



USAID Knowledge Management Community of Practice Pilot Project

Knowledge Management/
Knowledge Sharing
Subcommittee

Business Transformation
Executive Committee
BTEC





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Knowledge Management is...

Sharing USAID's cumulative organization-wide best practice, lessons-learned, and intelligence to build expertise, discover new knowledge, and achieve the Agency's long-term objectives.

A Community of Practice is...

A self-sustaining network of people that share:

- A common intellectual or professional passion;
- Exposure to a common set of problems and devotion or commitment to solving those problems; and
- A common language and culture.

Why CoPs?

American Productivity and Quality Center says, "Communities of practice are the next step in the evolution of the modern, knowledge-based organization."

1. Introduction

Over the past few months, the USAID BTEC Knowledge Management/Knowledge Sharing Sub-committee (KM/KS) has been working to create a strategic vision and plan for the implementation of an Agency-wide Knowledge Management program. One component of this plan includes the implementation of a pilot project for USAID Communities of Practice (CoPs).

The cornerstone of this plan is to leverage and coordinate existing Communities of Practice within the Agency and to establish new Pilot CoPs. The objectives of this plan are to work with the KM/KS to facilitate the creation of Communities of Practice and to establish the processes, organizational guidelines, and web-based systems necessary to support CoPs within USAID.

1.1 Role of CoPs in Knowledge Management

To use the techniques of Knowledge Management (KM) to build an effective knowledge organization, the most successful knowledge organizations organize KM in the context of:

- Strategy and Leadership
- Organization and Process
- People and Culture
- Technology and Systems

CoPs are key areas that span each of these KM dimensions. Leading knowledge organizations agree that CoPs are the "killer application" for building a knowledge-based organization. Formal CoP programs can be a critical catalyst in developing self-sustaining CoPs.

In the context of USAID, CoPs span formal organizational lines to bring together people from multiple Departments and Bureaus, including USAID employees, development partners, and people from other Federal agencies, around a common interest or goal. As a result, the Agency benefits from a level of collaboration and synergy that cannot effectively take place within formal organizational bounds.



What's So Different About CoPs?

It took some time for the CoP pilot members to understand the concept of CoPs. We spent several sessions working with them on defining the CoP concept and what made it different from what they did already. We found:

- CoP are not an intuitive concept – its takes a lot of time to internalize;
- Real-world examples help a lot; and
- Many USAID are already in CoPs and don't realize it -- we worked with them to help them identify their existing CoP memberships.

Communities are not teams...

Many members of the pilot project were confused between the different between teams and communities:

- **Teams** are goal focused, usually composed of members with divergent skills and interests, aimed at producing products or deliverables, and of limited duration
- **Communities** are problem focus, composed of individuals with similar skills and interests, focus on ongoing concerns and experiences, and are open-ended.

1.2 Pilot CoP Methodology

The methodology for this pilot CoP project included the following steps:

- Facilitate the selection of the pilot CoPs;
- Define the Roles and Value of CoPs throughout the Agency;
- Provide the technical and organizational support to implement the solution in managed pilots from whom the Agency can learn what works best; and
- Develop the requirements for a community portal solution - the web-based collaborative software best suited for USAID CoP's

The CoP selection process involved the review of over 12 nominated CoPs by the KM/KS Committee. The KM/KS Committee developed a series of selection criteria through which to vet the nominations. These selection criteria included:

- Active versus new CoP;
- Presence of an executive sponsor;
- Presence of an active and engaged CoP leader;
- Well-articulated mission or purpose;
- Well-articulated statement of supporting an Agency-wide objective; and
- Washington versus field outreach.

In evaluating the CoPs relative to the above criteria, the KM/KS Committee attempted to have a set of Pilots that offered differing answers to the above selection criteria such that the pilots would be relatively unique to one another. This approach was taken in an attempt to maximize the learning experience from the Pilot project.

The three pilots chose as a part of this process included:

- **HIV/AIDS:** The HIV/AIDS CoP focussed on the data needs within the HIV/AIDS department and how that data is collected and used by USAID employees. Focus was also given to the future use of the data by HIV/AIDS partners in the field.
- **Management Performance Metrics (MPM):** The MPM CoP was originally centered around a new department formed within the Management Bureau. The MPM Department wanted to study the impact of using a CoP to help the Department interact in a more collaborative way with direct MPM stakeholders as well as broadly sharing MPM best practices broadly within USAID.
- **Youth:** The Youth CoP was selected as a new CoP with strong Agency support and as a topic area that spans throughout the Agency as well as outside USAID. The Youth CoP is being sponsored by the Education Group within EGAT as a part of EQUIP 3.



Why Us?

In our experience, one of the critical criteria in the operation of successful CoPs is the committed leadership. Since there had been significant turnover in two out of the original three pilots, there was up-front confusion as to why these groups had been selected as pilot CoPs.

Although most staff came to see the value of CoPs, this illustrates the difficulty of creating “top-down” communities.

“Bottom-up” community members naturally understand the value of a community. On the other hand, “top-down” communities require clear management support and forceful promotion of rationale for the CoP

Physical and Virtual Community Space

CoPs typically create both a physical and online community space focused to facilitate the CoP’s objectives. This community space brings the CoP together to:

- Capture, Communicate & share knowledge
- Build community identity
- High-light & advocate management activities
- Discover & create new knowledge
- Access & organize knowledge

The result of this project has been a series of findings and lessons learned for the most appropriate processes, organizational guidelines and web-based systems to support communities of practice at USAID. We have divided these findings and lessons learned into the following four sections:

- CoP Selection
- CoP Membership
- CoP Content
- CoP Technology

2. Findings & Lessons Learned

2.1 CoP Selection

Challenge	Lessons Learned
<p><i>CoPs typically develop from informal groups of like-minded individuals – as such, they need little support from management to flourish and grow. Assuming that CoPs do not organically group, what selection criteria should be used to identify areas for promising CoPs?</i></p>	<p>Based on the pilot experience, CoPs are most likely to flourish when the following conditions are present:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, demonstrated, and documented need (ideally supported by a business case) • Presence of existing networks (formal or informal) • Internal community leadership (or potential for leadership) • Executive sponsorship • Manageable size and budget • Culture amenable to change or open to knowledge sharing • Technical competence and access to necessary technology

2.1.1 Bottom-up “Demand” Driven Selection

The pilot CoPs showed that CoPs created by senior management are extremely difficult to create without strong executive support, budget, and tangible tools to that can demonstrate what the CoP would be. CoPs should not be selected unless these criteria are met at a minimum. In the meantime, the focus should be on supporting voluntary “bottom-up” CoPs and developing common standards and tools.

We Won't Have Time!

The Education CoP initially attempted to establish four CoPs (Data, Youth, Training, and Workforce Development). When they began to understand the time commitment involved, they realized that they could not support such an investment. As a result they targeted their resources on a single CoP – Youth. This CoP could be partly supported via their new Youth initiative contract (EQUIP3). This illustrates the need to:

- Target CoP investments to leverage a critical mass of resources;
- Provide some contract funding to help get the mundane tasks of a CoP underway; and
- Focus on CoPs where there is a genuine interest to proceed.

HIV AIDS and Too Much Data

The HIV/AIDS CoP was focused on trying to provide better access to the information they have developed. HIV/AIDS has numerous informal CoPs and has developed a large number of databases to support these CoPs. Unfortunately, this has led to duplication and confusion as to where to find data. They dealt with this problem by conducting a survey of core membership to identify their data needs and data source assessment to determine the data contained in different databases. They then developed a data portal that created a one-stop-shop for all data. The portal directed staff to the most common data requests and describe what could be found in data sources.



2.1.2 Complimentary Management Support

Given the centrality of executive sponsorship with developing CoPs, building management support should be emphasized. This could include developing formal business cases, developing real-life anecdotes and stories to demonstrate CoP tangible benefits at USAID, and conducting simulations to show Agency leadership the benefits and challenges of creating CoPs.

2.2 CoP Membership

Challenge	Lessons Learned
<i>CoPs demand considerable work and staff support to grow and flourish – how can USAID’s already overworked staff find the time to participate and support CoPs?</i>	<p>All CoPs grappled with the problem of finding time to support CoP operations. In general they pursued the following strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on demonstrating benefits to a core CoP group and providing them with value – only broadening out when they are convinced of and using a CoP.• Integrate CoPs as much as possible into everyday operations and used them to make potential members’ jobs easier (don’t make CoPs one more requirement).• Integrate CoP support and KM responsibilities into contracts as they are awarded – this provides the budget and institutional support needed to create benefits to sell to potential members.• Include individuals from USAID and contractors – outreach needs to be conducted to all these groups.

2.2.1 Value-added Tools and Standards on Day-One

Embryonic CoPs need to demonstrate value to potential members very early on. A valuable service could be provided if there were a series of tools and standards that developing CoPs could adopt quickly and get off the ground allowing new CoPs to demonstrate value to members on “day-one” of the CoP.

2.2.2 Training

The agency should consider offering CoP training to support core teams and those staff that are interested in developing CoPs.



Management Metrics and Not Enough Data

The Management Metrics Group had a hard time deciding which data to include because the area was new and ill-defined. They decided on a more open process where members would be allowed to add information sources as part of an effort to define measures.

Technology isn't the Answer (but it sure helps)

Every CoP saw that a CoP was more than technology. However, technology proved crucial in helping CoP members understand what CoPs did and how they could change the way they worked. In particular, technology demonstrations were vital tools in helping community members visualize how CoPs might work.

CoP Technology – The Gateway to the Missions

CoP technology is also vital to spreading the CoP word outside Washington. Missions have so far been untouched by the CoP message. Web enabled CoPs are ideal for communicating the message to overseas staff.

Beware of Favorites

All CoP pilots had a favorite technology based on an early demonstration. However, a good demonstration is no substitute for a requirements analysis and a unified approach – vital for OMB Exhibit 300s.

2.2.3 CoPs as a Part of All Agency Business

We found that individuals are most likely to use top-down CoPs when they have to as part of some process or contract requirement. As such, to the maximum extent possible, the Agency should consider re-engineering process where possible to support CoP use. The Agency should consider this as a potential first step towards a large CoP policy.

2.3 CoP Content

Challenge	Lessons Learned
<p><i>CoPs typically contain information resources. These resources can be highly organized, provided by an information management source, or supplied voluntarily by members – how should information resources be organized?</i></p>	<p>USAID staff contacted as part of the CoP pilots generally believed that they are drowning in data by cannot find what they need. As a result, the pilots suggested that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not replicate existing information resources – adopt a portal framework to point uses to existing data sources and experts • Focus on establishing tools that help people find data like FAQ, common data needs, expert directories • Focus on information that is of immediate use to potentials members – this will draw members in an encourage them to become active members of the community

2.3.1 Use of Advisory Services

Advisory Services is a model found in many best practices organizations as a means of providing knowledge management support and facilitating valuable support in providing information for CoPs. For USAID, Advisory Services Teams can act as sector-based knowledge intermediaries between the Agency's knowledge requestors and the sources / repositories of Agency knowledge. These (permanent) teams harvest re-useable requests and responses and knowledge nuggets from their interactions with the (transient) Communities of Practice and knowledge requestors that they support, storing that knowledge in Agency repositories for future access and re-use. Individual Communities of Practice meet the knowledge needs of their own members and maintain community based repositories of their own knowledge assets. The Advisory Services Teams provide the primary access to this community-maintained knowledge for those who are not members of the community. CoPs should consider using them when possible.



Any Technology—One Size does not fit all

Many CoPs had experience with CoP technology products. Different products were found to fit different situations. Team based products (e.g., eRoom, Quickplace) were useful for teams that needed to establish a quick presence and work collectively on a product. Community-based products (e.g., Sharepoint and Simplify) were better suited to true community-style ventures. Every CoP saw that a CoP was more than technology.

Partners and CoP Technology

USAID partners are already big users of CoP technology. In almost every instance, the pilot CoPs had some exposure to CoP technology via their partners (e.g., HIV/AIDS – Sharepoint, Youth – Quickplace). This means:

- There is a reservoir of experience in partners vis-à-vis CoP technology that USAID could draw on;
- USAID is already paying indirectly for multiple CoP platforms in partners’ organizations – as a result, USAID pays for duplicate systems and loses the benefits of CoP technology as it remains with the partners.

Privacy is a Growing Problem

Privacy Assessment are becoming part of any IT implementation – when the Agency selects new CoP technology it should conduct a privacy assessment if it is to satisfy future OMB requirements.

2.3.2 Follow a Clear Content Development Roadmap

CoP core teams should use a commonly accepted taxonomy to classify information – work with CDIE and use USAID taxonomies. CoP Core Team should begin with relatively “deep” application knowledge and expand other types of knowledge as resources permit.

2.4 CoP Technology

Challenge	Lessons Learned
<p><i>There is a wide variety of CoP support technologies available – to what extent should CoPs use technology and which technology?</i></p>	<p>Based on the pilot experience, CoPs are most likely to flourish when the following conditions are present:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numerous existing CoPs within the Agency already use CoP technology to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Facilitate communication between geographically dispersed experts ○ Coordinate team activities working on large projects ○ Help organize information • No single technology is used throughout the Agency – WebBoard, Sharepoint, eRoom/Documentum, and Simplify are all used for different purposes – staff wish clarifications on which technology to use and would like more functionality – especially in the information and knowledge management agency • Technology demonstrations proved to be a very successful way of getting users to understand the potential value of CoPs and what would be involved with CoPs

2.4.1 Method to Technology Selection

Different groups within CoPs need different collaborative technologies (e.g., team, community, portals) – potential CoPs need guidance as to which technologies should be used for different purposes. This project developed some tools that will be made available on the USAID KM web site





(<http://knowledge.usaid.gov/>). These tools provide a repository of best practices and lessons-learned to assist communities throughout USAID.

2.4.2 Common Technology Platform

There is widespread interest in using collaborative technologies – however, there is great uncertainty as to what should be used. A common platform, set of standards, or recommendations for technology to deal with common problems would be of great value.

2.4.3 Model Learning Platform

Technology demonstrations were vital in getting staff to understand the value of CoPs. A model CoP that could be used to show potential CoP leaders, members, and potential members would be extremely useful in spreading the CoP message through the Agency. Management of the KM/KS subcommittee as a CoP would be a great way to illustrate this concept.

2.4.4 Extranet as a Place for USAID/ Contractor Collaboration

The extranet should be used as a community space. Most pilot CoPs needed a common space to work with Agency staff and contractors. There was general agreement that cooperative technology investments should be made to facilitate this goal. Currently, the emerging USAID extranet would be the ideal area for this type of function and should be supported.

Contractors should be encouraged to use agency owned and managed collaborative workspaces. Currently almost all contractors use some form of community or team tool as they support the Agency. As a result, the Agency is indirectly paying for multiple, redundant tools and loses some of the benefits it would otherwise gain from knowledge productive if it owned and managed the tools. The Agency should consider requiring or encouraging contractors to work within a common community or team space on the extranet and capture information from these activities