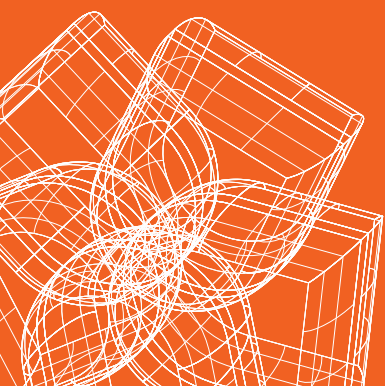
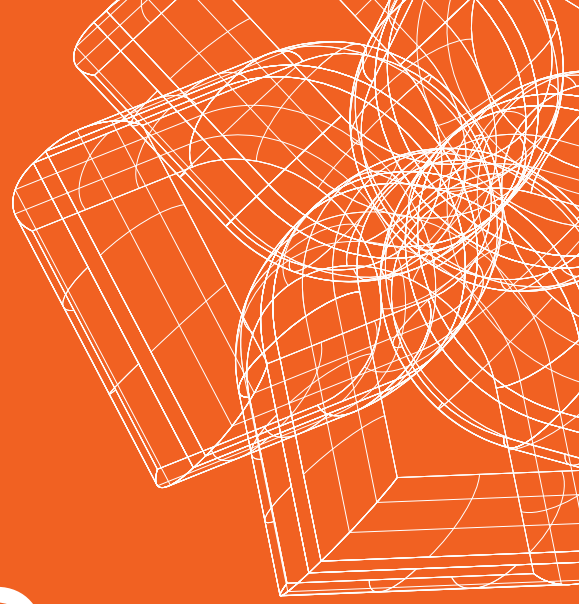


building leadership capital

communities of practice white paper



DEAKINPRIME
corporate education

DeakinPrime—Building leadership capital
Communities of practice white paper

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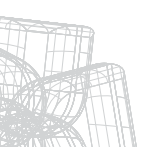
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Leadership



What is a Community of Practice?

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002, p. 4) define Communities of Practice as:

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.

The general notions that characterise Communities of Practice are as follows:

- bonding by exposure to common problems
- common practices and language
- common sense of purpose
- groups that learn
- members evolve more creative practice.

The notion of Communities of Practice has emerged from current thinking of learning in general and workplace learning in particular, and can be seen as being underpinned by Situated Learning Theory.

In his book *The Adult Learner at Work*, Robert Burns (2002) defines learning as 'a relatively permanent change in behaviour, with behaviour including both observable activity and internal processes such as thinking, attitudes and emotions' (Burns 2002, p. 114).

Burns juxtaposes this with the notion of training, which is seen 'as a far more restricted concept involving a set of arrangements external to the learner in which the environment is deliberately shaped by an instructor with respect to some predetermined learning outcomes' (Burns 2002, p. 114).

Several scholars define learning as experiential and individual (Billett 2001, Hansen 2000, Keeton 1976, Kolb 1993, Merriam 1993, Rogers 1951) and further propose learning in the workplace as more than incidental. For Billett (2001, p. 19), 'learning and working are interdependent'; that is, as people go about their work tasks they are interacting with colleagues and supervisors and their behaviour, attitude, knowledge and skills in the workplace is constantly being formed and reformed. McIntyre (2001) identifies three areas of learning in the workplace:

1. Learning practices
2. Work relationships
3. Organisation culture.

Situated Learning Theory proposes that people are actively engaged in making sense of their world – they are not 'empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge' but are actively involved in striving to make sense of the world (Billett 2001, p. 30). Situated learning is dependent on the particular context or on social relationships that are themselves embedded in a particular context of practice.



Effective practice

For Communities of Practice (CoP) to be effective, it is important that employees are:

- motivated and willing to participate and contribute
- engaged through consistency of approach.

Participants need to ensure that:

- membership of the CoP is consistent
- management is flexible to allow ownership of the learning and tasks
- collective engagement is maintained as opposed to individualised work
- the environment is collaborative and not too competitive
- adequate time is provided to develop collective understanding
- regular and common 'space' to get together is provided
- activities are 'open' for human interaction and collaboration.

Value and benefits

Lesser & Storck (2001, p. 833) describe Communities of Practice as linked to organisational performance:

... the vehicle through which communities are able to influence organizational performance is the development and maintenance of social capital among community members. By developing connections among practitioners who may or may not be co-located, fostering relationships that build a sense of trust and mutual obligation, and creating a common language and context that can be shared by community members, communities of practice serve as generators for social capital. This social capital, in turn, creates an environment in which business performance is positively impacted.

Moving towards a Community of Practice offers the following opportunities to employees and the organisation:

- a 'support' network for existing and potential work
- a group of interested and passionate colleagues to discuss 'issues' pertinent to program development
- the ability to expand the 'community' to include external practitioners, consultants and other experts (maybe even clients interested in a think tank activity)

- continued building of intellectual capital and leadership development capability
- recognised credibility and 'trusted advisor' status based on knowledge of best practice design, development and delivery of leadership development
- stockpile of reviewed papers, articles, tools and other resources.

Establishing a Community of Practice

The following actions are recommended for establishing a Community of Practice:

- a) Inform development and mutual understanding around:
 - i. membership and behaviour
 - ii. purpose and activities
 - iii. expectations and outcomes.
- b) Define the group's domain – common ground and common identity.
- c) Understand the group's community – creating the social fabric of the group to foster interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust.
- d) Establish the practice – what frameworks, tools, ideas and information the group share.

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