ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE WITH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice are the lifeblood of knowledge management (KM). When communities thrive, they provide an invaluable source of learning, collaboration, problem-solving, and innovation that proves the value of KM to leaders and employees alike. But when communities weaken and fail, that can sour people on the entire KM effort.

In this article, you will learn five best practices for communities of practice with case examples from organizations recognized by APQC’s Excellence in Knowledge Management program.

Strategy: What Communities Should Do

There’s an infinite number of things communities can do, and that’s a big reason why they’re so valuable. When you bring smart and creative people together around a topic that they care deeply about, there’s no limit to what they can pull off. Communities should have enough leeway to pursue projects and generate conversations that engage their members. However, KM does need to put up some guardrails to keep communities on track. Use these three best practices to ensure communities stay focused on the activities that drive value for both members and the organization as a whole.

Communities need tangible and explicit goals tied to business value.

Throughout two decades researching communities, APQC consistently finds that communities deliver the most value when they are guided by explicit goals tied to the organizational strategy. After all, the knowledge sharing that occurs within communities cannot meaningfully influence business outcomes unless it is focused on topics or issues that are central to the business.

One way to ensure communities have business-relevant goals is through annual plans or charters. Among Excellence in KM Award recipients, those with the strongest community programs require their communities to submit formal plans/charters. This holds communities accountable to their goals and ensures they have the support needed to reach them.

At engineering firm Arup, for example, communities called Skills Networks create annual plans that define specific projects (e.g., research initiatives, trainings) and then receive budget allocations based on these plans. Similarly, each of Tata Steel’s communities have an annual charter called an Annual Business Connect (ABC) that outlines its goals and plans (Figure 1). Each
year, Tata Steel’s communities identify four or five sub-communities to focus on specific goals; this dedicated resourcing helps ensure communities make progress toward their goals.

Sample Excerpt: Tata Steel Annual Business Connect for a Community of Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL. No.</th>
<th>Business Theme</th>
<th>Thrust Area Linked To</th>
<th>KPI</th>
<th>Base</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>End Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identification, sharing &amp; deployment of best practices for business process enhancement</td>
<td>Best practice sharing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Decrease in Specific consumption of Raw Material by reducing Coke Rate in Blast Furnaces</td>
<td>BO&amp;S Item</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>349</td>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Improved environmental compliance in Iron making by reducing CO2 emission</td>
<td>BO&amp;S Item</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>535</td>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>New trials in Blast Furnaces</td>
<td>Aspirational target Item</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Excellence in Process Safety Management by roll out of PSM COE to new departments</td>
<td>Best practice sharing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Excellence in Knowledge sharing by involving new plants in LEO (LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER)</td>
<td>Learning from past experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another approach is to focus on the most strategically important communities. Professional services firm Cognizant, for example, has communities that collaborate around a range of topics, but some don’t need as many resources as others. Cognizant’s KM team worked with the business units to establish “strategic communities” for areas of high business focus. These communities have designated managers to oversee activities and ensure effectiveness.

Communities should help with content curation and management.
Communities have long played a role in content management. Communities have expertise about a topic area, and as such, they are a natural organizing point for content contributors, experts who review/validate content, and coordinators who determine whether content is unique and valuable. In recent years, the growing volume and diversity of enterprise content has amplified challenges around content governance and management. Many of the programs recognized by APQC’s Excellence in KM program are leveraging their communities to meet this challenge.

Communities can support taxonomy development, which remains critical to content findability. Taxonomy is a hierarchy of categories used to classify content by moving from broad categories to increasingly narrow ones. While machine learning tools can help auto-tag and auto-classify content, they can be cost-prohibitive. Moreover, these are not “set it and forget it” tools—you need taxonomies in order to customize, train, manage, and govern them properly.

When it comes to taxonomies, you can never have a perfect result...things are always evolving, so as long as you build a good foundation, you can continue to develop it further.

—Akshaye Sikand, SNC-Lavalin
Building a taxonomy that reflects how people think about work requires expert input and consensus building, and communities are well-positioned to fill these needs. At petroleum company PTT Exploration and Production, for example, each community conducted workshops to develop taxonomy for its topic areas. These taxonomies were then rolled up into an enterprise taxonomy used to classify and organize KM content across the business. At professional services firm SNC-Lavalin, the first project for any new Knowledge Network (i.e., community) is to define a technical taxonomy with all the topics and sub-topics within the focus area. Networks then play a stewardship role, ensuring that taxonomies stay up to date and that new taxonomies are created as needed.

Communities can also support content management by curating, harvesting, and verifying relevant content. At SNC-Lavalin, Knowledge Network leaders create content plans to cover different topic areas on discussion boards and webinars. These discussions create “seed content” for expert-created, formal knowledge content. Similarly, the KM team at professional services firm Mercer monitors communities to look for posts that can be usefully harvested into high-value content for a broader audience.

Communities should be a hub for organic knowledge sharing and networking.

While communities can and should help with business-focused tasks, much of their value stems from activities that are more spontaneous and organic. Communities should always be a place where employees can meet like-minded folks and engage in conversations around the topics they care about. KM and community leaders need to work together to lay the groundwork to facilitate conversations and networking opportunities. This can be achieved by establishing (and monitoring) discussion forums, planning regular webinars and virtual meetings, and hosting in-person events.

Award-winning KM programs provide communities with the tools and support they need for organic knowledge sharing. At Cognizant, each community has a dedicated Yammer or Microsoft Team for networking and discussion. SNC-Lavalin provides similar capabilities on the company’s KM portal. Each of SNC-Lavalin’s Knowledge Networks has a dedicated site on the portal with discussion forums, a wiki, member/expert lists, and links to regularly scheduled expert-led webinars. Arup and PTT Exploration and Production also provide their communities with discussion forums and encourage them to host webinars and knowledge sharing sessions.

It’s smart to help communities cast a wide net and prevent them from becoming silos. Arup, for example, encourages communities to work together on inter-disciplinary projects and allows employees to cross-post discussions to multiple communities. SNC-Lavalin’s KM team tracks community engagement by region and works with communities to create targeted, local-language webinars and discussion topics to bring under-engaged audiences on board.

Communities should be part of what makes KM fun, so don’t put up too many boundaries around what they can discuss. Side conversations, jokes, and memes don’t directly drive business value, but they help build relationships and keep people engaged. Some organizations, like Mercer, allow employees to create their own informal and non-work-related communities. Mercer has

“Communities support the work we do for clients, but they’re also a powerful enabler of colleague engagement.”

—Lisa Weber, Mercer
communities around personal interests, such as photography and sports, as well as business resource groups such as Women@Mercer, Racial & Ethnic Diversity, and PRIDE. These provide additional opportunities for employees in different parts of the business to network, have a little fun, and deepen their connection to the organization.

Structure: How Communities Should Work

To hold together over time, communities require a balance of structure and flexibility. Communities need enough structure for members to understand what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it. Communities also need to be agile enough to adapt to new realities in and beyond the business. Use these two best practices to get the balance right and build strong, yet flexible, communities.

Defined leadership roles drive engagement, accountability, and value.

Communities cannot succeed without strong leadership structures that clearly define roles and responsibilities. The most important role in a community is the community leader, who sets the direction and is usually responsible for outlining annual goals and roadmaps. Community leaders often assume more tactical duties as well, such as onboarding new members, organizing meetings and webinars, directing questions to appropriate experts, and monitoring discussions and activities. APQC recommends providing community leaders with a thorough onboarding and dedicated time to focus on their community role.

Especially for large and active communities, it can be helpful to add supplementary community roles to ease the burden on the community leader. At Arup, each Skills Network includes the following roles:

- **Skill Leaders**—leaders from across each of Arup’s five operational regions (Americas, East Asia, Australia, Europe, and UKIMEA [UK, India, Middle East, and Africa]) who work as a team to ensure the Skills Network meets the global needs of the skill and are coordinated by one of those leaders, who also has the role of **Global Skill Leader**.
- **Network Manager**—individuals who, with the assistance of administrative resources, support the leaders and drive activities of the Skills Network.
- **Delegated Roles**—individuals who are accountable for specific strategic areas—such as research, learning, digital, and sustainable development—and drive activities in these areas.

SNC-Lavalin also provides community leaders with additional support. Each of the company’s Knowledge Networks is stewarded by a committee with representatives from relevant divisions. On an annual basis, the committee selects one member to serve as community leader. SNC-Lavalin’s KM coordinator then onboards the new community leader and helps them set goals for the year.

A flexible structure helps the organization confront crises, opportunities, and rapid change.

Communities are a gathering place for experts and other smart, creative, engaged people. When crisis (or opportunity) strikes, you’ll want to be able to harness their expertise and energy. The best way to do that is by building flexibility into individual communities and the community program as a whole.
KM should ensure individual communities have the support they need to capitalize on emerging opportunities. At SNC-Lavalin, for example, communities typically plan out a series of webinars for the year. But when a webinar on Building Information Management generated tremendous excitement, the KM team helped the community set up a series of additional webinars on the topic.

Communities are a source of innovative ideas, and it’s important for both KM and the business to listen to them. At Arup, Skills Networks’ strategic goals are a core component of the organizational structure. Skills Networks effectively provide the organization with a complementary and organic operating system, one that is agile enough to respond to complexity, change, and new strategic challenges. The networks often work together on interdisciplinary activities such as workshops and problem-solving activities. For example, five networks recently joined together to explore challenges around the use of combustible materials in building facades.

At a broader level, the community program should be flexible enough to incorporate diversity. For example, most of Cognizant’s communities fit into a standard mold, but the organization also has a special community, comprised entirely of experts, called DeepSmarts. DeepSmarts provides employees and project/deal teams with access to a network of more than 2,500 senior experts across various domains and technologies.

Community programs also need to be agile enough to start up new communities in response to emerging needs. Mercer is one of many organizations that leveraged its community program to respond to COVID-19. In the early days of the pandemic, Mercer employees in Asia created a COVID-19 community to share resources and discuss developments (Figure 2). Mercer’s KM group monitored this community closely to identify pandemic-related knowledge that would benefit all of Mercer. Then, it helped start up a global coronavirus community to ensure all employees had a place to ask questions and get answers. Today, it is Mercer’s most used community.

“Skills networks are, and have always been, the primary vehicle for sharing knowledge across our firm. They’re the more fluid parts of our business that allow us to react with creativity and agility to help the whole of Arup respond to new challenges.”

—Dominique Poole-Avery, Arup
Key Takeaways

While all KM approaches involve people, communities are certainly the most “human” of them all. That’s a big reason why achieving excellence with communities can be so challenging—and so rewarding. KM teams can’t force communities to deliver value to their members or the organization, but they can do a lot to set them up for success. Give communities the structure, tools, guidance, and support they need to grow and thrive, but also remember that what each community achieves is ultimately up to its members.

For more guidance on communities from Excellence in KM Award winners, see Communities of Practice: Advice from KM Leaders.

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