



Communities of Practice (CoP): Five Tips for Engagement

Maintaining a Community of Practice (CoP) is a lot like planting a delicate tree. At first the tree requires intensive care, patient cultivation, and constant attention. Likewise, with careful “gardening” for the first 2 years, an online CoP will eventually reach sustainability, with dynamic and engaged participation.



During the developmental stage, the leader or facilitator of an online CoP must: a) carefully manage communications with participants, b) designate roles and teams, c) create interesting events, and d) support, expedite, and enrich the activities of CoP members.

Below are some suggestions from iCoHERE on how to keep your CoP members engaged through the creative use of your online collaboration tools.

1. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

a) You may want to consider a regular (somewhere between monthly and quarterly) **email newsletter** to your members that contains links and updates about your online CoP collaboration space. Be careful not to overload your members with too much.

Your short-term goal should be to encourage and entice people to your online space, while your long-term goal should be to reduce e-mail as the vehicle through which your CoP members communicate with each other.

b) **Announcements** within the website can be effective communication tools, especially since these can include attachments and polls to which members can respond. Ask a provocative question, and then take a poll of how members weigh in on the issue. They will probably come back to the website to see your report of the results of the poll.

c) Many established CoPs already **meet face-to-face** at a regional level once every year or two. The leader should ensure that part of the meeting is devoted to using the online collaboration tools together. Be sure to demonstrate new or under-used features, and take the time to gather questions or complaints.

d) Periodic **conference calls** can encourage CoP engagement for members who are widely dispersed. Try to sponsor conference calls at least once every quarter year.

e) **Use instant messaging** to facilitate networking with others who happen to be online. You can send instant text, or documents and photos related to things already in your CoP's online space.

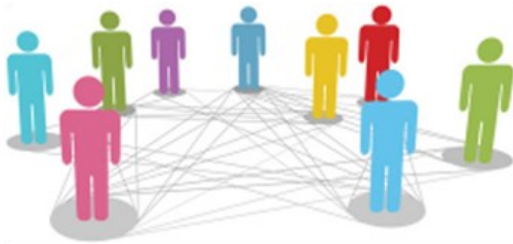
f) Try holding scheduled "**happ-E hour**" on a regular basis. Perhaps you can choose one Friday a month – the purpose is simply to socialize informally online, using a conference call or video but with no agenda other than to talk with your colleagues. Send or post images of yourself enjoying your happ-E hour with your fellow CoP members.

2. Distribute Roles & Responsibilities

By assigning roles and responsibilities to different CoP members, you can provide a sense of ownership. When members own a particular task, they are more likely to participate on a regular basis. Assigning leadership roles will help create a more vibrant learning environment and will reduce the burden on the CoP leaders to maintain the quality of material in your online collaboration tool. Roles and responsibilities can be given to members who are good at or attracted to a particular type of activity. Some possible roles are as follows:

- **Discussion Facilitator.** Encourage certain members to be in charge of particular discussions. Typically, there are subject matters that some members will be quite interested in: let them explore that interest by facilitating other members in a discussion. One of the key aspects of helping a CoP to grow is implicit or informal knowledge into explicit knowledge that can then be shared with a broader spectrum of people.
- **Historian / Secretary.** This person or group would be responsible for taking implicit (experiential) knowledge that has been shared in the site (often in discussion areas) and developing explicit knowledge resources. For example, they might produce memos or white papers based on information and experiences shared by community members on a certain discussion topic. Of course, this role cannot be filled until valuable content exists to be captured.
- **Subject-Matter Expert.** Recognize the special interests and achievements of members who can serve as resources for others. Encourage them to start blogs on the website and to write and publish articles, perhaps with research assistance from other members. Perhaps members already have subject documents available to share—they just need to be encouraged.
- **Link Mavens.** For those who like to research on the web, this is an ideal role. The links feature on the website can become a useful bookmarking tool for sites related to the CoP subject matter. Many beneficial blogs and websites on related topics are probably used regularly by various site members. Have someone collect, organize, and upload links to these to your CoP website.

- **Librarians.** The Resource Library on each CoP website should be in a constant state of adding content and refining organization of the folders in which they reside so members can easily access them all. Video presentations and graphics can be stored here also.
- **Graphics Gurus.** A CoP website will always be more appealing when enhanced with images, graphics, and icons. There are many places in a CoP site where graphics would make it more pleasing to the eye and more fun to navigate. Assign a graphics enthusiast to collect appealing images from the wide range available on the web into a folder in the Resource Library.
- **Photography Editor.** Although you already have a photo album in place on the CoP website, a photo buff might be interested in adding more albums and photos from your organization's events and projects from various locations and writing captions or starting discussions about them.



- **Social Secretary, or People Connector.** This important role might work to enhance the connections, reciprocity, and trust between members. They research the background of members, develop a sensitivity to group dynamics, and look for opportunities to link members to one another.

The key is simply to get different people to be responsible for different roles. More members become engaged and administrators need to do less.

3. Create a Schedule of Knowledge Events

By setting a schedule of presentations or “knowledge events,” you remind your members that the site is in constant and active use. More importantly, an established rhythm will allow participants to expect a certain pace of events and encourage them to participate more readily. Often members do not participate in a CoP website because they feel that there is little to no activity. By scheduling a **series** of stimulating online events, you will stimulate members to visit the site more frequently. If the events go well, members will also be more likely to begin using the CoP site for everyday knowledge management tasks as well.

Knowledge events should ideally be given by content experts or “celebrities” in your organization. Having a recognized speaker will make members more inclined to log in to the event. More importantly, a content leader’s presentation can add to the knowledge resources within the CoP site and can serve as the basis for ongoing discussion.

One of the simplest types of presentations that can be offered on your site is a **prerecorded “webinar”** or web-based seminar, which consists of a set of attractive slides with a recorded audio track and timed slide changes. A webinar can be rolled out initially as an “event” on your website, and can then become the focal point for a new discussion topic. These webinars can be produced at no cost.

Several types of live speaker events can be also hosted within an iCohere CoP website:

- **Webinar with Conference Call.** The members attending this type of online presentation watch a PowerPoint presentation and call into a conference line to hear the live audio. An unlimited number of members could log in to this type of presentation.
- **Live Chat Sessions with Content Experts.** Complementing webinars or simply as standalone events, text chats are an easy way to hold a live event in your CoP site. Live chats work best when expanding on some other community project. For example, if a community group were to launch a certain initiative, then the project leader would be an ideal candidate to give a live chat. Facilitators can and should participate in all live chats to field questions that participants might have and to get a sense of who is engaged.
- **Webinar Presentation with Live Video Streaming.** The members attending this type of online presentation would see a PowerPoint presentation of your speaker's remarks as well as a streaming video of him/her in an upper corner while he/she was speaking. Participants would also be able to enter questions online to be addressed during and/or after the presentation.

4. Capture Stories

Staff members in your CoP may have a plethora of stories and narratives consisting of their experiences in the field, their biographies, and their visions for the future. This vast resource can inspire CoP members to participate. By allowing people to share personal vignettes or narratives, you will engage them and others in the CoP. Two key ways to capture stories in the site are the following:



- **Create a Discussion Area on personal project narratives.** Give members the opportunity to provide their narratives from work on a special project as a new discussion topic in the site. Such narratives often have much implicit knowledge built into them and reading these stories may become a key resource for other members. Headline the stories appropriately and add graphics so that members can easily find what is most useful for them.
- **Create a web form to capture narratives.** The iCohere web form tool in your website allows the creation of fields in a form for structured story collection.

5. Require Participation

Sometimes it is useful to *require* members to participate in activities on the website. These requirements need not be stringent. Much like the optional “Scavenger Hunt” feature helps people learn how to use various modules in an iCohere site, simple requirements can get members into the site and actively using its tools and resources. Several low-key requirements might include the following:

- **Post key documents in the site rather than e-mailing them out.** By posting key documents in the site, you force members to enter the site to retrieve them. When a key document is uploaded, you can send an Announcement from the site letting everyone know that it is now available in the Resource Center.
- **Require members to comment on a presentation.** A requirement after viewing a presentation might be posting about it in the appropriate discussion area.
- **Grant access to certain groups based on a set criterion.** Although you generally want to make resources readily available to all members, certain resources can be given VIP status, so to speak, by setting site permissions such that only members who meet specified criteria will be added to the groups that can see these documents.
- **Give an assignment.** Although the idea of giving colleagues homework might not appeal to all, some people respond very well to “assignments.” We have found that an assignment can sometimes inspire further participation.

Remember: Passive site members are still engaging

Most learners in an online CoP are passive, which means they are not posting or offering feedback to the site. Although passive, these learners comprise the bulk of the membership in any fledgling CoP and should be thought of as full participants. They may not be posting, but they are still engaging.

In the start-up phase of a CoP, facilitators and administrators must keep the site up-to-date and adjust the content regularly so that the site always appears fresh and active. It is unlikely that very many members will be online at the same time. However, when they do log in, they should feel that others have been on recently and are actively participating. Before long, your passive participants will connect with an interesting topic in the site and start to engage.

Summary

Many different tools are available to encourage engagement. Some are mentioned above; many are to be discovered. It’s almost an art form, discovering and creating ways to get people engaged. Much of it depends on the audience and what their expectations are, what they need, and what they are willing to do. Each CoP is different and requires a different set of engagement tools. Hopefully some of the above tips will be useful for yours.

More information about Communities of Practice can be found at:

<http://www.icohere.com/webcommunities.htm>



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