in practice:

U.S. Army: Sharing Lessons from the Field

It began gradually, organically. Some young, noncommissioned officers wanted to share their experiences, talk about their jobs and learn from one another. At first, they met in person, but as their group became larger and outgrew a local venue, their connection expanded to the Internet, and the U.S. Army's first community of practice was born.

"What had been going on for about five years in a number of different Web boards and discussion forums, this group of officers put some form to using commercial, free, on-the-Web software," said Michael Prevou, senior knowledge adviser to the Army's Battle Command Knowledge Management Systems and founder and president of Strategic Knowledge Solutions. "They developed an Army community of practice focused on being a company commander. We know that today as companycommand.com."

Prevou said this grassroots effort began a widespread axis of communities of practice, and other departments quickly took advantage of the inexpensive, user-friendly method to connect Army personnel. The forums that sprang up also came at a perfect time to aid the organization in managing the glut of information it was getting from electronic command and control systems.

"Just after the war started with Afghanistan and Iraq, somewhere in the 2003 to 2004 time frame, we started to notice that our organizational structures within the Army needed help managing the knowledge being generated and captured," Prevou said. "It was also about lessons learned, and I think this was one of the big drivers on this sort of second axis — how do we get a lesson from a patrol in the field and share that lesson with the rest of the Army very, very quickly, not so the next unit can have it six months or a year from now, but so that the next patrol can have it hours from now?"

In 2004, Prevou said Lt. Gen. Thomas F. Metz, then commander on the ground in Iraq, funded a program to formalize the Army's organizational knowledge requirements and develop the procedures and people needed to help the Army manage knowledge more effectively. This effort became known as the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS).

In addition to the more visible benefits regarding knowledge management, such as reducing time from months to hours to share field lessons, Prevou said the formal adoption of communities of practice also enabled Army personnel to learn better.

"What are the tools that I need to do my job? Where do I find them? How do I get that information? Where do I keep it? How do I share it with other practitioners doing my job?" he said. "Then, there's the ever-present and continuing need for leader development and what we call professional forums. Whether they are cooks, mechanics, company commanders or operations officers in a particular size unit, each has specific job requirements. We have built the structure for these professional forums around those practitioners and the jobs that they do."

There are about 60 professional forums on the Army rolls, but the number changes weekly, as forums are added, or those that have reached the end of their life cycle are turned over or archived. Within those forums, there are hundreds of communities of practice. Prevou estimates that about a quarter of the Army population participates in some type of professional forum or community of practice.

"That participation is born out of the necessity to be able to share very quickly," he said. "Until recently, with the advent of the Internet and the right kind of tools, we've been unable to do this very efficiently. Even before we created BCKS, we probably had close to 20,000 people involved in communities, but none of them were joined together and coordinated."

BCKS provides the software and server on which to run a community, as well as training, procedures, technical expertise to set them up, coaching and professional facilitation. Prevou said BCKS has about two dozen professional facilitators who help people start their forums and act as forum facilitators. Facilitators support the forum leader and do a lot of the administrative functions and training needed to grow the community.

He also said the community grew from about 20,000 to more than 80,000 in less than three years, which was due, in some part, to that facilitation.

The Army measures the impact of its knowledge-sharing activities on three levels: individual, community and organization.

"It's very important to measure and line up the objectives of each smaller community of practice or professional forum to achieve a larger Army end state: improved leadership, improved professional development, improved efficiencies, even lives saved," Prevou said.

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ASQ's structure consists of a headquarters staff that facilitates the day-to-day business of the society, industry-focused divisions that are led by member leaders and member-led sections that are based on where members live. In each division and section, there are many chair positions, including an education chair.

In the ongoing initiative, ASQ is developing roles, responsibilities and process for the education chairs and enabling them with tools to collaborate and leverage society intellectual capital. In short, the quality profession is applying quality tools to enhance the knowledge base of the profession and to remove waste in the sharing of professional knowledge.

So, how do you get started? First, determine the need for establishing a community of practice. What is the purpose of the community of practice? If the community is simply to maintain professional awareness, then its structure should remain simple. But if the objective is to effectively manage the intellectual power of a community, organization or value stream, then processes and procedures should be considered to ensure success. Figure 3 provides an idea of how the level of process rigor relates to effectively managing knowledge in communities of practice.

But don't do something because it sounds like something you should be doing — make sure you truly understand the purpose, objective and value of the activity in which you are about to engage. Then, make sure the right people are involved and that they have the resources to do it correctly. With communities of practice, if it's done right, the return on investment is huge. ∎

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