

Member Value? Evaluating Professional and Learning Networks

Elizabeth A. Carter
Capella University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Imagine an organization where every employee/member/student is fully engaged, working to full potential, adding personal and professional value. How does that happen? It happens through deliberate engagement tools that allow individuals to come together with common interests and goals. The goal is to elevate the skills of the individuals to the point of personal and professional growth. This case study describes an educational environment that is very beneficial in driving development, performance improvement, engagement, and value at a low cost.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The organization can be any “group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting (with each other) on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). These types of groups are technically termed communities of practice. Examples of common communities of practice include, “special interest groups, professional associations, parent–teacher associations, and clubs” (Roy & Pershing, 2012, p. 83). Examples in corporate settings include employee networks, business resource groups, diversity and inclusion networks, and learning communities.

The qualities of a community of practice are different than those of groups who function as teams. Wenger et al. (2002) describes the difference as a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain (p. 28). Watland, Hallenbeck, and Kesse (2008) have identified these reasons that communities of practice are not teams:

the relationship lasts longer in duration than teams, membership is voluntary, and members continue to interact as long as there is value. *Value* is defined as the awareness of the benefits and outcomes, provided as improvement in a tangible or intangible way, that positively impact organizations and/or individuals and their personal and professional environment.

A community of practice is a newly identified solution to improve an individual’s and/or organization’s performance. Performance can be tangible such as monetary status or profitability, or intangible such as confidence or stature. When Van Tiem, Moseley & Dessinger enhanced their 2000 performance improvement technology model in 2012, they added professional communities of practice as a personal development solution. They recognized that personal development does not only occur in one-on-one interactions such as coaching or mentoring, but that group feedback in a peer environment also enables growth and development.

Because of the newness of the term, the groups or teams in organizations may be communities of practice. To assist in determining if a group or team is a community of practice, an organization can compare why their members join. Community of practice members come together “to share their knowledge and engage in innovative thinking that fosters creative, meaningful approaches to problems” (Regan & Gold, 2010, p. 18). These types of groups add value to organizations in several ways; help drive strategic direction in the organization, solve key problems quickly, transfer best practices, develop professional skills, and help recruit and retain talent (Regan & Gold, 2010. p. 18). Wenger et al. (2002) noted these reasons why individuals join communities of practice; to expand skills and expertise, a way to enhance one’s professional reputation, a place to gain a sense of professional identity, and the ability to increase marketability and employability.

Participation in a community of practice occurs through social and professional networks (Cortese & Wright, 2018). Table 1 provides some examples of groups that have communities of practice characteristics that may not have been recognizable at first thought.

Table 1. Examples of groups that function as communities of practice

Group	Community of Practice Characteristics
Professional association groups (such as industry associations, labor groups, affinity groups)	Association exists “on behalf of members sharing their knowledge with others and networking; they normally convene via monthly/quarterly meetings, conferences/conventions and other venues” (Carter, 2018, p.109).
Community groups (such as age 55+ groups, Girl/Boy Scouts, youth teams, specific interest groups)	Members “join for the networking, social aspects, and to interact with people with similar interests” (Carter, 2018, p.109).
Religious institutions (such as bible study groups)	Group offers accountability, creates connections, fosters community, and provides encouragement (Brown, 2017).
Medical support groups (such as drug support groups, Alcoholics/Eaters Anonymous, etc.)	Group provides “a venue to cope and be part of a community that shares the same concern, symptom, or situation” (Carter, 2018, p.109).
Cohort of educators, students and field experts	Each cohort will: explore theories and practices of community-engaged learning; meet monthly to discuss readings, projects and challenges; and expand the idea of what it means to teach and conduct research, with community partners. The diversity of projects and programs that will lead to rich conversations and collaborations and will have important positive benefits for their students and community partners (McGandy, 2019)
Collaboration of non-profit organizations for underserved entities, community members, and local experts	Participants have in common” their commitment to improving the lives of their citizens and an understanding that making more effective use of data and evidence can aid them in their goals” (“What works”, 2019).

^aMost annotated from Carter, E. A. (2018). *Perceived value of professional communities of practice: A case study* (Doctoral Dissertation). Capella University. Available from ProQuest Central. (2135425081).

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