



## **Chapter XVII**

# **Facilitator Toolkit for Building and Sustaining Virtual Communities of Practice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The boundaries of a Community of Practice (CoP) have changed significantly because of changes in organizations and the nature of the work they do. Organizations have become more distributed across geography and across industries. Relationships between people inside an organization and those previously considered outside (customers, suppliers, managers of collaborating organizations, other stakeholders) are becoming more important. In addition, organizations have discovered the value of collaborative work due to the new emphasis on Knowledge Management—harvesting the learning and the experience of members of the organization so that it is available to the whole organization. This chapter offers a practical toolkit of best practices, tips and examples from the authors' work training leaders to launch and sustain a virtual CoP, including tips for chartering the community, defining roles, and creating the culture that will sustain the community over time.*

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual Communities of Practice (CoPs) enjoy interactive environments that give their members the chance to engage with other members through a series of tools such as chats, document postings and community discussions at any time from any place. In traditional CoPs, individuals often interact between meetings in one-on-one conversations. In a Virtual CoP, the group can continue to meet as a group in ways unbounded by time or location.

## THE CHANGING NATURE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The boundaries of CoPs have changed significantly because of changes in organizations and the nature of the work they do. Organizations have become more distributed across geography and across industries. Relationships between people inside an organization and those previously considered outside (customers, suppliers, managers of collaborating organizations and other stakeholders) are becoming more important. In addition, organizations have discovered the value of collaborative work due to the new emphasis on Knowledge Management (KM)—harvesting the learning and the experience of members of the organization so that it is available to the whole organization. All these changes in organizations have changed how CoPs evolve and how they operate. Communities have changed with regard both to membership and to projects.

As work in organizations becomes more complex and everyone strives to do more with fewer people, it is increasingly difficult to get the time and other

*Table 1: Key Changes in Communities of Practice (Adapted from Eunice et al., 1998)*

FROM	TO
Fixed membership	Shifting membership
All members drawn from within an organization	Members can include people from outside the organization (clients, collaborators)
The community comes alive during periodic face-to-face meetings	The life of the community is ongoing (as much happens between meetings as during meetings)
Members are co-located organizationally and geographically	Members are distributed organizationally and geographically
Interests of the group are fairly static	Interests of the group change frequently
Leadership is provided by an individual or small group	Leadership is widely distributed and changes over time

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