Communities of Practice

A Start-Up Kit

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Introduction

This CoP Start-Up Kit provides a variety of resources useful to people who are interested in sponsoring or starting up a Community of Practice (CoP). More general, background information about CoPs is provided in the CoP Overview, a separate segment of this Start Up Kit.

This section of the Start Up Kit includes the following:

- Introduction (p.1)

- A high level view of the Start Up Process (p.2).

- A diagram illustrating a strategy for migrating CoPs from their mainly informal status to a more formal basis as "Knowledge Communities" (p.3).

- Considerations for allocating resources between supporting existing CoPs and starting up new ones (p.4).

- A diagram depicting the life cycle of a CoP (p.5).

- General guidelines and broad action strategies for sponsoring and starting up a CoP (p.6).

- The qualities and characteristics to look for in spotting existing CoPs and to gauge success in starting up one (p.8).

- Factors to consider in picking a focal point around which to establish or organize a CoP (p.10).

- Considerations in marketing and promoting your CoP (p.13).
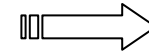
A High Level View of the Start Up Process

Preliminaries ⟹ **Start-Up** ⟹ **Behaviors & Activities** ⟹ **Shut Down**
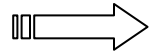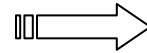
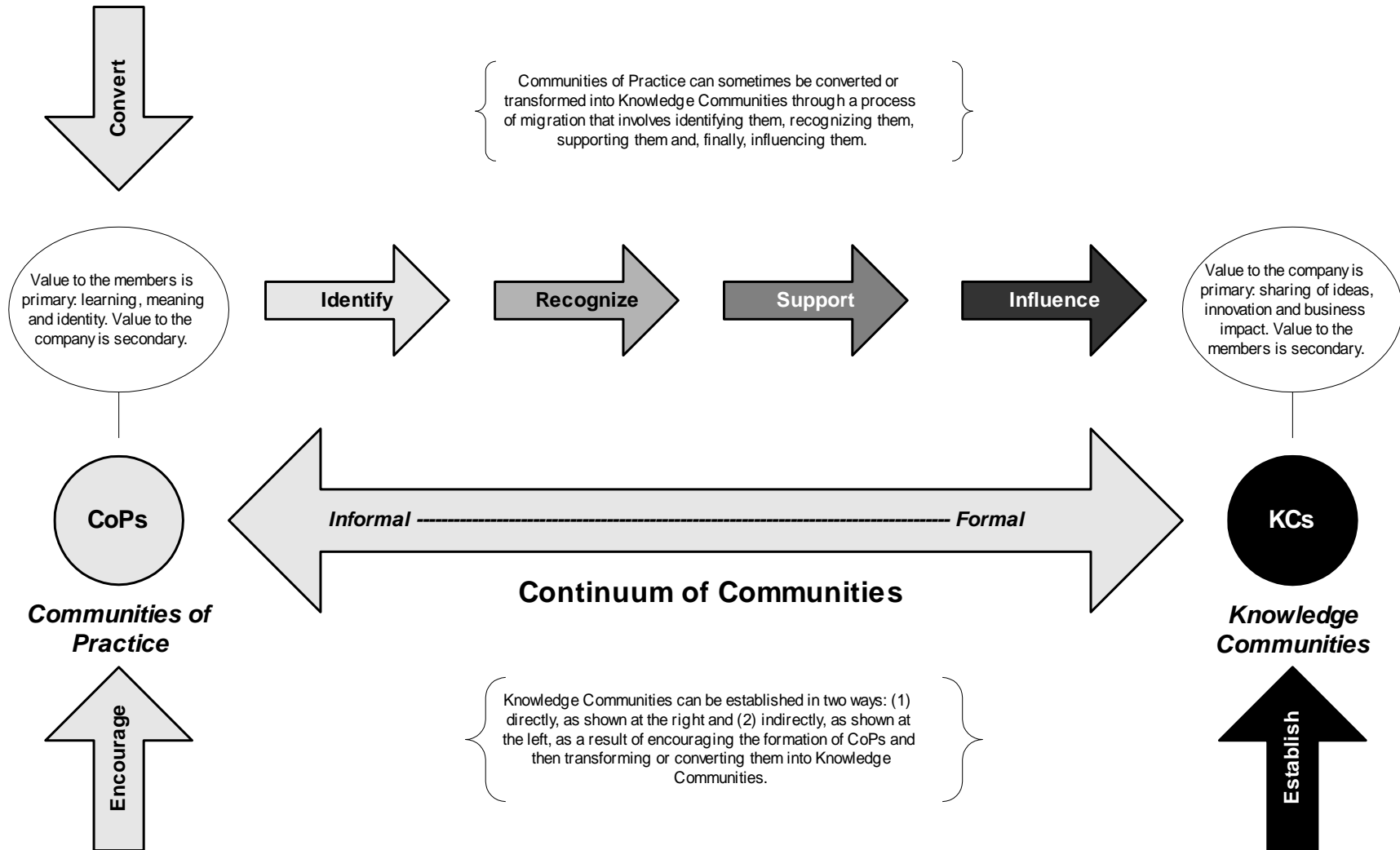| Preliminaries	Start-Up	Behaviors & Activities	Shut Down

• Identify the champion and the sponsor
• Pick a focal point
  - problem
  - practice area
  - process
• Prepare a business case
• Present a proposal (where resources or support will be needed)
  - value/benefits
  - sponsorship/support
  - interactions
  - outcomes
• Select/enlist members
• Get organized
	• Set the agenda
	  - issues/interests
	  - problems
	  - goals/outcomes
	• Devise interaction modes
	  - e-mail
	  - face-to-face meetings
	    - scheduled/unscheduled
	  - virtual meetings
	    - telephone/conference calls
	    - videoconferencing
	• Confirm and secure support requirements
	  - technology
	  - resources
	• Get underway
		• Share experiences and know-how
		• Discuss common issues and interests
		• Collaborate in solving problems
		• Analyze causes and contributing factors
		• Experiment with new ideas and novel approaches
		• Capture/codify new know-how
		• Evaluate actions and effects
		• Learning
			A shutdown decision may be made by the CoP members or by sponsoring management if this was a sponsored CoP

Migrating from Communities of Practice to Knowledge Communities

Convert

Communities of Practice can sometimes be converted or transformed into Knowledge Communities through a process of migration that involves identifying them, recognizing them, supporting them and, finally, influencing them.

Value to the members is primary: learning, meaning and identity. Value to the company is secondary.

Identify → **Recognize** → **Support** → **Influence**

Value to the company is primary: sharing of ideas, innovation and business impact. Value to the members is secondary.

CoPs

Informal --- *Formal*

KCs

Continuum of Communities

Communities of Practice

Knowledge Communities

Encourage

Knowledge Communities can be established in two ways: (1) directly, as shown at the right and (2) indirectly, as shown at the left, as a result of encouraging the formation of CoPs and then transforming or converting them into Knowledge Communities.

Establish

CoP Start Up and Support Considerations

Where should resources go?

Start Up   ## Support

Pros	Cons
Payoffs from a new CoP could be sizable	Takes time; not likely to see any immediate benefits CoPs can be seeded and nurtured but they can't be managed and they will serve their members' needs first

You have two basic options regarding Communities of Practice (CoPs):

(1) You can identify existing CoPs and work with them to determine the kinds of support that will benefit them and the company;

OR

(2) You can "plant some seeds" as it were and start up a CoP where none existed before.

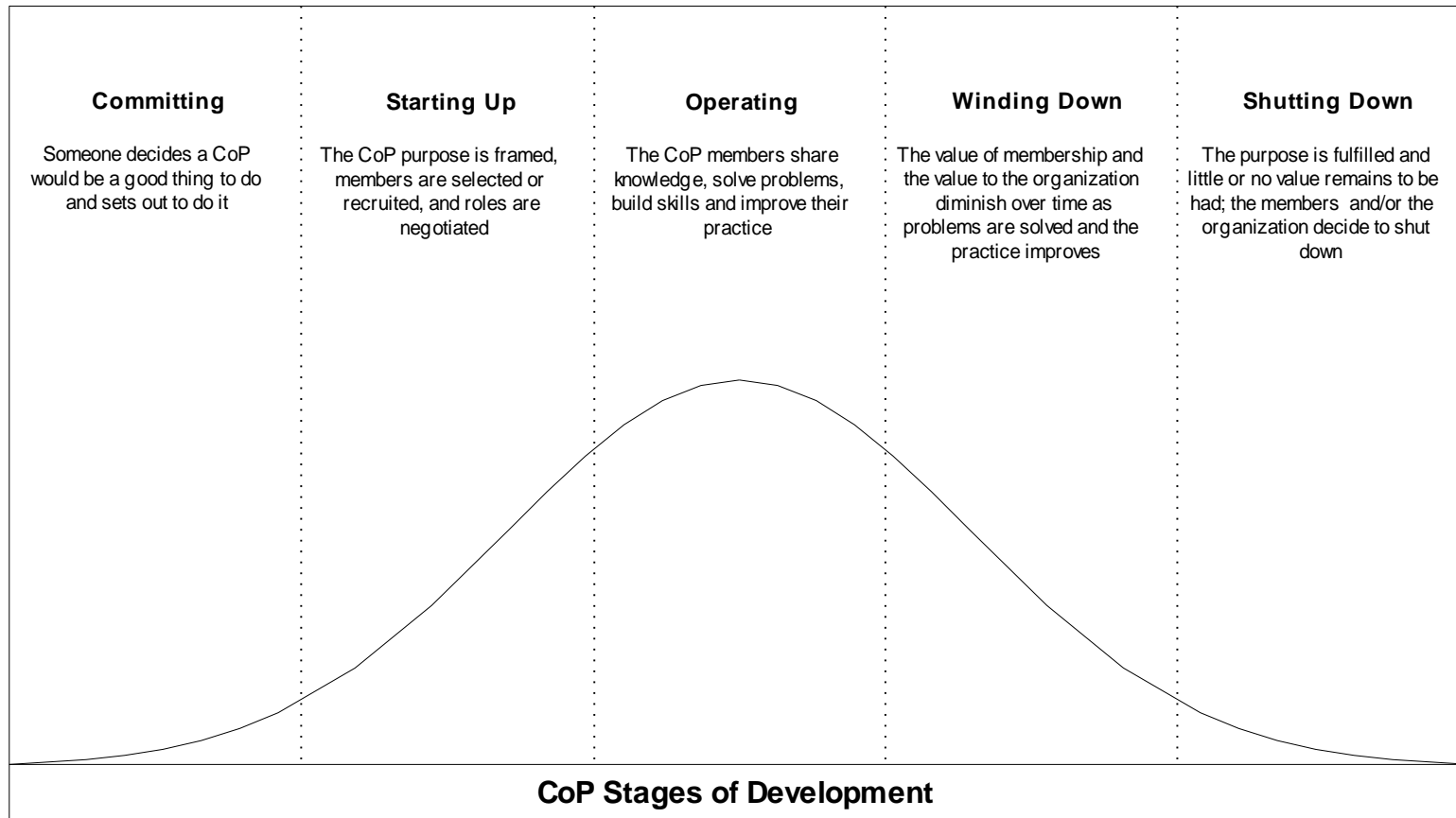There are pros and cons to both options as shown in the tables to the left and right.

Pros	Cons
Takes less time; success offers an early win Might be easier to build on what exists than to start from scratch	Runs the risk of driving the CoP underground and losing its benefits Gains might be less than those from starting up a new CoP

- ➤ **Pick A Focal Point**
- ➤ **Enlist Key People**
  - **- sponsor**
  - **- champion**
  - **- members**
- ➤ **Organize/Establish the CoP**
- ➤ **Negotiate Support**
- ➤ **Provide Support**
- ➤ **Manage Relationship**
- ➤ **Evaluate Relationship**
  - **- continue support**
  - **- withdraw support**

- ➤ **Identify Existing CoPs**
- ➤ **Make Contact**
- ➤ **Negotiate Support**
- ➤ **Provide Support**
- ➤ **Manage Relationship**
- ➤ **Evaluate Relationship**
  - **- continue support**
  - **- withdraw support**

The CoP Life Cycle

As you contemplate starting up a Community of Practice (CoP), keep in mind that a CoP has a distinct life cycle. Its duration might be long or short but it will go through the following stages.

Committing	Starting Up	Operating	Winding Down	Shutting Down
Someone decides a CoP would be a good thing to do and sets out to do it	The CoP purpose is framed, members are selected or recruited, and roles are negotiated	The CoP members share knowledge, solve problems, build skills and improve their practice	The value of membership and the value to the organization diminish over time as problems are solved and the practice improves	The purpose is fulfilled and little or no value remains to be had; the members and/or the organization decide to shut down

CoP Stages of Development

Factors to Keep in Mind When Sponsoring or Starting Up A Community of Practice

General Guidelines

- Use a "light hand." Mandates to "launch" CoPs may create resistance to what could be viewed as "the next corporate program to wait out."

- Keep things simple and as informal as possible. Levying demands and imposing strong expectations can quickly convert a CoP into a project team focused on tasks and deliverables. The team will drive toward satisfying the boss – instead of producing and sharing new knowledge.

- Remember that the members of a CoP are there to serve their own work-related ends as well as those of the organization. Remember, also, that the success of a CoP hinges on trust between and among its members.

- Do stay focused on the primary purposes of a CoP – to learn from each other as a result of sharing and collaborating.

- Resist the urge to reach for technology. Most CoPs can make do quite nicely with telephone calls, e-mails and occasional face-to-face meetings. A web page with links to relevant resources might be useful but the real action in a CoP is in the interactions among members. Start small and evolve.

Broad Action Strategies for Senior Managers and CoP Sponsors

- Send a continuing message reinforcing the business value of CoPs.

- Provide information to others about what CoPs are, how they operate, how to support and encourage them — and how to avoid undercutting them.

- Encourage appropriate professionals to form CoPs that focus on key business issues at the unit, sector, process, function, or company level.

- Seek out and subtly promote a few exemplar CoPs. Point to solid results and value added but don't overdo it.

- Spend time with a few existing CoPs to learn first-hand how they operate.

- Provide the necessary infrastructure and support (e.g., web pages, group email lists, time, meeting space, etc.).

- Provide and allow for face-to-face interactions as well as virtual or electronic communications.

- Leverage outside events (e.g., bring attendees together afterward and de-brief the sessions attended).

Communities of Practice

How to spot one and how to tell if you've succeeded in starting up one.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) should not be confused with teams or task forces. A task force ties to a specific assignment. Once that assignment is complete, the task force disbands. A team ties to some specific process or function. A team is often structured to include the different roles in a function or process. In teams, roles and tasks often vary; in a CoP they are generally the same.

A CoP ties to what is called a "practice." Three characteristics or qualities define a "practice":

1. *Joint Enterprise*. The members of a CoP are there to accomplish something on an ongoing basis; they have some kind of work in common and they see clearly the larger purpose of that work. They have a "mission."

2. *Mutual Engagement*. The members of a CoP interact with one another not just in the course of doing their work but to clarify that work, to define how it is done and even to change how it is done.

3. *Shared Repertoire*. The members of a CoP have not just work in common but also methods, tools, techniques and even language, stories and behavior patterns.

These three qualities or characteristics are intertwined and inseparable

What to Look For

Two indicators stand out from all the rest:

❑ People have a strong sense of identity tied to the community (e.g., as technicians, salespeople, researchers and so on).
❑ The practice itself is not fully captured in formal procedures; people learn how to do what they do and become seen as competent (or not) by doing it in concert with others.
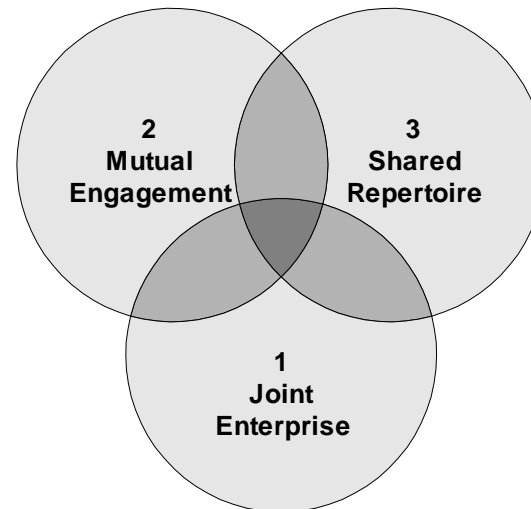
Indicators of A Community of Practice[1]

Indicators in addition to those on the previous page are listed below.

- ❑ Continuing mutual relationships – harmonious or conflicting (i.e., regular, work-related interactions, rough or smooth)

- ❑ Shared ways of doing things together (i.e., common practices and beliefs about best practices)

- ❑ A rapid flow of information between and among members (e.g., a really effective "grapevine")

- ❑ Quick diffusion of innovation among members (e.g., rapid transfer of best practices)

- ❑ Conversations come quickly to the point (i.e., no lengthy lead ins)

- ❑ Problems are quickly framed (i.e., a common understanding the milieu in which they all operate)

- ❑ A fairly broad consensus among the members about who is "in" and who is "out"

- ❑ A widespread and shared awareness of each others' competencies, strengths, shortcomings and contributions

- ❑ An ability, concentrated or distributed, to assess the effectiveness of actions taken and the utility of products produced

- ❑ Common tools, methods, techniques and artifacts such as forms, job aids, etc.

- ❑ Extensive use of "war" stories to communicate lessons learned

- ❑ A shared, evolving language (e.g., special terms, jargon, "shortcuts" such as acronyms, etc.)

- ❑ Behavior patterns that signify membership (e.g., gestures, postures, and even seating patterns in the cafeteria)

- ❑ Perspectives reflected in language that suggest a common way of viewing the world (e.g., shared analogies, examples, explanations, etc.)

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[1] Adapted from Chapter 5 in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* by Etienne Wenger.

Picking A Focal Point

Communities of Practice (CoPs) can be organized around any one of three aspects of work. The table below contains an example of each aspect.

Problem	The "CBT Switch" group was established to solve a particular business problem: reduce the cost of training as a result of increasing the number of instructor-led, classroom courses successfully converted to computer-based and web-based training.
Process	The Purchasing Power group is focused on leveraging the company's purchasing power on a global basis. Its focal point is the purchasing process.
Position	Although it is just getting started, the directors of Research in all subsidiaries have met once and, with encouragement and support, could form a CoP based on their positions in the company.

Comments

Depending upon your situation (i.e., Informal versus Sponsored CoP), there might or might not be a lot of choice about focal point. In any event, the choice of focal point carries some implications for proceeding. The comments that follow, then, are meant to stimulate thinking about your situation, not as a step-by-step procedure.

- A CoP formed to tackle a specific business problem will have clear expectations regarding business results. The CoP sponsor will be someone with a strong stake in having the problem solved, probably someone with organizational responsibility for the result. CoP members will be recruited for their expertise relevant to the problem and for their stake in seeing it solved. Resources to support the CoP are more likely to be made available when a specific business problem has been targeted. Relevant expertise will be driven by the nature of the problem and might be quite narrow or quite diverse.

- A CoP organized around a particular process will also have reasonably clear-cut expectations (e.g., improvements in process performance and sharing of internal best practices). Candidates for CoP members will tie to groups or units that play a role in the process. An important consideration in CoP membership is its coverage of the different roles or functions making up the process. The sponsor will most likely be the "process owner" or the equivalent. Resources to support the CoP are likely to be made available because, as is the case with a CoP tied to specific business problem, the link to business results is easy to see. Relevant expertise is likely to be quite varied owing to the fact that processes tend to include several functions and a broad range of expertise.

- A CoP focused on a particular position is the least likely of the three to have clear-cut expectations regarding business results. It is important, then, when setting out to establish a CoP focused on a position to spend some time up front thinking about the business results that might be obtained. The key factor to consider here is how better sharing of knowledge and best practices could benefit the business. The less clear the link to business results, the more difficult it will be to obtain resources to support the CoP. Members will all come from the position in question. The sponsor is likely to be someone who has an interest in seeing the practice associated with that position improved and who has available at least some resources to support the CoP. Finally, because the focal point is a position, the range of relevant expertise is likely to be quite narrow, namely, that associated with the job or position.

The gist of the comments above are summarized in the table on the next page.

	Problem	**Process**	**Position**
Results	Clearly defined.	Clearly defined.	Requires up front effort to define them.
Recruiting	Focused on people with expertise related to the problem and who have a stake in solving it.	Focused on people who are in roles or functions that are part of the process.	Focused on people who are in the position in question.
Resources	Business case is usually clear, making support for the CoP reasonably easy to obtain.	Business case is typically easy to define. This in turn eases the difficulty of obtaining support for the CoP.	Business case can be difficult to define, which makes resources difficult to obtain.
Relevant Expertise	Driven by the nature of the particular problem.	Typically associated with the roles and functions that make up the process.	Narrowest of all in that the relevant expertise ties to a specific position.

General Expertise

Two kinds of expertise transcend problem, process or position: project management skills and the selling of concepts, ideas and proposals. When recruiting CoP members, care should be taken to ensure that enough members have these two kinds of expertise to adequately support those occasions when the CoP will be presenting its ideas, concepts and proposals to others, especially those in management.

Marketing & Promoting Your CoP

CoPs don't just happen; it takes hard work to form and sustain them. Regardless of your role – Sponsor, Champion, Facilitator, Practice Leader, Information Integrator, or Member – all members of your CoP should take some responsibility for marketing and promoting their CoP. Each member individually, and your CoP collectively, will want to "market" the value of your CoP. This means *generating interest* in your CoP and demonstrating its value. Both members and non-members need to know the value of their CoP: what real benefits accrue to the members and the company from the investment of time, energy, and resources in the CoP?

Successful CoPs answer that question with clarity, and then market that answer to ensure the multiple constituencies understand the answer. Why exert the effort to market your CoP's results? Several reasons:

- To generate enthusiasm among current members

- To ensure continued resources and support from your sponsor(s)

- To stimulate interest in joining from high-potential prospective members

- To promote interest on the part of your colleagues in finding out what the members of your CoP have learned and, as a result, to share what they have learned with your CoP

- To better leverage the knowledge created and the learnings generated by your CoP

How to Market

As with other high-value services or products, the range of marketing methods is wide. Your CoP might well address this challenge itself as a topic of discussion, knowledge sharing, and best practices research. However, for starters, here are a few methods to consider:

- Write and publish brief articles or results descriptions in company or unit communication vehicles

- Create special communications: your CoP might produce and distribute its own publication once or twice a year

- Invite others to special briefings where your CoP members share their learnings and results

- Publish articles in external journals or magazines and then distribute them internally (after clearing through Corporate Public Relations)

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