Tool: Community of Practice (CoP)

Groups of people with a shared passion or concern that meet to exchange and deepen their knowledge by interacting on a regular basis with other CoP members.

**Uses**
- Solves problems; seeks out and generates new knowledge.
- Can be structured according to topic (e.g. OHS), problem (e.g. work absenteeism), industry (e.g. printing), or profession (e.g. OHS coordinator).

**OHS Use**
- During or after new projects have been implemented.
- CoPs can be created according to topic: prevention, property management, noise reduction, general health. Workers from different departments or even different organizations can take part and share their experiences.

**Practical OHS Example**
Within Quebec's Department of Transportation, specialists in the areas of signage and traffic on road job sites gather in community of practice to find solutions leading to increased safety for road users and construction workers. Joint sector-based associations are also a developed form of community of practice.

**Benefits**
- Facilitates exchanges and transcends the organization's usual divisions by connecting stakeholders in different work units or organizations.
- Makes it possible to view a situation from various angles and to generate new knowledge.
- Gives access to other pools of knowledge and people.
- Promotes learning and networking.

**Limitations**
- Requires an investment of time.
- Is difficult to maintain the pace of meetings.

**Conditions**
- There must be an underlying rationale and one or more shared, relevant objectives.
- Discussions of real, concrete issues bolsters the process.
- Quality facilitation is required.
- Mutual commitment, sense of belonging among members, and management support (allocation of time and money, recognition) are also necessary.

**References and Resources**
How It Works

The steps* according to Wenger ([http://www.ewenger.com/theory/start-up_guide_PDF.pdf](http://www.ewenger.com/theory/start-up_guide_PDF.pdf)) include:

Set Strategic Context
- Articulate a strategic value proposition.
- Identify critical business problems.
- Articulate the need to increase and leverage knowledge.

Education
- Conduct workshops to educate management and potential members about the CoP approach.
- Help people appreciate how CoPs are self-defined and self-managed.
- Establish a language to legitimize communities and establish their place in the organization.

Support
- Provides some process support, coaching, and logistic assistance.
- Identify needs and define adequate infrastructure.

Get Going
- Have a few pilot communities going as soon as possible.
- Identify areas where there is potential and readiness.
- Interview some prospective members to understand the needs, start discussing a community, and identify potential leaders.
- Gather a core group to prepare and initiate a launch process.
- Help members organize an initial series of value-adding activities.
- Encourage members to take increasing responsibility for stewarding their knowledge.

Encourage
- Find sponsors to encourage participation.
- Value the work of communities and publicize successes.

Integrate
- Integrate communities in the way the organization works.
- Identify and remove obvious barriers.
- Align key structural and cultural elements.

Comparison to Other Forms of Working Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Community of Practice</th>
<th>Working group</th>
<th>Informal networks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Exchange, generate knowledge, and develop skills.</td>
<td>Accomplish a specific task.</td>
<td>Circulate information of common interest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who the members are</td>
<td>Personal membership based on expertise or interest in a subject.</td>
<td>Any stakeholders related to the tasks.</td>
<td>Personal and business relations. Word of mouth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Links between members.</td>
<td>Passion, commitment. Identification with group.</td>
<td>Project goals and steps.</td>
<td>Reciprocal needs and relations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life cycle</td>
<td>As long as members are interested in maintaining the CoP.</td>
<td>Predetermined end (when it's finished).</td>
<td>No beginning or end. Based on friendship.</td>
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Adapted from Wenger et al. 2002, p. 42