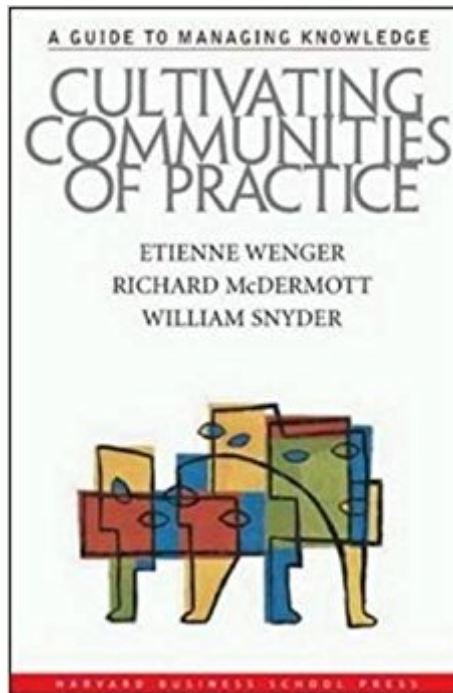




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Cultivating Communities Of Practice



Synopsis

Today's economy is fueled by knowledge. Every leader knows this to be true, yet few have systematic methods for converting organizational knowledge into economic value. This book argues that communities of practice--groups of individuals formed around common interests and expertise--provide the ideal vehicle for driving knowledge-management strategies and building lasting competitive advantage. Written by leading experts in the field, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* is the first book to outline models and methods for systematically developing these essential groups. Through compelling research and company examples, including DaimlerChrysler, McKinsey & Company, Shell, and the World Bank, authors Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder show how world-class organizations have leveraged communities of practice to drive strategy, generate new business opportunities, solve problems, transfer best practices, develop employees' professional skills, and recruit and retain top talent. Underscoring the new central role communities of practice are playing in today's knowledge economy, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* is the definitive guide to fostering, designing, and developing these powerful groups within and across organizations.

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Customer Reviews

From the time our ancestors lived in caves to that day in the late '80s when Chrysler sanctioned unofficial "tech clubs" to promote the flow of information between teams working on different vehicle platforms, bands of like-minded individuals had been gathering in a wide variety of settings to

recount their experiences and share their expertise. Few paid much attention until a number of possible benefits to business were identified, but many are watching more closely now that definitive links have been established. In *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, consultants Etienne C. Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder take the concept to another level by describing how these groups might be purposely developed as a key driver of organizational performance in the knowledge age. Building on a 1998 book by Wenger that framed the theory for an academic audience, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* targets practitioners with pragmatic advice based on the accumulating track records of firms such as the World Bank, Shell Oil, and McKinsey & Company. Starting with a detailed explanation of what these groups really are and why they can prove so useful in managing knowledge within an organization, the authors discuss development from initial design through subsequent evolution. They also address the potential "dark side"--arrogance, cliquishness, rigidity, and fragmentation among participants, for example--as well as measurement issues and the challenges inherent in initiating these groups company-wide.

--Howard Rothman

Among the myriad challenges managers in large corporations face today, one is becoming increasingly important: how to make the best use of the knowledge that a company's employees possess. The authors consultants all lift models from Xerox, DaimlerChrysler and the World Bank to show how to tap into the wisdom within, making this book helpful, in theory. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder spend much time explaining ways to organize, maintain and sustain communities of practice, which they define as groups that "share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and... deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." Laying out a logical, step-by-step process for building one of these communities, the authors define specific roles for each member of the group. But senior managers looking, as the subtitle suggests, for "a guide to managing knowledge" may be disappointed in the scant space actually devoted to developing a system that captures and manages the learning that comes out of a "community of practice." Managers seeking the best way to obtain and use the knowledge coming out of these groups probably won't find it here. (Mar. 6)Forecast: Wenger is the biggest name in the theory of communities of practice, and those familiar with his work will want to add this book to their collection. Neophytes would do better with his 1998 primer, *Communities of Practice*. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

The metaphor in this book's title says it all. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder have written a practical

guide aimed at helping you grow and develop semi-informal communities capable of having a life of their own. The model they put forward is fairly simple and easy to understand. Communities of practice, according to the authors, have three essential focal points. The first is the "domain" which is essentially the topic area or subject that people gather around to discuss, learn, and improve. Next is the "community" which includes the people who want to learn, share, and engage one another. In the words of the authors, these communicating people are the "social fabric of learning." Finally you have the "practice" which is a specific set of frameworks, tools, information, language, stories and documents that the community shares and produces with one another. All communities of practice must address the domain, community, and practices if they are going to be successful and meaningful. With this framework in mind, the authors go on to discuss how communities of practices move through five different stages--from potential to transformation--as they mature. The majority of the book discusses the opportunities and obstacles that we face when working with a community of practice throughout the five stages. Many key ideas emerge in these chapters. Stewardship seems to be more important than management. We cannot expect communities of practice to only solve the problems we face (which they can), but we must also expect them to create problems of their own. Building connections and aiming to add value to each community member should be an early priority. These statements are just a small sample of the ideas discussed. Finally, the book ends by discussing how you might measure the value added and how community-based knowledge initiatives can help an organization improve its overall learning and performance. No doubt the addresses a "soft" topic. My reaction is that effectively stewarding a community of practice requires a fairly unique person who is able to work for the good of the group and has particularly strong networking and opportunity identification skills. That said, the authors do a superb job of helping us see exactly what skills are needed for growing our own community. This is a highly practical and easy to read book. I read this cover-to-cover in a single day. The theory of communities of practice is largely limited to only essentials and most of the time is spent helping the reader see how communities operate. If you are looking for advice about how to form a learning or discourse community around a particular issue or topic at work, or if you are interested in forming a collegial group that shares and learns about a topic, then this book is for you. This book is very much about life long learning in a professional context. It presents the community of practice as a nice alternative to the formal team or ad hoc committee. In short, this is a users' guide for meaningful and productive knowledge management groups and learning communities.

Cultivating Communities of Practice is the second book from Wenger which is only about

Communities of Practice (COP). The first book was a little dry and academic (and intended to be), but this book is your typical business book, which makes it easy to read. Wenger is teaming up with Richard McDermontt and Willian Snyder, which probably helped a lot in the amount of real-life stories in the book. The books can be separated in two major parts. The first five chapters are about just about COP and the last five chapters are about COP related to other topics. The first two chapter are introduction chapters which talk about what COP is and what their value is to the organization. It also does a good job in separating COP from other communities. The three main elements of a COP is domain, community and practice. A COP related to a domain, creates or has a community and owns a set of practices within that domain. They are self-managing and emergent, which means that in organizations its hard to create them -- you need to cultivate them. The third chapter talks about the cultivation and the principles of doing so. I probably liked this chapter most, it's concrete and clear. It can be used directly in organizations who would like to promote communities. The next two chapters describe a typical life of a COP and the different stages they go through. Knowing the typical stages helps in deciding your actions to cultivate them. Interestingly, I wish I would have stopped reading after chapter 5. (which the exception of chapter 7). At this point I thought the book was one of the most interesting books I've read in a while, but then the second part was disappointing to me. Chapter six talks about distributes COP. It is still important, but somehow the tone of the chapter changes (or did my mood reading it?). Chapter seven was good again, about the downside or dysfunctions of COPs and what to do about it. Chapter eight, about measuring the value of COP, completely lost my interest. The writing style seemed to change (different author?) and the emergent, self-managed tone of the first couple chapters changes to a more controlling tone. The examples also changed and most related to McKinskey. Chapter nine is the typical "change" chapter of business books and describes the stages for implementing COP in organizations. Chapter ten tries to predict the future of COP. Though I felt chapter ten just miserably failed and it even seemed the authors moved away from their previous definition of COP and talked about communities in general. After the first five chapters, I would have rated this book five stars and would have recommended it to everyone. Though, the last five chapters would just be a three star rating, so I'll go for the average here. I'd strongly recommend to buy this book and read chapter 1-5 and 7.

i'm building Gaudeamus - the academic network for publishing in journals (gaudeamusacademia.com), an online community of scholars (professor, researchers and journals' editors). It was founded to provide a tool for academics to help them to get their

research published in journals, enabling them to network with editors and to share what they have learned and discovered about publishing. So this book has provided us with an useful guide to manage knowledge and with the theoretical bases to keep building and developing our globally distributed community.

I originally thought this book might be too academic or that the examples from Shell and McKinsey would not be relevant. I was pleasantly surprised, however, that the book contained numerous ideas that I'm using to introduce communities to my IT organization. The book isn't perfect. It could be shorter. The writing is dry. Some of the observations and recommendations verge on the obvious. But even the chapter on Measuring and Managing Value Creation - one of the more high-level and unhelpful chapters - talked about the use of "systematic anecdotes" to demonstrate value of a community. The examples of story-telling to demonstrate value resonated with me and we're using this approach today. The bottom line is that the book is very useful. I took many notes, dog-eared a number of pages and I'll be using it as my implementation reference.

For those who are tasked to develop Communities of Practice (CoP), this is a great resource AND reference. I plan to keep it in steady rotation for (especially) checking the stages of CoP development and how to facilitate my CoPs through them.

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