

Communities and Networks FAQ

This guide answers the questions APQC hears most related to communities of practice, also known as networks.

What are Communities of Practice?

Communities of practice are networks of people who come together to share and learn from one another face-to-face, virtually, or both. Each community is held together by a common purpose, which usually focuses on sharing experiences and insights related to a topic, discipline, or challenge.

As organizations increasingly adopt artificial intelligence (AI), communities and networks continue to play an important role in connecting people, sharing tacit knowledge, and fostering collaboration. AI can help members discover expertise, summarize discussions, and locate relevant resources, but communities remain essential for building relationships, exchanging experiences, and developing collective knowledge.

Why Should I Implement a Community of Practice?

The most common impetus for starting a community is to encourage communication and collaboration across different locations and parts of the business. Additionally, leading KM programs leverage communities to perform knowledge-oriented tasks on behalf of the business such as:

- Documenting and transferring best practices or lessons learned
- Creating, maintaining, and stewarding bodies of knowledge
- Providing access to expertise
- Supporting on-the-job learning
- Generating new ideas and innovation

All these are worthy goals, but the best communities have specific objectives and targets. Before launching a new community, make sure you've outlined exactly what it will do to support members and the organization as a whole.

How Many People Should Be a Part of My Community?

Communities vary widely in size—from less than 10 to hundreds or even thousands of members—depending on their structure and purpose. However, APQC finds that the number of active participants matters much more than the number of members overall. Each

community needs a critical mass of active members to spark discussions, ask and answer questions, and share information. Without this critical mass, even very large communities can feel lifeless and low value. On the other hand, communities with only a handful of members can contribute a lot of value if nearly all members are active and engaged.

Thus, APQC recommends against mandating participation in or setting quotas for communities. Instead, partner with senior leaders and other advocates in the business to draw people into the community. Then, use structures—including [clear roles and responsibilities](#), a charter, and, if needed, [committees and sub-committees](#)—to build and sustain a critical mass of active participants. If people see the connection between community activities and the core work they're responsible for, they will be more likely to join and contribute.

Why Does My Community Need a Charter?

A charter articulates the community's role and how its activities align to the broader business strategy. It also outlines the required resources and [measures of success](#). Without a charter, a community can quickly turn into chaos—or, more often, into a desert of inactivity.

Charters need not be overly long or complicated. APQC offers a [Community of Practice Charter Template](#) you can use to get started. We recommend revisiting your charter annually to ensure alignment with the evolving needs of members and the business.

How Do I Get People to Participate in My Community?

There are many levers that communities can use to build and sustain participation:

- **Advocacy from senior leaders and influential people in the business**
- **Integrating communities with existing work processes, objectives, and tools**
- **Regular events** such as webinars, lunch and learns, sharing sessions, or workshops that give members a chance to interact directly
- **Defined responsibilities and training** for key roles such as community leader, sponsor, and subject matter experts
- **Compelling communications** that help potential members understand “What's in it for me?”
- **Activity feeds, daily/weekly digests, or personalized homepages** that alert employees to new community content, discussions, and events
- **Rewards and recognition** for outstanding communities and contributors
- **Positioning communities as a means of achieving employees' existing performance goals**, such as those around learning and helping others

What Are the Biggest Mistakes Organizations Make with Communities of Practice?

The biggest mistake organizations make with communities is not aligning them with the real work of the organization. If the organization offers communities with vague, generic value propositions—such as “share your work” or “collaborate”—employees are unlikely to perceive their purpose and value. For each community, employees need to understand:

- The who (key participants and the target audience for community outputs)
- The why (the ways in which communities support their day-to-day work and big-picture career goals)
- The how (the ways they can participate and help the community thrive)
- The best way to clarify the why and how is by creating—and regularly updating—a community charter.

What Should the KM Team Do When There Are Too Many Communities?

When the number of communities gets out of control, KM should perform an [audit](#) to identify inactive and redundant groups that can be retired or merged. To prevent this problem from arising in the first place, consider implementing a [formal launch process](#) for new communities. You can also define different categories of communities with varying levels of formality and, accordingly, different degrees of

support from KM. Especially in large and fast-moving organizations, this can be a good way to allow employees the freedom they need while also keeping the community program manageable.

See More KM FAQs

- [Knowledge Management FAQ](#)
- [KM Strategy & Program Development FAQ](#)
- [Knowledge Retention & Transfer FAQ](#)
- [KM Engagement & Culture FAQ](#)
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US: 1-800-776-9676 **INTL: +1-713-681-4020** **FAX: 713-681-8578**

123 N. Post Oak Ln Houston, TX 77024