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Guidelines for Establishing and Facilitating Communities of Practice

Introduction and Purpose of the Guidelines

A community of practice is a group of peers with a common sense of purpose who agree to work together to share information, build knowledge, develop expertise and solve problems. Communities of practice are characterised by the willing participation of members, and their ongoing interaction in developing a chosen area of practice.

Communities of practice are learning forums where members teach and learn from each other and use each other as a sounding board. Communities of practice may focus on problem solving, knowledge sharing and innovation.

These guidelines provide tips on establishing and facilitating communities of practice; they are not intended to be prescriptive, as communities of practice may vary according to their particular purpose and membership. The guidelines aim to support the facilitation and establishment of communities of practice, provide a consistent high quality experience for participants, and thereby contribute to optimising the outcomes for community of practice members, member agencies and the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO). The guidelines outline the value contribution provided by communities of practice, and highlight their role as a consultative forum and information conduit that can support AGIMO's work on strategic priorities.

The guidelines are based on the 'usual' community of practice lifecycle. During the establishment phase of a community of practice, when members are first joining and the forward program and communication tools, such as web pages and email lists, are being established, more facilitation support is required. As the community of practice matures and becomes more self-supporting, facilitation and support is increasingly shared across members. Over time, as the goal of the community of practice is achieved, the community of practice enters the post-maturity phase when evaluation can be used to establish whether it should close or possibly refocus on more relevant issues.

Types of Communities of Practice

Problem solving communities

Most communities of practice have an element of problem solving within their sphere of practice. A community brings together expertise from a variety of sources to focus on solving a common problem, thus providing benefits to members and facilitating agencies.

Knowledge sharing communities

One of the main tasks of communities of practice is to develop new knowledge that will improve business performance. A knowledge development community may decide to focus on finding, collating, organising and distributing the knowledge that their members use every day. This involves the community in organising shared information processes and focusing on filling knowledge gaps.

Better practice communities

These communities focus on developing, validating and disseminating specific practices and usually develop a structured vetting process developed through sharing documented practices.

Innovation communities

Some communities of practice are based around technical or professional peer groups, and the focus is on new and emerging areas of knowledge where there may be the opportunity to gain an edge. These groups can provide the basis for rapid dissemination of new ideas or products.

Facilitation Role of AGIMO

AGIMO's role in relation to communities of practice is that of a catalyst and facilitator, especially in the establishment phase, using processes that build ownership amongst members and facilitate maturation of the group so it becomes self-supporting. AGIMO's support of communities of practice is aligned with the following priorities for 2005-2006:

- providing strategic leadership; and
- promoting capability for innovation, particularly working with stakeholders to enhance economic and social benefits by increasing ICT literacy and skills.

Particularly in the initial phase, AGIMO's role may take the form of the following activities.

- establishing a cross-agency facilitation group, to share leadership, and assisting this group to develop a forward program of presentations, activities and products; and
- coordinating and encouraging the self-generation of information sharing and knowledge building through meetings, forums, email discussion forums, a web page and general advice.

A community of practice web page is available at <http://www.agimo.gov.au/resources/cop>. To facilitate access by members and prospective members to information about communities of practice, each community of practice supported by AGIMO is linked to this page.

AGIMO's role in relation to communities of practice is consistent with other whole of government work.

Value Contribution

Sharing credible information, knowledge and expertise can contribute to better practice in information management. In addition to contributing to better decisions and outcomes, communities of practice can be a useful consultative forum or test-bed, which can help identify strategic information management issues for referral to the appropriate area or person within AGIMO. In this way, communities of practice can complement AGIMO's focus on strategic issues.

Effective communities of practice can provide the following benefits to members, agencies and AGIMO.

- facilitating information sharing across organisational and business unit silos, particularly where the body of knowledge is still developing and is therefore not easily accessed;
- increasing access to expertise across government;
- helping government officers do their jobs more effectively by improving understanding of better practice and innovation in their field;
- identifying and promoting better practice methodologies which can be re-used by practitioners in similar work roles;
- improving problem solving capabilities across government;
- improving skills and competencies of individual members;
- increasing opportunities to pro-actively raise issues with relevant forums; and
- encouraging strategic alignment within AGIMO and across government.

Checklist for Establishing and Facilitating Communities of Practice

The follow checklist is provided to assist in establish and manage AGIMO's relationship with a community of practice over the course of its lifecycle.

Establishment Phase

1. Business Case

- Ensuring there is a robust business case is vital to forming an effective community of practice. To assist in developing a business case, the issues listed below may need to be assessed.
 - The degree of alignment of the topic with AGIMO priorities, and broader government directions such as network enabled government, and partnerships.
 - The level of priority of the topic amongst potential community of practice members.
 - Whether there is a pre-existing community of practice or forum in the topic area.
 - Whether the issue is the domain of another agency.
 - The available capacity within AGIMO to provide facilitation support especially in the initial phase of establishment.
 - The value contribution of a community of practice compared with a different response — perhaps a workshop or forum may better meet the information needs for this topic area, or possibly a policy consultative group would be a more appropriate strategy.

2. Identifying Member Needs

- Preparing to invite individuals to become involved in a community of practice may include considering the following issues.
 - The level of demand and need for knowledge and capacity building in the particular topic area.
 - The willingness and capacity of potential members to contribute to supporting the group.
 - The level of knowledge and expertise of members in relation to the topic, and their willingness to share this with each other.
- Once the level of demand has been established (through measuring the response rate and the level of enthusiasm), an email survey may be a useful tool to provide further detail about the needs of potential members and scope the parameters of the community of practice. The following questions have proved useful for engaging agency support with facilitation and identifying priorities.
 - What are your 3 key information and learning needs in relation to 'insert topic'?
 - What activities is your agency currently undertaking in relation to 'insert topic'?
 - What do you expect to gain from participating in the community of practice?
 - How do you anticipate participating in the community of practice? (give examples)
 - Are you interested in being part of a small informal steering group that would assist with devising the forward program of meetings and activities?
 - We anticipate holding presentations at some meetings — who do you suggest could be suitable presenters and on which topics? (Note: this could include you).
 - What are your preferences with regard to meeting times and intervals etc?
 - Based on your experience, what are the key success factors for this community of practice?

3. Membership

- Unless the business case indicates otherwise, AGIMO's communities of practice are for government officers. Membership may be drawn from across a wide range of agencies and even tiers of government. The following points can assist clarifying membership of a community of practice.
 - Explain the scope of a community of practice prior to inviting members to join so prospective members can self-select on the basis of its relevance to them.

4. Goals, terms of reference and operating principles

- So as to ensure that the process of identifying goals, terms of reference and operating principles encourages members to own the community of practice, the following points may be useful to take into account.
 - If a survey is carried out of potential members' goals and expectations, the results can be presented at the first meeting for discussion and agreement.
 - Once agreed, goals and terms of reference can be published on a web page and be periodically reviewed in consultation with members.
 - Operating principles can also help members clarify their expectations of each other. The rules can be practical and aspirational, for example:
 - at least one new learning from each meeting;
 - privacy and confidentiality is maintained within the community;
 - views expressed are those of individual practitioner members; and
 - after each meeting a summary of the discussion is circulated to members.

5. Cross-Agency Facilitation

- Forming a voluntary cross-agency facilitation group can be a useful means of encouraging cross-agency ownership, sharing costs and the facilitation of the community of practice and getting assistance with planning and implementing a forward program. In the initial phase the facilitation group may need support, and the following points may need to be considered.
 - Regular meetings of the facilitation group may be held to plan the forward program and identify how facilitation can be shared.
 - A facilitation group can help identify expertise, resources and references, presenters, site visits, venues and topics for the broader community, as well as facilitate meetings.
 - Consider establishing an email discussion list to help communication flow and facilitate relationships across the facilitation group. The Finance Web Manager can provide assistance with setting up email discussion lists.

6. Engagement and Facilitation

- Each community of practice catalysed will require initial support and facilitation by the relevant business unit. Over time it is expected that this role will be taken on by, or shared with, another agency. However, ideally the communities of practice should be largely self-supporting. The tips listed below may help to encourage a community of practice to become self-supporting.
 - In addition to the cross agency facilitation group all members can be encouraged to take an active facilitation role at meetings and other activities, and to share information and expertise and capture knowledge.
 - Meetings and information sharing can draw from wherever the expertise lies, including within the group, from non-members and/or the private sector, and share this information as appropriate.

7. Online Operational Support

- During the establishment and maturity phase the lead agency can facilitate a community of practice by providing online operational support through the following activities.
 - An email discussion group may be set up to encourage member's engagement and share expertise and information. The Finance Web Manager can assist in establishing email discussion lists.
 - A web page may be a useful tool, and can include public and private domains to encourage information and expertise sharing. For example an index of members identifying their areas of knowledge and experience could be included.
 - Links to information about communities of practice can be made from the communities of practice web page at <http://www.agimo.gov.au/resources/cop>.
 - When the community of practice has members from outside Canberra and/or from all tiers of government, facilitating contact between members in the same geographical area or tier of government and/or identifying individual members willing to be a local contact can help build member relationships.

Maturity Phase

8. Maintenance

- When a community of practice has matured it ideally becomes largely self-supporting and the lead agency's facilitation role diminishes. Lead agency staff might consider undertaking the following activities to help ensure that the community of practice is continuing to function well and work towards its goals.
 - Maintaining a watching brief regarding participation of members in email discussion and the web page.
 - Updating the web page and email discussion list.
 - Sharing costs with member agencies.
 - Stimulating meeting attendance and email discussion.
 - Monitoring participation by the facilitation group.
 - Attending meetings.
 - Feeding the community of practice useful reference material and information.
 - Sharing information on visiting experts and other relevant events.

9. Evaluation and measurement

- Seeking regular feedback from members and periodically evaluating outcomes can be a useful means of measuring the 'health' and relevance of the community of practice. Emerging issues can also be identified through these processes. Timing evaluation to feed into the AGIMO planning cycle can assist with identifying its future. The following points could be included in the evaluation:
 - the level of participation in email discussion, presentations and meetings;
 - the range of agencies involved;
 - the attendance at meetings;
 - the involvement of agencies in a facilitation group;
 - outputs achieved, such as better practice checklists and toolkits;
 - evaluation of the uptake and usage of these checklists and toolkits; and
 - member satisfaction.

Post-Maturity Phase

10. Closing a community of practice

- A community of practice may be closed in any of the following circumstances:
 - the group is no longer active;
 - it has achieved its principal purpose;
 - it has been assessed by the lead agency as no longer serving its original purpose, is no longer considered to be an organisational priority, or has drifted from its agreed mission; and/or
 - it has failed to become self-supporting.
- Suitable processes for closing a community of practice may need to be taken into account. Issues to consider include:
 - Consulting members regarding closing the community of practice.
 - Recognising the group's achievements
 - Acknowledging member's contributions
 - Notifying members that the community of practice is closed, via email and at meetings as appropriate.
- At the end of the lifecycle, the lead agency can explore the possibility of working with the facilitation group and community members to make reasonable efforts to capture the knowledge gained, lessons learned and practical tools, which are likely to be of future benefit to AGIMO.

References

Wenger E, McDermott R, Snyder W. M *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Harvard Business School Series, Boston, USA. 2002.

Guidelines for Communities of Practice (Internal Guide). Victorian Department of Justice. 2003.

The Knowledge Garden web site - <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/definitions.shtml>

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