

# Communities of Practice in Government: Leveraging Knowledge for Performance

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## *Purpose of the article*

*To define communities of practice as a tool for cross-organizational collaboration, highlight some success stories, and provide guidelines to readers on how they can cultivate communities of practice to improve performance outcomes.*

“This approach helps build buy-in from people who will implement the approaches, versus saying, ‘Oh here comes another dictate from Washington.’ These are our own problems and we should design our own solutions.”

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It is well known that breakthroughs in government policies and programs are held back when colleagues within an agency are unable to connect the dots between their work—much less with practitioners in other agencies or at the local level. The problem is generally not a lack of good intentions or shared purpose. Rather, it is mainly an organizational problem—as exemplified by the structural impediments that the intelligence community is now addressing, in response to the urgent need to improve homeland security.

The complexity of today’s challenges and associated performance expectations—in public, private, and non-profit sectors—requires a commensurate capacity for learning, innovation, and collaboration across diverse constituencies. But conventional government bureaucracies are designed to solve stable problems for established constituencies through centrally managed programs and policies. These structures are not sufficient to address the messy problems we face today. Many of our most urgent social problems—in education,

community safety, the environment, job creation, affordable housing, healthcare, and more—call for flexible arrangements, constant adaptation, and the savvy blending of expertise and credibility that requires crossing the boundaries of organizations, sectors, and governance levels. One way to integrate efforts across these boundaries is to cultivate “communities of practice” that promote cross-boundary action learning to address national priorities.

### **WHAT ARE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE?**

Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”<sup>1</sup> They operate as “social learning systems” where practitioners connect to solve problems, share ideas, set standards, build tools, and develop relationships with peers and stakeholders. Organizations and researchers use a variety of terms to describe similar phenomena, such as “knowledge communities,” “competency networks,” “thematic groups,” and “learning networks.” A community of practice is a particular type of network that features peer-to-peer collaborative activities to build member skills and steward the knowledge assets of organizations and society.

A community’s effectiveness depends on the strength of its three core structural dimensions: its domain, community, and practice.

- “Domain” refers to its focal issues and the sense of members’ identity with the topic
- “Community” includes its member relationships and the nature of their interactions—levels of trust, belonging, and reciprocity
- “Practice” consists of a repertoire of tools, methods, and skills—as well as members’ learning and innovation activities

These structures are essentially informal; they cannot be mandated from the outside. A crucial characteristic of a community of practice is voluntary participation, because without this a member is less likely to seek or share knowledge; build trust and reciprocity with others; or apply the community’s knowledge in practice. Members’

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<sup>1</sup> Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W.M., *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003.

willingness to learn and relate together is what drives value in communities. This is not to say external sponsors and stakeholders cannot guide or influence a community—in fact, they have important roles to play. But the nature of the sponsor relationship is qualitatively different than a traditional reporting relationship. It is more like a strategic alliance, in this case with an informal, knowledge-based structure.

As knowledge structures, communities of practice complement the function of formal units, such as departments or cross-functional teams, whose primary purpose is to deliver a product or service and to assume accountability for quality, cost, and customer satisfaction. A salient benefit of communities, in fact, is to bridge formal organizational boundaries in order to increase the collective knowledge, skills, and professional trust and reciprocity of practitioners who serve in these organizations. Because they are inherently boundary-crossing entities, communities of practice are a particularly appropriate structural model for cross-agency and cross-sector collaborations.

The knowledge-based, network structures that government needs today are not new. To the contrary, they have always existed on an informal level wherever practitioners—whether farmers, artists, or engineers—have gathered to swap stories, solve problems, or just hang out together. In recent years, however, these structures have been deployed aggressively and systematically in a growing number of leading organizations (such as Proctor & Gamble, Shell Oil, McKinsey & Company, the World Bank, and DaimlerChrysler). They are getting particular attention in the private sector where organizations depend on such strategic community initiatives to compete in a hyper-competitive global economy. For them, “knowledge capital”—including skills, methodologies, and innovation capabilities—drives results. Calling these knowledge-based networks “communities of practice” emphasizes the role of practitioners to take charge of knowledge issues. We believe communities provide an essential new structural approach that can dramatically increase government’s capacity to fulfill its civic mission on a number of fronts.

## COMMUNITIES IN GOVERNMENT TODAY

Examples of communities of practice can be found throughout the federal government today. Some are thriving and some are struggling. Some are based in one agency, others span several agencies, and some even cut across levels and sectors, involving state and local governments as well as private-sector organizations and NGO's. We briefly describe four representative communities below, each of which highlights one of the types of knowledge-based performance challenges that agencies face today: within an agency; across agencies; across sectors and levels; and across a highly distributed network of professional staff.

**An agency-based community: the Rumble Strips Community.** The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) set a strategic goal to reduce highway fatalities by 20 per cent nationwide in the 10 years between 1998 and 2008. Mike Burk, leader of the Knowledge Management (KM) department at the agency, worked with agency executives to design an initiative to accelerate the diffusion of rumble strips—a proven road-design innovation that significantly reduces run-off-road crashes. The KM team's challenge was to help the agency go beyond disseminating information, which was having little influence, towards more compelling ways to engage state safety engineers and policy makers to implement rumble strips as a smart investment that saves lives as well as tax dollars.

<b>Rumble Strips</b>	
<i>Sponsor</i>	Federal Highways Administration
<i>Domain</i>	Installing rumble strips to prevent highway crashes and fatalities
<i>Members</i>	100+ federal and state agents nationwide, industry, civic groups
<i>Activities</i>	On-line access to research, vetted written and video descriptions of methods, directory of members; coordinator for Q&A and expert referrals
<i>Outcomes</i>	Acceleration of adoption across states; reduction in highway fatalities

**An inter-agency community: the E-Regulation Community.** A number of regulatory agencies had to respond to a legislative mandate to offer online access to compliance forms for their customers. Bill Bennett, the person leading this initiative at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), decided to seek out his counterparts at other

agencies to explore best practices for meeting that mandate. The Federal CIO Council was aware of his activities and through its Knowledge Management Working Group invited Bennett to coordinate a pilot community of practice involving a number of federal regulatory organizations. This community would serve as a forum for learning from each other, finding synergies, establishing standards, and coordinating with key entities such as the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

The E-Reg community illustrates how communities can foster cross-agency coordination as well as knowledge-sharing. When you can put a human face on agency bureaucrats and experts who have joined your community, you are more likely to collaborate with them, discuss the problems you face, and find ways to act in concert. The E-Reg community discusses standards that should be adopted by all agencies so they can coordinate software purchases as well as exchange and archive records of transactions. In contrast to other structural approaches, in a community the impetus for coordinating actions is rooted in members' passion for their domain. They seek to act in concert because they care about what they do, not merely to comply with a top-down directive. This produces informal acts of trust and reciprocity that are at the heart of any well-functioning bureaucracy—and which cannot possibly be specified in systems and procedures or extrinsically enforced by authority.

<b>E-Regulations/E-Records</b>	
<i>Sponsor</i>	Federal CIO Council
<i>Domain</i>	Developing electronic compliance and records management systems
<i>Members</i>	Professionals in IT, KM, and Records Management from: FERC, DOD, GSA, SEC, NRC, IRS, NARA, Interior, Agriculture, Transportation
<i>Activities</i>	Face-to-face meetings, sharing agency approaches, joint project
<i>Outcomes</i>	Faster learning about methods across agencies; phase one of an initiative to establish on-line access for citizens; new community to design e-records system

**An inter-sectoral, inter-level community: SafeCities.** Reducing gun violence on the streets of America is a goal that is shared by many governmental and non-governmental organizations in cities across the nation. The National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) office responded to a report from the Attorney General’s office that highlighted an opportunity for cities to learn from each other about how to reduce gun violence. Pam Johnson and Michael Seelman brought together a group of managers from several federal agencies to convene a community of practice that included practitioners from federal agencies, mayoral offices, and local law enforcement agencies, as well as citizen groups, faith leaders, school administrators, business executives, social workers, and others. The SafeCities community fostered learning across its member cities as well as collaborations among players at local, state, and federal levels.

<b>SafeCities</b>	
<i>Sponsor</i>	Vice President’s Office/NPR, Departments of Justice and Treasury, White House Office of Management and Budget
<i>Domain</i>	Reduce gun violence nationwide
<i>Members</i>	Justice (mostly the Office of Community Policing), Treasury (mostly ATF), local law enforcement, social services, faith leaders, etc.
<i>Activities</i>	Teleconferences, listerv, website, visits, face-to-face conference, projects
<i>Outcomes</i>	Joint efforts between police and faith leaders that spread innovative policies and practices to new cities; and increased collaboration among ATF, FBI, US Attorneys, and local law enforcement

**An on-line, distributed community: CompanyCommand.com.** Nothing can fully prepare new company commanders for the responsibilities they must take on during their two-year command. When Tony Burgess and Nate Allen, two rookie commanders who were friends and neighbors, realized how much they benefited from their frequent conversations about their challenges, they decided to find out if others would benefit just as much. They created a forum for new and seasoned commanders to share their insights and experiences; lessons learned; and tools and methods. The result was one of the most successful online communities in military history.

Every agency in the federal government—like organizations nationwide—is faced with a demographic time bomb that threatens to de-commission nearly half their employees between now and 2010. CompanyCommand.com demonstrates that communities can provide an ideal context for experienced practitioners to pass on their expertise before they leave—or to stay in the loop as alumni who provide “on call” support when the community’s active members need help.

<b>Company Command</b>	
<i>Sponsor</i>	Self-sponsored initially; now sponsored by the United States Military Academy at West Point
<i>Domain</i>	Professional development for company commanders
<i>Members</i>	Thousands of company commanders worldwide, (including future and former as well as current commanders)
<i>Activities</i>	On-line access to tools, stories, videos; coordinator team for newsletter, book program, local forums, and Q&A
<i>Outcomes</i>	Accelerate “time-to-talent” for isolated leaders in demanding roles

## **UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

These four examples show how communities of practice complement formal units to help organizations weave critical connections across formal groups and leverage knowledge for performance. Through shared commitment to a domain of knowledge that members care about, a community of practice generates “social capital” that enables new levels of collaboration and coordination: for building and sharing collective knowledge, and for developing members’ skills.

Communities help practitioners *build knowledge* by providing a forum for talking together about problems and developing innovative approaches. They may organize projects to build a new tool—as did SafeCities practitioners who developed an instrument for assessing a city’s capability to reduce gun violence.

Communities of practice *share capabilities* across boundaries by connecting practitioners and engaging them in peer-to-peer action-learning activities. For members of the E-Reg community, this kind of sharing was a key to accelerating the implementation of their E-Government mandates and avoiding the wasted time and expense of learning the same

lessons over and over. Similarly, the FHWA community reduced highway fatalities by shortening the cycle time for diffusing the rumble strip innovation across states.

Finally, as exemplified by CommanyCommand.com, communities also *promote professional development*—building skills, developing relationships, and engaging members in ways that can nurture or reawaken the sense of personal calling that inspires many employees to choose a career in public service.

### **LEADING A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY-OF-PRACTICE INITIATIVE**

The key to successful communities of practice is an appropriate leadership infrastructure that can guide, support, and renew the community initiative over time. In every case we are familiar with, leadership is the most critical success factor for community participation and effectiveness. It is essential to overcoming the typical obstacles that boundary-spanning communities face, such as agency silo mentalities, lack of administration mandates or support, and missing metrics for cross-agency results. There are several key leadership roles that are especially crucial:

- community coordinators for each community
- a support team for a community-based initiative
- an overall executive sponsor

**Community coordinators.** At the community level, the “community coordinator” can make or break the success of a community. Community coordinators nurture the community by orchestrating activities, connecting members, shepherding initiatives, and helping to solve problems. Ideally, for an active community in a strategic area, the coordinator is half-time or more. Michael Seelman, coordinator of the SafeCities community, was nearly full-time, as was the moderator for the start-up phase of the Rumble Strips community. Bill Bennett had less time to devote to the E-Regulation community, but his availability and dedication were nevertheless instrumental to the community’s progress and accomplishments. It is not only the time and commitment of coordinators that are crucial, but their level of technical and interpersonal competence. As one cross-agency community member said:

“There has to be someone whose sole responsibility is to keep the network going, to bring the issues to the table.... It has to be someone with

connections, with access to decision makers who will return their calls and respond to requests that come to the table.”

It is not necessary to be an expert in the field, but it helps to know enough in order to appreciate who should be involved, who should talk to whom, and to have legitimacy with members who feel it is important to know the business.

**The support team.** Another important role is the “support team.” It supports the launch and development of communities of practice in an organization by providing services at an overall initiative level (which may include anywhere from a few to hundreds of active communities). Support team functions include educational activities; initiative planning and coordination; coaching for community leaders; managing infrastructure (especially technology); and acting as a liaison among communities and with sponsors to facilitate ongoing learning and alignment.

In all organizations where there is a significant community-of-practice initiative that is getting results, inevitably there is also a strong support team. Mike Burk and colleagues at the FHWA provided the support-team function out of their Knowledge Management office, and they have helped launch a number of communities beyond the Rumble Strips Community. The E-Regulation community and another one on Performance-Based Contracting received support from the GSA team, and SafeCities was supported by a strong support team at the NPR office, which also served several other communities. Community-of-practice initiatives are still very new for organizations, and there is much to learn in the early going. Support team staff can help the organization start further up the learning curve and improve the success rate of communities that produce benefits for both members and the organization.

**Executive sponsorship.** Our experience and case research over the last ten years has repeatedly reinforced the importance of executive-level sponsorship—particularly when the initiative is designed to address strategic objectives or cross conventional organizational boundaries. Executive sponsors are generally required for communities to have the requisite staff time and organizational legitimacy to fulfill their potential. Sponsors must also be careful to staff and support those who act as support team

professionals. The support team role requires expertise in a number of disciplines and enough savvy to liaise among sponsors, communities, and line managers.

Communities of practitioners exist in all organizations. The question for sponsors is how important it is to cultivate key communities to address strategic objectives that cannot be achieved otherwise. The sponsor's investments, guidance, and legitimacy are crucial to both support team and coordinator roles—and therefore to the success of the community initiative overall. Sponsors are even more important in a government context where the communities' contributions to bottom-line objectives may be less visible because there are no reliable cross-agency performance metrics—and yet citizens rely more than ever on cross-agency coordination for good government.

**Setting up a leadership structure.** Agency executive sponsors should organize a leadership structure to steward the overall community initiative. This helps ensure broader stakeholder support and the community's continuity when there is a change in senior leadership. The first step is for agency executives to consider how a community-based initiative can contribute to their strategic objectives. This often means convening formal and informal conversations to talk about how communities of practice can build capabilities; and discussing which capabilities the organization needs to achieve strategic objectives.

Steps for establishing the strategic context and stewardship structure include:

1. Organization and education (informal as well as formal) of a sponsor board that includes a high-level sponsor and steering committee members who will be instrumental to implementation.
2. Identify where to focus the community initiative—through an executive review of strategic priorities or by engaging a broader group of stakeholders in collective conversations to identify hot issues.
3. Establish key roles and leaders for sponsoring and supporting the initiative:
  - o Identify the sponsor board functions
  - o Staff a support team to coach community leaders and liaise with sponsor board
  - o Recruit and develop community coordinators (one or several for a community, depending on size and intensity of activity and respective time allocation).

It is of course not necessary to have all these roles formally established to get started. But when these initiatives are successful, they typically rely on influential and skilled people actively filling community coordinator, support team, and executive sponsorship roles.

### **CONCLUSION: A PLATFORM FOR STRONGER CIVIC GOVERNANCE**

The boundary-crossing organizational structures that we describe here serve not only to accomplish agency missions better. In the longer term, they also provide a foundation for a new kind of national governance model that emphasizes participation, inquiry, and collaboration. Communities of practice—addressing issues ranging from e-government to public safety, and operating across organizations, sectors, and levels—can address national priorities in ways no current organization structure can.

In any case, we have no choice but to discover some combination of new organizing strategies to deal with the problems we face today. We need a step-change in our organizational capacity for learning and collaboration. The complexity of civic problems, combined with increasing performance demands, is likely to become only more urgent in the years ahead. We will need cross-sector stewardship groups at all levels—local, state, and national—to build a national governance capacity capable of taking on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges and opportunities before us.

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*For further coverage of concepts and cases introduced here, see:*

Snyder, W.M. & Briggs, X. de S., 2003. "Communities of Practice: A New Tool for Managers." Washington, DC: IBM Center for The Business of Government.

<http://www.businessofgovernment.org> .

Snyder, W.M. & Wenger, E., 2003. "Communities of Practice in Government: The Case for Sponsorship." [www.km.gov](http://www.km.gov)

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