

**Introduction to Communities of Practice**

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**Introduction**

Communities of practice can be very beneficial to a variety of fields of practice, sectors, and organizations. Through communities of practice, members can learn and share knowledge to gain a better understanding of various topics and issues. To be able to establish a community of practice, we must know and understand the elements required of a community of practice. These include: collaboration opportunities, support, strong relationships, and commitment. Another element needed for a community of practice includes a wide range of colleagues, such as educators, students, supervisors, etc. (Lee et al., 2009, pg. 41). Through these elements, members can experience the many benefits associated with a community of practice (Seibert, 2015, pg.71). These benefits include: improved communication, balance between individual and group learning, and sharing of knowledge. However, with these benefits there may be challenges that can arise and need to be addressed (Cox, 2005, pg. 6). These include: unsustainable relationships, competitive and time pressurized environments, and individualized work. This paper is an introductory exploration into conversations of

communities of practice through the questions: What is a community of practice? How to support the members? How understandings of communities of practice have evolved over time? And what are the potential benefits and challenges of communities of practice?

### What is a Community of Practice?

Communities of practice have been gaining popularity among a variety of fields and professions since the '90s. The concept of a Community of Practice (CoP) stems from a theory of social learning, and was first introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Li et al., 2009, pg.1). Through a theory of social learning individuals learn from each other, through observation, modeling, and collaboration (Li et al., 2009, pg.3). Lave and Wenger initially defined a CoP as, "People from the same discipline improving their skills by working alongside experts and being involved in increasingly complicated tasks" (Li et al., 2009, pg.4). They proposed that by working alongside experts, individuals with varying skills and experiences can learn from each other. Later on, Wenger redefines the term community of practice to reflect further knowledge he has acquired about the concept (Li et al., 2009, pg.6). Wenger shifts the idea of a CoP from "individuals' learning and identity development" (pg.6). Through this shift the focus of a CoP is the knowledge gain of the members not just the individual. Also, the definition of a CoP changes to "groups of people who share concerns, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in their area by interacting on an ongoing basis" ( Li et al., 2009, pg.6).

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger first introduced the concept of communities of practice in 1991 with their book *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. In this book, Lave and Wenger explain that Interactions with older, more experienced employees is the process by which newcomers gain knowledge and create their own professional identity within the larger community. In 1998 Wenger updated the concept of CoPs in his book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. In this work Wenger introduced the three domains of a CoP: Mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Li et al. (2009) define these three domains as follows: mutual engagement is the “interaction between individuals that leads to the creation of shared meaning on issues or a problem”, joint enterprise is “the process in which people are engaged and working together towards a common goal”, and lastly shared repertoire is the “common resources and jargon that members use to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning within the group” (pg.5).

Following this publication, in 2002, Wenger along with McDermott and Snyder published a book called *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Through this publication the three domains introduced in the previous literature by Wenger were changed to; domain, community, and practice. According to Li et al. (2009), the concept of domain “creates the common ground and outlines the boundaries that enable members to decide what is worth sharing and how to present the ideas”, while community “creates the social structure that facilitates learning through interactions and relationships with others”, and practice “is a set of shared repertoires of resources that include documents, ideas, experiences, information, and ways of addressing recurring problems” (pg.6). In addition to the change of domain names, Wenger also introduces

the concept of leaders and facilitators. “Typically, the leader/champion is someone who is well respected within an organization, and often holds a leadership position” (Li et al., 2009, pg.6). The leader is not a member in a position of power, but a member who is able to bring the group together and facilitate collaboration. As time progresses, the concept of a community of practice also progresses to reflect changes in practice.

Li et al. (2009) explain that in some cases individuals refer to the term community of practice as a group of people working in the same practice setting ( as cited in Seibert, 2015, pg. 70). This differs from Wenger’s explanation of communities of practice. As, Wenger’s concept does not only refer to those working in the same professional environment, but a group of people who share knowledge, ideas, and experiences to better themselves and their field of practice (72). Seibert (2015) explains that communities of practice promote learning opportunities, through collaborative approaches that create opportunities for professional development (pg. 70). In essence, it is a form of learning and shared knowledge based on social relationships between those who have been in the field or profession for a long time, and those who are new. According to Lave & Wenger (1991), this learning happens through a process called ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (as cited in Guldberg & Mackeness, 2009, pg.528). Lave & Wenger (1991), describe legitimate peripheral participation as a model that allows newcomers, such as students or new graduates, to collaborate with members of greater experience (as cited in Berry, 2011, pg. 9). This allows participants to learn from each other and contemplate ideas after gaining feedback from others.

Li et al. (2009) explain that in order to fully understand the CoP concept, we must define and understand the meaning of ‘community’ (pg.3). Barret & Chrisentary

(2015) describe community as, “[a] group of individuals for whom the domain is relevant; community includes the relationship between members” (pg. 26). A relevant domain between individuals would be a common interest or a shared field of practice that members can build a relationship upon. According to Wenger (1998), one of the main characteristics within a CoP is that members have a shared domain of interest (as cited in Guldberg & Mackness, 2009, pg.529). A shared domain of interest allows individuals who have similar practices to connect together and form a CoP. This also allows members to build relationships in order to learn from each other. This space of a common relevant domain forms a community for members to learn and share knowledge between each other, to better their practice.

In addition to defining the concept of community, we must also understand and define the concept of ‘practice’. Barret & Chrisentary (2015) define practice as, “the body of knowledge, methods, stories, and documents that members share and develop together.”(pg. 26). Through this concept of practice, members share and develop ideas together as they gain insight and new perspectives on a shared topic of interest. Therefore, in a community of practice, it is essential to establish strong relationships around shared bodies of knowledge to take part in to gain and develop new and innovative ideas.

CoPs also allow members within an organization to gain a wider range of access to colleagues (Lee et al., 2015, pg. 41). This wider range of access to colleagues allows educators to interact with students, students with supervisors, and supervisors with educators. When members have a wider range of access to colleagues of various experiences they can further develop their ideas. This allows CoPs to flourish and

benefit all who are involved. As a result, CoPs can be found in governments, organizations, education, associations, social service sectors, and the internet (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pg. 4). Since the concept of a CoP can be applied in various settings, it is becoming more widespread.

Over time, the concept of a CoP has evolved to include changes in business practices, professional learning, and collaboration. To reflect this changing use and understanding, Wenger currently defines CoP as “groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pg.1). The current definition of a CoP removes the thought of experts. Instead, it purports that within a community of practice everyone should be seen as an equal contributor; no one contributor is more qualified than another. It is suggested, that when members are viewed as equals, they work more closely together and have more intimate and authentic working relationships to advance the focus of their practice (Li et al., 2009, pg.3). That being said, the understanding of what a CoP is, has changed a fair amount since its introduction in the 1990's.

### How have Communities of Practice Evolved over Time?

Although the true intentions of CoPs, to share knowledge to improve practices, remain unchanged the method of practice has transformed to adapt to shifts in organizational practice. Hoadley (2012) explains that the meaning of community of practice has evolved over time, from a descriptive to a more prescriptive concept (pg. 287). The descriptive concept of a CoP stems from a natural occurrence of information

sharing through an informal practice of storytelling between individuals about day to day occurrences. The prescriptive concept of a CoP is a means for collaboration to facilitate change within an organization (Hoadley, 2012, pg. 288). Initially, the descriptive concept of CoP was adopted through a focus on individual learning for professional growth. With a growing focus on learning and problem solving to better the organizations and communities, a prescriptive practice has taken hold.

Although the concept of CoPs started as a learning theory that encouraged social learning and empowerment of new employees, it has recently developed into more broad management tool (Li et al., 2009, pg.7). If a CoP is viewed as a management tool, it becomes challenging to apply (pg. 7). One of the issues that makes the concept of communities of practice, as a management tool, challenging to apply is, “the tension between satisfying individuals’ needs for personal growth versus the organization’s bottom line” (pg.7). Viewing a CoP as a management tool can also limit the benefits that CoPs may offer (pg. 7). Benefits, such as the personal growth, that members may acquire within a CoP would be partial when a CoP is viewed as a management tool. As Li et al. (2009) explains, “this potentially limits our ability to [view] CoPs as a strategy to improve clinical practice”. Therefore, it is important to maintain the focus of a CoP to benefit the individual learner as well as the organization, group, or field of practice.

Guldberg & Mackness (2009) point out that in the more recent works from Wenger, focus is placed on the identity of individuals within the CoP (pg. 529). Guldberg & Mackness (2009) state that Wenger (1998) argues that, “individual’s identity is fluid [,] it is formed and re-formed throughout people's lives” (pg. 529). The community members are working through and altering their identity as they move from the outside

of the group as 'newbies' inwards as they become more experienced (pg. 529). As members gain skills and experience, they begin to pass their new found knowledge to others, completing the cycle of knowledge sharing.

The concept of communities of practice has evolved and continues to evolve to improve current practices and provide increased opportunities for individuals to collaborate across the globe. Guldberg & Mackness discuss the change in definition of a CoP, as now it is "viewed as a management tool through which geographically dispersed teams and groups can be connected" (pg.529). This new view of CoPs has led to the rise of virtual CoPs. By embracing the use of technology in a CoP:

functional working groups can consist of team members located in various cities, states, and countries. Technology bridges geographic distances, and virtual communities of practice (VCoP) enable virtual workgroups to gain knowledge by using the virtual environments to reinforce an organization's collective operational knowledge (Barret & Chrisentary, 2015, pg. 25).

These virtual communities of practice offer access to individuals that may be interested in becoming members but are not geographically close. As Wenger et al. (2005) explain, "the web has enabled people to interact in new ways across time and space and form new breeds of distribution yet interactive communities of practice" (as cited in Guldberg & Mackness, 2009, pg.529).

### Elements of a Community of Practice

To create successful communities of practice there are many factors that need to be considered. Two main factors are: 1) A clear unified focus that is important and relevant to the practice of the community, and 2) Defined leadership to help build commitment, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas (Nemec & LaMaster, 2014, pg. 337). Nemec & LaMaster (2014) explain, "Focus topics need to be important to the community members and relevant to the work itself (the "practice")" (pg. 336). A clear unified focus is important as it provides a community of practice with direction (pg.336). Defined leadership is also essential in a community of practice (pg. 337). McDermott (2001) suggests that this leader should be a well-respected community member, as through this respect the leader will be able to coordinate the CoP (as cited in Nemec & LaMaster, 2014, pg. 337). As Lencioni (2002) explains, "The leader's role is central to facilitating personal relationships among community members [,] [this] build[s] commitment, [and] promote[s] collaboration...a sign of an effective team" (as cited in Nemec & LaMaster, 2014, pg. 337). Therefore, a clear focus and defined leadership are essential to ensure the effectiveness and success of a community of practice.

To create a successful community of practice members should select themselves, and not be forced or selected to be a part of the community of practice (Seibert, 2015, pg. 71). If members are required to commit to a CoP, they will not be as invested in their own contributions and the overall success of the CoP (pg.71). Seibert (2015) highlights that community members must be willing to join the community of practice and not forced, as this allows members to be self-motivated and fully contribute to improve the practice (pg. 71). Lee et al. (2015), explain that there are extrinsic

motivators that can prompt individuals to be a part of a community of practice (pg. 42). These extrinsic motivators are individual rewards including better promotion opportunities, better work assignments, or better job performance reviews (pg. 42). An extrinsic motivator for individuals to participate in a community of practice would arise from the value or importance an organization puts on participating (pg. 42). If an organization places a high value on an individual's involvement in a community of practice, an individual may be motivated to take part, to be able to gain better job performance reviews or an increased chance of a promotion.

Like communities of practice, Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP), should also have strong leaders to help form relationships among members that do not have the benefits of face-to-face connections. Barret & Chrisentary (2015) state that a "VCoP requires leaders who have the ability to build trust, motivate, and connect and create personal bonds with individuals through technology" (pg. 25). As building strong relationships is an essential aspect in communities of practice, especially in VCoP where members cannot experience face to face interactions. Furthermore, Barret & Chrisentary (2015) elaborate on the importance of transformational leadership, which requires an individual to communicate clearly, be highly motivated and encourage motivation throughout the group, as well as encouraging team collaboration (pg. 27). This individual must have strong leadership skills, which will help promote respect and motivation between all members. That being said Guldberg & Mackness (2009) also "recognized that the shift to increasingly virtual communities of practice would bring challenges to some of the basic principles of communities of practice, such as experience of 'togetherness' across time and space." (pg.529). Therefore, the unique

nature of virtual communities requires a leader to ensure the members bond together and are empowered as a team.

Similarly, in virtual communities of practice, necessary elements must be considered to ensure the community can form connections and build relationships. Guldberg & Mackness (2009) explain that emotions run high as groups form and new members navigate the community and form connections, these emotions can run higher with the use of technology (pg. 532). Some members may not be as tech savvy as others, thus they feel frustrated when experiencing technical difficulties. Furthermore, members of virtual communities of practice need to experience connectivity among the group. “This notion of connectivity [is] related to the feelings of belonging to a community” (pg. 532). Guldberg & Mackness (2009) state that participants in a VCoP are most successful when they have the ability to “cope with the technology, adapt their learning strategies to align with the learning environment, effectively manage emotion and learning tensions, make conceptual and social connections and establish an online identity” (pg. 534). Therefore, when participants of CoPs or VCoP have the elements needed to foster success, they are able to gain the full experience of communities of practice.

### Benefits and Challenges of Communities of Practices

Some benefits of communities of practice include: improved communication, balance between individual and group learning, effective utilization of time, pooling resources, break down of cultural barriers, sharing of knowledge, and creating a sense of ownership (Berry, 2011, pg. 8). Through these improvements a community can foster

increased problem solving and decision making in the workplace (Seibert, 2015, pg. 72). Satisfaction and value can also arise from the collaboration and work members are a part of, within communities of practice (pg. 72). As members acquire new found knowledge, they feel satisfied because they feel they have learned something new. Also, members feel valued because they are part of the decision making process (pg. 72). When members are part of the decision making process they feel belonging, which in turn leads to the sense of value.

Through participating in CoPs, members gain short term benefits as well as long term benefits. Members are able to receive support for challenges they bring forward, build confidence, as well as gain access to expertise (Region of Waterloo, 2015, para. 6). Long term benefits that members gain are personal development and professional identity. Members are also able to network with others in the field (Region of Waterloo, 2015, para. 6). Also, members are able to acquire a sense of belonging by sharing their work experience (Barret & Chrisentary, 2015, pg. 26).

Organizations also gain benefits for participating in CoPs. Their short term benefits are that CoPs involve provide solving, knowledge sharing, as well as collaboration across units (Region of Waterloo, 2015, para. 7). As for the long term benefits, organizations gain strategic capabilities, retention of talents, as well as being able to keep up to date on new activity/news etc. (Region of Waterloo, 2015, para. 7). Organizations involved in CoPs gain value and significance, as these opportunities for collaboration result in new and improved products or services for the organization (Lee et al., 2015, pg.41). Therefore, communities of practice can be beneficial to organizations, communities, and individual members.

Similar to CoPs, virtual communities of practice have many benefits that may be experienced by members. Firstly, virtual communities of practice can further enhance the connections and collaboration among members. According to Hoadley (2012), technology enables members of communities of practice to be able to represent and reorganize information in various formats (pg. 295). This allows members with different learning styles to benefit, as they are able to understand information in a way that is suitable to them. Technology can also be an avenue to connect members of a community of practice (pg. 296). For example, individuals from different countries that cannot meet in person can create a community of practice online by corresponding through various social networking databases. This encourages individuals who have similar practices to connect together and form a virtual community of practice (pg. 297).

Cox (2005), suggests that there are many factors that can limit the success of a CoP (pg.6). The first factor that can limit the success of a CoP is frequent reorganisation (pg. 6). This can be a problem because members of a CoP cannot form relationships and sustain them, thus they do not have enough opportunities to collaborate amongst each other. Another factor is employment of temporary or part time staff (pg. 6); this is a problem because these individuals are unable to accomplish their tasks based on their schedules. Individualized work is also identified by Cox (2005) as a factor that can limit the success of a CoP (pg. 6). Individualized work decreases the chances members have to connect with each other and increase their knowledge. Competitive and time pressurized environments can also create conflict through collaboration in a CoP (pg. 6). This creates a stressful and unwelcoming environment for all members of the CoP as they feel pressured because of these circumstances.

Like CoP, there are also potential challenges that come from virtual communities of practice. Li et al. (2009) refers to “issues regarding privacy, user-friendliness of online technologies, and the ability to access a computer can become fatal barriers to an individual’s ability to participate” (pg. 3). Other factors that could become barriers are in the bonds made within the group. While it is important for members to work together and form connections, pre-existing bonds among members can hinder the integration of newcomers, and “a community can also become a clique when relationships among members are so strong that they overshadow all other concerns” (pg.3). Very strong relationships between certain members could lead to other members feeling isolated. Li et al. also explain, without new learners a community can fall apart, it is the exchange of knowledge between the experts and the new learners that is the foundation of communities of practice (pg. 3). Without this rotation or cycle of knowledge renewal, the virtual community of practice will not foster change or improvements to the setting of practice.

### Conclusion

Establishing a community of practice enables communities to incorporate different perspectives throughout a field of practice. This allows members to learn and share knowledge amongst each other. Within a community of practice there are many elements that are needed to ensure the process runs smoothly. Collaboration opportunities, support, strong relationships, and commitment are all included. Through these elements members of a community of practice can experience the many benefits

of establishing a community of practice. However, with these benefits there may be challenges that arise. Many researchers have been able to contribute to the topic of communities of practice; through their research we are able to gain a deeper understanding of what is involved in communities of practice and their importance.

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