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Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

Communities of Practice 2.0 **May 2007- Jeanne C. Meister**

“If you want to go fast, travel alone, but if you want to go far, travel together.”

– *African proverb*

Communities of practice are being reinvented for Web 2.0 as a growing number of jobs require complex skills. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that over the next two years, knowledge-intensive jobs will grow three times as fast as the employment rate in general.

This is all changing as companies relaunch communities of practice as a way to harness the collective wisdom of employees. The power behind communities of practice is to engage employees to become both consumers and contributors of knowledge.

One organization that has taken a lead in this area is Defense Acquisition University (DAU). Its evolution from knowledge management repository to knowledge net worker is impressive. Since launching communities of practice in 2003, there are now:

- 13 communities of practice.
- 25 special-interest areas, which distribute knowledge among various segments of the workforce.
- 23,681 registered accounts, totaling in excess of 2 million page views per year.

What's more, this level of activity is grounded in a 5 percent to 6 percent participation rate. I recently asked Jill Garcia, DAU knowledge project officer, about the university's transformation in this area. Three lessons are worth sharing here.

Integrate Communities of Practice into the Real Work of the Business

Communities of practice at DAU originally were developed to assist program management teams to perform their jobs more effectively through knowledge sharing. Since its release, it has expanded to become an umbrella system to support communities, covering all career fields. Communities start as an outgrowth of planning meetings with senior leaders to understand business needs and challenges in the marketplace. This ensures communities of practice have a "reason for being" and support organizational goals.

Train Potential Members on the Power of Engagement

Ensuring all potential members understand the vision and mission of a community of practice is tantamount to its success. A detailed implementation and training guide is one of the first documents created to jump-start a community of practice effort. It is important to remember, though, that the heart of a training effort is in the processes, commitment and overall linkage to performance management. For example, the DAU guide trains faculty in how to launch and facilitate a community. But behind the training guide is a tight linkage to performance management, as faculty members are evaluated on their level of engagement in the community. Metrics such as the frequency and level of contribution to a community are recorded and included in a faculty member's overall evaluation.

Develop Community Metrics, Not Just Activity Levels

It is easy to focus community metrics on activity levels such as number of page views, visits and active members. But don't forget to capture metrics on how communities contribute to increases in employee productivity, decreases in duplication of effort, decreases, errors and overall time impact on an organization's ability to innovate and react rapidly to market changes.

What's Next for Communities of Practice?

With this much interest in communities of practices, how will they evolve over the next two to three years ? One path being investigated is to integrate best practices into corporate learning programs and university core curricula. This might be what has been missing in past knowledge management efforts, as well as what takes us on the path of developing “Communities of Practice 2.0.”

Jeanne C. Meister is an author and independent learning consultant. She can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.