

3.0 Practice Guide – Capability Area # 2: Networks and Communities

Networks and Communities

Tips for recognizing the importance of networks and identifying practices to identify, measure and support the stimulation of these structures

Networks and communities offer a way of working across traditional vertical structures to support cross-boundary learning and increase knowledge flow. Networks and communities of practice (CoP) are similar in that they are less formal than vertical structures; they tend to span boundaries; they are voluntary and structured from within; and they are closely tied to individuals' work. CoPs are simpler to recognize than networks, because CoP members regularly connect around a common domain. Networks focus largely on "go-to" people. Networks operate at many levels: technological, human, social and business. According to value networks expert Allee (2003), organizations need to better understand (by key area of learning):

Strategically: our organizations [or ministries] as participants in multiple networks where intangible assets & relationships are key;

Tactically: networks and CoPs as ways of leveraging knowledge and innovation;

Operationally: how digital networks support people in creating, organizing and accessing important knowledge;

Integrity: new ethical underpinnings for networked organizations; and

Communication: how to facilitate and engage in conversations that matter.

When?

- Learn about existing networks.
- Identify how new networks can fit with the overall knowledge strategy.
- Reflect on surprises.
- Carefully probe potential challenges to knowledge flow and monitor results.

Networks can be measured and stimulated

- Learning about existing networks is a good starting point. You can do this through deliberate research. Social network analysis (SNA) is one way to identify networks in and across organizations.
- Through understanding existing networks, you may identify a need to enhance an existing network or stimulate a new network.
- You can deliberately stimulate a network by bringing people together using tools such as Open Space Technology and CoPs.

Benefits:

- Knowledge and trust develops through conversations amongst citizens, companies and public servants
- Relationships build across boundaries
- Knowledge is shared across vertical structures
- Tacit knowledge that cannot be codified and stored no longer only sits with a few specialists
- Social networks and social capital is strengthened
- Potential for knowledge generation and innovation increases

Pitfalls to avoid:

- Trying to control, manage and measure as one would a project team
- Assuming you understand the organization's networks
- Trying to constrain the network to match your span of control
- Assuming networks cannot be influenced because they are driven by factors such as workload and personalities
- Assuming that lots of communication will optimize networks
- Assuming that everyone needs to be connected to everyone
- Being unaware of how much organizations can learn from networks.

To learn more:

Krebs, V. (2008). *orgnet.com*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Social Network Analysis, A Brief Introduction: <http://www.orgnet.com/sna.html>

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Reinelt, C. (2008, May 22). *Leadership Learning Community*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Social Network Analysis and the Evaluation of Leadership Networks: <http://leadershiplearning.org/blog/clair-reinelt/2008-05-22/social-network-analysis-and-evaluation-leadership-networks>

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