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The Role of the Community Manager

*A Review of Community of Practice Management
Strategies that Maximize Engagement and Impact*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
The Underlying Concepts of Social Learning	4
Benefits of CoPs	6
CoP Technology	6
CoP Roles	8
CoP Roles: Formal	8
CoP Roles: Informal	9
The Community Manager (CM)	10
Community Manager Skills	11
Preparation Strategies	13
<i>Determine the Desired Outcomes for the CoP</i>	13
<i>Become Proficient in the CoP Domain</i>	13
<i>Influence Technical Decisions</i>	13
<i>Become Proficient in the CoP Environment</i>	14
<i>Understand the Maturity Process of a Community</i>	14
<i>Understand Issues Specific to Collaboration</i>	15
<i>Manage the Product</i>	16
<i>Map out a User-Friendly Process</i>	16
<i>Plan to Manage CoP Content</i>	17
<i>Communicate the Value of the CoP</i>	17
Implementation Strategies	18
<i>Manage the Product</i>	18
<i>Reinforce the Process</i>	18
<i>Troubleshoot Technical Issues</i>	18

THE COLLAGOLOGY INSTITUTE

<i>Train Members on the Platform and Process</i>	18
<i>Demonstrate Effective Online Communication Skills</i>	19
<i>Help Members Establish the Direction and Norms of the CoP</i>	19
<i>Build Trust</i>	20
<i>Nurture Relationships</i>	20
<i>Maximize Member Engagement</i>	21
<i>Participate in Discussions</i>	22
<i>Moderate and Edit Discussions</i>	23
<i>Minimize Undesirable Behavior</i>	24
<i>Manage CoP Content</i>	24
<i>Oversee Other Community Leaders</i>	24
<i>Connect Internal and External Voices</i>	25
<i>Recognize Accomplishments and Contributions</i>	25
Evaluation Strategies	25
<i>Evaluate the Health of the CoP</i>	26
<i>Evaluate the Impact of the CoP</i>	27
<i>Communicate the Health & Value of the CoP</i>	27
<i>Adjust CoP Based on Evaluation Results</i>	28
THE ENTERPRISE COMMUNITY MANAGER	28
CONCLUSION	29

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INTRODUCTION

Learning and development (L&D) within organizations has changed over the years as a consequence of the availability of collaboration tools, but many learning organizations have struggled to define the roles and skills needed to maximize the business impact of these tools in order to provide better results faster.

Due to technological innovation around social/collaborative tools, people are now able to share information and expertise more effectively and efficiently without regard to geographic barriers. When provided with the capability to connect more easily with colleagues, a person's role in their learning can expand to include being an active, co-creator of their own learning. To achieve this, L&D professionals need to also expand their skillset beyond just being the facilitators of learning—they also need to become the *enablers* of learning by providing and supporting the environment in which peer-driven learning can take place.

THE UNDERLYING CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL LEARNING

To fully understand what we mean by *social learning*, it is important to explain the terminology and concepts that are the groundwork of this paper. The key concepts that are referred to throughout include:

- Social learning
- Synchronous learning
- Asynchronous learning
- Community of Practice
- Collaboration

Social learning comes from a blending of the reference to social learning theories (such as those espoused by Albert Bandura and Lev Vygotsky) and social media. It refers to the acquiring of new knowledge or skills by virtue of a connection to socially constructed information or knowledge on the Internet. Social learning revolves around the sharing of tacit knowledge, which requires “interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling, conversation, coaching, and apprenticeship,” within a virtual environment.

Synchronous learning takes place between learners and facilitators at the same time (real time), but not necessarily in the same place. Synchronous learning can take place either in-person, which always takes place at the same time and in the same location, or via the Internet using a virtual meeting or classroom platform such as Teams, Zoom, Google Workspace/Classroom, or Slack Huddles.

Asynchronous learning takes place between learners and facilitators at different times (time delayed) and can be accomplished when learners and facilitators are in different locations. In today's technology savvy world, the typical environment for asynchronous learning is an online platform that people can access at different times in order to find content, upload files, and participate in discussions. Often these platforms include features such as profiles, discussion forums, and/or blogs.

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Collaboration in this context refers to the act of two or more people coming together to maximize their own and each other's learning through the sharing of knowledge. Effective collaboration can result in more natural communication, better productivity, opportunities for innovation, and possible synergies to develop better solutions than could ever be generated on one's own. Usually, the term collaboration is used when there is a specific goal (product) toward which people are working as a group.

Community of Practice (CoP) is a term that was coined by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave in 1991. It is a network of individuals who interact with one another around a common issue, problem, or topic in an effort to learn from one another, solve problems, use one another as sounding boards, and/or innovate. Members of a CoP can connect with one another in person or using technology, but common reference today infers the use of technology. (There are also communities known as "Communities of Interest", but they do not have the inherent purpose of improving practice among members. Rather, they gather to discuss something of interest simply because of a passion for the topic.)

Because a CoPs is often the core structure within which social learning takes place, some additional explanation is warranted. CoPs are found in both formal and informal learning scenarios. To set the stage for the reasoning behind this, imagine that online learning methods can be placed along two axes: Formal/Informal and Self/Network. *Formal* learning is learning that is planned, designed, and implemented by the company; and *Informal* learning is learning that is initiated by the learner on an ad-hoc, as-needed basis. *Self* refers to learning that takes place by oneself, and *Network* refers to learning that takes place as part of groups. All online, group-based learning falls on the right side of the grid where the learning occurs within a community (network) of learners.

Formal/Networked learning enables learning to occur directly between learners within a structured, cohort-based learning experience (e.g., learners are encouraged or required to brainstorm and network with one another via discussion forums, blogs, virtual breakout rooms, etc. to accomplish course outcomes). In this scenario, course instructors include asynchronous, online tools as part of the learning experience and assign tasks that require participation in these cohort communities. Many organizations and educational institutions are blending online communities with in-person (virtual or live) courses.

Informal/Networked learning enables learning to occur directly between learners within a community without imposed agendas or mandated participation. Although the online environment for CoPs is typically purchased and designed by the company, the company allows communication between community members to be self-initiated and unstructured (informal), allowing the learners to address the issues that are most pertinent to them. That said, companies can – and often do – allow CoPs to be initiated by employees through a grass-roots process.

CoPs do not look alike. Every CoP has its own unique origin, purpose, and audience. Each revolves around a particular domain of knowledge which defines the specific set of issues, a community of people who care about those issues, and the practice (behaviors, skills) that are being developed for each to be effective dealing with those issues. CoPs can be small or big, short-lived or long-lived, co-located or distributed geographically, homogeneous or heterogeneous, within corporate functions or across boundaries, spontaneously or intentionally generated, and unrecognized by the company or sponsored by the company.

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BENEFITS OF CoPS

Before wrapping up the discussion of CoPs, it would be irresponsible not to mention that organizations have found value in encouraging employees to participate in CoPs. Some benefits are intangible, such as increased engagement and unleashed creativity resulting in product or service innovation, while others are tangible, such as reduced costs, improved efficiency, and better product development. In fact, there is evidence that linking members of a CoP with experts to get assistance with immediate problems on an as-needed basis (as opposed to waiting for training) as a performance support strategy can positively impact a company's bottom line.

Cultivating CoPs in strategic areas of a business is a practical way to manage knowledge as an asset, just as companies manage other critical assets, as CoPs are in the best position to collect and codify both tacit and explicit knowledge and distribute it immediately throughout the network of users. Knowledge is not static, and CoPs can efficiently ensure that corporate knowledge is continually kept up to date by the people who best understand the issues of their role, function, and field.

Finally, CoPs have been connected to an increased speed to competency and mastery of one's domain, which can improve overall workforce readiness, especially in an era of complexity and constant change. The ability to connect and share ideas with people across formal business unit boundaries can not only help bridge the information silos that often exist, but also enables faster, more creative innovation.

CoP TECHNOLOGY

The primary capabilities that are needed to promote asynchronous, computer supported collaborative learning (social learning) include the ability to use tools and features that allow users to upload and share their ideas, information, files, videos, photos, etc. Possible features/tools include:

The ability to identify one's own and others' areas of interest and expertise

- Member profiles
- Search

The ability to form and find groups/communities around areas of interest or practice

- Communities
- Groups
- Sub-groups
- Social networking
- Search

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The ability to broadcast one's individual ideas to a group or groups of users

- Blogs
- Discussion boards
- Comment feeds

The ability to participate in conversations with other group members

- Discussion boards
- Comment feeds

The ability to participate in two-way conversations with individual users

- Instant/private messaging

The ability to respond regarding the ideas or files posted by others

- Ratings
- Reviews
- Commenting

The ability to test the opinions of people within the community

- Polls

The ability to upload/add and find content to the system

- Video/document sharing
- Link sharing
- Pinned resources
- Search

The ability to determine and recognize the quality of user contributions

- Badges
- Ratings
- Reviews
- Commenting
- Leaderboards

Numerous vendors offer integrated platforms that combine community discussion, knowledge sharing, and content management. These tools are most commonly delivered as Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), though some organizations deploy them in private cloud or on-premises environments to meet security and compliance needs. In many workplaces, the “starter stack” is Microsoft 365, using SharePoint for knowledge/content management, Teams for collaboration, and community-style discussion via tools such as Microsoft Viva Engage (formerly Yammer). Others pilot peer-driven learning by assembling a modular set of tools (chat, a knowledge base, co-authoring, and internal Q&A) before standardizing on a consolidated platform.

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CoP ROLES

There are two elements that make or break a CoP, regardless of the features and tools that any given company selects to incorporate into its online social learning environment. One is the purpose of the group and the other is the people who are involved in that group. Each company or CoP founder must determine what the fundamental purpose of the group will be and make sure that the purpose is aligned with and relevant to the business goals and strategy. While having a purpose is common and essential for every CoP, specific goals will be unique to each CoP.

As for the people involved, there are roles in a CoP that exist regardless of the group's purpose. There are formal roles and informal roles. The formal roles are comprised of individuals who officially moderate the community and are either appointed by an entity within the company or are (ideally) taken on by members who step up to the plate to lead their fellow CoP members. There are also informal roles, which are filled by those members who exhibit behavior that nurtures and promotes the health and vitality of the group.

CoP Roles: Formal

Ultimately, what the CoP needs to be successful are members. Not many people think about "member" as being a formal role, but without members, there would be no community. Everyone involved in a CoP is considered a member, whether they hold formal titles within the community or not. Based on the amount of activity a member puts into the community, there are three levels of membership:

- 1) *Core members*: those who drive the energy and success of the CoP;
- 2) *Active members*: those who participate to a lesser degree than core members, but who also contribute content and ideas to add to the quality of the CoP; and
- 3) *Peripheral members*: those who watch, read, and benefit from what the core and active members are producing, but don't contribute anything themselves.

No member is officially appointed to any of these three levels; rather, members reflect what level they are in by the quality and frequency of their activity. Usually, those individuals with formal roles (below) are part of the core group of members, although there can be other interested and supportive members who can be considered as core members.

Besides the role of member, there are a few other formal roles (titles) that might be found within a CoP:

- **Community Manager (or Administrator, Leader, or Owner)**: Leads the direction of the CoP and is typically the primary motivator for members. If assigned the role, the Community Manager is typically responsible for the success of the CoP.
- **Moderator or Editor**: Tracks and edits member communications to ensure appropriate content and language.
- **Content Manager**: Solicits, organizes and distributes content within the CoP.

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- **Community Communicator, Marketer, or Developer:** Communicates the purpose and value of the CoP to solicit new members and gain support and buy-in from other entities within the enterprise.
- **Technologist:** Sets up, maintains, and supports network members in their use of information technology.
- **Treasurer:** Collects dues, fees, and manages the network's cash flow (if any).
- **Knowledge Manager:** Integrates CoPs as part of a larger company knowledge management strategy.

These roles above are only identified with separate titles in large communities with hundreds or thousands of users. Most CoPs only have one or two roles – someone who serves as a community leader, typically referred to as the Community Manager, who also serves as the Moderator, but sometimes someone else will moderate discussions and ensure that content is relevant and appropriate. Typically, these leaders are individuals who are Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) of the topic/discipline/practice around which the CoP has been formed.

Besides the ones listed above, there are several other titles to identify the person who can serve as the CoP leader, including social media manager, social media community manager, community facilitator, social media supervisor, community administrator, community owner, user experience manager, community host, community wizard, community coordinator, social community strategist, and community director. Although there are many alternative titles being utilized for the CoP leader, the one title that stands out as the most common is Community Manager, so that is the title we will use in this paper.

CoP Roles: Informal

It is possible for every active and core member within a community to play an informal role, regardless of formal role assignments. Informal roles are generally recognized as sets of characteristics and/or behaviors that certain members exhibit that enhance the community in a specific way. (There are negative informal roles, as well, but we will focus only on the positive ones as we are highlighting the skills needed for *successful* CoPs.)

As is the case with formal roles, there are several informal roles that might be found within a CoP:

- **Integrator:** Interfaces with other units and ensures clarity and lack of duplication in the information disseminated within and outside of the CoP.
- **Champion:** Serves as chief organizer of events and may be the administrative source for communications support.
- **Sponsor:** Bridges between a CoP and the rest of the formal organization, particularly the authority hierarchy.
- **Practice Leader:** Is the chief influencer within the community and is the commonly acknowledged leader of the CoP (and may not be the formal leader). The acknowledged leadership is based on competence, not rank or position. Practice leaders emerge—they cannot be appointed.

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- **Hub:** Serves as the center of the network or of a sub-network within the larger network. Sometimes people are hubs because their jobs put them there, but often they become hubs because they are practice leaders, or people are attracted to them for their expertise, energy, effort or connection to other hubs.
- **Central Connector:** Makes connections among people within a cluster or subgroup.
- **Broker:** Makes connections across groups.
- **Weaver:** Discerns patterns, makes connections, and builds trust and skills while organizing collaborative projects. Often, the network Weaver can be the hub, as well. The critical tipping point is when the network has achieved sufficient social capital that the weaver can remove himself from the hub, allowing the network to grow organically.

People who find themselves in one or more of these informal roles are those who naturally exhibit the characteristics and behaviors that enable the results of the role(s). CoPs do not have to acknowledge the individuals who emerge in these informal roles, or bestow the titles listed above upon them, for them to fulfill the informal role behaviors. For example, a central connector is a natural networker and will help people connect with one another within the community regardless of whether they are recognized as a central connector.

Although people will fulfill these roles no matter what, because people do like and respond to being recognized for their achievements, it will benefit the community to acknowledge informal leaders (for that is what these people are) by granting them the titles they deserve. Consider creating badges that indicate informal and formal roles so that people can recognize when someone is seen as a *Weaver*, a *Broker*, a *Practice Leader*, and so on. Doing so may even increase activity of those who would like to earn a title.

The Community Manager (CM)

As stated, the role that is most visible (and often most influential) within an online Community of Practice is the Community Manager (CM). While the label is newer in many organizations, the function is not—it traces back to early online communities such as bulletin board systems (BBSs), in which “system operators” shaped participation norms, moderated discussion, and kept the community active. Over time, this leadership function has become a recognized capability for sustaining engagement and value creation in communities of practice, to the point that some organizations staff it as a formal position (especially for large, strategic, or externally facing communities). Depending on the organization and platform, the role may also appear under titles such as Community of Practice Manager, Community Lead, Community Program Manager, Community Moderator, Community Facilitator, or Knowledge/Community Manager—all reflecting the same core responsibility: guiding participation, enabling knowledge exchange, and evangelizing the community’s purpose and practices.

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An effective CM is the servant to the group and follows the lead of the group rather than dictating purpose or process. CMs do more active infrastructure maintenance and external promotion than members; however, they do not differ from other members in reading messages and encouraging member participation. It may be helpful to remember that the CM role is less about moderation and more about product management (the “product” being the networking of the people within the CoP and the outcomes of those connections).

CoPs need a combination of strong leadership, a compelling business case, sufficient technology to enable communication, and an intense people focus to be successful. The CM role will, if done well, provide that strong leadership, communicate the business case that drives the CoP to members, ensure—either through direction or influence—that the technology (platform and/or features) meets the communication needs of members, and be intensely focused on the people involved in order to maximize connections, and thus the impact of the CoP.

COMMUNITY MANAGER SKILLS

The capabilities required for effective network leadership are not straightforward as they vary depending upon the size and type of the network. Some CoPs will grow spontaneously around an urgent issue or a topic that people are passionate about and require minimal reinforcement to engage members and keep them engaged. Others will require careful seeding and nurturing in order for them to succeed, which can be time consuming, but is necessary to build member engagement. No matter the size and type of CoP, communities should not be overly managed. The trick for the CM is to first be able to recognize the level of the organic energy of the community (or lack thereof), and then to be able to identify the needs of the CoP that the CM must address to inspire that energy.

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Because each corporate culture is unique, each individual within that corporate culture is unique, and every network of individuals is unique, community management is much more of an art than a science. As such, every CM has the responsibility to identify and apply the set of skills and characteristics that best support his/her unique CoP. The following are the practices a CM can leverage, divided into the three categories of preparation, implementation, and evaluation:

Preparation Strategies

- Determine the desired outcomes for the CoP
- Become proficient in the CoP domain
- Influence technical decisions
- Become proficient in the CoP environment
- Understand the maturity process of a community
- Understand issues specific to collaboration
- Manage the product
- Map out a user-friendly process
- Prepare to manage CoP content
- Communicate the value of the CoP

Implementation Strategies

- Manage the product
- Reinforce the process
- Troubleshoot technical issues
- Train members on the platform and process
- Demonstrate effective online communication skills
- Help members establish the direction and norms of the CoP
- Build trust
- Nurture relationships
- Maximize member engagement
- Participate in discussions
- Moderate and edit discussions
- Minimize undesirable behavior
- Manage CoP content
- Oversee other community leaders
- Connect internal and external voices
- Recognize accomplishments and contributions

Evaluation Strategies

- Evaluate the health of the CoP
- Evaluate the impact of the CoP
- Communicate the value of the CoP
- Adjust CoP based on evaluation result

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Preparation Strategies

Determine the Desired Outcomes for the CoP

Establishing leadership and stakeholder expectations for the results of a **CoP** is essential because those expectations define what “success” means and, therefore, what evidence must be collected. When intended outcomes are explicit—such as faster problem resolution, improved **process consistency**, or reduced rework—the **CM** can translate them into observable indicators (participation patterns, response times, solved/accepted answers, content adoption, and member feedback) and build reporting routines. Clear expectations also enable formative assessment throughout the CoP’s lifecycle: the **CM** can review engagement and value signals early; identify friction points; and adjust facilitation, prompts, governance, or platform configuration before issues become entrenched. Finally, aligning on outcomes up front ensures the CoP captures the right baseline and ongoing data to support credible summative evaluation later, **which will demonstrate** whether the community delivered the results leadership intended and informing decisions about scaling, resourcing, or redesign.

Become Proficient in the CoP Domain

In order to ensure credibility as a leader, CMs should be able to speak the language of the community’s domain (i.e., the project, topic, skill set, profession, role, etc.) around which the members are gathered. If the CM is not already familiar with the domain, a crash course in the practices, challenges, solutions, processes, language, and membership characteristics is in order prior to the launch of the CoP. One method for conducting a crash course in the domain that serves more than one purpose is to interview prospective members of the CoP. This approach not only familiarizes the CM with the domain and helps them truly understand the issues/challenges that could be discussed within the CoP, but also starts the relationship building process early, which could provide a head start for recruitment of CoP leaders and active members.

Influence Technical Decisions

Often, the CM is not the person who can decide which technology can be utilized for a CoP. If that is the case, it may be possible for the CM to at least influence those decisions. If brought into the process early enough, the CM should consider the purpose of the CoP, the member characteristics, and the technology architecture of the company and present a few platform and/or feature options—with logical rationales—to the appropriate decision makers. Some other important technical decisions include:

- The design of a system that manages knowledge assets in a way that maximizes effective information exchange, capture, and retention in a reusable form and allows for reflection and stimulates complex human thinking.

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- An appropriate technology medium that is extremely user friendly, facilitating easy knowledge exchange, retrieval, and collaboration. Questions to answer include:
 - Does it include a repository of community content and/or knowledge?
 - Is the technology supported by the organization's IT group?
 - Does the technology meet the needs of community members?
 - Can community members have input into the look, feel and content?
- Security structure that ensures that the practices of the community are in line with the company social media policies.
- Potential risks if social media is not managed or is mismanaged.
- Social media policies to protect the company and the members.

Become Proficient in the CoP Environment

The platform is not just a delivery channel—it shapes participation, trust, and knowledge flow. Proficiency means understanding how members discover content, ask questions, share resources, and connect with one another, as well as how features like permissions, tagging, search, notifications, and moderation tools influence behavior. When the CM knows the environment well, they can reduce friction for members, model effective use, troubleshoot quickly, and design simple routines (e.g., onboarding, prompts, curation, recognition, and escalation paths) that make sharing safe and worthwhile. In practice, becoming proficient requires hands-on use, a basic grasp of governance and analytics, and close coordination with IT, security, and stakeholders to ensure the space stays usable, compliant, and aligned to the community's purpose.

Understand the Maturity Process of a Community

Those familiar with teams and teamwork will most likely be aware that teams generally follow a maturity process. Well, the same is true for CoPs. There are differing views on how virtual communities develop. One perspective is that there are three basic evolutionary phases: 1) Self-Awareness, 2) Self-Identity, and 3) Sustaining. Another perspective offers five phases that are not unlike the standard Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning team development cycle: 1) Potential, 2) Coalescing, 3) Maturing, 4) Stewardship, and 5) Transformation.

Another model more specific to CoP maturity focuses on the complexity and richness of member connections and the level of corporate support, and defines four stages of development:

1. **Hierarchy:** There is little to no active use of social technology or community features, and communication reflects a predominantly top-down, hierarchical paradigm, likely aligned with the hierarchy of the company.
2. **Emergent Community:** Communication is mostly ad hoc, and the social and community tools and/or processes are primarily being utilized by a few "founding" and active members. Connections are incidental and based on individual need and not necessarily made based on an overarching CoP goal or strategy.

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3. **Community:** The work of the CoP is explicitly chartered by the company or the CoP members. The CoP might be funded and/or staffed by the company for the purpose of addressing specific initiatives. Measurable business outcomes are expected. Communication is driven by a common purpose and involves many members.
4. **Network:** The work of the CoP is directly linked to corporate strategy and is driven by a networked market perspective. The CoP is likely funded and/or staffed by the company. Measurable business outcomes are being realized. Communication is rich, complex, and involves most members.

In general, CoPs initially focus on connecting people, building the network, and sharing knowledge with one another. Early value is mostly derived from focusing on the current problems of the members. If they thrive and continue to build energy, they progress to a focus on building out the knowledge of the CoP in order to support key business initiatives/goals and demonstrating thought leadership. Finally, the most mature CoPs are able to have a direct impact on the strategy of the business. As CoPs mature and evolve, their membership, sharing styles, meeting frequency, and business goals will inevitably change, and these shifts should not just be tolerated by the CM, but rather should be supported and encouraged. This can be difficult for CMs who want to maintain some level of control within the community. However, if a CoP is developing as it should into a vibrant and active community, at some point the CM should recognize when to back off and let the network manage itself.

There should be no expectation that CoPs will last forever. Every CoP comes to an end at some point, and while there are several reasons for a CoP to come to a close, there are three factors that are most common triggers: 1) organizational change, 2) change in the CoP domain, and 3) CoP leadership change. Some CoPs drift into non-existence. Some redefine themselves and morph into a new kind of community with a new purpose. Some merge with other communities based on aligned or parallel goals and/or member overlap. Finally, because of their tremendous value to the company, a few have actually developed into company units in and of themselves. A CM should not fight the end of a CoP unless it is occurring prematurely due to inactivity. However, even then, CMs should be open to the possibility that the CoP simply may not provide enough value to members or the company to justify its continued existence. The CM should be aware of when the CoP is winding down and be a positive catalyst to assure a successful and positive transformation.

Understand Issues Specific to Collaboration

Collaboration is more than people just sharing ideas and knowledge with one another—it is working together to achieve a particular shared goal. Within a CoP, that might manifest itself in the members of a community coming together to improve processes and/or develop solutions to business challenges. Fostering collaboration presents a unique set of challenges. Besides helping to keep the group on task (if necessary), the CM needs to be aware of possible problems that can arise.

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One environment that is often used for collaboration is a shared knowledge space such as SharePoint. When using a space like this, there are specific issues that need to be thoughtfully considered, such as intellectual property rights, ethics specific to group writing, pulling out and respecting diversity of views, possible avenues of abuse, domination, managing conflict, and nurturing harmony and coexistence. This kind of shared knowledge space also poses challenges in regard to regulatory compliance. However, a wise CM will invite people to the CoP who are trustworthy and, with guidance, can maintain the open, welcoming, and trustworthy spirit of the community.

Manage the Product

A set of skills that supports successful community management that is often overlooked is product management, which is the responsibility of getting the product (the CoP) developed on budget and on schedule. Product management is more time intensive in the preparation and initiation stages, with efforts toward ensuring timely design and launch of the CoP. A significant step toward effective product management is to engage a cross-functional and multi-level design team up front to help with CoP design and implementation that will meet both the community's needs and the company's goals.

Design features should always be planned with the perspective of the CoP member in mind. For example, to ensure members connect quickly, it is helpful to provide a central space where new members can quickly find one another and get common questions answered, and where existing members can pop in to meet new members. Another avenue for enabling connections is a directory of community member names and other key information, such as areas of expertise, skills, and interests. Other design aspects to think through are sections where members can share assets and ideas, such as for social bookmarking, where members can share relevant links; for a shared bibliography; for hot topics and/or current events to be featured; for virtual exhibitions (to introduce companies, organizations, and vendors to CoP members); for synchronous chats; for reminders and announcements; and for some kind of regular written communication, such as a newsletter.

The smart CM will design the CoP with the idea of starting small but planning for a larger presence in the future. One proven approach is to design for evolution over time, possibly starting with a CoP to solve a specific problem or support a particular initiative. Then, as the CoP starts to succeed and grow its level activity and outputs, its purpose can be expanded.

Map out a User-Friendly Process

In addition to ensuring an effective *product* design, the CM has to do the same for the community *process*. You can have the best product design, but if the process is awkward and not intuitive, then it will be difficult to get people to want to participate. One of the most important outcomes of a smooth and user-friendly process is greater engagement, and this needs to be considered before the launch—and then throughout the life cycle—of the community. One process consideration is the way in which members are involved in the definition of the agenda, mission, and goals of the community either before its launch or right afterward, making sure that members drive the direction and the culture of the community.

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Another consideration to be addressed up front is how members are drawn into immediate participation, possibly through a group meeting or activity scheduled for the first week. Not only is the relevance of the activity itself important, but the process of signing up for that event and all other subsequent events is also. Part of orchestrating events is to recruit influencers within the community to help get participants to attend events, as well as any event documentation and summaries to reinforce the value of the event. It is also helpful to have some kind of recognition system that highlights member contributions and activity level. It is important to keep members continually informed of what is happening in the community, leverage opportunities to increase engagement, make certain that members have all the materials they need to participate in discussions and achieve goals, and find the shortest and easiest methods for members to network and talk with one another.

Plan to Manage CoP Content

For most CoPs, the Community Manager also serves as the content (knowledge) asset manager. Knowledge management is the compilation of tactics used to capture, codify, and distribute useful and relevant information throughout an enterprise. Successful knowledge management can lead to significant improvements for members in regard to their learning, and in the CoP in regard to its impact, so the CM must understand the principles of knowledge management.

Of course, the technology handles a large part of the content storage and access, but there are tasks that the CM can do to make the content of the community a dynamic, up-to-date knowledge resource rather than just a static library. The CM must think about the content that will be most relevant and useful to the CoP, and then plan for a repository that enables quick and easy access to a variety of content types, such as text files, audio files, video clips, images, etc. In addition, there must be a way for members to know which items are “hot” (most active) and which items are new – especially considering some members will log in regularly while others will log in only once in a while. Conversations should be held with the company’s IT function as it might be possible to integrate the company’s existing content management system with the CoP. However, just because it can doesn’t mean it should, so the CM should think through all the repercussions should such integration take place—both positive and negative—to assist with the decision regarding how to proceed.

Communicate the Value of the CoP

As mentioned, one of the responsibilities of the CM is to get and keep members engaged in the CoP. One way to engage members is to make sure that they are fully aware of the benefits of participating in the CoP, but not just the benefits for the company. Each person who is a potential member will have their own, individual motivations for wanting to be part of the network. Some will participate in hopes of some kind of return, such as some kind of corporate reward or knowledge/skills that can help with a career track; some may be participating because they enjoy being part of a group of like-minded individuals; and some may participate because they see it as a way to gain recognition for their experience and expertise. Trying to identify all the potential individual motivations ahead of time will help focus all communications from the start on the value of the CoP in a way that will maximize interest.

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Basic marketing skills will be important to master, as well. To start, the CM will need to help prospective members understand how, why, and when to participate in a CoP. Also, building anticipation for the launch of the CoP with 'coming soon' notices will keep people ready and willing for the initial rush of participation. In addition, some external promotion to communicate the value of the CoP will be advantageous to gain up-front buy-in and ongoing support from those who may have decision making authority regarding the continued existence of the community. In essence, this role makes the CM a community advocate, keeping external stakeholders apprised of the value of the CoP, the work that the CoP is doing, and how that work is contributing to the company goals.

Implementation Strategies

Manage the Product

Once the CoP is launched, the CM needs to continue with product management as the product is not fully developed until it realizes results. Product management at this point is conducted by making sure that the product results are achieved, including tasks such as the evaluation of the site's effectiveness and keeping records of all changes made to improve the community site.

Reinforce the Process

To build and sustain networking vitality, the CM must continue to make sure to keep up the calendar of activities, milestones, and deliverables. This calendar should include holidays and other significant events such as corporate events that may affect the CoP's schedule. If the CoP is less formal, then consider holding virtual parties at which people can get together at the same time in a virtual environment. It might be an interesting experiment to use an immersive virtual meeting environment such as Teams Immersive Spaces, Zoom Immersive View, Spatial, Virbela, or Arthur for CoP meetings or parties.

Troubleshoot Technical Issues

While there may be people available in the IT group to assist with technical issues, the CM should be knowledgeable about some basic end-user problems that might be encountered so that they can be addressed and resolved as quickly as possible. At the very least, the CM must make sure that the process for requesting assistance with technical issues is clear, that it is easy for the members to follow, and that IT is responding to requests for help in a timely fashion.

Train Members on the Platform and Process

The CM should train members on the use of the platform and the processes in place to connect with one another, participate in discussions, contribute to shared knowledge spaces, etc. Such training can be provided through document, video, or e-learning resources, can take place in groups (in person or virtually), or can be done individually, which may have to be arranged after the first wave of members are inculcated into the community.

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Demonstrate Effective Online Communication Skills

The skills needed for communicating in an online environment are not quite identical to those needed for effective in-person communication. For example, we don't have any physical cues that we often use when communicating with others. In addition, it takes longer for social interaction when using a technology-based environment, and this is particularly true for a collaborative learning environment such as a CoP utilizes. What is needed for leading a CoP are skills specific to interpreting members' digital "body language" through their online behavior, which can include tracking members' interaction cadence (how quickly members typically respond); spotting when members are ignoring discussions, updates or replies; and the standard way people involve themselves in public discussions. In addition, the CM needs to be an effective communicator, portraying positive digital body language and making sure that the messages that are being sent to individuals or to the entire community in writing are clear and not easily misinterpreted.

Help Members Establish the Direction and Norms of the CoP

At the same time that CMs reinforce the community process, they must remember to tread the line carefully in order to allow the community members to be the ones to lead the group's vision, agenda, and expectations regarding member behavior. However, the CM does need to help guide the group in defining these things, as well as perform community health checks and prepare for any appropriate community transitions, if needed. One way to guide the community to establish the direction of the CoP is to ask questions. Some questions to consider asking include:

- What topics and issues does the community care about?
- What kind of influence do we want to have in the company?
- What roles does the community need to run smoothly?
- How often will the community meet?
- What kinds of activities will generate energy?
- What kinds of activities will help develop trust?
- Where are the best sources of knowledge and benchmarks outside the CoP?
- What knowledge should be shared, developed, and documented?
- How should the knowledge repository be organized to meet the needs of the community?
- When is the right time to report on something in the community?
- When is the best time to use synchronous communication? Asynchronous?
- Should membership be open to anyone who meets certain criteria (based on company roles, expertise, etc.) or by invitation only?

The CM might want to consider capturing certain things that are developed by the community, such as the community mission, its vision, the desired community culture, membership criteria, behavioral norms. Then, post these in an area of the community site that is quickly accessed and prominent enough for new members to find easily.

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Build Trust

Trust is a critical component of a healthy community. In fact, trust must be felt by members before they are willing to share their ideas in a public forum such as a CoP. It is the CM's responsibility to help members feel trust in the community. This is an art that involves helping members feel as though they are valued and that the environment is a safe one in which to express themselves.

One way to help build trust is to include all members in the definition of the community's direction as described above. Another way is to be consistent about any public recognition so that people don't feel slighted if they don't receive recognition for something for which someone else did receive recognition. Also, fostering alternative viewpoints and ensuring that the brainstorming process isn't squelched by criticism, ridicule, or misappropriation will contribute to creating a safe environment for open communication.

Nurture Relationships

In order to grow a network, the CM must fundamentally nurture relationships between individuals. The relationships between CoP members make up the heart and soul of a community and determine the community culture and the distribution of power (influence) within the community. The stronger the ties are between members, the greater are the levels of trust and engagement. However, the CM also must create relationships with members of the CoP in order to maximize effectiveness as a leader.

The CM can encourage engagement first by reaching out to and establishing relationships with those members that are extremely active and seen as community leaders by their passion, expertise, and/or their impactful contributions to the knowledge base of the community. Of course, the CM should be aware of who the most influential members are and what their impact is on the CoP. However, having solid relationships with these influencers encourages an even higher level of participation as these influencers may be more likely to serve in a more formal leadership capacity if they are asked to do so by a CM whom they trust and respect. Another advantage to having relationships with these key members of the CoP is that the CM is better able to keep their finger on the pulse of the community at large.

One strategy to nurture relationships is to facilitate connections between members. A CM might assign member "buddies" who are encouraged to contact each other by e-mail or phone to introduce themselves and talk outside of the CoP environment. Another way to kick-start relationships is to set up a face-to-face kick-off meeting (in person or videoconference) so members can meet each other and talk with one another directly while seeing faces, and those people who attend will have a few relationships started before the bulk of the electronic networking begins.

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Maximize Member Engagement

Everything that the CM does should be done with participant engagement in mind. From designing the community platform to evaluating the impact of the CoP, the CM can increase the likelihood that the CoP will flourish and make a difference in the organization. This is important as member engagement is paramount to learning success—and members of a CoP are, indeed, learners in that they are learning from one another through collaborative communications. Without learning, a CoP would just be an electronic bulletin board, so it is critical for the CM to encourage and influence the level of member participation to maximize learning. In fact, the Community Manager could probably change their title to *Community Engagement Officer*, except for the fact that the acronym of CEO would cause some serious confusion.

In a typical online CoP, there are essentially three levels of engagement: 1) a *core* group of regularly active members who generally make up about 10-15% of the entire CoP population and will include the formal and informal community leaders; 2) a group of periodically *active* members, who make up about 15-20% of the CoP population; and 3) a significant group of *peripheral* members who watch activities and read discussions and content, but are not contributing to the CoP themselves, which makes up of as much as 65-75% of the total CoP population. The CM should remember that the members who are just watching the action are not necessarily completely inactive, as they might be taking the time to learn from their fellow members, but they aren't truly involved in the full give and take learning process.

The CM needs to consider benefits for members at all three levels of engagement so that everyone feels like full members. As mentioned previously, there may be leadership roles for the many active members. Also, recognition for bright spots among contributions will help reinforce the participation of somewhat active members. Finally, ensuring that there are many current discussions, links and downloads will help the peripheral members feel as though there is always something new for them to look up and read.

The CM should want and invite all three levels of participation, because these three levels of engagement are not static. People come and go between them based on their availability and interest. Your next generation of core leaders will likely come from your partially active users, and some of the peripheral members will be motivated to contribute eventually, especially if the CM sends direct, person-to-person requests for sharing of ideas or expertise. Besides the other sections of discussion under Implementation Practices—most of which have member engagement tactics mentioned—below are some additional member engagement strategies that the CM should consider using:

- Send out a welcome kit of some kind that provides all the necessary information for new members, helping them feel competent and prepared to dive into the community.
- Schedule occasional virtual meetings for all members, or members within sub-groups, or even monthly, quarterly, or annual in-person events, depending upon how widely distributed your CoP is and how much your company is willing to dedicate the employees' time.

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- From among your core members (or even the active members), recruit people to help seed the discussion spaces with positive and thoughtful responses. This can be particularly impactful for any discussions started by new members as they get the immediate satisfaction of having people respond to their posts.
- Articulate the benefits for members clearly based on what members value most, such as information, social connections, visibility, recognition, or altruism. Communication of benefits should be targeted to the community as a whole, to individual members, and to potential members.
- Decide on community strategies and events that best match the values and needs of the members.
- Celebrate successes of the community (and individual members) by announcing them to the community.
- When members must leave the CoP, express an appropriate *goodbye* on behalf of the community.
- Broadcast news and information at regular intervals through external venues to keep the CoP in the consciousness of members and other employees through newsfeeds, subscriptions, newsletters, etc.
- Help members identify what areas, discussions, etc. in which they are knowledge *seekers*, and which areas, sub-groups, etc. for which they can be knowledge *sources*.
- Keep a clear, compelling business case in front of the CoP in realistic terms by asking yourself and the community what value the CoP brings the team, department, business unit, and the company.
- Take time to coach and mentor CoP members as the opportunities present themselves. It is likely that the relationships built with members will open up opportunities for coaching and mentoring.

Participate in Discussions

It might seem obvious at this point, but it should be said that the CM needs to be active in the community conversations rather than staying behind the scenes. This does not mean that the CM should dominate discussions, of course. Rather, the CM's best approach is to add timely, strategic, and focused responses to member posts to help move the discussion along when it seems stuck, or when the information is critical for the community to know. Discussions aren't the place for CoP announcements, but rather for contributing key knowledge that will help enrich the dialogue. It can also help for the CM to summarize a discussion that appears to be coming to or has reached its conclusion, weaving together the ideas expressed in a synopsis for the community members. In addition, the CM should be willing to use appropriate humor, as well as to share his/her own mistakes.

If the CoP is relatively active, then the CM should let others start discussions. When a CoP is launched, the CM might find it tempting to begin conversations. However, it might be more effective for the CM to reach out to core members to ask them to post the conversations that the CM thinks might be helpful in nurturing participation. In the same vein, the CM should not be the first to respond to posts. Again, maybe other core members could be recruited for that task. This way, the community does not start to rely on the CM to be the "backbone" of the CoP discussions, which can end up inhibiting contributions. As the maturity of the community grows, core and/or active members will initiate these tasks on their own. Ideally, the CM will eventually "work themselves out of a job."

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Moderate and Edit Discussions

One of the more challenging tasks of a CM is to moderate and edit discussions. In very large CoPs, it might make sense to establish a separate role devoted to this responsibility. However, for many CoPs, the CM will oversee moderating and editing discussions. Imagine the level of editing and moderation on a continuum, with absolutely no moderation on the left side and complete filtering on the right.

No moderation can work. Some companies that have sponsored online communities set an expectation of professional behavior while participating in a CoP and then let the community members police themselves. This can be successful as community platforms can provide features to members that combat spam and flag inappropriate posts. On the other end of the continuum, some companies have all posts and content go through an approval process before being made visible to CoP members. This is extremely time-consuming, but for companies with strict privacy policies and concerns regarding legal issues, regulations, or intellectual property, it may be the only way to allow CoPs to exist.

The approach that many CMs take puts the level of moderation in between these two extremes. These moderators will often conduct a regular review of discussion threads and, if a posted discussion or a reply to a discussion appears to be inappropriate for any reasons, the CM removes the text and replaces it with a phrase like, "This post has been removed by the Community Manager." This way, the inappropriate post is gone, but the thread of the rest of the discussion is still there and can be followed. If a medium-sized CoP has sub-groups, it is possible to have a subject matter expert from among the core members to be responsible for the moderation within that sub-group. An alternative structure is to pull together a group of volunteers among the members to serve on a moderation committee. If the role of the moderator is delegated, be sure to find people with strong writing, communication, and editorial skills. Regardless, the CM should strive to guide the CoP toward the right side of the continuum, encouraging more self-moderation within the CoP over time.

Some of the specific tasks that a CM might do when moderating/editing discussions include:

- Making sure the right people are answering the questions by helping to connect the right experts are directed to discussions in their areas of expertise.
- Checking that answers to questions are accurate and relevant, and responding to correct an incorrect response, if needed (or directing an expert to do so).
- Dealing with inappropriate community behavior.
- Moving discussion threads if posted in the wrong category or sub-group.
- Gently redirecting discussions if they start to go off track.
- Deleting or archiving discussions that are out of date or are no longer relevant to the CoP.
- Keeping up with new posts to stay apprised of the active discussions and ensure they are categorized correctly.
- Extracting useful information from the various discussions and content database and making them available throughout the CoP.

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In a moderated community, it is important to share with CoP members to what degree their CoP is moderated. A good place to share this information is in a community policies or expectations of behavior document or post.

Minimize Undesirable Behavior

The CM needs to stay on top of member behavior. Poor behavior, not enforcing standards of behavior, and excessive advertising can drive people away from a CoP. Often, the core and active CoP members will squash any undesirable behavior themselves. However, if some inappropriate behavior occurs without correction, or if a pattern emerges among members, then it is the CM's role to step in to privately stop the negative behavior. On the flip side, the CM should reinforce the correct, positive community behavior. This should be done privately and directly if a formerly inappropriate member has changed their behavior for the better, but it should be done publicly to the group when the reinforcement is general to show everyone what behavior that contributes to the culture the CoP desires. As touched on already, some of the typical inappropriate behavior found in online communities includes spamming, flaming, trolling, scapegoating, etc.

Manage CoP Content

Once members begin to upload and share files, video clips, podcasts, links, etc., the CM must effectively manage the knowledge assets so that they are easily found whenever needed by members. With social collaboration technology, all ideas are captured as they emerge, and so the posts and discussions themselves become knowledge assets to be managed to draw out and tap into collective intelligence rather than simply warehousing and categorizing information.

The CM must ensure that all CoP members understand how to share knowledge assets; when to share and use content for learning and for achieving CoP goals; and what content is most relevant, useful, and desired. It should be made clear to all members that the CoP comes together for a specific purpose and that sharing unsolicited, irrelevant content is not encouraged as it might annoy some members and discourage them from coming back to the community. Regarding the content itself, the CM should periodically evaluate submissions to the CoP repository to ensure that content is up-to-date and relevant to the members. If the content does not fit the criteria that the CoP sets for useful information, it can be deleted or hidden.

Oversee Other Community Leaders

If additional CoP leaders are chosen or emerge, possibly based within areas of expertise, sub-groups, or responsibilities such as discussion moderation, then the CM would be the person to oversee this group and keep them on task and apprised of CoP changes, direction, and accomplishments. This is not typically supervision in a formal sense. Instead, as the individual who is charged with the success of the CoP, the CM uses influence and provides guidance and coaching to make sure that all moving parts are aligned and moving forward.

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Connect Internal and External Voices

The CM should determine whether there are any opportunities for external experts, leaders, and/or stakeholders to contribute to the community (“external” referring to anyone who is not a member of the CoP). Connecting internal and external voices could be accomplished in several ways. One would be by inviting guests to do presentations as community events. Another could be having guests participate in discussions of interest or applicability. Another possibility is asking a guest to pose a problem-solving challenge upon which members could focus. By opening a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, the CM helps keep the community energy fresh and helps keep external stakeholders aware of what is going on inside the CoP.

Recognize Accomplishments and Contributions

A great way for the CM to increase engagement and keep members up to date on all the work the community is doing is to acknowledge the contributions and accomplishments of individual members and the group as a whole. Success stories can include such things as significant member contributions, user status growth, milestones met, member seniority, learning application achievements, compliments and recognition from external parties, and the impact that the CoP is having. One thing is certain: failure to take the time to acknowledge members in some form or fashion can drive users away.

It is important to be thoughtful regarding how to thank people. Some people will appreciate a private thank you note much more than public accolades, while others crave a public spotlight and visibility. A CM might be able to gather such preferences up front through a new member survey, which can gather basic information about each member that will inform how the CM can best engage them.

In addition, a CM should take the time to talk with business leaders about how the company might be able to maximize community success through company-wide acknowledgements, or possibly through an incentive program wherein there could be peer nominations or some kind of “knowledge in action” award for those who are applying what they are learning within the community and making a difference in the effectiveness of their own work, and/or the work of the team, department, or the company. Of course, if the CoP has positively impacted the company, it would be uplifting for members to have the company formally and publicly recognize their contribution.

Evaluation Strategies

What is needed to ensure a sustainable CoP is a documented plan for the collecting, reviewing, sharing, and validating CoP metrics using a combination of quantitative methods (surveys and polls) and qualitative methods (self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and even collaborative evaluation) on both the processes and the products of the CoP. The CM should track and act appropriately upon metrics for the health of the CoP, as well as the impact it is having on members and the company.

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Evaluate the Health of the CoP

The CM must stay on top of the health of the CoP in order to intervene when needed, and to help nurture growth when the opportunity seems ripe. One primary measurement is the activity level of members. Metrics that reflect the level of engagement of the CoP members are those that capture member participation and attention to the community. A few metrics that could be added to the CoP evaluation plan include:

- # page views
- # members as of a certain date, or over a range of dates
- # people who posted during the period analyzed
- # posts total
- # people who have ever posted who have dropped out
- # who have ever posted who are still members as of a certain date
- # of replies to others' posts
- # trust words within messages
- Average # of messages over a certain time period
- Average # of participants
- Average # of participants per message
- % posted by most active participant
- % participation posting more than average
- % members as of a certain date who have never posted
- % members who have not posted in the past 3 months (inactive members)
- % members who have posted at least once in the past 3 months (active members)
- % current members who are core, active, and peripheral
- % time spend doing certain activities (searching, processing making decisions, interacting with other members, coordinating events, etc. – would require a time study)
- Frequency of leadership posting messages
- Amount of time individual members are logged in
- Satisfaction ratings
- The *density* of the CoP, or the degree to which everyone is connected to everyone else (100% density would mean that all members are connected to everyone else);
- The *distance*, or the number of people a piece of information must go through in order to finally get to everyone in the CoP (the fewer the number of degrees, the more efficient the CoP);
- The *centrality* of the CoP, or the level of dependence the members of the CoP are on one or two people (if only one central person or small group of people – or hub – exists, then the higher the likelihood of crisis should that hub disappeared); and

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- The degree to which the CoP is *open* or *closed* to external influences (a *closed* network is immune to outside disturbances or negativity, while an *open* network can leverage objective, fresh ideas and insights from the outside – a balance is often a healthy approach for a CoP).

Evaluate the Impact of the CoP

To demonstrate to the company leaders that the time, energy, and resources going into the CoP is worth it, the CM will need to assess and communicate the return on expectations (ROE)—or even the return on investment (ROI)—by putting the value in terms of impact on both individual learning goals and business goals. In voluntary CoPs without specific assignments, it may be difficult to determine members' learning gains and the CM may need to rely on self-reports and/or supervisor feedback. The CM might also consider asking members how they would like to be evaluated insofar as learning is concerned.

Some options that could ascertain impact include time saved, either on an individual member level or on a larger department, function, or company level. Depending upon the CoP, the CM might consider traditional tests that would reveal the learning that has occurred on an individual or team level, and those scores could be aggregated to show community-wide learning.

Company impact metrics would include any measures that would determine possible cost savings, increased revenue, enhanced profitability, improved management or business process capability, reduced cycle time, and/or the degree to which the CoP has moved the needles on strategic goals. It is critical for the CM to connect CoP activities to tangible business outcomes to be able to show company leaders the value of the CoP (and preventing them from dismissing the CoP as inconsequential – a “nice to have”). It is critical to determine the leadership/stakeholder expectations prior to implementing the CoP so that both formative and summative evaluations can be successfully conducted.

Communicate the Health & Value of the CoP

Of course, having data about the community and doing nothing with it makes it a futile effort. Once data is gathered and analyzed about the health and impact (value) of the CoP, the results around the community process and product need to be communicated with the CoP members and the stakeholders (at the very least).

The CM needs to become an advocate/evangelist with community sponsors to generate more support; with current members to maintain and increase engagement; and with prospective members to promote the community (explain why they should participate), pique interest in the community, and recruit new members. One piece of advice is to include success stories (anecdotal evidence) and visually appealing statistics and updates in community health and value reports. However, the CM should avoid overstating the value of the community, especially to senior leaders. They will see through any undeserved and unsupported hype.

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Adjust CoP Based on Evaluation Results

Evaluation results should directly inform how a CoP is tuned over time, because they are social systems—small design choices can either reduce friction or quietly suppress participation and value. Formative indicators (e.g., uneven participation, slow responses, low reuse of shared artifacts, recurring confusion, or off-topic drift) can signal the need to adjust structure (subgroups, channels, roles), process (prompt cadence, escalation paths, curation routines), norms (what “good” posts look like, expectations for responsiveness, psychological safety and tone), or even membership (bringing in missing expertise, rotating champions, clarifying who the community is for). Making these adjustments keeps the CoP aligned to stakeholder outcomes, improves the member experience, and prevents the community from becoming either a “ghost town” or a noisy channel with little practical payoff. Over time, this responsiveness also strengthens summative results by demonstrating that the CoP is actively managed, evidence-informed, and capable of evolving as needs, priorities, and participation patterns change.

Summative evaluation results should be used to make higher-level decisions about the CoP’s direction and resourcing. When end-of-cycle evidence shows which outcomes were achieved (and which were not), stakeholders can determine whether to scale the community; refocus its purpose; re-scope membership; or invest in stronger facilitation, platform capabilities, and subject-matter support. Summative findings can also drive structural changes, such as splitting an overly broad community into focused sub-communities, formalizing roles (champions, moderators), or tightening governance so the CoP evolves from an experiment into a sustained capability aligned to organizational priorities.

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For larger companies that are planning (or have implemented) a networking platform that will have (or has) multiple department, function, or role-specific CoPs—each of which will have its own CM—there may be a need for a CM who oversees the entire collection of communities: the Enterprise CM (ECM). This person would have elevated privileges regarding enterprise-wide *gardening* of the entire network. In essence, this ECM would be charged with nurturing the entire enterprise network to help it reach any overarching goals to which it could contribute.

The ECM would be the go-to person when it comes to the enterprise community platform. This person would not help all members with the “how do I use this” questions but rather would be the person who makes decisions regarding any changes to be made to the user interface and platform processes. Finally, the ECM would support all individual CMs throughout the business. This would require some training duties and ongoing coaching to ensure the CMs are being as effective as possible. For extremely large companies that have hundreds of CoPs, this task might be daunting, but it can be done with creative support strategies.

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CONCLUSION

In this paper, we've reviewed in some detail the strategies that an effective Community Manager would need to use to maximize the health and value of a CoP for the greatest business impact, as well as the proposition that the CM role is the key to leading and enabling asynchronous, collaborative group learning. However, the importance of this topic goes beyond a simple skill set. The future of learning is not just providing classroom training and eLearning, but rather it is in enabling employees to learn on their own, when they need to, and as an integral part of their day-to-day work experience.

The basic set of strategies for learning enablers includes:

- Providing an environment for social/networked/collaborative learning (these environments are often technology-based and can be relatively quick and inexpensive to design and implement).
- Ensuring that learners have the knowledge and skills necessary to access and use the learning environments and processes effectively.
- Leading the culture change to embrace and employ networked learning.
- Designing learning solutions that maximize the social learning process.
- Encouraging informal, as-needed, just-in-time learning.
- Monitoring the social learning environment, communities, and transactions.

To understand the new role of learning professionals as *learning enablers* rather than training providers, it is important to understand the growing importance of *how* people learn over *what* they learn. We propose that the skills employees need today are far more about the acquisition and processing of information rather than absorbing specific content. Skills in areas such as thinking critically, leading across units, understanding systems, experimenting based on observation and research, networking, collaborating, and innovating require an environment that promotes and reinforces skills, not one that imparts content in measured doses. Therefore, learning enablers must create the conditions and shape the environment to enable learning to occur whenever and wherever it is needed rather than at pre-determined times and places. This requires relinquishing control and moving away from more traditional ways of learning. Learning enablers identify and engage SMEs throughout the organization rather than trying to be the content experts and find ways for learners to connect with those SMEs to access their expertise. In this new role, learning professionals will need to become the learning *process* experts.

Learning leaders will need to guide this shift in both the mindset and practices of the learning organization. The learning leader is the champion for the learning organization's mission, which is to be the *catalyst* for enterprise learning, maximizing the opportunities available to leverage informal, collaborative learning.

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If the learning organization is going to progress, it must restructure and establish new roles such as the CM role to take on the responsibility of making sure that members of teams, departments, functions, and/or roles are connecting with one another outside of formal training curriculum for the purpose of learning, problem solving, innovation, and making decisions. To increase the legitimacy and impact that the CM role has in the company, the learning organization may also want to consider layering another level of responsibility that includes transferring the learning and outputs from the CoP (along with recommendations regarding how they can be applied) across the organization. In addition, asynchronous learning facilitation skills are significantly different from traditional platform facilitation skills—and even online synchronous facilitation skills—so it is important to remember that those who take on the role of CM must have the competencies necessary to be successful. The list of strategies presented in this paper is not exhaustive but highlights the primary set of skills that an effective CM will need.

However, before making any changes to your learning organization structure or even experimenting with community tools, be sure to get your C-Suite behind you. The social learning experiments that have been the most successful have been fully supported from the top and typically aligned with a specific strategic business objective. Take time to assess your company's commitment to social media and social learning as honestly as possible so you know what you're getting into and what type of support you can expect to receive. Although learning leaders do have to make the effort to sell the value of CoPs to corporate leaders, executives are more open to the idea of collaboration these days. However, you may want to consider partnering with IT, marketing, and/or communications to develop a social technology solution that addresses cross-functional goals. Presenting a broader collaboration initiative might increase the likelihood of buy-in.