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## Relevance and participation in Communities of Practice – Relaunching a CoP

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In these days, the convenience and usefulness of communities of practice as organizational resources is becoming more and more evident. Practitioners everywhere band together to try and reap the benefits of a community of collaborating peers. Many CoPs are designed every week, and quite a few are launched. After a longer or shorter while, a lot of them fail, dissolve or become irrelevant.

Over time, CoP managers have started to think about the problem. Some have tried to summarise the steps to success. Some have gathered together in communities about communities, such as the impressive CPSquare. And some will be trying to delve into the matter during October at the EU's KnowledgeBoard CoP SIG.

This is an attempt to set a few ideas for discussion and comparison of experiences and models. It does not portray all possible explanations, recipes or environments: it is here to serve as catalyst for discussion.

### A few hypotheses

In order to start analysis, we have tried to identify the **key characteristics of a successful CoP**. There are a lot of candidates, but we have settled on two:

- **Relevance**. Defined as the ability to impact the work of the participant practitioners in a serious and exclusive way. To help them as no other thing does.
- **Participation**. Defined as the ability to draw in and durably engage a significant number of the people who would benefit from a successful CoP of its characteristics.

We will be making a further hypothesis: that the CoP has some sort of cohesive decision-making system. In other words, that it has someone who feels responsible for it and can act. This may be a changing team, a single person, a project manager, an enthusiast. It may be an uncontested consensual leadership or an un-anointed, troublesome power-grab. We just need to be able to assume that **any CoP has some coordinator**. A mindless CoP can't change coherently, and will probably not last.

### Relevance

Where does “relevance” come from? How can each of those factors be improved?

- Clarity of goals
- Direct work relevance
- Indirect relevance
- Competitive advantage



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*Clarity of goals* amounts to the CoP's managers knowing what the CoP is there for. Frequently, CoPs turn into diffuse initiatives that change focus too fast (trying to pursue the members's interest, so as to remain relevant), or simply lack a practice focus and have become a mainly social network (practical relevance never was there). It can be painful to correct, but a formal "**refounding**", in which the managers and members agree and restate the CoP goals, and then proceed to prune the off-focus activities, can work wonders.

It may also lead to dissolving the CoP if members and management don't feel there are worthy goals to pursue.

*Direct work relevance* is a measure of how the CoP affects individual members' productivity. This will generally be a by-product of two things: *questions answered* (problems solved) at the CoP, and *methodology created*. The first one can be improved in most CoPs through a **more active facilitation** (possibly appointing more facilitators who know the field, probably just by making asked questions more visible and directing them at knowledgeable members), and in some cases it may require a look at the **technology** used: if the CoP has a lot of online messages, email makes questions less visible and answers less searchable than a forum, for instance.

The creation of methodology is a formal by-product of conversations: very often it is easy to **propose and animate a "guide to ..."** thread in a list or forum (chosen based on real current interests of the members), and then editing and refining it into a very useful knowledge object is a work of hours, not days, that will raise CoP relevance like few things.

*Indirect relevance* is derived from factors not directly associated to professional efficiency. It is usually derived from the sharing of common values and ethos, and the appreciation of other CoP members. An inclusive, friendly and open atmosphere is a heavy, continuous job for the administration. But some things help: **taming divisive members** (with clear private conversations or even exclusion) can calm a strained CoP. Most divisive characters react well to a constructive conversations; the rest, however bright, are bad for CoPs. Some **rules of engagement** for conversations (avoid insults and derisive comments) can reduce friction. Also famously effective are **events and meetings** at which the social side takes precedence on the professional, factional conversations, and people learn to appreciate the other members as people and not just opinions.

*Competitive advantage* is the key to survival. CoPs are not Guilds. They are easily created, particularly outside of corporations, and a domain seldom has just one. The biggest threat to a CoP's relevance is a competing CoP. When merger is out of the question, the CoPs are in natural competition: the more relevant (problem-solving, methodology-creating, friendly) a CoP is, the easier it finds to attract new participation. More participation means more brainpower, so it enhances the CoP's relevance. Ultimately, without differentiation, there will only remain one.

So CoPs must differentiate and build competitive advantages. A CoP with good financial or technical muscle can differentiate on **services** (document repositories, indexes, webmeeting services, content, publishing); CoPs with a good address book may differentiate with some **big-name collatorators**, or may go for a big-name **seal**



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**of approval** (such as the EU's for KnowledgeBoard). Visible **activities and events** can be a critical distinction. But the easiest to build and hardest to break are "**character**" **differentiations**: a CoP may survive because it's kinder to beginners, or more exacting with paper reviews, or more open to innovation, or more respectful of established methods, or more international, or more work-focused, or more theory-oriented, or more tolerant of socialising elements... These differences may guarantee survival even when an overlapping CoP is more effective, even when the others are enormously bigger. This requires something that is not usual, though: being able to **stop imitating success**, and start making the most of your differences.

## Participation

What encourages or hinders participation? What can be done to foster it?

- Recognition
- Amiability
- Reference and guide
- Technical means
- Integration in processes

*Recognition* of an individual member's useful participation is a long-term key to a CoP's health. Unrewarded effort is not usually continued. This does not mean that active member should all receive **prizes** (some companies, such as SIEMENS with Sharenet, do reward good participants this way). But simpler, cheaper methods exist. A ladder of **member titles** to reward higher accumulated participation can be a good start (there are unlimited possibilities, and each domain has its own words. A curious example: newbie, member, active member, pillar of society, sacred cow). But a **ready ear from the managers** is usually more appreciated by CoP old hands. And good **exposition of their work** and contribution (without stridence: publishing visibly-signed papers, referencing what they did in CoP documents) can warm hearts a lot. Meetings and events are good times at which to stage **recognition acts** (elect the most-contributing member, the best article, the best thread, or the best facilitator).

*Amiability* is key. For new users it amounts to a kind welcome (and a not-too-steep entry process), for full members it amounts to tolerance to divergent views and mistakes. Harshness diminishes participation in the long run, and culls growth very fast.

When a lack of amiability is perceived, solutions can be aimed at either of the two possibilities. New entrants can receive a **welcome talk** from older members, and virtual CoPs may have a **beginners forum** in which to gain self-confidence and learn the ropes of the CoP before launching into the full professional conversations. For older members, amiability is a habit... and it is managed person by person. So a lot of **heavy facilitation and rule-setting** may be necessary to change a harsh culture... but, more frequently, after a couple of calls for leniency are made, it is just one or two people who need to be **reeducated or expelled**.

*Reference and guide* are not just for newbies. In many CoPs, members don't participate more because they are not aware that they can, nor of the CoPs mechanisms. It is frequent to find virtual CoPs where members suppose that all



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articles are written by recognised gurus, and so refrain from participation. When people don't know how the CoP works, or how they can use its mechanisms, or how to approach the managerial team with an idea or proposal... the CoP loses a lot of potential participation and valuable knowledge exchange. Also, a lot of problems can be avoided by making sure that the CoP's conventions, netiquette and "rules of engagement" are known by all.

So all these things need to be **written clearly** and put where they are **easily found**... and then **announced** wherever relevant.

*Technical means* such as the appropriate software tools can be much more important than apparent. A healthy-looking CoP such as the email list com-prac would probably explode into a much more active community if housed in a competently-designed forum system, thus needing much more facilitating work which the CoP managers don't want to be saddled with. So the choice of a more restrictive tool looks correct. Other virtual (or partly virtual) CoPs need to assess the needs that their CoP has, their ability to manage themselves in other environments, and their technical and funding capacity, and **evolve** technologically before an old tool selection begins to cramp the CoP.

*Integration in processes* is a great helper of participation: when the CoP is accessible at the time of professional work, it is less costly (in terms of focus and time) to use it as a professional enabler, or to add information about professional experiences. In this way, CoP committees can be established at relevant points of a lab's publishing or research process; a link to the CoP's forums can be prominent in the corporate website as a means of getting support; a list of available CoP members may be ready when a consultant drafts a proposal, or lodges a progress report. Indeed, improving integration in processes requires the managers to **identify the tasks** in their members's work processes during which the CoP is most useful, and designing **the workflow** and **the tools** so as to maximize the accessibility of the members to the CoP at those moments. This does not just mean changing the members' environment, since that may not be possible. For instance: if CoP members work in an environment in which email is their only means of communication, a forum-based CoP should enable a way to accept and answer email messages... and thus allow them to use the CoP **during work**.

## Measurement

Not infrequently, CoPs can start losing relevance and participation before they realize. Some periodic polls can be a good indicator of continuing or declining health. Some simple relevance questions I'm asking at a CoP system right now:

- a) What proportion of your work-related questions are answered by the community (as opposed to other information sources)? [answer in percentage ranges]
- b) How often do you turn to the community for solving a doubt or problem? [answers in frequency ranges: from daily to monthly or more]
- c) How has the CoP affected your productivity? [answers from "negatively" to "fundamentally"]



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d) How do you perceive the balance of contribution? [answers from “getting much more than I put in” to “putting in much more than I get out of the Cop”]

I'm using an online poll (it's a mostly online CoP), but anyway I suggest answers be anonymous. It may also be interesting to separate the answers of facilitators from the member responses.

### Some other factors

- Publicity.
- Openness.
- Governance and values.
- Evolution.
- Authority.
- Clear boundaries.
- Human relationship element.

*Publicity* is the fastest, most effective single measure for reviving a CoP. Just by making sure that anybody with an interest in the domain or a relevant competence in it is informed and invited, a CoP manager's already got a huge probability of a successful (re)launch.

*Openness* can be a requirement. Members can react very adversely (and potential members even worse) when the goals, allegiances and management structure of a CoP are not clearly transmitted and made public.

*Governance and values* are not just a competitive factor. A bad alignment with the values of the people that the CoP wants to involve is a medium-term guarantee for disaster. And a governance mechanism that upholds those values is therefore most useful.

*Evolution* is a fact of life in CoPs. Focus shifts in professions, and in personal careers. The CoP needs to be open to (reasonably) evolve its goals, rules, focus... almost everything. Separating the essentials of a CoP from the evolvable characteristics will become unavoidable for survival, so it's good to know them in advance.

*Authority* has a bad press but very good results. A CoP that has a clear policy, clear goals, fast decision-making and good project management is a CoP where authority (however born) is exercised... and also stands a high chance of being an efficient CoP.

*Clear boundaries* are a requirement for efficiency too. What a CoP addresses and what it doesn't are decisions that need to be made and known for avoiding wasting efforts in subjects and work that are not relevant to its aims.

The *human relationship element* is at least half of a CoP's health. Also called “goodwill” and “trust”, the readiness to help and to listen is not just cultural, but also most individual. The ability to foster behaviours that favour trust, and to reward the exercise of goodwill toward other CoP members, is a key CoP management competency.