td at work
TIPS, TOOLS & INTELLIGENCE FOR DEVELOPING TALENT

APRIL 2021
ISSUE 2104

Expand Employee Learning With Communities of Practice

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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

knowledge management
VOL. 38 • ISSUE 2104 • APRIL 2021

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TOOLS & RESOURCES

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Printed in the United States of America.

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TD at Work (ISSN 2373-5570, Electronic ISSN 2373-5589, ISBN 978-1-95215-7-837, Electronic eISBN 978-1-95215-7-844) is published monthly by the Association for Talent Development, 1640 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. *TD at Work* is available for subscription in print or digitally. ATD national members receive a digital subscription to *TD at Work*, plus archive access, as part of their membership dues. The subscription rate for the Monthly All-Access (12 print and digital issues, plus archive access) is $119 (ATD national members) and $159 (nonmembers). The monthly digital subscription rate for 12 issues is $99 (nonmembers). Periodicals postage paid at Alexandria, Virginia, and additional entries. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *TD at Work*, 1640 King Street Alexandria, VA 22314. Claims for replacement of subscription issues not received must be made within three months of the issue date.

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Peer learning is everywhere—whether via a business resource group in a formal work setting; through support organizations, such as those for new mothers; or in communities where individuals come together to learn more about the local area, religion, or leaders.

Industries have been built on peer learning. Just look at the rise of YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok stars teaching others how to apply makeup, change a dryer vent exhaust hose, put together the greatest seasoning, or learn a new dance. Instructors are joining the movement and uploading courses to popular learning platforms to share their expertise. When experts and curious individuals come together, they form peer networks.

Roughly 70 percent of learning comes from experience, 20 percent via peers, and 10 percent from formal programs. And as a learning leader, you can accelerate learning by formally organizing peer learning in the form of communities of practice (CoPs).

L&D professionals spend much of their time developing formal learning programs. Yet, in today's work environment where

geographically dispersed workforces may limit in-person gatherings, many budgets are constrained, and the pace of business is increasing, you need to be intentional about fostering experiences and peer interactions to keep learning going. CoPs can help you do just that.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, I will:

- Review different peer learning methods.
- Highlight how CoPs work and their organizational benefits.
- Discuss methods of creating, maintaining, and encouraging CoPs.
- Outline best practices for successful CoPs.

Peer Learning Methods

Learning is in everything individuals do, both professionally and personally. People can choose to learn from any experience, and organizations have a responsibility to create environments where individuals can do and learn at the same time. You can facilitate those learning opportunities outside of formal learning programs in various ways. The following three means leverage organizational experts and peers but solve for different purposes.

Mentorships are relationships where a trusted guide counsels or influences individuals. An organization or talent development professional more specifically may facilitate this type of peer learning relationship when someone needs specific guidance for a set time period to advance or enhance knowledge or experience in a given area. The personalized direction develops the mentee while giving the mentor an opportunity to demonstrate coaching and leadership skills. This is typically a student-teacher relationship.

Project teams are goal-oriented groups tasked with achieving a time-bound assignment, often when a company defines a business need. The teams work to achieve that goal. This type of peer learning is a great opportunity for individuals to learn about new parts of the business and how different teams work together to accomplish an aligned business need. While being a member of a project team is beneficial from an experiential learning standpoint, the primary goal is not the learning but the achievement of the agreed-upon goal.

Communities of practice are groups of individuals who share a concern or a passion for something they do and want to learn how to do it better via regular interactions. Think of them as focused interest clubs that expand members' thinking around ways of working in an area of practice. CoPs enable experts to surface and exchange information, like a boiling pot where bubbles arise from different areas. You can use CoPs to amplify expertise and passion, elevating all members of the group. One week, an expert is a learner, and the next week that role may be reversed.

CoPs Defined

In 2002, Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder coined the phrase *community of practice* in their book *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. They used adult learning theory—specifically readiness—and self-concept to identify the partnerships that had initially been recognized in apprenticeship relationships. They discovered that these opt-in communities were everywhere, even when formal environments didn't exist.

Organizations have a responsibility to create environments where individuals can do and learn at the same time.

CoPs extend learning beyond a formal learning program, enabling you to further help learners to improve, change, or amplify behavior. The communities can reinforce learning by commercializing organizational strategies, values, processes, and other concepts that are often your responsibility as the individual tasked to train others. When you can leverage organizational experience to demonstrate how to use a new tool successfully to change the workday in real time or troubleshoot a new process by putting it in the context of

the work environment, you're extending that learning, engaging with employees, and sourcing new ways of modifying your training program.

However, just because individuals gather together does not make them a CoP. Departmental or cross-functional teams often briefly come together. By contrast, CoPs gather for long-term growth, development, and application in their respective fields. Three elements differentiate them from other group gatherings:

- **Domain.** This is the CoP's focus. It is a specific topic that is central to the group and is an area in which participants have high interest. The subject motivates and excites learners. Defining the domain helps you determine the terms and resources the group will use. Doing so also is vital to keeping the group focused, engaged, and motivated.
- **Practitioners.** As with other types of adult learning, immediate relevance is critical. CoPs should consist primarily of those who are practicing in the domain. That enables them to apply the shared learning in their everyday jobs and roles. Without the CoP being exclusionary, participants should be devoted to working in the respective space—not casually curious. For example, a CoP created around consumer insights should comprise those who are researching and developing insights every day or using them in their work. An accountant with a passing interest in consumer preferences should not join.
- **Community.** This encompasses interaction, trust, and communication. For a CoP to work, participants must trust each other and feel comfortable raising questions, providing answers, and sharing best practices. Community in this case in not about geographic proximity but rather about the rules and norms that members create that will help unite them. Interactivity is key. The intention with CoPs is not only to share but also to challenge, co-create, and exercise the concepts brought forth in the group.

CoPs can develop spontaneously or be formally organized. Spontaneous communities can develop out of shared interests discovered in an organized event. In the workplace, people can run into each other, start a conversation, and discover their common pursuits. Their curiosity sparks conversation, which leads to identifying a need to recruit like-minded individuals to share concepts and best practices and—more importantly—to think together to solve problems or things that stand in their way. Self-generated CoPs, which are organic in nature, ensure that participants' enthusiasm and motivation are baked into the group's formation, which leads to strong ownership and sustainability.

You may also see a need to establish a CoP around a specific topic. That will require more work to connect the appropriate individuals and create the group. But as a learning leader, you have the advantage of perspective. You have the opportunity to see when people are

Case Study: CoP Develops Organically

A company went through a reorganization that fragmented similar learning functions into interdependent units with different leadership silos. That led to a lack of clarity both on overarching strategies and resources that were available and applicable to the organization.

Solution: A group of learning practitioners generated a learning council to meet and communicate updates on a regular basis. The individuals saw an opportunity for better collaboration and began regular interactions among themselves. They share information once a month via virtual meetings; communicate regularly through email, text, and communication platforms; and have come together to generate new, cross-functional learning opportunities.

Results: This community of practice began as a place for individuals to share status updates, but it evolved into a professional development opportunity. The group's transparency and collaboration have increased, and the interdependent units now collaborate successfully. Further, the learning council and other practitioners come together frequently to engage in lively discussions about professional development via sharebacks and about best practices, self-paced learning evaluations, podcast and article reviews, and other skill-building activities.