A Framework for Creating and Sustaining Communities of Practice

An APQC overview

Figure 1 shows APQC’s framework defining an enterprise-wide approach to communities of practice (CoPs). This framework provides best practices across the entire community life cycle, from planning and positioning a community program to designing, launching, and sustaining effective communities.

APQC’s Framework for Creating and Sustaining Communities of Practice

The remainder of this article provides detailed descriptions of the four primary stages of the framework: align to business strategy, plan CoP strategy, design and launch, and sustain and evolve.
ALIGN TO BUSINESS STRATEGY

Strategic positioning for communities revolves around three elements essential to a successful enterprise-wide approach: a link to key business strategies, the formation of a core group to manage and deploy the community strategy, and a model for funding. The strongest strategic position for a CoP program is at the sweet spot between business drivers (strategy), pain points (need), and passion (support).

APQC has found that the most effective communities are woven deeply into the fabric of the organization: functionally, by discipline, and by strategic issue. Many firms have established and positioned a formal, enterprise-wide center of excellence whose charter is to promote CoP consistency, health, and economies of scale. In addition, APQC has found that business units and functions are assuming a major role in funding communities.

PLAN COP STRATEGY

Strategic alignment is linked closely to strategic planning, which helps build the relationships, assessments, and business case for communities. Planning is also instrumental in engaging IT and other stakeholders in the process. Best-practice organizations use an explicit link to business strategy as a key criterion for determining which communities to support. Innovation—an important business objective for most companies—is also used as a criterion for establishing communities. Although creating innovation solutions or service lines is a key function of many communities, there is still a strong focus on sharing best practices, producing and refining documentation, and capturing lessons learned.

DESIGN AND LAUNCH

The tools and methods for successfully designing and launching communities have become robust and repeatable. Leading organizations have explicitly defined the responsibilities of community leaders and expanded training and mentoring opportunities for various community roles.

Just as organizations have gone global, so have their communities. This means that technological, language, and cultural differences may need to be addressed.

SUSTAIN AND EVOLVE

Processes for sustaining communities and enhancing them over time have become robust, repeatable, efficient, and effective. Best-practice organizations recommend assessing community alignment with business and CoP goals annually. Most leading firms do not rely solely on automated tools for community metrics. Instead, they go to the source—the people—to determine what works, what doesn't, and what should be changed; they then calibrate this qualitative data with activity measurements from the system. APQC recommends using a combination of member satisfaction measures, knowledge-sharing activity measures, process measures, and business outcomes to assess the value of investments in communities.
Best-practice organizations use their measurement systems and tools to help manage the ongoing processes of communities. By watching leading indicators such as content "freshness," member participation, and the number of visitors to community Web pages, the CoP support groups can intervene quickly when problems arise. Finally, these groups also use their measurement tools and health assessments to determine when a CoP has run its natural course and warrants decommissioning.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
This article is designed to introduce APQC’s community framework and provide an overview of its four stages. More in-depth information about building and sustaining communities can be found in the best practices reports *Sustaining Effective Communities of Practice* (2010) and *Using Communities of Practice to Drive Organizational Performance and Innovation* (2005).

ABOUT APQC
For more than 30 years, APQC has been on the leading edge of improving performance and fostering innovation around the world. APQC works with organizations across all industries to find practical, cost-effective solutions to drive productivity and quality improvement. We are a member-based nonprofit currently serving more than 500 organizations in all sectors of business, education, and government.

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