

Networks *Digest*

A spotlight on network-related resources

Issue #10, March 2006

How to Avoid a Mid-Life Crisis in Your CoPs: Uncovering six keys to sustaining communities

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The author surveyed six global companies in the pharmaceutical, oil, defence, telecommunications, and technical consulting industries to ascertain how communities of practice (CoPs) mature into influential business structures. CoPs were first embraced as an inexpensive way to link employees in informal networks to share expertise, solve problems, improve performance, and help organizations become truly global. Sustaining these fledgling networks beyond their mid-life, which the author suggests is anywhere from three to five years, is a more difficult task than originally expected. Problems that can inhibit a community's growth include loss of momentum, loss of relevance, and the sense that the network has become too localized.

While some CoPs falter, others mature into dynamic entities that seem to share six characteristics:

- **Clear purpose** - The community sets and evaluates clear short-term and long-term goals. It might establish annual goal-setting and assessment processes or simply make sure the purpose of its work is clearly articulated.
- **Active leadership** - Community leadership is passionate and actively promotes the work of the community; one group leader spends 25 percent or more of her time on community leadership.
- **Critical mass of engaged members** - CoPs thrive on the work of a committed, stable, active core group of members who view membership as a key part of their job and/or their career; core members in some communities are expected to spend 10 percent of their time on community activities.
- **Sense of accomplishment** - CoP members have a strong sense of accomplishment knowing they are addressing vital problems that advance community goals.
- **High management expectations** - Management's high expectations challenge the community to become involved in substantive business operations.
- **Real time** - Involvement in the community is a real, not a subsidiary, aspect of members' work.

Key messages

- Communities of practice (CoPs) hold great promise for organizational improvement and thrive when first established; however, they can be difficult to maintain beyond mid-life due to loss of momentum, lack of attention, and a tendency to localize.
- Six global communities with effective community development initiatives were found to share six characteristics - clear purpose, active leadership, critical mass of engaged members, sense of accomplishment, high management expectations, and real time work.
- Healthy communities mature into "influence structures" or active teams of peers who demand or are asked to take on influential roles in their organizations. These teams set short- and long-term goals, establish formal roles and structures, and assume vital organizational tasks.

The author further asserts that mature communities are distinguished in three related ways:

- they are communities of peers, not hierarchical, authority-based structures;
- they focus on developing a body of knowledge that serves larger organizational goals; and
- individual members' influence is legitimated only through the expertise, creativity, and knowledge he or she contributes to the community.

The article gives examples of how mature CoPs redefine their initial helping role and either demand a more influential position in their organization or respond to an organizational challenge. One CoP sought to directly influence work carried out by its company's operating teams. An oil company required operations groups to consult the community on all approaches or procedural issues. Other organizations sought out the expertise of mature CoPs precisely because they are not authority structures. The author argues that CoPs must establish formal modes of operation to become legitimately influential in these ways and that empowerment is necessary if CoPs are to overcome mid-life crises.

McDermott, Richard. 2004. "How to Avoid a Mid-Life Crisis in Your CoPs: Uncovering six key to sustaining communities." *KM Review*; 7(2); p. 10-13.

www.mcdermottconsulting.com/pdf/article.pdf

Networks Digest - Issue #10 was featured on March 2, 2006. For more information about the Networks Digest series or to retrieve other summaries, please go to www.chsrf.ca/networks. Please note that this summary is an interpretation and is not necessarily endorsed by the author(s) of the work cited.

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