

EXPERT SERIES

The “Expert Series” is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions’ associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

Project Community of Practice *Another name for the Project Office?*

by J. Kent Crawford, PMP

Research carried out by project management researchers Lynn Crawford of the University of Technology at Sydney (Australia) and Terry Cooke-Davies of Human Systems, Ltd., in 1994 found that, while most project management groups are good at capturing lessons learned and storing them in some way, the step where Knowledge Management (KM) fails for most project-oriented companies, is in the transfer of that knowledge to future projects and project teams.

In Crawford’s words, in terms of transferring lessons from one project to another, “a faultline runs down the center of the process.” Lessons learned are captured toward the end of a particular project and are the responsibility of an “outgoing” project team, whereas knowledge generation and transfer occur toward the beginning of a project and are the responsibility of an “incoming” project team.

Some of the problem lies in the way project managers have traditionally thought of projects: as unique endeavors. “Unique” is even a part of the standard definition of project work. That being the case, it can be tempting to dismiss the experiences of Project A as being due to specific circumstances that don’t apply in the circumstances of Project B.

Another condition of project work is a sense of rivalry between teams: the Project B team has a high degree of respect for those who worked on Project A, they may be less than anxious to learn what that team has discovered. Crawford notes that such respect and sharing is much more likely if both project teams see themselves as members of a higher-level community, with accountability to all members of the community, rather than as separate entities in competition.

In addition, project managers tend to place the highest importance on aspects of the project other than knowledge transfer. The UTS researchers asked participants to rank the importance of project management practices relating to initiating and planning, monitoring and controlling, and closing and capturing lessons learned, and found that study participants ranked monitoring and controlling most highly, closely followed by planning, with closing and capturing lessons learned coming in a distant third.

Finally, in terms of personality characteristics, project personnel in the UTS study tended to be more task-oriented than people-oriented; in other words, they did not readily take time to share their knowledge with others.

The Project Office, as the central repository of project information, keeper of project management methodology, administrator of project management infrastructure, and trainer of project personnel, is in a unique position to maximize an organization’s ability to learn from its own experiences. Software provides a partial answer to the resolution of the loss of knowledge over time; but “humanware,” Lynn Crawford suggests, can be even more effective. Crawford’s work with international networks of project management practitioners has led her to adopt the community of practice as a model way to nurture project management competence.

The Project Office as a “Community of Practice”

“Any methodology worth its salt,” says process improvement expert Michael Wood (in an excellent article on gantthead.com), “seeks to harvest the wealth of knowledge that exists within the minds of those who actually do the work.” How is this “harvest” best carried out? Wood contends that knowledge workers who are organized into cross-functional groups representing the end-to-end processes that actually deliver value to stakeholders can readily define and resolve the value gaps in the process.

The cross-functional group he describes is an apt description of the teams that accomplish project and program work in most organizations. Thus, an organization in which most work is accomplished by teams is already in a position to engage in continuous improvement of its own methodology and processes. All the Project Office needs to do is learn how to nurture those cross-functional groups and provide them with the infrastructure to put up their “harvest” for safekeeping and future use. What organizational structures are best suited for making the most of that harvest?

Lynn Crawford has suggested project management communities of practice can be invaluable in facilitating knowledge creation, transfer and learning between individuals and across organizational boundaries.

Communities of practice are not new, but the term has acquired new significance in the era of the knowledge worker and intellectual capital. Communities of practice are groups of people informally bound together by shared interest and shared expertise—a simple enough definition and one which might apply to most voluntary groups in our society.

Yet the importance of the community of practice to the development of technical and business knowledge began to be truly appreciated thanks to the Institute of Research on Learning (IRL), in Palo Alto, Calif., founded in 1987 and associated with Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center, and to the work of social learning theorist Etienne Wenger. A key finding of the IRL’s work was that learning is social. In this context, communities of practice have become associated with the concepts of the learning organization and knowledge management.

The primary reason to implement a Project Office is to improve project performance across the organization. Standardizing on best practices is one way to accomplish that goal. Thus, the encouragement of best-practice sharing among all segments of the organization is thus a natural role for the Project Office to take. By recognizing the shared interests and goals of project management practitioners throughout the organization, the Project Office can play an important part in supporting, facilitating, and networking the informal communities that are “people repositories” of project knowledge around the enterprise. Organizations such as Boeing, NASA, NCR, and Ericsson have provided support for project management communities of practice along these lines, even rewarding active participation in corporate communities of practice. Further, the development of communities of project management practice between organizations has led to initiatives that benchmark project management practices.

Since it is a truism that informal channels of communication are faster than formal ones, and since “A firm’s competitive advantage depends more than anything on its knowledge ... on what it knows, how it uses what it knows, and how fast it can know something new,” the Project Office’s facilitation of project management communities of practice can contribute not only to the capture and growth of project management knowledge, but to the speed of innovation and change in the organization as a whole.

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In addition, the community of practice, like a distributed computing network, links and expands the “repository” of project management knowledge that is stored in practitioners’ minds—the tacit knowledge that is otherwise so difficult to manage.

What do the experts tell us about building and maintaining communities of practice? In “Knowing in Community,” knowledge management expert Richard McDermott (Knowing in Community: Ten Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice, *Knowledge Management Review*, May/June 2000) listed a number of critical success factors for communities of practice:

1. Focus on knowledge important to both the business and the people. This echoes Wally Bock’s advice to limit the focus of your KM efforts to areas where you can make a difference. The topics addressed by the community need to be ones people feel personally passionate about.
2. Find a well-respected community member to act as coordinator, to keep people and create opportunities for people to share ideas. A coordinator need not be a leading expert, but must be someone who connects well with people.
3. Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate. Some companies specifically allocate a certain amount of project time to community activities to ensure that the time and energy people invested in the community would count in their performance appraisal.
4. Involve thought leaders who either have an important specialized knowledge or who are well-connected and influential members of the project management community. These people legitimate the community and draw in other members.
5. Make opportunities for contact. While documented reports, templates, tips, analyses, proposals, and so on are helpful to most community members, face-to-face contact is key to building a sense of commonality, enthusiasm, and trust.
6. Allow people to participate at their own comfort level. Even lurkers often get great value from a community where they can drop in quietly to find out who is working on what or learn about the field and make contact later.
7. Encourage real dialogue about real problems and cutting-edge issues by building a trustful and mutually helpful environment.

ONE OF THE MANY things that these communities do to add value in an organization is not only share but also benchmark best practices, both internally and against other organizations.

Excerpted from J. Kent Crawford, *The Strategic Project Office*, Marcel Dekker/Center for Business Practices, 2002