



SPARC Knowledge Management Toolkit

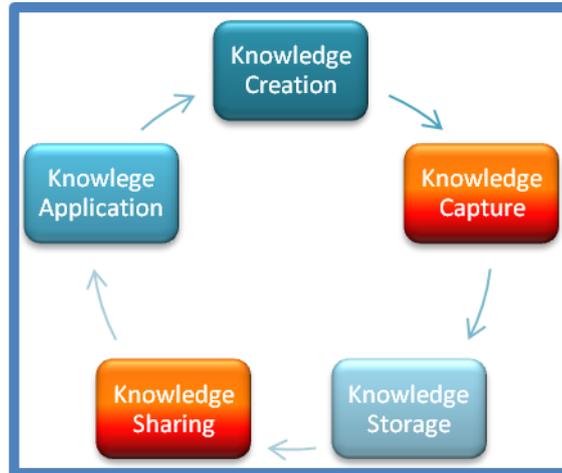
Communities of Practice

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The Knowledge Management Cycle



The purpose of this tool (work-learn-share)

The purpose of setting up a community of practice (CoP) is to extract and share knowledge within a defined area of work amongst a group of practitioners. It is a way of extracting lessons (learning) and sharing 'soft' or *tacit knowledge*, and group as well as individual knowledge. It tests and validates ideas amongst a group of peers.

Description of the tool

A community of practice is a group of people set up with a work-related aim, but it differs significantly from most other work groups, which are task or project related. It is best described by its distinguishing characteristics:

Feature	Community of Practice	Project or Work Team
Creation	Organically created, by mutual consent.	Created managerially as an organisational structure with a formal mandate.
Aim	To share knowledge and experience on a theme. Each CoP member may have their own individual objective for membership.	To achieve a specified common work output.
Membership	Open to all who wish to participate. Membership may change and operate at different levels.	Defined managerially, usually fairly static.
Duration	Lasts as long as the members find it of value. But can transform into a new CoP with a new aim.	Normally time-bounded.
Relationships	A peer grouping in which all have equal status.	Hierarchical.
Management	Facilitated, gives rise to outputs which feed into management processes.	Has a formal manager within the organisation structure.

An earlier study of the potential for the use of CoP within the SPARC programme (Arikpo, 2009) listed a number of important findings, including:

- The need for CoP to develop within the framework of a Knowledge Management model, and to follow a template that is consistent with the model;
- The need for facilitation;
- The need for incentives for participation to be provided, and for barriers to participation to be removed;
- CoP can contribute to sustainability and replication;
- CoP can be organised by thematic areas or within and across work streams, but must be unified around an issue or problem area;
- Face-to-face meetings are vital, especially in the formative stages, but can be accompanied by or supplanted by virtual/remote group working techniques;
- Capacity to document lessons and best practice needs to be built in.

How to use this tool

What is the CoP based on? Try not to form a CoP based on a work area or a professional grouping, but rather form it around an issue or problem area held in common by many people. State the purpose as a problem-solving statement: e.g. "Development of best practices for data collection". Allow shifts in focus onto new issue areas, but be clear about what the issue is and any one time.

Who belongs to it? The CoP should be self selecting, and contain those who are interested in the issue and/or those who can contribute to it. Membership should be open and flexible. Welcome and allow different levels of participation – such as: (1) A core group who participate intensely in the community through discussions and projects. This group typically takes on leadership roles in guiding the group; (2) An active group who attend and participate regularly, but not to the level of the leaders; (3) A peripheral group who, while they are passive participants in the community, still learn from their level of involvement. Create opportunities for open dialog with outside perspectives.

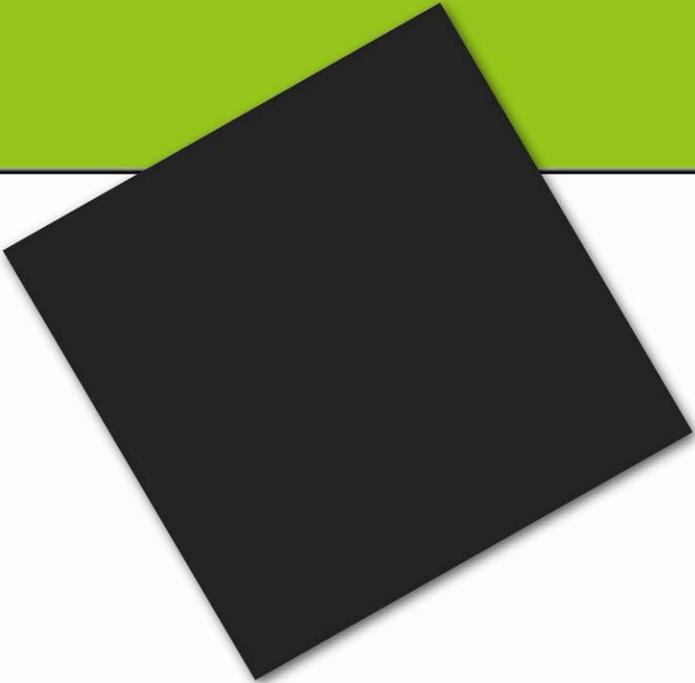
How is it facilitated? Ideally, the community should appoint its own facilitator, but it may well require (especially in the early stages) some external support and facilitation from one of the KM team. Combine familiarity and excitement - CoP's should offer the expected learning opportunities as part of their structure, and opportunities for members to shape their learning experience together by brainstorming and examining the conventional and radical wisdom related to their topic.

How does it meet? As soon as possible after formation, a face-to-face meeting should be organised so that members can get to know each other. You should be alert to any further opportunities presented by the programme diary to allow some or all of the CoP to meet up. But in the main, a CoP will operate as a remote, virtual group, not tied to formal meeting events, but able to run continuous discussion threads supported by *discussion forum tools* or other *collaborative working tools* provided by the programme. Find a regular rhythm - CoP's should coordinate a thriving cycle of activities and events that allow for the members to regularly meet, reflect, and evolve. The pace should maintain a level of engagement to sustain the energy of the community, but not unwieldy and overwhelming in its intensity.

What is captured? The CoP should make sure that any important outputs or conclusions are formally captured. These can be in many forms; case studies, best practice guidelines, recommendations, and so on. KM team support may be needed to assist with lesson-learning and analysis.

Lead KM Specialist

The coordinator and lead specialist for this tool is Tim Donaldson. Any questions and suggestions should be directed to him.



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