

## Knowledge in Action - Issue 31

# Evaluating communities of practice: adopting learning-oriented approaches

Communities of practice are increasingly common within knowledge-based organisations. But how best to justify the investments made in supporting and fostering such communities of practice? Commonly used quantitative approaches, involving measures of inputs, outputs, and activity levels, rarely provide unambiguous answers.

Research by the Henley Forum into the practical application of an approach known as developmental evaluation finds that it offers a number of advantages over traditional approaches, and can lead to better knowledge management outcomes.



In many organisations, communities of practice (CoPs) are now a well-established feature of knowledge management. Bringing together individuals 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”, they are a way to connect knowledge across organisational boundaries.

But investing resources in actions and initiatives that are designed to support and foster CoPs necessarily leads to questions of whether these resources are being used wisely—questions that are difficult to answer, not least because CoPs are complex social systems, making it inherently difficult to directly connect cause and effect.

The Henley Forum has investigated an alternative portfolio of evaluation methods—collectively termed ‘developmental evaluation’—which are characterised by a learning orientation and the active participation of those involved. Research into the practical use of developmental evaluation within four organisations has confirmed the value of the approach, and suggested ways of deploying it to maximum effect.

“Business restructuring had prompted some realignment of our CoPs, and we had also updated our community support technologies and introduced some new tools. For me, developmental evaluation has come to mean looking at how things are working, and then working out what you need to do about it—and not just looking at how they are working.”

Sarah Grimwood, head of knowledge management, MWH



### Where’s the value? Justifying interventions

The Henley Forum carried out research into the key factors that underpin successful CoPs back in 2002. This research has stood the test of time, and the core principles and structural requirements that it identified remain valid.

However, subsequent advances in understanding how CoPs support and enable workplace learning point to the need to make even more explicit the value of investing in CoPs.

In particular, thinking has moved on from a view of CoPs as essentially voluntary forums that emerge and evolve haphazardly, to a more mature understanding of the role that the broader organisation can play in supporting and developing the CoPs within it.

Specifically, there is a realisation that interventions by the organisation can allow CoPs to be more productive in delivering value to individuals and the organisation.

What sort of interventions? Technology investments, for example, to link individuals together, and provide an IT-based forum in which they can better interact. Incentive and reward interventions, for another, to encourage and recognize the role played by CoPs’ leaders and facilitators. And, perhaps most importantly of all, providing time away from immediate task priorities to take part in community meetings and discussions, in order to learn from others and share ideas.

Yet in making such interventions, organisations will rightly wish to be satisfied that there is a positive—and hopefully tangible—return on any investments. This, though, can be difficult: CoPs interact with many other organisational activities that are intended to improve collaboration, efficiency and learning, making it difficult to disentangle cause and effect in any meaningful way.

### Traditional approaches are too simplistic

Various approaches to designing ways of monitoring and evaluating CoPs have been identified by researchers, consultants and practitioners. Broadly speaking, many of these build on ways of determining the value of knowledge management itself, and on ways of assessing the return on investments in knowledge and learning programmes.

Typically, such approaches share a number of common characteristics:

- A measure of the inputs required to establish or sustain a CoP.
- A measure of the activity of the CoP (eg, number of participants,

### Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Co-ordinated by Dr Christine van Winkelen of Henley Business School, the insights into knowledge-sharing described here involved a six-month practical trial of developmental evaluation approaches with communities of practice belonging to four organisations. The project was completed during 2014, and reported at the Henley Forum Conference in February 2015.

## Examples of developmental evaluation frameworks and their use with CoPs

Evaluation framework	Overview of approach	Commentary from the research
Basic descriptive questions	Descriptive factual open-ended questions to develop a shared picture of what is happening – such as who, where, when, how and what?	Useful for a knowledge manager stepping into a new situation with existing CoPs to establish a picture of the landscape.
Fundamental evaluative thinking	Questions to get clarity about what is happening, explore what this means and what this suggests are the next steps – such as what, so what, now what?	Similar to KM techniques such as in- and after-action review processes and lessons learned cycles. A developmental approach means embedding them into the thinking processes and activities of those leading and facilitating CoPs.
Triangulated learning framework	Aims to develop a learning organisation by moving towards action based on evidence rather than beliefs and opinions. Questions relate to the use of evidence and the application of lessons.	Lessons learned processes are fundamental to knowledge management. Here the focus is on understanding what difference these are making to future action. It requires a long-term view.
Focus on strengths and assets	When there is resistance to evaluation or poor experience with evaluation in the past, this can be helpful. Approaches include appreciative inquiry, positive deviance and the success case method.	Appreciative inquiry is useful as a group process using a workshop to understand what CoP members view as success and how they can build on current practices to achieve this.
Collaboration: nature and degree of working together	Useful when changing the way people work together as a driver for the change process. Explores what the group can better do together than apart.	This confused existing CoPs as the inherent nature of CoPs makes these questions redundant. The approach may be appropriate for less well-established or new CoPs.
Actual-ideal comparative framework	This recognises that as an initiative gets underway, the ideal view of the desirable end point may change. In essence, fundamental evaluative questions are used as above, but it treats base lines as emerging and subject to revision.	The culture determines whether a 'right answer' is expected from the outset. Maturity models provide a useful vehicle for discussing current situations and progress towards higher levels.

frequency of participation, and the time taken for queries to be answered).

- A measure of the outputs generated by a CoP—queries answered, decisions taken, or actions undertaken or enhanced.
- A measure of the value of these outputs to the organisation.

Generally speaking, while it is possible to attach firm figures to measures of inputs and activity, measures of outputs and value have required supplementing by stories and subjective value judgements.

The use of stories reflects the need to take a broad perspective and to acknowledge many interacting influences and effects, something that is necessary in the complex social systems that characterise many CoPs, again making it inherently difficult to directly connect cause and effect.

### A learning-oriented approach

A Henley Forum literature review of current thinking in the field of evaluation in complex social systems led the researchers to the work of Michael Quinn Patton, who has introduced the term 'developmental evaluation' to describe evaluation in situations defined by such complexity.

A number of discrete evaluation approaches sit within the scope of developmental evaluation, all characterised by a learning orientation and the active involvement of those involved.

Usefully, developmental evaluation is consistent with the principles underpinning CoPs themselves, namely learning, engagement, and knowledge development. Furthermore, the approach is particularly suited to exploration and to supporting adaptation and change.

Moreover, the individual evaluation approaches that it embraces all appeared likely to engage people in the process of reflecting on CoP performance, and to emphasise the importance of creating a constructive dialogue between a CoP's leaders and the organisation's knowledge management team.

However, developmental evaluation does require those undertaking it to have skills in evaluative questions, and be capable of evaluative thinking about evidence. What's more, it requires a learning environment in which there is a focus on expanding the capacity of those involved "to create, to think, and to act openly in the quest to learn together...."

### Using developmental evaluation in practice

So how does the use of developmental evaluation pan out in practice? Representatives from four Henley Forum member organisations elected to find out, by using the approach within CoPs that were in place within their own organisations.

Accordingly, facilitated by an academic researcher from the Henley Forum, developmental evaluation approaches were trialled over a six-month period at consulting engineers MWH, the National Audit Office, the Financial Conduct Authority, and the Financial Ombudsman Service.

In particular, the intention was to see the effect of adopting and adapting six discrete developmental evaluation frameworks (see table). Developmental evaluation theory emphasises that adaptation and combination of frameworks is acceptable practice: what matters most is a learning-oriented mindset, a participatory approach, and critical thinking.

“The exercise allowed us to identify quick wins that could be implemented easily, as well as longer-term actions—and confirmed that there are opportunities for even more flows of knowledge into and out of our CoPs. In my view, carrying out this kind of exercise increases the credibility of knowledge management, showing that it isn’t just about ‘business as usual’, but also about stepping back and seeing how to improve things.”

Christine Astaniou, technical specialist,  
Financial Conduct Authority



Regular conference calls and an online collaborative workspace allowed the team to share progress and exchange lessons during that period, and telephone interviews with the academic researcher brought out the learning that had been achieved from the process, and helped to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. A final one-day workshop provided an opportunity to review all the findings, and refine the conclusions that emerged.

And what were the conclusions? Broadly speaking, it was possible to make seven distinct observations about the use of developmental evaluation in connection with questions regarding CoPs and their value to organisations:

- A developmental and learning orientation seems to motivate people to be involved, more so than with a judging or auditing approach. This in turn means that any findings or recommendations are more likely to be put into practice.
- Expectations are established from a process of developmental evaluation, and the knowledge manager needs to be willing to ‘follow through’ and sustain the momentum that the approach generates.
- Developmental evaluation increases the credibility of the knowledge managers involved, as it requires clear attention to business needs and realities, in order to understand what is actually working and where improvements are needed.
- Tailored approaches are best. The language and culture of the organisation need to be taken into account in judging how to frame and implement all the developmental evaluation approaches.
- Relatively simple approaches can be quite powerful if they have a developmental orientation. Questions such as “What now?”, “So what?”, and “What next?” proved to be very powerful in prompting thinking about improvement opportunities.
- Maturity models were helpful in understanding the current reality, with an evidence layer alongside subjective assessments being potentially useful, both for peer learning and to challenge thinking. Simply asking “Now what?” at appropriate points helped contribute to making the process developmental.
- More than anything else, developmental evaluation is characterised by a future-oriented mindset and a willingness to engage with improvement actions on an ongoing basis.

In short, it appears that developmental evaluation supports a constructive dialogue between knowledge management practitioners and the leaders of CoPs, motivating people to be involved, and contributing to a situation in which findings and recommendations are more likely to be put into practice. However, a future-oriented approach—and a willingness to engage with improvement actions—are needed by all concerned.

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To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Dr Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849.

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