing. Community membership includes new hires as well as senior managers and subject matter experts. Communities vary in size; some have more than 4,000 members, whereas others have fewer than 500. The purpose of Eureka communities is to provide technical input across the organization, as well as to help members learn and engage in problem solving around specific issues.

Schlumberger was awarded the 2008 Global MAKE award, presented by Teleos and The KNOW Network.

ABOUT APQC

For more than 30 years, APQC has been on the leading edge of improving performance and fostering innovation around the world. APQC works with organizations across all industries to find practical, cost-effective solutions to drive productivity and quality improvement. We are a member-based nonprofit currently serving more than 500 organizations in all sectors of business, education, and government.

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