



Chapter XIII

Best Practices: Developing Communities that Provide Business Value

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ABSTRACT

Organizations continually look for ways to do more with less. One of the most important methods today for helping improve the company bottom line involves linking experts in Communities of Practice to find, share and validate best practices, ideas and solutions. This chapter examines how several best-practice organizations select Communities of Practice, provide support for their ongoing work, develop specialized roles to sustain their efforts, and use technology to bolster the rich tacit knowledge exchange offered by these entities. APQC has also developed a list of critical success factors for Communities of Practice and questions to help organizations develop those factors from its research on Knowledge Management over the last eight years.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations of all forms have always contained smaller, informal communities. However, what is emerging in the new workplace is the recognition of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as boundary-spanning units responsible for finding and sharing best practices, stewarding knowledge and helping community members work better. This new role for communities is emerging because organizations now consciously nurture and harness relevant knowledge.

The American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC), a non-profit research and advisory services firm that helps organizations adapt to rapidly changing environments and build new and better ways to work, has researched many of the leading examples of successful CoPs. For APQC, CoPs are networks of people—small and large—who come together to share ideas with and learn from one another in physical and virtual settings. A common purpose or mission holds these communities of practice, of interest, and of learning, together. They are sustained by a desire to share experiences, insights and best practices.

For the past 25 years, APQC has been identifying best practices, discovering effective methods of improvement, broadly disseminating findings and connecting individuals both with one another and with the knowledge, training and tools they need to succeed. During these efforts, it has found a number of useful practices that organizations, in both the public and private sectors, use to cultivate CoPs. In taking a step away from an academic perspective and focusing on APQC's original research, this chapter will examine practical factors in cultivating CoPs, specifically: the selection of a community, gaining support and establishing resources, roles and development, ongoing facilitation, and technology support.

SELECTING A COMMUNITY

To begin, the organization must determine what communities it should develop and sustain. This decision should be driven by the knowledge sharing and overall business strategy of the organization. Formal CoPs should help their members improve their performance, and by extension that of the organization's bottom-line. APQC's 2001 benchmarking report, *Building and Sustaining Communities of Practice* (APQC 2001a), found that the following criteria were used by best-practice organizations when looking to select a Community of Practice (CoP) to support.

- The CoP must relate to a business need. It should not focus on additional work, but instead on existing tasks and responsibilities.
- The CoP, with guidance, must be able to demonstrate results such as enhanced revenue or profitability, enhanced management and business

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