

Networks *Digest*

A spotlight on network-related resources

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Getting to 7 — Cultivating Communities of Practice: The 7 Stages of Development

Information Authority, National Health Services, U.K.

This user-friendly guide was produced by the Information Authority of the National Health Services (NHS) in the U.K. It was designed to help NHS member organizations succeed at consciously and visibly connecting people's knowledge with business purposes through multi-agency partnerships. The guide is a toolkit of techniques and ideas presented in four parts.

Part 1: Developing knowledge management in the Information Authority

This section outlines the Information Authority's physical infrastructure, goals, and values. The NHS is embracing non-hierarchical decision-making models and "learning organization" principles because it wants to be a leader in the adoption of new organizational and technological advances. The five foundations of the Information Authority's vision for its employees are:

1) knowing what you know; 2) knowing who knows; 3) knowing how you know; 4) knowing where you know; and 5) knowing why you know.

Part 2: Introducing communities of practice

This section offers employees reasons why and instructions on how to get involved, plus descriptions of the support available and the areas of accountability expected. The aim of the community of practice effort is "to get you meaningfully involved and producing results, rather than just talking about problems."

Communities are encouraged to set up one or more best practice groups that concentrate on specific business improvement issues and validate and disseminate "quick wins" within their own interest areas, in consultation with the delivery units. Both communities of practice and best practice groups meet physically only occasionally and determine their own objectives.

Although the Information Authority provides technical and administrative support, leadership is expected to emerge from within the groups. For example, management conducts regular evaluations of community and best practice group activities to help them improve their performance in a number of areas. Management also monitors activities to ensure stakeholders and customers

Key messages

- As part of a strategic initiative to become a leader in knowledge management, the Information Authority of the National Health Services has produced a comprehensive guide to support the development of communities of practice and best practice groups.
- Information Authority managers encourage communities of practice to focus on best practice development, because this focus can enhance relationships across groups and overcome organizational fragmentation.
- In keeping with the principles of self-direction, leadership is expected to emerge from within the communities.

affected by the introduction of a "best practice" are properly identified and allowed to make recommendations, prior to implementation of that practice.

Part 3: Getting to seven

This section describes the seven stages of a community of practice's development.

Stage 1 — Identifying a common agenda. This stage is about community development within a social network. The spark of common interest can happen spontaneously between people with a shared interest or with a little help from management. A six-step model for coming to a shared agenda is offered (share aims, define issues, identify interests, generate options, develop objective criteria, and evaluate options), as well as advice on how to shift members' focus from "positions" to "interests" and how to generate, evaluate, and select options.

Stage 2 — Building trust and commitment. The guide describes the steps and processes needed to build trust (reliable and positive interactions), commitment, and accountability.

Stage 3 — Working together in a best practice group. Here you'll find help on how to establish your group's purpose and principles (such as norms for operating and criteria for evaluating success) and how to maintain a happy, productive team atmosphere (for example, rewards for team success).

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Stage 4 — Delivering early wins. This step “implies a less perfectionist approach.” The group skill here is to balance the need to develop team relationships with the need to deliver results. Guidelines are offered to help teams determine when to release products early and when to continue to refine them.

Stage 5 — Improving productivity. Here you'll find tips on holding effective meetings and attracting and keeping members.

Stage 6 — Developing your communications. The key message here is to get the help you need to design and execute an effective communications plan.

Stage 7 — Implementing your products. This section offers a few essential steps for implementation, like ask yourself before you ask others, check if you need to do things differently while you are doing them, and offer freely your skills and learnings.

The guide stresses “structure can help us develop our confidence in accepting complex situations. It can help us to develop our abilities to discover better ways to work.”

Part 4: A toolkit of techniques and ideas

This section provides a broad overview of techniques designed to help groups 1) see the big picture; 2) analyse a situation in its context; 3) determine cause and effect; 4) explore consequences; 5) solve interpersonal problems; and 6) design a course of action.

From its beginnings as the coming together of several NHS organizations, the Information Authority has aspired to become a “learning” organization — flexible, adaptable, and capable of delivering the immediate results that its stakeholders and users require. The contents of this guide were inspired by this intention.

Information Authority, National Health Services. 2004. Getting to 7 — Cultivating Communities of Practice: The 7 Stages of Development. www.informatics.nhs.uk/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=689

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