

What do you know? Centering Knowledge Generation and Sharing to Transform Evaluation Systems

Who

Users of a community of practice

To create and sustain an effective CoP, it's essential to understand your community members and potential members. This includes member interests and needs, their motivations or barriers to participation (including technology preferences, if the CoP is virtual), their preferences and behaviors in other CoPs (are they confident in posting questions or giving responses? do they prefer structured or unstructured discussions, or a mix? what motivates them to join and contribute to a CoP?).

A CoP is likely to have members with different backgrounds and experience levels. This diversity of members is likely to enrich the discussions and create value for members. It's also worth noting the strong connections between member interests and needs and the (multiple) purposes of CoPs – and that these are likely to develop and evolve over the lifecycle of a community.



Example

Footprint Evaluation Community

Who

Aimed at evaluators who are interested in incorporating environmental sustainability into evaluation. Some members have started to do this, majority are not sure how to do this (yet).

What

- Online discussion forum
- Email alerts and reply functionality
- Webinars

Why

Knowledge creation

- Member contributions
- Documenting practice
- Feedback on content/ideas

Knowledge sharing

- New content
- Curated content

Supporting use

- Answering user queries

Advocacy

- Sharing knowledge that tackles particular myths or challenges
- Empowering others to advocate for better choices in evaluation

How

A core group of Footprint Evaluation Team members introduce topics for discussion (i.e. sharing ideas or content for feedback and input). This is supplemented by 'open threads' where members can share their own work or questions. A webinar series supplemented this forum to allow for synchronous feedback and discussion.

What

Platforms and features

Choices around the form of a CoP should be grounded in an understanding of user needs and community purpose. There is basic 'community' functionality – will there be an online forum? will users be able to post and reply from email? Considerations here can widen to include added functionality – if an online forum is included, are features such as 'user roles' or 'badges', 'tagging', and searchability of value?

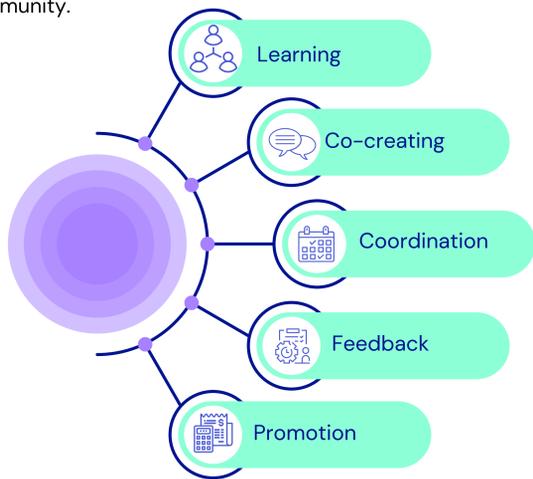
- Online forum
- Email alerts and posting
- Resource repository
- Regular synchronous meetings
- Summaries of discussion (e.g. blogs)
- Structured or facilitated discussions

What is the wider knowledge management strategy for this community? Is a resource library needed? How formal will this need to be to support the community's purpose? – will a shared document or dropbox folder suffice, or is a website repository needed? Other aspects relate to use of the technology – are users comfortable with using (and likely to use) the platform? Is there a need for capacity strengthening?

Why

Purpose of a community of practice

Communities of practice have a general purpose of improving practice. Beneath this, there can be a number of more specific purposes, that can either be deliberately built in to the creation of the CoP, or that may arise naturally through participants' interactions. Etienne Wenger (2011) includes the following in a list of potential purposes of a CoP: Solving problems; Requests for information; Seeking experience; Reusing assets; Creating coordination and synergy; Discussing developments; Documenting projects; Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps. The figure below presents some of the purposes of the Footprint Evaluation Community.



Transforming evaluation systems

Through knowledge sharing and generation

In an effort to build transformative evaluation systems, how can we be better at capturing, learning from, iterating, and sharing knowledge so our work can be more influential for users needing to make decisions about evaluative findings?

Why knowledge? M&E is often said to serve two key purposes: accountability and learning. And knowledge is foundational to both of these purposes – and central to making M&E systems work.

Why CoPs? There are many ways that knowledge can be generated and shared, with CoPs being one of many mechanisms. CoPs have been defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, E., 2011).

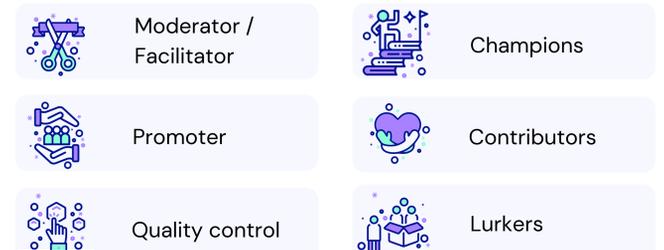
Whether virtual or in-person, within an organization or cross-sector, region and/or language, CoPs offer a space for individuals to come together to ask questions, offer advice, and share resources and experiences – and co-create knowledge. This peer-to-peer learning approach is an important complement to more formal capacity-strengthening activities.

"Bringing together a diverse group of people that share the same challenges, but have different experiences, creates a wider pool of knowledge to draw from when it comes to problem-solving" (Webber, E., 2016)

How

Roles in a community of practice

Communities of practice rarely 'just happen'. There are a number of roles that support and nurture a growing community. Moderators are essential to ensuring the day-to-day functioning and relationship-building of a community. In a more structured community, this might also include a facilitation role to help guide conversations. Promoters can help share the community content with others, as well as invite others to join the community. Ensuring quality control of posts is another important role – this is often done by a moderator, but non-admin members can also play this role and 'self-moderate'. Contributors (or 'posters') are obviously essential to an active community. Some communities may also have 'super-contributors', or 'champions' who regularly answer questions and support new members. Communities are often mostly made up of 'lurkers' – members who read but do not post. While this role can be easy to dismiss, if the aim is to improve practice, lurkers who *use knowledge* from the community are still making a valuable contribution.



Considerations

when setting up a community of practice



POST MODERATION
In virtual CoPs, you can choose to allow members to post with or without moderation. While no moderation can be fine for small, closed groups, for larger groups moderation is safer. Stopping personal, inappropriate or accidental 'reply-all' posts before sending to the entire group helps to create a safe space for members.

SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS
Being clear about the purpose, goals, and moderation policies of the community will help to ensure members post relevant and appropriate content. This includes being clear about the risks of posting – even in closed groups members should be aware that posts can be shared externally.

DATA PRIVACY AND SECURITY
Cyber threats are increasingly common, and as the owner of a CoP you are responsible for member data. There are many resources on best practice for data security. Some tips include: limiting access to data to a small group of admins, thinking through access controls to groups and shared documents, ensuring strong password policies, etc.

'OPEN' OR 'CLOSED' GROUPS
Opening access to everyone who is interested in joining can be helpful in some communities. Other communities benefit from the freer conversation that can come from restricted access.

ENSURE RESOURCES
A community of practice is not a casual endeavor. It can be helpful to really ask whether a new community is needed before starting. If the answer to that is 'Yes!', make sure you have adequate resources (especially time) to nurture the growing community. Recruiting community 'champions' can help.

What do you think?

tell us how and why you might contribute to a community of practice

What has (or might) motivate you to post?

What features do you value in a CoP?

What advice would you add to this list?

Do you have any resources or CoPs to share?

Resources

references and further reading

KM Communities and Online Resources

- Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev)
- KM World
- Stam Garfield's KM Website
- WBG Community of Practice Toolkit
- CDC Communities of Practice Guide and Resource Kit
- FeverBee's Beginner's Guide to Community Management
- Online Community Toolkit (Full Circle Associates)

Books and Journals

- Handbook of Community Management: A Guide to Leading Communities of Practice (Stam Garfield)
- Learning in Communities: Understanding Communities of Practice in the development sector. (Aditi Sethi 2017)
- Digital Habitats: stewarding technology for communities (Etienne Wenger, Nancy White, and John D. Smith, 2009)
- Knowledge Management for Development Journal 13(3): 4–21
- Communities of practice: A brief introduction (Etienne Wenger, 2011)
- Building Successful Communities of Practice (Emily Webber, 2016)

KM CoPs

- KM4Dev Community of Practice and Listserv.
- Stam Garfield's List of KM CoPs

Evaluation CoPs

- Peregrine Community
- Footprint Evaluation Community
- EvalGender+
- EvalTalk



Follow QR for URLs and details