EIGHT KEY FINDINGS ABOUT COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

What Characteristics Are Common Across Best-Practice Organizations?

APQC has completed numerous large-scale research projects on communities of practice inside organizations and has studied more than a dozen best-practice organizations. Below are eight key findings derived from APQC’s extensive research on communities.

FINDING NO. 1
Make sure each community has a clear business purpose

When deciding which communities of practice to support, best-practice organizations make strategic selections based on the communities’ importance to the business and business opportunities. Although sub-communities or special interest communities may be created within the larger “home” communities, the core communities are designed to serve very specific, defined purposes.

FINDING NO. 2
Design communities according their primary business intent

Communities can be categorized according to their primary business intent. Possibilities include:

- to provide a forum through which community members can help each other solve every-day work problems;
- to develop and disseminate best practices, guidelines, and procedures for community members;
- to organize, manage, and steward a body of knowledge from which community members can draw;
- to foster collaboration and sharing across a geographically dispersed work force; and
- to innovate and create breakthrough ideas, knowledge, and practices.

Most communities serve more than one of these purposes, but a primary intent usually dominates the choices made regarding community design, implementation, and support. For example, a technical community whose intent is to develop and steward a body of knowledge related to a particular discipline will have different processes than a community whose chief goal is to help members collaborate and answer one another’s questions. The majority of best-practice organizations support more than one type of community.

FINDING NO. 3
Solicit active, enthusiastic community leaders

Although senior leadership support for communities is important, such support does not guarantee that communities will remain active and effective over time. Management is instrumental in selecting topics for communities, ensuring that communities are aligned with business objectives and opportunities, and
securing resources and funding. However, once communities are deployed, the most important factor in ensuring success is the skill and enthusiasm of the community leader. Management can hamper or kill a community strategy, but it cannot make communities thrive.

FINDING NO. 4
Support communities with a combination of central and business-unit funding

Leading organizations support their communities by providing community leaders and coordinators, software applications, and content managers and systems. Models for support and funding vary, in part because different types of communities require different resources. All communities depend on some central resources—especially at the beginning—for consulting, training, and content management. Business units typically underwrite the personnel costs of leader, expert, and member participation. Once communities are fully established, the business units usually underwrite the central costs through direct billing or overhead allocation. Communities are often included in the budgeting and planning process as a regular feature.

FINDING NO. 5
Link communities to the organizational structure and seek leadership sponsors

In order to become institutionalized, communities must be connected to the official organizational structure. Although communities tend to be boundary-spanning entities, their support structures are often tightly linked to the frameworks of the organizations in which they reside. This provides legitimacy and necessary connections to management support, funding, and shared resources. At most best-practice organizations, communities are formally sponsored by a KM council, a steering committee, or business management.

FINDING NO. 6
Promote communities and the value of participation

Even at organizations with mature community programs, engagement strategies vary greatly. In some instances, membership in communities is purely voluntary; in others, participation is either strongly encouraged or mandatory. Often, community membership is not required, but is promoted through communications, rewards and recognition, and the overall culture.

FINDING NO. 7
Give members a say in community objectives and direction

Communities tend to be member-driven and democratic in nature—especially when compared to formal organizational structures, which are usually more rigid and hierarchical.

FINDING NO. 8
Measure community health and impact

When it comes to evaluating the success of communities of practice, efforts tend to revolve around two measurement categories: assessing health and measuring impact. Appropriate measures are a direct
reflection of the type of community being assessed. Organizations that receive desired results from their communities have either institutionalized communities or are in the process of expanding their programs.

CONCLUSION

This article contains only a brief selection of the community-related best practices that APQC has uncovered over 15 years. For more information, we recommend the following APQC best practices reports and books:

♦ Transferring and Applying Critical Knowledge (2013)
♦ Positioning Communities of Practice for Success (2011)
♦ Sustaining Effective Communities of Practice (2010)
♦ Networks: Compete on Knowledge with CoPs (2007)
♦ Communities of Practice & Associations (2006)
♦ Using Communities of Practice to Drive Organizational Performance and Innovation (2005)
♦ Building and Sustaining Communities of Practice (2001)

In addition, APQC members can search our Knowledge Base to find hundreds of articles and case studies on community-related topics.

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