

# Benefits of Communities of Practice

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This summary of the benefits of Communities of Practice was prepared by John Mitchell and Sarah Wood from John Mitchell and Associates to assist VET practitioners participating in the current Reframing the Future pilot program to develop Communities of Practice across VET organisations, industries and borders.

The benefits of Communities of Practice can be divided into two sections:

- impacts on individuals
- impacts on organisations (on practice and productivity).

The following tables summarise these impacts and describe the benefits of establishing and maintaining Communities of Practice.

**Table 1: Benefits of Communities of Practice for individuals**

Benefit	Description
<b>Enable employees to manage change</b>	<p>‘Communities frequently link people with a common interest who do not have regular day-to-day contact’ (McDermott, 2000, p. 3). They often form around technical disciplines and topics that draw people from many work teams.</p> <p>Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue that ‘when a company reorganises into a team-based structure, employees with functional expertise may create Communities of Practice as a way of maintaining connections with peers’. They believe that people may also form communities ‘in response to changes originating outside the organisation, such as the rise of e-commerce, or inside, such as new company strategies’ (p. 141).</p>
<b>Provide access to new knowledge</b>	<p>Stewart (1996) describes Communities of Practice as ‘groups that learn’ where members ‘collaborate directly, use one another as sounding boards, and teach each other’ (p. 2). This empowers individuals, opening up access to new knowledge and skills, and enables individuals to manage change and fulfil the requirements placed on them by society or by their employer.</p>
<b>Foster trust and a sense of common purpose</b>	<p>According to McDermott (2000), frank and supportive discussions of real problems frequently build a greater sense of connection and trust between community members. ‘As they share ideas and experiences, community members often develop a shared way of doing things, a set of common practices, and a greater sense of common purpose’ (p. 4). In the course of helping each other, sharing ideas, and collectively solving problems, individuals ‘often become a trusted group of peers’ (p. 4).</p>
<b>Add value to professional lives</b>	<p>Communities of Practice frequently form around topics community members have invested many years in developing. McDermott (2000) maintains, however, that communities are not just focused on common interests, but on ‘the practical</p>

	aspects of a particular practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, and things that do and do not work' (p. 2-3). In this way Communities of Practice add value to the professional lives of their members.
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**Table 2: Benefits of Communities of Practice on organisational practice**

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Generate knowledge and encourage skill development</b>	Through participating in Communities of Practice, 'members develop the sense of trust and mutual obligation that is critical to encourage contribution and sharing of ideas and knowledge' (Lesser and Everest, 2001, p. 39)
<b>Use knowledge management to drive strategy</b>	According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), Communities of Practice are an important knowledge management strategy and as such can contribute to an organisation's strategic direction (p. 140).
<b>Disseminate valuable information and transfer best practice</b>	Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue that Communities of Practice enable expertise to be transferred across organisations, encouraging the discussion of effective solutions to a range of problems.
<b>Initiate new lines of business including new products and services</b>	Communities of Practice 'provide an important spark for innovation' (Lesser and Everest, 2001, p. 39), through establishing a forum for individuals to share their knowledge and ideas.

**Table 3: Benefits of Communities of Practice on organisational productivity**

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Facilitate rapid responses to customer needs and problems</b>	By developing knowledge of its members and their various strengths, Lesser and Everest (2001) believe that Communities of Practice enable organisations to quickly identify individuals with the subject-matter expertise necessary to provide the best answer to a client problem (p. 39)
<b>Decrease the learning curve for new employees</b>	Communities of Practice serve as a vehicle to develop mentoring relationships between junior employees and established practitioners. Lesser and Everest (2001) argue that this helps new employees to understand how their role fits into the wider organisational context and how their job impacts other individuals and processes.
<b>Help companies recruit and retain talent</b>	According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), members of Communities of Practice have an understanding of the expertise within their community. As such community members can identify opportunities that are tailor-made to their interests and expertise of their colleagues.

## References

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