Questions to Ask Before Starting a Community

By Mike Hower, Chief Learning Officer

Communities have been called the “killer app” of organizational learning and knowledge management. While simple in concept, communities are difficult in execution. Many community programs never reach their full potential because of a failure to plan.

Here are a few things we ask pilot groups to consider before they even begin thinking about building a community (of any type). Developing good answers to these questions before starting to design a community will go a long way towards encouraging success.

The Community – A Focus on People

- **Who is the community for? What is the audience?**

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<th>Consider</th>
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<td>A group that works in a specific area of expertise (a practice).</td>
<td>a Community of Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>A general, loosely associated group.</td>
<td>a Community of Interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>A team or project group.</td>
<td>a Community of Purpose</td>
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- **How do the potential members of the community collaborate today?**

How members collaborate pre-community is critical to community success. Do team members freely collaborate in a knowledge-sharing culture, or is the organization stovepiped where individuals hoard knowledge (out of fear of losing competitive edge)? It is very difficult break into a stovepiped, hoarding culture without dedicated efforts focused on facilitation and knowledge exchange.

- **Will members participate voluntarily, or is participation mandatory?**

If participation is mandatory, consider creating a Community of Purpose with specific performance goals. If participation is voluntary, consider creating a Community of Practice or Interest. The best communities are voluntary; however, incentives can be established to improve participation.

- **How many people would potentially participate, and what would draw them to the community to discuss the practice?**

For Communities of Practice to be effective, you need active participants. Remember the 90-9-1 rule—you always need the 1 to get the 9…and the 9 to get the 90. The 1 is often a full- or half-time facilitator focused on the topic. If there is no draw to support discussion, consider an unfacilitated Community of Interest to support ad hoc conversation.

The Practice – Is there a Need for Community?

- **Is there a specific practice (area of expertise/subject), or does the community address a general topic?**

For general topics, a Community of Interest or a Knowledge Center (document library) is often best.
• **Do potential members talk about the topics in the practice informally (when they have simple questions), professionally (as in to solve problems or build knowledge), or to achieve goals (to complete projects)?**

  Communities of Interest are best used for informal, ad hoc knowledge transfer or to answer simple questions. Communities of Practice are best used to solve problems, transfer knowledge, or create new knowledge in a specific area. Communities of Purpose are focused on achieving specific goals (i.e., completing projects).

• **Are the job requirements of people in this community well established, or are members required to gather, analyze, and synthesize data and information to solve problems and perform non-routine actions?**

  Communities of Practice work best for solving problems, transferring knowledge between experts, and creating new knowledge in a specific area. They are less effective for explicit tasks, or areas of knowledge that are well defined. For these types of practices, consider creating a Knowledge Center (document library).

• **How do potential members find information in the practice area today?**

  If people find information by asking others versus going to books or other library-style resources, then a community may be helpful.

• **How often do members have questions about the practice area, or how often do members need to find resources on this topic?**

  More is better. If it is only once a year or rarely, then you probably don’t want to invest the effort in creating a community.

**The Domain – Identifying Knowledge**

• **What topics will the community collaborate on? Why are these topics important?**

  This gets at the heart of the domain. If your organization can’t decide on this, then it’s over before you start.

• **Do you have a body of knowledge about these topics that is advanced through discussion and collaboration?**

  If not, then you should consider a Community of Interest or a Knowledge Center (document library) instead of a Community of Practice.

• **Is there a core body of knowledge or expertise in this practice?**

  If so, where does it reside? Is it tacit (in people’s heads) or explicit (written down)? If there isn’t an explicit body of knowledge associated with the practice, then it may be hard to generate enough “seed” content to both get people interested in the community and keep them coming back for more.

  If there is a core body of knowledge, how will you get at it to “seed” the community? Good communities are “seeded” with key content (explicit knowledge) to get members interested and start a dialogue.
How much seed is required? More than can be consumed in a single browsing session. We typically recommend 100-200 pieces of explicit content addressing the entire practice domain of knowledge be available at launch. This makes the community instantly useful to new members.

The Organization - Designing for a Learning Culture

- **How does the organization learn today: in-house, online, formally, informally?**
  
  The learning culture of an organization is key to community success. Organizations that already have a social learning culture tend to develop communities that succeed. Organizations with structured, formal learning programs may find it difficult to create participation needed to drive effective communities.

- **Do you have an organizational sponsor that will support the community?**
  
  Building and sustaining a community can be a resource intensive task. An executive-level sponsor can provide motivation for members to participate and resources for effective facilitation.

- **How much time do you want to spend on this?**
  
  Building an effective community is a time-intensive task. Communities of Interest take less time than Communities of Practice, which take less time than Communities of Purpose.

- **How much time are your potential members able to spend in the community?**
  
  Some organizations are project-based, meaning they need to have billable hours to spend participating in communities. This is often hard to do.

- **Are potential members co-located or distributed?**
  
  This determines whether a live or virtual community is needed. Live communities can be very effective if an entire team is co-located in a single facility.

- **If a virtual, or online, community is indicated, how comfortable are potential members with technology?**
  
  Older workforces don’t always take to online communities as well as younger members. If training is required, what will that training look like? Who will develop it? How will it be conducted?

- **For virtual communities, do you have an IT platform that supports community behaviors?**
  
  Many IT platforms focus on content management. This focus doesn’t provide the needed social or collaborative tools required to make communities work. Good community platforms include robust implementations of collaborative tools, including: threaded discussions, expertise location, ideation, content voting/social validation, presence indication, and synchronous conferencing.

These questions are a great place to start a conversation and raise awareness of how sound community design practices can help your organization.

To learn more about communities and how they can help your organization, check out our free preview of *Everything You Need to Know about Communities of Practice* at [www.StrategicKS.com](http://www.StrategicKS.com).

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