Communities of Practice
Questions and Answers

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Community of practice definitions

1. What is a community of practice?
A community of practice at the World Bank is an informal group of practitioners that shares knowledge on common development problems while pursuing joint solutions. CoPs contribute to a more informed dialogue with decision-makers, often leading to improved development outcomes. They also facilitate problem-solving among individual members, stimulate learning, promote professional development, address individual questions, and generate the type of knowledge that members need in their daily work. Cops utilize a complementary mix of tools and activities to facilitate ongoing and sustained interaction among members.

Other definitions of communities include:

"Groups of people who come together to share and learn from one another - either face-to-face or virtually - are held together by a common interest in a body of knowledge and are driven by a desire and need to share problems, experiences, insights, templates, tools, and best practices."
Source: http://www.apqc.org/pubs/summaries/CMKMCOP.pdf

"As groups that learn, communities of practice, have special characteristics. They emerge of their own accord: Three, four, 20, maybe 30 people find themselves drawn to one another by a force that's both social and professional. They collaborate directly, use one another as sounding boards, teach each other."
Source: http://www.co-i-l.com/oil/knowledge-garden/op/definitions.shtml

"A Community of Practice (CoP) is a special type of informal network that emerges from a desire to work more effectively or to understand work more deeply among members of a particular specialty or work group. At the simplest level, Cops are small groups of people who've worked together over a period of time and through extensive communication have developed a common sense of purpose and a desire to share work-related knowledge and experience."
Source: http://www.tfriend.com/op-lit.htm

2. Where did the concept of CoP originate?

The concept has its origins in the private sector, and in the recent literature on knowledge management. Groups of employees, meeting regularly to share stories and learn from each other in corporations as diverse as Xerox, Boeing, and Best Buy, have existed as long as the corporations themselves. Increasingly, their value in improving organizational performance - through increasing innovation and responsiveness; improving worker skills; reducing duplication; connecting workers and raising the level of trust; responding to problems quickly, and capturing and reusing tacit knowledge - has become recognized and rewarded. With their impressive knowledge base and the relationships they facilitate, CoPs present a strong business case and occupy a prominent role in the private sector. In the Xerox Corporation, for example, groups of technicians traditionally met informally during their coffee breaks to share their experiences about repairing different types of machinery. These informal channels of communication have served to address individual problems as these technicians swapped stories and insights. The result for

Xerox was an overall improvement in the skills of its technicians, enhanced performance and efficiency, and a better bottom line.

For more information, go to:
Knowledge Networks and Communities of Practice (OD Network Online)
Communities of practice and organizational performance (IBM Systems Journal)

3. What is the difference between a CoP, a network, a work team, and other types of communities?

A community of practice is different from a network in the sense that focuses on a substantive topic; it is not just a set of relationships. A CoP is different from a work team in that the shared learning and interest of its members keep it together. It is defined by knowledge rather than by an individual task, and exists because participation has value to its members. A CoP is different from other communities since its members are more likely to share a common profession or work situation. It is important to remember that "people belong to communities of practice at the same time as they belong to other organizational structures. In their business units, they shape the organization. In their teams, they take care of projects. In their networks, they form relationships. And in their communities of practice, they develop the knowledge that lets them do these other tasks. This informal fabric of communities and shared practices makes the official organization effective and, indeed, possible."
Source: Etienne Wenger quoted in: http://www.km.gov/op/op_primer.html

Communities of Practice at the World Bank

4. Why are CoPs important?

CoPs are important at the World Bank for many reasons. In broad terms, they are the "heart and soul" of knowledge sharing in the organization due to the wealth of experiences, insights, and perspectives - the social and organizational "capital" of the Bank - their members offer. They also play a leading role in the Bank's overall strategy in creating, sharing, and applying knowledge. See the graphics below:

More specifically, CoPs are critical because:

- They serve as an ongoing learning venue for Bank staff and outside practitioners who share similar goals, interests, problems, and approaches.

- They respond rapidly to individual inquiries from members and Bank clients with specific answers.

- They develop, capture, and transfer best practices on specific topics, by stimulating the active sharing of knowledge.

- They influence development outcomes by promoting greater and better-informed dialogue.

- They link a diverse groups of practitioners from different disciplines - TGs, for example, represent the nexus between experts in the Regions and the Sectors, and are thus intertwined with the Bank's organizational structure.

- They promote innovative approaches to address specific development challenges.

5. What forms do they take?

World Bank CoPs are extremely numerous and diverse. The best known are the Thematic Groups (TGs) which number more than 100 and cover a wide array of topics. Leadership and membership in TGs is voluntary and open to all staff at the Bank and sometimes to the public. Some receive funding from their sector board(s) based on work program agreements that link TG work to the sector strategy.

In addition, the group of some twenty Advisory Services within the Bank is a very active CoP drawn together by the need to share ideas and good practices to improve the quality of their functions. This is a good example of a grass-roots, cross-sectoral CoP.

Other CoPs established by the Bank place greater emphasis on reaching out to external audiences and partner organizations. Four examples include Ayuda Urbana, the Water and Sanitation Think Tank, and the Investigative Journalism group.

6. Who are the members?

Membership in all CoPs is voluntary. The majority of Bank staff belong to at least one Thematic Group. TGs are open also to other development professionals, particularly those with an expertise in a given topic. Some CoPs, such as the artisan community, actively recruit non-Bank members. Others, like Ayuda Urbana, are more selective due to geographic and language factors. The number of members also varies and is not especially important unless the size begins to undermine trust.

7. How are CoPs at the Bank organized and governed?

CoPs do not conform to a single type of organization. Several, such as the Water and Sanitation Think Tank, are managed through partnerships with other development organizations. Thematic Groups are structured differently across the Sectors, and funding from the Sectors varies greatly. The seven TGs involved in Public Sector issues (PREM), for example, designate two staff, one senior and one junior, to lead and facilitate the activities of each. In contrast, Social Protection TGs are led by a greater number of members. In any case, CoPs tend to lack a rigid hierarchy which affords members the opportunity to participate freely and in innovative ways.

8. What do CoPs at the Bank do?

CoPs engage in a broad range of activities, services, and programs. For example, Thematic Groups engage in the creation of knowledge collections (good practices, sector statistics, etc.), dissemination and outreach to staff and partners (brown bag lunches, clinics, workshops, study tours, websites, newsletters etc.), and support to task teams. The overall effect is enabling staff to learn, apply, and adapt knowledge from all over the world to their own particular situation without the adverse impact of information overload: specific insights that contribute to problem solving are shared in the context of a community's particular knowledge base ("pulling" versus "pushing" information and knowledge).

9. How do they enhance knowledge sharing and learning?

CoPs have contributed significantly to both knowledge sharing and learning. By involving members from different disciplines and geographic areas, they multiply knowledge flows, address knowledge gaps, and foster knowledge partnerships. And, by emphasizing learning in the context of a "practice" (rather than in a formal classroom setting or behind a computer), they improve the overall culture of learning within the Bank. In fact, they increasingly represent a new model of learning at the Bank, a model that centers on continuous learning as opposed to one-off learning events.

10. How do they influence outcomes?

Through their ability to raise the level and quality of knowledge sharing, and support continuous learning, CoPs improve the process of decision-making for both Bank staff and clients in developing countries. The work of Thematic Groups is being aligned increasingly with operations with the intent of magnifying their impact on Bank operations. Other CoPs, such as Ayuda Urbana, have contributed directly to better informed policy making at the country or municipal level.

The Building Blocks of Communities of Practice

11. How is a community of practice started at the Bank?

Informal networks exist everywhere within the organization. Whether or not they coalesce into genuine CoPs depends on numerous factors: perceived need and common objectives; the presence of leaders and facilitators; the availability of funding. Many of the Thematic Groups were created to address knowledge gaps in specific area.

12. What are the critical building blocks of a CoP?

Although every CoP is unique in how it creates a sense of community among its members, all CoPs share essential traits. They include:

- leaders/facilitators
- critical mass of active members
- management support/being an integral part of the organizational structure
- resources
- topic focus
- problem-solving emphasis (practical aspect)
- technology
- knowledge transfer and dissemination mechanisms
- trust
- passion

13. Is substantial funding required to build and sustain a CoP?

Funding can be of enormous help, especially during a CoP's formative stages. Organizing events, designing a website, and publishing best practice notes can involve significant resources. However, funding cannot be a substitute for the quality, participation, and enthusiasm of the community members. A number of Thematic Groups and other CoPs receive little or no funding and are often led by Bank staff serving as volunteers. They manage to survive and even thrive due to the value each member receives from being part of the community.

Technology and Communities of Practice

14. What is the role of technology in CoPs?

Technology is a critical building block. However, its role should not be overestimated and should be viewed as a support to the social aspects of sharing knowledge (building trust, personal communication, and meeting face-to-face). To be effective, technology should be adapted and customized to the needs of the community. After all, the best tools will have little worth if the members do not use them or find them difficult to use. The "best" technology usually involves tools that help community members find, disseminate, and apply knowledge and enhances communication among them.

For more information, go to:
American Productivity & Quality Center on Knowledge Management Archive
Supporting communities of practice; a survey of community-oriented technologies
The Coworking Institute: virtualcommunities.start4all.com

15. Which tools are available?

There are many technology choices for CoPs at the Bank. The following list illustrates the diversity:

Websites (External and Internal), Notes databases (Internal), Activity rooms, E-discussions (Development Forum, Rapid Response), Videoconferencing (GDLN) B-SPAN(Internet-based broadcasting station that presents World Bank seminars, workshops, and conferences on a variety of sustainable development and poverty reduction issues) Debriefings (Internal- Process that gives staff the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and identify lessons learned. In turn this enables them to share knowledge and helps to create an operational knowledge base for improved quality in project/program design and implementation.), Newsletters, Print publications, like PREM Notes and IK Notes

16. Is there a "right" mix of tools?

There is no perfect mix since every community's dynamics, needs, and constraints are different. What is crucial is that the tools complement each other in a way that maximizes communication and learning for its members. For example, a website can serve as a repository for the knowledge base of a community with an online discussion as a ongoing venue linking members. Videoconferencing, as a cost-effective way for members to meet and for capturing learning events, can also play an important role.

17. Can a CoP exist only as a virtual entity?

It is unlikely that online interaction is sufficient for a CoP since it cannot substitute entirely for face-to-face events that create much of the trust and common purpose within a community. Although online tools can greatly enhance communication and cohesion, they do not by themselves constitute community. Face-to-face events are vital, particularly in the early stages of a community. These events are largely responsible for fostering and personalizing the links between members.

Measuring the impact of Communities of practice

18. How are Cops evaluated?

CoPs are evaluated in different ways at the Bank. Each Sector Board measures the impact of its Thematic Groups using different indicators. Some Boards tie the performance of TGs directly to their funding and, therefore, evaluate performance along various criteria. Other Boards that provide little or no funding to their TGs are less rigorous in their evaluation and rely more on such qualitative indicators as stories and anecdotes.

19. What surveys have been conducted?

Individual Sector Boards, Thematic Groups, and Advisory Services have conducted various formal and informal surveys. One good example is the Public Sector Board. It recently conducted an online survey on different aspects of its TGs and received responses from 200 members on questions ranging from how much time they devote to TGs to the value they place on them. Click here to access the results of the survey.

20. What kind of knowledge do CoPs create?

Above all, CoPs capture, organize, and disseminate insights and experiences on specific development topics from sources all over the world. The "good practices" and "lessons learned" that the Bank and its clients have assembled and continue to assemble, through TGs, other CoPs, and other knowledge management activities, represent an impressive resource.

21. Is the knowledge being used?

Although it is difficult to measure, based on different indicators, the knowledge shared by CoPs is used extensively. This is, no doubt, related to the Bank's acknowledgment that its global knowledge and expertise represent a tangible product equal in stature to its lending operations.

22. What has been the impact on Cop members?

The impact on individual members also varies enormously. Merely belonging to a CoP does not guarantee that a particular member will benefit. However, depending on the time and commitment a member devotes, to what is essentially a voluntary activity, that member has opportunities in a unique knowledge sharing setting. The overall impact at the Bank has been on improving the skills of community members through continuous learning.

23. How are CoPs sustained over time?

CoPs do not have a specified life span. Some fizzle out due to apathy and inactivity. Others become stronger. Many Thematic Groups at the Bank have gone through phrases: a number have joined together while several have been phased out. The key factors in how a CoP develops over time is the quality and durability of its building blocks. Go to Module 2 to learn more about how to sustain a CoP.