

KM Concepts: Communities of Practice [Part 1] (8 in a series)



As organizations grow in size, geographical scope, and complexity, it becomes increasingly important to enable the cross-functional flow of critical and relevant knowledge across the organization.

Sponsorship and support of communities of practice (CoP)—groups whose members regularly engage in sharing and learning on common interests—can improve individual, team, and organizational performance.

More specifically, a CoP can be defined as a group of individuals:

- who voluntarily come together for a shared purpose
- whose collective action can significantly impact organizational and individual performance
- whose ongoing interaction provides a sense of identity and a mechanism for mentoring and personal development
- who identify themselves as members of the community
- whose interaction is expected to last while it serves their common purpose and enhances their relationships
- who engage in regular and, often, scheduled activities such as meetings, seminars and other interactions where they share what they know.

There is often confusion between the workings of a CoP and the workings of a team. While similar at first glance, they are different in many important aspects. The figure to the right contrasts teams and CoPs. While both exist to add value, they do so in different ways and for different reasons.

Teams	Communities of Practice
Driven by deliverables <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared goals and results • Value defined by charter • Value in result delivered 	Driven by value <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared interest or practice • Value discovered/evolves • Value in ongoing process
Defined by task <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdependent tasks • Clear boundaries 	Defined by knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdependent knowledge • Permeable boundaries
Develops through a work plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone contributes • Managed objectives through objectives & workplan 	Develops organically <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variable contributions • Managed by making connections
Bound by commitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint accountability • Based on explicit agreement • Team leader or manager 	Bound to identify <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reciprocal contributions • Based on trust • Core group/coordinator

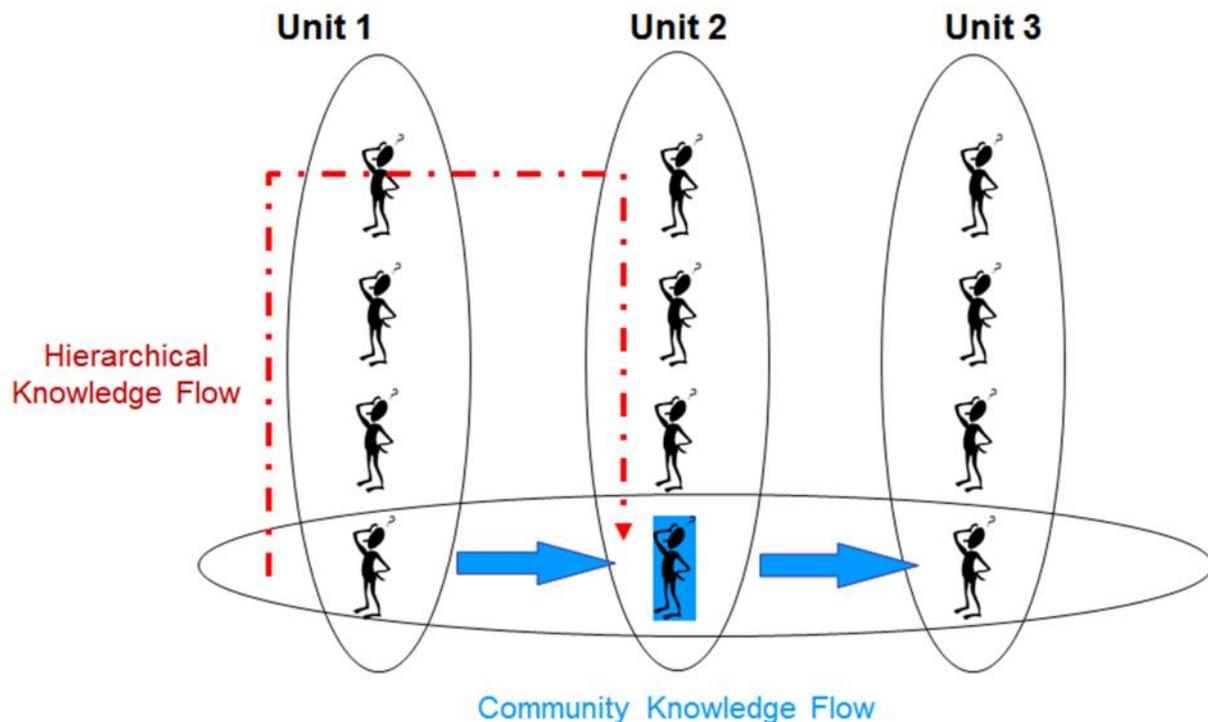
There is one key understanding about a community of practice (CoP) that I believe is most important. The concept of community has to do much more with the behavior than with the online representation of the community. So, having a website or where members post documents and other artifacts may not really be considered a CoP unless ongoing behavior that supports the transfer of knowledge to improve individual performance is part of the activity.

Source: E. Wenger

The ability to move knowledge across an organization, across boundaries within an organization, is greatly enabled through Communities of Practice. Consider the figure below.

Knowledge flows vertically within an organization (**hierarchical knowledge flow**) as part of the normal “command and control” structure within the organization. With communities of practice enabled and working within an organization, the members of the community, who often work within separate units within the organization, enable the horizontal (**community knowledge flow**) flow of knowledge across the boundaries of the organization. So when a community member learns something new or creates new knowledge within their own unit, this knowledge is now available to be shared across the community to members in the other units. This also works the other way. New knowledge learned or created as a result of community activities is available to be shared across all other units through their community members. This adds great value in improving the flow of knowledge within and across an organization to improve overall organization performance.

“Knowledge that does not flow has no value.”



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Next: Communities of Practice (Part 2)