



# A Hitchhiker's Guide to Communities of Practice in the Public Sector

**October 22, 2003**

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# Communities of Practice as Gardens of Knowledge

1. What are they?
2. How do they function?
3. A Tale of Two Communities
4. Things to Consider





## The Role of Knowledge

**Knowledge is a strategic organizational asset that is resident in people** (human capital)

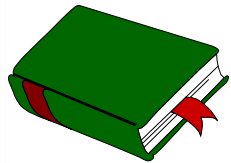
**Knowledge is a major ingredient in research, strategy and policy formulation** (insight, expertise and intelligence)

**Knowledge is a critical resource in program delivery** (skills and competencies)

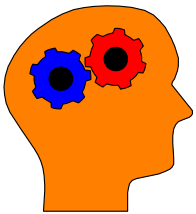
**Knowledge is embedded in services and products** (high value-added)



## Two Forms of Knowledge (Polanyi)



**Explicit knowledge:** knowledge that is articulated in formal language and which can be easily transmitted among individuals. It can be expressed in scientific formulae, codified procedures or a variety of other forms. It includes codified information, data, facts, records and documents, text, etc and is held in many different types of media.



**Tacit knowledge:** knowledge that is embedded in individual experience such as perspective and inferential knowledge. Tacit knowledge includes insights, hunches, intuitions, and skills that are highly personal and hard to formalize, making them difficult to communicate or share with others. It can be ‘learned’ from someone often only by close association with them for a period of time. It represents the cognitive abilities of people.

# Forms of Knowledge Transfer


	<b>Tacit</b>	<b>Explicit</b>
<b>Tacit</b>	<i>Socialization/ Intermediation</i> (e.g. conversation)	<i>Externalization</i> (e.g. codification)
<b>Explicit</b>	<i>Internalization</i> (e.g. reflection)	<i>Combination/Cognition</i> (e.g. automatic feedback)





# Knowledge Management Principles (*T. Davenport, L. Prusak*)

- ✓ Knowledge originates and resides in people's minds
- ✓ Knowledge sharing requires trust
- ✓ Knowledge sharing must be encouraged and rewarded
- ✓ Management support and resources are essential
- ✓ Knowledge is creative and should be encouraged to develop in unexpected ways
- ✓ Technology enables new knowledge behaviours




# Communities of Practice

## What are they?

**“a 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 on an ongoing basis”**

“Cultivating Communities of Practice”, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder






# Communities of Practice

## What are they?

- *A Community of Practice is a group of people that shares knowledge, learns together and develops common / improved practices.*
- *They have committed themselves to the exploration and advancement of the 'practice' of the community.*
- *They recognize the value in what each other knows and they need to stay current on the topic.*
- *The sense of 'community' enables a learning environment to exist where practitioners of varying knowledge, skill, or experience levels can openly share and build on each others' knowledge and ideas in a climate of trust and respect.*



# Communities of Practice

## What are they?

‘they are peers in the execution of real work. What holds them together is a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows’


John Seely Brown

‘...people find themselves drawn to one another by a force that is both social and professional. They collaborate directly, use each other as sounding boards, teach each other’

Thomas Stewart

‘a group of people informally bound together by a shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise...Their members inevitably share knowledge in free-flowing creative ways that foster new approaches to problems.’

Etienne Wenger, William Snyder



# Communities of Practice

## What are they?



‘A community of practice defines itself along three dimensions:

- what it is about - its joint enterprise
- how it functions - mutual engagement that binds members together
- what capability it has produced - the shared repertoire of communal resources’

Etienne Wenger

‘More than a “community of learners”, a community of practice is a “community that learns”. Not merely peers exchanging ideas around the water cooler, sharing and benefiting from each other’s expertise, but colleagues committed to jointly develop better practices’.

George Pór



# Communities of Practice

## What are they?

**Typologies:** Emergent and Posited

**Focus:** Knowledge, Skill and Practice

**Orientation:** Personal, Professional & Organizational

**Attributes:** Virtual and Physical

**Scope:** Intra-/Inter-organizational

# Communities of Practice

## How are they different from Teams?

Teams	Communities of Practice
Driven by deliverables <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared goals and results</li> <li>• Value defined by charter</li> <li>• Value in result delivered</li> </ul>	Driven by value <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared interest or practice</li> <li>• Value discovered/evolves</li> <li>• Value in ongoing process</li> </ul>
Defined by task <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interdependent tasks</li> <li>• Clear boundaries</li> </ul>	Defined by knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interdependent knowledge</li> <li>• Permeable boundaries</li> </ul>
Develops through a work plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone contributes</li> <li>• Managed objectives through objectives &amp; workplan</li> </ul>	Develops organically <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Variable contributions</li> <li>• Managed by making connections</li> </ul>
Bound by commitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint accountability</li> <li>• Based on explicit agreement</li> <li>• Team leader or manager</li> </ul>	Bound to identify <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reciprocal contributions</li> <li>• Based on trust</li> <li>• Core group/coordinator</li> </ul>

Source: KM Review



## Seven Principles for Cultivating CoPs (*E. Wenger*)

- Design for Evolution
- Open a dialogue between inside/outside perspectives
- Invite different levels of participation
- Public and private community spaces
- Focus on value
- Combine familiarity with excitement
- Create a rhythm for the community



# Evolutionary Design (*E. Wenger*)

- Prepare – assess, strategize, educate
- Launch – sponsors, pilots, learning, stories
- Expand – spread, develop, connect, systematize
- Consolidate – institutionalize, integrate, align
- Transform



## Developmental Stages (*E. Wenger*)

- Discover/imagine – potential
- Incubate/produce – coalescing
- Focus/expand – maturing
- Preserve/open up – sustaining
- Let go/Live on – transforming

# How Do They Function? The Garden Metaphor



***The Soil***

***The Seed***

***The Fruit***

***The Gardener***



# How Do They Function? The Garden Metaphor

## ***The Soil: Culture and Environment***

- ✓ what is the condition of the soil?
- ✓ what soil is right?
- ✓ preparation and maintenance
- ✓ the right tool for the job
- ✓ a time to every purpose: fallow and active use



# How Do They Function? The Garden Metaphor

## ***The Seed: People - Knowledge and Creativity***

- ✓ what to 'plant'
- ✓ where to 'plant'- variety, proximity, cross-fertilization
- ✓ how to 'plant'
- ✓ life cycle and life expectancy



# How Do They Function? The Garden Metaphor

## ***The Fruit:* Improved Practice, Relationships and more ...**

- ✓ what fruit to expect - recognizing fruit
- ✓ knowing how to harvest
- ✓ knowing when to harvest



# How Do They Function? The Garden Metaphor

## ***The Gardener: Stewardship***

- ✓ planning the garden
- ✓ cultivating the soil
- ✓ planting the seed
- ✓ care: fertilizing, watering
- ✓ intervention: thinning, weeding, grafting
- ✓ environment: sun, wind, birds, insects, etc
- ✓ harvesting



## How Do They Function? A Tale of Two Communities

The **Project Management Leadership Forum (PMLF)** is a community of practice on the topic of Project Management, drawing together people from across the organization at all skill levels.

Main objectives for the PMLF:

- developing consistent project management practices and education,
- networking with experts and other peers, both externally and internally,
- seeking management support and buy-in for the discipline of project management, and
- facilitating effectiveness in the organization's strategic use of resources and the overall planning exercise.



## How Do They Function? A Tale of Two Communities

The **Interdepartmental Knowledge Management Forum (IKMF)** creates an exploratory environment that stimulates Knowledge Management practice in the public sector. As a community of practice on the issue of applying Knowledge Management practices in the public sector, the IKMF creates a safe environment for reflection, discovery, dialogue and innovation through the sharing of experiences, practices and insights between practitioners and those interested in Knowledge Management.

### Our Opportunity:

- The IKMF seeks to encourage dialogue and collaboration among colleagues from knowledge-intensive communities to focus on and share experiences in the implementation of knowledge management in the public sector.
- The IKMF seeks to be a centre of excellence and expertise in the development and use of knowledge management in the public sector...



## Things to Consider

<b><i>Needs:</i></b>	Communities	or	Teams
<b><i>Readiness:</i></b>	the 'Aha!' factor	or	the 'Huh?' factor
<b><i>History:</i></b>	excitement & support	or	cynicism & resistance
<b><i>Time:</i></b>	doing the right things	or	'sorry, too busy'
<b><i>Technology:</i></b>	enabler & partner	or	foe & barrier
<b><i>Management:</i></b>	stewardship	or	control
<b><i>Motivation:</i></b>	passion	or	politics
<b><i>Architecture:</i></b>	serendipity	or	orchestration
<b><i>Connections:</i></b>	open	or	closed
<b><i>Mechanics:</i></b>	dialogue	or	tasks



# The Lessons Learned

## The **Be-attitudes**:

- **Be strategic**: Identify your organization's greatest needs; Identify a holistic vision that captures people's imagination and engagement
- **Be practical**: Implement straight-forward solutions built on previous work; Manage the scope of effort and expectations; Deliver what you promise, when you promise it; Start somewhere!
- **Be inclusive**: Develop and build on personal relationships - yours and others; Build and use the support of natural allies, both internally and externally; Engage and excite; Be helpful and flexible
- **Be a champion**: Demonstrate servant-leadership; Keep moving forward; Be constructive; Carpe diem!





**Sunken Garden**  
Spring

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# Communities of Practice References for Further Research

**Cultivating Communities of Practice**, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, ISBN 1-57851-330-8

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Public Sector Communities Portal: [www.compra.ca](http://www.compra.ca)

E. Wenger: [www.CPsquare.com](http://www.CPsquare.com)

Com-prac: [groups.yahoo.com/group/com-prac/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/com-prac/)



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