
Collaboration & Communities

Communities of Practice in Local Government

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Collaboration and Communities:

Communities of Practice in Local Government

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Collaboration and communities: Communities of Practice in Local Government

Key Learning Points

1. Moving from a culture of knowledge repositories (people-to-information) to one of knowledge collaboration (people-to-people).
2. Introducing a sceptical and mature staff demographic to the concept of virtual collaboration using social computing/Web 2.0 facilities.
3. Creating, developing and growing trusted communities of practice in local government

1 Overview

The local government sector in England and Wales has been motivated to improve service delivery by a number of recent agendas, among them drives for efficiency and self-regulation.

The Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA), in their capacity of driving improvement across the sector, has responded to these demands with a knowledge management (KM) strategy, connecting resources and individuals across the sector. The KM strategy featured a programme of communities of practice (CoPs), which has established networks of practitioners facing similar challenges and experiences so that members can learn from each other.

This was largely achieved through regular training events and the development of a purpose-designed virtual collaboration platform (www.communities.idea.gov.uk), which integrates a number of web 2.0 tools into a common workspace. Low barriers to entry, simplicity and ease of use were the key criteria

in the design of the platform, which was launched in September 2006.

2 Background

2.1 About local government (England & Wales)

Local government in England and Wales employs a vast workforce of 2.1 million people across 410 local authorities. Each authority is working to deliver the same 700 services to their residents. The distributed nature of the sector is unfortunately conducive to 'silo-ed' working; many local authorities function as stand-alone organisations, isolated from their counterparts across the country who are facing parallel tasks and challenges.

The sector has considerable assets with which to serve their constituents. Local government has an annual operating budget of over £83 billion for delivering services and over £16 billion for capital assets such as new buildings.

2.2 Context for this project

The past five years have seen significant changes across the local government sector:

- The Cabinet Office's E-government and Transformational Government agendas had catalysed local authorities to offer more services via technology and citizens to increase take-up of those services. The initial response, a wave of electronic document/record management (EDRM) systems, had generally led to a disorganised proliferation of web sites across the sector that complicated the sector's ability to realise those visions.
- The Local Government Association, the lobbying body for English and Welsh local authorities, established the strategic priority of self-improvement and regulation for the



sector as an alternative to the external Comprehensive Performance Assessment inspection regime.

- *Releasing resources to the front line* (The Gershon Review) launched the Efficiency agenda, concluding that the entire public sector could realise more benefits from the resources they already had
- Sir Michael Lyons began his enquiry into the financing and future of local government, looking for evidence of efficiencies and improvement in service delivery

In this policy environment, councils were under pressure to produce and guarantee higher quality services while demonstrating more efficient use of resources. Though the sector had already in place some cross-cutting networks and communities, the factors above were demanding improvement while re-emphasising the value already held within the sector. Stronger connections and third generation knowledge management were essential to meet these challenges.

This was the catalyst for a KM strategy developed for the [Improvement & Development Agency](#) (IDeA)¹ to improve the way that councils connect and share knowledge with each other. By supporting communities of practice and professional social networks across local government, the IDeA is promoting the potential of knowledge management as a tool for continuous and sustainable improvement. The strategy increases the sector’s capacity to share and

maintain knowledge and experience across local, regional and national boundaries and supports the development of public sector policy and innovation.

3 The impact of knowledge management in local government

3.1 The principles of KM

The use of the web as a knowledge management environment within local government – in keeping with other sectors – can be considered as a three-stage evolutionary process, as seen in Table 1 (below).

These transfer into action and initiatives as follows:

1. **First Generation KM:** Focus on technology and infrastructure; having document repositories and search tools; collaboration using shared file areas and an online forum.
2. **Second Generation KM:** Communities and human factors; facilitated knowledge sharing and transfer using peer reviews or after-action reviews, etc.
3. **Third Generation KM:** Knowledge management activities driven by emphasis on business goals and business value. Use of people-to-people connections and social networks – e.g. communities of practice.

Table 1:

	First generation	Second generation	Third generation
Where knowledge 'Lives'	Artefacts	Individuals	Networks and Communities
Type of knowledge	Explicit	Tacit	Emergent
Implications	Focus on infrastructure for <i>capture, collection</i> and <i>re-use</i> of artefacts	Focus on collaborative <i>behaviours</i> and knowledge <i>exchange</i>	Provide the enabling <i>conditions</i> for individuals to maximise <i>value</i> of knowledge



All three categories in the KM evolutionary path provide efficiency gains, as staff are more readily connected with the relevant people and projects that have come before them. They can learn from one another even across organisational boundaries, saving them time and preventing them from 'reinventing the wheel'.

Communities of practice (CoPs) specifically foster these connections on an ongoing basis, joining up those who share a common role, challenge or policy agenda. The CoP introduces members to one another and helps them identify useful experiences in each other. CoPs also often host resources (documents, events, etc.), providing a central point of contact for members. See section 3.3 below for a more detailed discussion.

3.2 Using technology to deliver KM

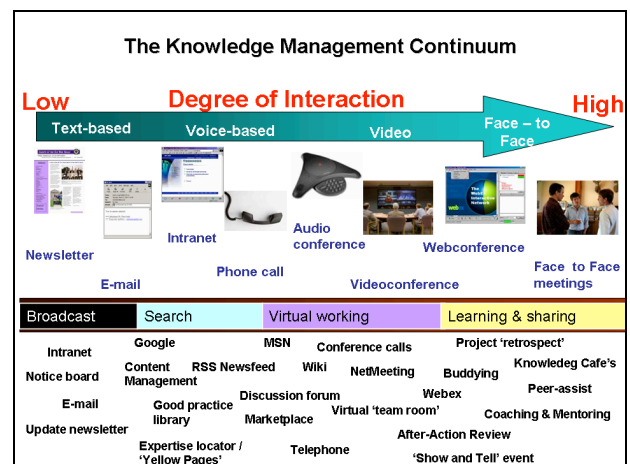
First generation KM has been popular in the public sector for quite some time. Document stores are abundant and numerous, which means that first generation KM can be a frustrating treasure hunt. With over 100,000 public body websites in the UK, searches can be difficult to focus and even harder to rank (often resulting in irrelevant pages in an unhelpful order). For many knowledge workers across local government, the original people-to-information paradigm is becoming an increasingly frustrating experience. Alternative methods of finding those nuggets of knowledge are necessary.

The climate is therefore ripe for encouraging collaborative networks where knowledge can be shared. In its simplest form this could be just online forums where questions are asked and 'experts' respond. However, the growth in social media applications and emergent web 2.0 tools is seeing a far richer set of solutions being developed. For example, it is much easier for individuals without any technical knowledge to publish information to the web,

and hence knowledge is increasingly being found on privately run websites that engage with users to add relevance and purpose to this knowledge.

In this context, it can be seen that connecting people with people is the missing knowledge management dimension, whether through some structured community of practice, interest or purpose, or through informal networking. Finding someone who has had a similar problem to yourself and resolved it, or who has had experience of the work you are engaged on is quite often more valuable than searching for that elusive case study that is tucked away on a web site somewhere.

Seen within the perspective of an overall KM continuum, the most effective KM strategies are those which utilise and integrate a number of different information- and knowledge-sharing channels to foster first, second and third generation KM practices. This principle is illustrated in the following diagram:



3.3 Communities of practice

Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups with a common responsibility, agenda, role, or challenge. In local government, they are often practitioners with similar job titles across



different local authorities or those responsible for introducing a particular government-sponsored change into those organisations. These staff have said repeatedly that they gain considerable insight and are more effective at their jobs when they are connected with others in similar positions.

As local government is composed of 410 authorities that are delivering parallel services to their residents, communities of practice are ideal for helping staff within them to maximise their own capacity and ultimately, the sector's.

To embed these new behaviours into this vast and diverse group, we examined much of the literature on existing communities of practice and tried to incorporate those experiences wherever possible.

Our research included the considerable and growing volume of information available in the printed medium and the blogosphere on the topic of communities of practice. Arguably the definitive reference source is still the book 'Cultivating Communities of Practice', by Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M Snyder², which has provided many of the foundations for the CoP strategy deployed by the IDeA.

Similarly, a wiki from the [Work and Learn Together](#) Project³ identifies the critical success factors for implementing CoPs. This seems to encapsulate the key points in a suitably succinct way and reflects the IDeA's approach. The following is an abstract from the wiki:

"Setting up a virtual CoP takes time. This is especially the case when the virtual CoP is not added as a tool to an already functioning CoP. In that case building trust and commitment and letting the identity of the CoP emerge is a gradual time consuming process.

The success of a community of practice depends, to a large extent, on participants of the community, because of the voluntary participation, self determination and practical relevance for the individual or organization. These aspects can be cultivated best, when the following critical success factors are taken into account:

1. *It is important not to apply very specific and narrow criteria with respect to what constitutes a CoP and to when a CoP is successful. Communities are intrinsically hard to define, because they are not by nature clearly bounded.*
2. *Participants of a community of practice have to experience the relevance and perceive the goal(s) of the community as useful. They will have to be able to identify themselves with it, to become "owner" of the community and enthusiastic about it.*
3. *Participants of community of practice have to be convinced of the fact that continuously improving and learning (new) competences leads to an improvement of job performance.*
4. *To realize this within the community there needs to be commitment and mutual trust. Participants have to experience their participation is valued by other participants. In most cases because of the knowledge they bring to the community but also because of their way of working and communicating.*
5. *The initiator of a CoP will have to be prepared to give a considerable freedom to the participants.*



6. *Participants need to have well developed social skills. Working together within and outside the community will lead faster to new knowledge, insight and solutions compared to trying to solve problems alone.*
7. *Especially in the start up phase, a lot of attention will have to be paid to community building by community participants themselves.*
8. *Conflicts have to be dealt with in a timely and respectful manner. The solution of a conflict is not seen as a victory or loss or individual participants but rather as a learning opportunity for the community as a whole.*
9. *Dialogue has to take place. Conclusions have to be drawn in a collaborative way. Opinions of all participants should be respected. Conclusions should not be imposed by the moderator.*
10. *Participants should experience the community as a safe environment in which they can express their opinions and positions without fear, feel free to ask questions and free to explore non-conformist solutions and creative ideas.*
11. *Participants experience commitment and support from the management of the organization (if applicable).*
12. *Participants experience their participation as contributing to their personal growth. Bottom line is that participants experience that, based on the gained knowledge, their performance on the job in the hotel, restaurant, guesthouse, etc. where they work has increased.*
13. *Participants experience the added value of the fact that the community is of a multidisciplinary nature and consists of participants from different hierarchical layers of the organization.*
14. *Because the CoP works to a large extent virtually, the community will need to be supported by a well-functioning collaborative working tool, which allows extending the range of functionalities as a community becomes more developed.*
15. *The management of the organization (if applicable) has to understand and actively support the strategic importance of the CoP but should not be directly involved in its daily operation or setting the goals of the CoP. The management has to accept and trust the community as a "self-steering" unit."*

This programme was built on a perspective of allowing organic, unbounded communities to grow following the needs of their members, similar to the above.

4 Developing a collaborative environment

The IDeA Communities of Practice platform was developed early in 2006 as part of the wider knowledge management strategy review commissioned by the IDeA. The purpose of the platform was to encourage connections



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between people and organisations working in the local government sector and to improve the way they work through capturing and sharing know-how.

Various commercial social media and social networking products were investigated but none offered the simplicity of use and degree of integration required between the various collaboration tools. Consequently, the system was designed and developed from the ground up using IBM Websphere.

Versatility and expandability were priorities in the development process. The platform was designed to support any number of individual communities of practice and enables groups of officers to communicate and collaborate with each other on issues of common interest or purpose. Each community can be available to the public (meaning that anyone signed up to the platform could join with a click of a mouse button) or private (users request to join and the facilitator moderates their membership).

Another important issue was accessibility, as the platform needed to be usable by officers across local government using divergent technology (both in terms of internet connection speed and browser capability). The platform's primary focus was not, therefore, to be fully featured from the start, but to evolve in functionality in response to its users.

The functionality of the environment was designed to foster the communities of practice in the following ways:

- Connecting people to people through shared interests, problems and experience
- Taking a community based approach to knowledge- and information-sharing that incorporates a conversational dynamic consistent with social media and web 2.0 principles
- Creating fluid knowledge bases where good practice can be developed by the

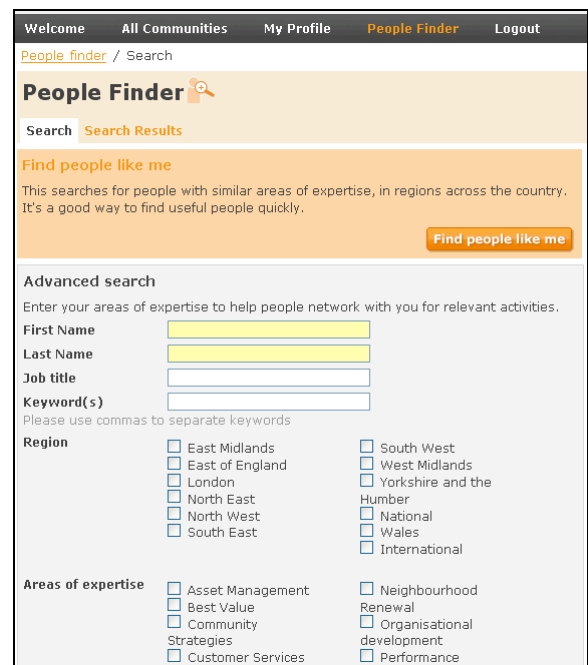
community, as opposed to having static downloadable content produced by single 'experts'

- Providing a space for ideas to be nurtured and projects to be completed collaboratively
- Increasing the value of existing networks by providing an online space where community members can interact when not physically meeting

Each aspect of the communities' functionality is described in the following sections.

4.1 People Finder

The people finder function lets registered members of the CoP platform to quickly and simply find and connect with other community members with similar interests to their own, or who have expertise in particular service areas that might be relevant (e.g. planning, procurement, education etc.)

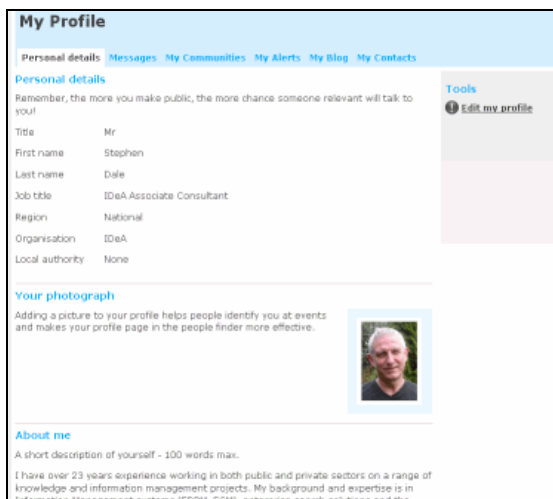


The screenshot shows the 'People Finder' search interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Welcome', 'All Communities', 'My Profile', 'People Finder', and 'Logout'. Below this is a search bar with the text 'People finder / Search'. The main heading is 'People Finder' with a magnifying glass icon. Underneath, there is a 'Search' button and a 'Search Results' link. A section titled 'Find people like me' contains a descriptive paragraph: 'This searches for people with similar areas of expertise, in regions across the country. It's a good way to find useful people quickly.' and a 'Find people like me' button. Below this is an 'Advanced search' section with the instruction 'Enter your areas of expertise to help people network with you for relevant activities.' It includes input fields for 'First Name', 'Last Name', 'Job title', and 'Keyword(s)'. A note says 'Please use commas to separate keywords'. The 'Region' section has a grid of checkboxes for: East Midlands, East of England, London, North East, North West, South East, South West, West Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, National, Wales, and International. The 'Areas of expertise' section has a grid of checkboxes for: Asset Management, Best Value, Community Strategies, Customer Services, Neighbourhood Renewal, Organisational development, and Performance.



4.2 Profiles

Each user on the system has a profile, similar to those on social networking sites such as [Facebook](#)⁴, [LinkedIn](#)⁵, etc. The profile allows the user to add contact information, a photo, and areas of expertise and interest. Users can mark each other as contacts, and can use a simple messaging system to contact one another. This is the first professional social network for the local government sector and is already generating people-to-people connections that would otherwise have been impossible.



4.3 Tags

All content on the platform can and should be tagged by users to create a folksonomy describing the content, which helps connect people to the information they are looking for. This also informs the site-wide search engine to make finding content more efficient. The tagging is truly community based, with any community member able to tag content, whether they produced it originally or not.



4.4 Blogs

Every user on the platform has their own blog, which they can use to publish any content they choose. This is done through an easy to use WYSIWYG editor, which allows for basic formatting, hyperlinks to external sites or links within the platform itself, file attachments and the embedding of media content (such as videos from [YouTube](#)⁶). Blogs can be published in any of the communities of which the user is a member, and comment facilities are available so that any blog post can become a conversation.



Communities of practice for local government

Welcome | All Communities | **My Profile** | People Finder | Logout

Welcome / My Profile

My Profile

Personal details | Messages | My Communities | My Alerts | **My Blog** | My Contacts

My Blog entries

CoP experiences - your feedback needed
21 Aug 2007 (09:28) | In CoP Facilitators CoP | 0 comments

I have been invited to submit a paper and presentation to the [Online Information Conference 2007](#) about communities of practice in local government.

The paper will focus on the development and use of this (IDeA) CoP platform, and how it may have changed the way that some work is done in local gov.

I would be most interested in getting any comments or other feedback from facilitators of the various CoP's that you would be happy for me to include in the paper. I would welcome honest and objective views on whether the IDeA CoP platform, and any support you have received from IDeA, has helped or hindered you and your community in working more effectively.

I'd also like to hear from anyone who has a particular (CoP-related) success story that they would be willing to share.

Please send any comments to me, either as a response to this blog, or email to steve.dale@idea.gov.uk.

I'm under time pressure to complete the paper, so need any feedback by 31st August.

Many thanks
Steve.

Tools

- Add a new entry
- Make blog inactive
- News feed

Notes

The news feed requires a feed reader that supports password protected feeds.

4.5 Forums

The forums are the centre of debate within every community and are probably the most popular feature of the communities at present. Discussions are presented as threaded conversations, and rich media content is again possible using the same editor as the blogs.

Communities of practice for local government

My home | All Communities | People Finder | My profile | Logout

Logged in as: Stephen Dale

Social Media and Online Collaboration

Home | Forum | Events | Members | Documents | **Wiki** | News feeds | Blog entries

You are here: All Communities > Social Media and Online Collaboration > Forum

Forum

Use the forums for discussions with the other members of your community.

Sort by Most Current | A-Z | My Topics

View 8 per page

Topic	Responses	Last update
Online tools we use and love	5	20 Dec 2007 11:26 Daniel Thorp
BarCamp UKGov Web	6	13 Dec 2007 07:35 Noel Hatch
Where do we go now?	15	12 Dec 2007 17:40 Dave Briggs
This community has been very quiet of late - ma...	5	12 Dec 2007 12:54 Dave Briggs
Social Media Risks	5	12 Dec 2007 12:54 Dave Briggs
A common theme that has cropped up in discussions ...	5	30 Aug 2007 14:57 Keith Lewis
Web 2.0 applications	3	28 Aug 2007 16:13 Keith Lewis
Central Office of Information and blogs	3	28 Aug 2007 16:13 Keith Lewis
The kable news service had this article yesterd...	5	21 Aug 2007 14:55 Alex Stobart
Social Media in Action	5	21 Aug 2007 14:55 Alex Stobart
It would be interesting to know what social media ...	6	17 Aug 2007 10:06 Duncan Ford
Local Government Glossary	6	17 Aug 2007 10:06 Duncan Ford

page 1 of 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Next >

Forum Tools

- Start new topic
- Subscribe for email alerts for this forum
- RSS feed

Tagged Items

Members of this community tagged items with these words. Click to view related items.

- barcamp blogging
- cabinetoffice collaboration
- CoP event guide
- information meeting
- presentation
- publicsector report RSS
- socialmedia wiki

View all tagged items in this community

Notes

The news feed requires a feed reader that supports password protected feeds.

Admin | Feedback | Help | Demo | Terms and Conditions

Supported by:

4.6 Wikis

Each community has an area where wiki pages can be created and edited by any member. Wikis have been used in a number of different and innovative ways, from lists of online resources and links to collaboratively edited policy documents.

Communities of practice for local government

My home | All Communities | People Finder | My profile | Logout

Logged in as: Stephen Dale

Social Media and Online Collaboration

Home | Forum | Events | Members | Documents | **Wiki** | News feeds | Blog entries

You are here: All Communities > Social Media and Online Collaboration > Wiki > Social Media Big Day Out Provisional Details and Agenda

Edit an entry: Edit the content

Title: Social Media Big Day Out Provisional Details and Agenda

Body text:

Introduction

The Social Media Big Day Out will be a launch event for the CoP, covering a number of topics which the community has expressed an interest in. The event will hopefully take place at the IDeA office in London, and will be in early 2008.

The discussion for the event is taking place in [this thread in the forum](#).

Draft Agenda

I have put people down next to sessions, without their knowledge. Please get in touch if you don't fancy it, but I think they should all be things you have expressed a willingness to do!

10am: Welcome and Introductions - Steve Dale

10.30am: The benefits of using social media in local gov, real life examples - TBA (there must be someone somewhere!)

11.30am: Building social web sites: blogs, wikis, forums and social networks - Dave Briggs

Path:

Reason for update:

Related entries:

Select up to 5 related pages from the wiki

Select an entry:

Select an entry:

Font size

Choose font size: A A A

Search

Search

Tagged Items

Members of this community tagged items with these words. Click to view related items.

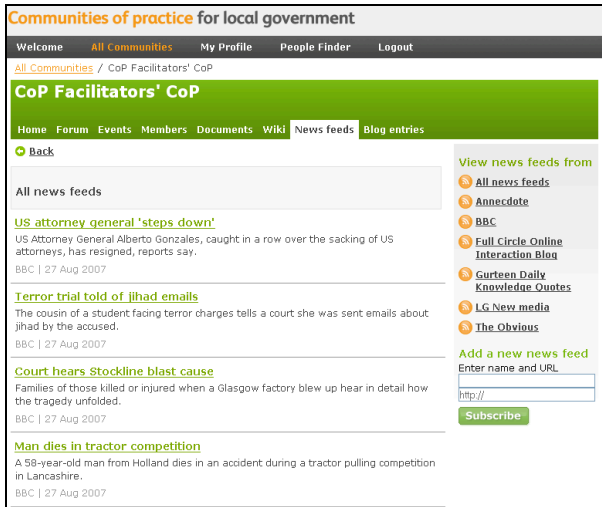
- barcamp blogging
- cabinetoffice collaboration
- CoP event guide
- information meeting
- presentation
- publicsector report RSS
- socialmedia wiki

View all tagged items in this community

4.7 News

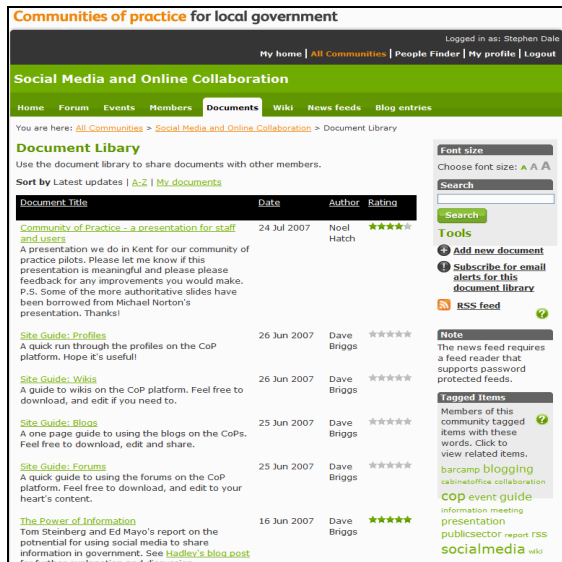
The news function provides an online really simple syndication (RSS) aggregator to present news feeds and website updates from relevant websites, chosen by the community. RSS is a vital part of social media and web 2.0 developments, and the ability to receive recent news updates via a web interface makes it considerably easier for local government officers to receive up-to-date information from across the web.





4.8 Document Library

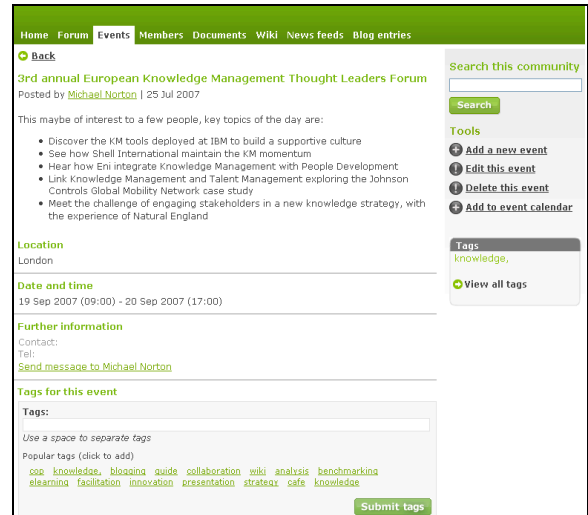
The document library is where files can be uploaded and shared with the community, whether it they are word processed, a spreadsheet or any other electronic document. Documents can be rated and tagged by users according to their usefulness and topics, while discussions can be held around a document through the commenting function.



4.9 Events

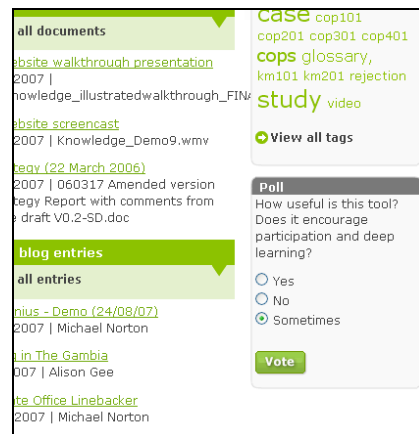
The events calendars provide a space for events to be brought to the attention of the

community, but also for the planning of community meetings through the comments feature.



4.10 Polls

The polling feature allows facilitators to run quick votes among community members. These have been put to good use: deciding on areas of focus for communities, for example, as well as providing feedback on how the community is operating.



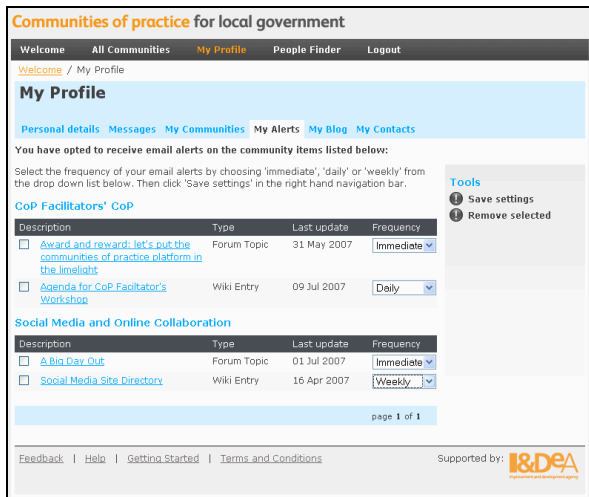
4.11 Alerts

Underpinning the whole platform is a system of email alerts, informing users of new content being added to their communities even when they are not logged in. These are fully



configurable through the profile screen, ensuring that no new content, and therefore opportunities for knowledge sharing, are missed.

organising groups across the local government sector.



5 The CoP programme

The KM strategy for the IDeA created a KM team, specifically responsible for embedding this programme into the IDeA itself and rolling it out into the sector at large.

The team was charged with increasing awareness of and engagement in the communities of practice. They accomplished this task by developing a facilitator base that was informed, fully engaged and willing to experiment and be creative in the running of their communities. To this end, potential facilitators were identified through leadership in the sector (within a topic area that might benefit from a CoP) and through existing work in the social media and web 2.0 space. Many facilitators volunteered themselves in response to publicity about the programme.

4.12 Other Features

Two other noteworthy points about the platform:

1. Each community can generate any number of sub-communities, which will inherit either all or a sub-set of the features from the main community (as the facilitator chooses). Sub-communities have been particularly useful where a small task group has been commissioned to deliver something for the main community. Creation of sub-community environments is fully under the control and discretion of a CoP – no development or technical intervention is required.
2. Creation of an entirely new CoP space is an automated process and is available to any registered member of the platform. (The site administrators closely monitor this process to ensure that there is no frivolous use of the platform and that CoPs are broadly being used for knowledge, learning and improvement in local government.) This removal of 'command and control' does appear to be stimulating innovation and the creation of self-

The team's biggest challenge was motivating and educating a predominantly mature and sceptical staff demographic on the merits of social computing and Web 2.0 technologies that could support virtual communities of practice.

For many, this has been a completely new way of working. For the first time, staff are easily able to find and connect with peers and experts working in other councils, without the constraints of geography or politics. For example, a group working on child adoption policy in Sunderland can connect and collaborate with similar groups in Somerset or Wiltshire. The 'silo' mentality is gradually being eroded, and knowledge is no longer confined to isolated and replicated repositories.

5.1 Supporting Facilitators

The facilitators have a major role in developing the base of community members as well as helping to shape the activities that their



communities are involved in. They manage this by:

- Encouraging discussion and debate by seeding conversations through blogs and forums
- Providing guidance and assistance on using the platform as well as on the principles of community based working
- Demonstrating best use of online collaboration and social media communication techniques to encourage others to engage with them
- Producing ideas and potential projects for the communities to work on together
- Organising face-to-face events and meetings to help bring community members closer together

The facilitators, as the dedicated resource to managing the communities, required support and training in order to develop and maintain their skill base. This included:

1. A training course for new facilitators, covering both the principles of facilitating online communities and an introduction to the CoP platform (See section 5.2)
2. A meta-CoP for community facilitators, which was the first community to be created. This CoP provides a relaxed informal area for best practice to be shared and developed
3. Workshops for facilitators, which involve a mixture of community facilitation guidance and technical training on the platform itself. These have involved expert speakers from outside the sector
4. Guidance documentation in a number of forms, from presentations to longer case studies and advice
5. Short guides to CoP functionality that the community itself has developed. Users and facilitators alike to refer to these guides

6. A culture of continuous improvement and development throughout the communities, both in terms of the technology and the culture of the CoPs. The facilitators, through the meta-CoP and other channels, are heavily involved in this process.

Feedback from the facilitator's events included the following:

It came as a great relief to hear from seasoned community facilitators like Ed Mitchell that convincing people to engage with a concept like the Communities of Practice isn't easy. Many of the facilitators I spoke to, like me, wanted to increase community participation, and were worried that a lack of activity at this stage might mean that things just weren't working. This leads me onto the second thing I learned: that these things take time and perseverance to get right and to see tangible benefits realised.

I'm now convinced that sharing knowledge, information and experience through CoPs is the future of success in local government, and that social media tools such as those employed within the IDeA CoP platform are the glue that can stick cross-sector collaboration projects together.

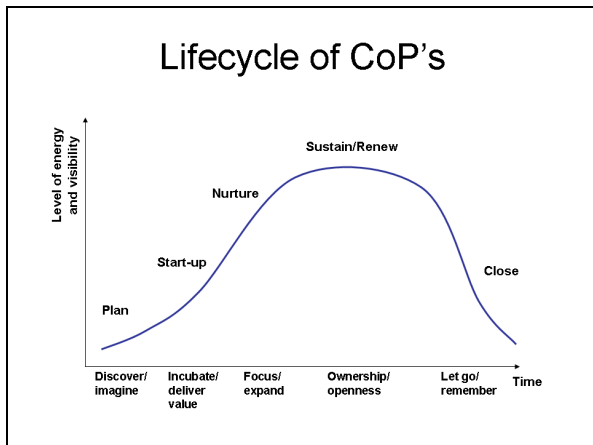
5.2 Facilitator Training – Understanding the CoP Lifecycle

The IDeA has developed a comprehensive training course for CoP facilitators or anyone thinking of setting up a new CoP. The training is a mix of theory, practical exercises and use of the CoP online environment. Delegates are taken through the various stages of the CoP lifecycle and various toolkits have been developed for each stage in the lifecycle.

Each CoP's lifecycle runs through five main stages, as outlined in the diagram below. The CoP activity will vary depending on where it is in the lifecycle. A CoP's activity can last for just



a matter of weeks, or for many years, and is dependent on the needs of the community itself rather than the precise level of activity at any one time.



1. **Planning:** The planning stage is the most important. It is when: the business case for the CoP is developed, facilitators and participants are identified and involved, uses for each function on the CoP platform are identified, and expectations are set (including what deliverables can be expected from the community).
2. **Start-up:** This is where the facilitator is most active on the CoP's online environment. The start-up phase can decide whether or not the CoP will succeed. The facilitator must make the platform applicable and approachable, generally by seeding discussions with open-ended submissions to all the CoP functions.
3. **Nurture:** This is an important phase where the facilitator and the community work together in locating expertise, connecting new members, establishing trust and building a collaborative environment. The process can be supported through regular status updates, meetings and other face-to-face events.
4. **Sustain/Operate:** This should be the phase where the facilitator can take more

of a back seat and allow the members of the community to make things run. Periodic intervention is still necessary, but not at the same levels or intensity as during the Nurture stage. Regular meetings and other events are likely to be organised by the community. This is the stage where the community will be sharing ideas, insights and practices. Some of this information will need to be structured and organised, conclusions defined and next steps agreed. The facilitator may need to help in the development of material needed by the community. The original goal for the community may be achieved or the community may have moved on to something which was quite different from the original objectives. However, the overall level of activity remains high, which infers that the community is achieving some particular purpose.

5. **Closedown:** While some CoPs will be general enough in their subject matter to continue indefinitely, most will come to a natural conclusion – even if it may start again in a different form. Managing the closedown includes: ensuring that any outputs are appropriately recorded and published, that lessons learned are logged and communicated, and that all expectations have been met where practicable.

6 Measuring Success

The Communities of Practice platform has had a tremendous level of take up since its launch in September 2006. This has resulted in the creation and development of 126 communities and sub-communities at the time of writing, with 3,963 registered users from 382 different local authorities signed up to at least one community.

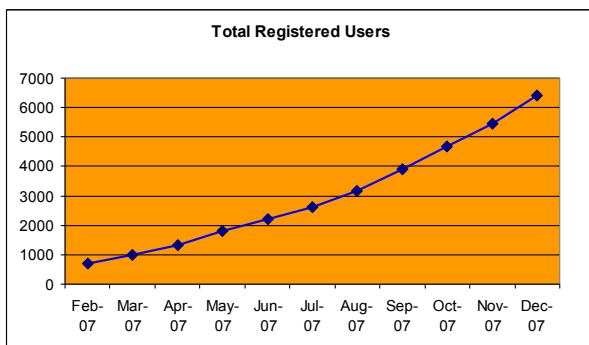
6.1 Usage and activity

The usage statistics show that there is active collaboration among members and a growing



number of connections between community members and even between communities.

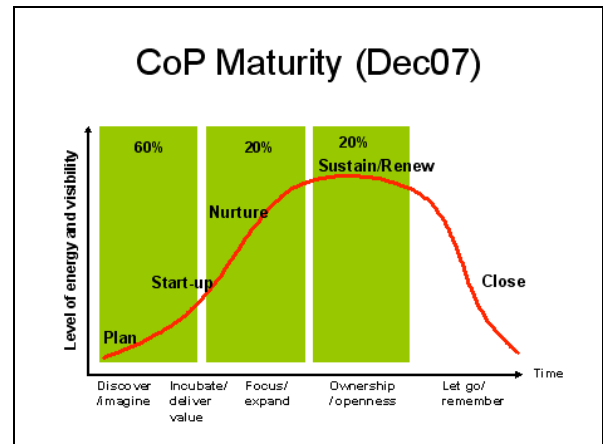
It is difficult to quantify a success measure in terms having an empirical measure of ROI or efficiency improvements in local government directly attributable to a CoP. However, in the same way that we don't need to pull up a tree and measure its roots to know that it is growing, we can infer from the metrics that benefit is accruing, and that a learning and sharing environment has been established and is being used.



A total of 748 posts have been made to forums, 447 blog posts written, 319 wikis created and 1024 wiki edits across all communities.

There is an average of 12% active contributors across all CoPs, though only about 1% contributes new content. This seems to be consistent with the oft-quoted "1% rule", where 1% generates content, 10% add to content and 89% just view.⁷

The majority of the CoPs (60%) are in the start-up and planning stage, with about 20% in the nurture stage and 20% in the fully operational or 'sustain' stage..



There are two distinct categories of community on the site – those tackling cross-cutting issues around the UK, which are often communities created only because the platform made it possible. Such communities include Social Media and Online Collaboration, Knowledge Management, Performance Management and Talent Management.

The second category are those CoPs set up for communities which either already existed or which were being planned anyway. These groups are often more geographically focused and have a higher concentration of activity than the general groups. The combination of a specific purpose and funding from host organisations could explain the greater activity, as members are accountable in their own responsibilities to deliver through the group. Examples include the Cornwall Language Group and the Daventry Benchmarking Group.

6.2 External CoP Developments

Another measure of success is in terms of output, or value created. A number of CoPs have had significant results in this regard, such as:

1. [The Local Government Glossary](#).⁸ One community of practice member identified a lack of a comprehensive glossary of local government terminology as being a major stumbling block for those new to local



government, and an inconvenience for even experienced officers. The solution identified was a publicly accessible and editable wiki – outside of the CoP platform – which allowed for a community approach to generating the glossary. This was a completely different way of tackling the problem to those which had gone before – which were based around static content, managed by organisations rather than communities. The Local Government Glossary ensures that the knowledge it contains belongs to, can be used by and can be changed by the users, thus ensuring its ongoing relevancy in the future.

2. **LGSearch.**⁹ The issues around the efficacy of basic web search mentioned earlier in this paper were tackled by a community member by creating a vertical search engine for the local government sector. This site used Google’s customised search service to return pages only from UK local councils, related bodies, central government departments and health, fire and police authorities. These categories could be used to further drill down into results creating even more relevant lists of results.

6.3 Looking forward for the CoP platform

If we compare the building of the CoP platform to the construction of a set of physical meeting rooms where these communities can meet, we can consider that the design task has been accomplished adequately. The platform is fit for purpose, and the programme itself is helping people from many parts of local government to use it. But not every meeting taking place in the hypothetical rooms has a clear agenda, and even those that do don't always seem to have people turning up regularly. Indeed, this is particularly true for those who are members of several

communities (and therefore are expected in several different rooms), who may be unsure of where their time is best spent.

The IDeA communities platform does not have the social aspect that Facebook, for example, has, which means that participants aren't likely to just be around when a conversation breaks. In this light, if they have a slot in their diary and their priorities for Project X, and Project X happens to be taking place as a community of practice, then they'll come along to the CoP's online space to satisfy their deliverable. But they will probably not just be around for water-cooler-style chit-chat.

While it appears that the technology itself is sufficient to host community activity, it could possibly be enhanced in a few areas. One potential improvement could be a common communal space where breaking conversations can be monitored (inviting everyone to join each other's conversations).

7 The Social Media Revolution

The Communities of Practice platform has provided clear evidence that there is an appetite for new ways of working to improve local government and that the web will play a vital role in moving this forward.

But there are other opportunities which must be taken if the sector is to continue to engage effectively, not just with the organisations within it but with the communities it serves. The growth in the profile and use of social media and web 2.0 technologies has the potential to provide a vital interface between local government and its citizens.

There is already evidence of this taking place, though the emphasis has been on the third sector's attempts to provide interfaces between the people and governance –



MySociety's [FixMyStreet](#)¹⁰ being a prime example. Local government itself must open up to such endeavours, as well as investing in its own infrastructure to ensure that there are as many opportunities for citizens to engage with their local councils as possible.

How can this be achieved? The culture change that has been witnessed as part of the take-up of CoPs operating across the local government sector can provide the traction necessary to open up other communication channels between councils and citizens. This will enable two-way conversations to take place, providing local authorities with a direct voice to the public without the need to go through a third party, such as the local press.

Creating blogs is an obvious example of a way in which communications can be improved through social media. Innovative use of online video will surely follow as another means of getting the message across in a useful and interactive way. Citizens will be able to vote on online petitions to voice their views on important local issues. Consultations should be run through wikis, enabling anyone with an interest to have their say and to contribute.

An important part of this culture change will be giving local government officers the responsibility for engaging with online social networks and becoming an integral part of the social network as opposed to being part of an unresponsive and faceless regulatory authority. An important aspect of social media and web 2.0 is that we can all be communicators, and it will be for the benefit of local government as a whole as well as the communities we serve if this can become a reality.

As one community facilitator said at a recent meeting:

I genuinely believe that local government is at a crossroads in terms of management culture and the way it approaches communications.

Social media tools, through blogs, wikis, forums, and social networks, can make a massive difference to the way that internal communications are handled at a council; and can have tremendous benefits for officers working on projects across teams or departments. This is true externally as well; communication and engagement with the community can be made simple by using the web. And as the CoP platform shows, collaboration between officers from different councils is made significantly easier....

By evangelising these tools and services, and raising awareness of their potential, we can create a group of people willing to innovate and lead the way within their own authorities - and the more this happens, the more likely that wider culture change is possible.

8 Conclusion

The Communities of Practice platform has been launched and is gathering a user base and momentum. Generally speaking, and in view of the fact that the CoP platform and programme were only launched in September 2006, it does appear to be working. There is plenty of activity; new users are continually joining and posting content or responses. Many of the communities are being used to swap signposting information: links to publications, news and upcoming events. There seem to be a lot of people who want to post things (including requests for help) but some shortage of those who want to respond, and at present, most of the forum threads and blog discussions are quite short. Further training and an increased visibility of the communities should encourage more in-depth dialogue.

There is clearly an appetite in the local government sector to try new things and for people working in the sector to connect and learn from each other. Whether or not the



individual users are there with the blessing of their employers and managers is not known.

Within the larger context of the self-regulation agenda, the KM strategy as a whole and the CoP platform continue to increase the sector's capacity for self-improvement.

Further developments in the technology and broader reach of the programme (including more trained facilitators) would continue to expand the impact of the communities of practice. As the programme and the online platform have been designed to foster and encourage innovation, more participants should further develop new uses and applications for the community model.

References

¹ The Improvement & Development Agency for local government. See <http://www.idea.gov.uk>.

² Wegner, E, McDermott, R and Snyder, W. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press. 2002.

³ The Work and Learn Together project is a European Commission-funded group collaboratively building implementation guidelines for the hospitality sector. Their communities of practice wiki is available at http://www.worklearntogether.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page#Identify_target_group_characteristics

⁴ Facebook is a social networking platform, available at <http://www.facebook.com>

⁵ LinkedIn is a professional networking platform, available at <http://www.linkedin.com>

Overall, it has been an interesting journey to date, (indeed a valuable learning experience) but the journey is really only just beginning!

Addendum

Collabor8now Ltd is the consultancy that worked with the Improvement and Development Agency to help create and develop the communities of practice platform. A list of active Communities of Practice on the IDEa CoP Platform and their own descriptions of their activities can be found at:

<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/communities.do>

⁶ YouTube video sharing site is available at <http://www.youtube.com>

⁷ Data from Yahoo! Groups, Wikipedia and YouTube. See Arthur, Charles. 'What is the 1% rule?' *The Guardian*, 20 July 2006, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/jul/20/guardianweeklytechnologysection2>

⁸ The Local Government Glossary (a CoP initiative) is available at <http://localgovglossary.wikispaces.com/>

⁹ Local Government Search is available at <http://lgsearch.net/>

¹⁰ FixMyStreet is available at <http://www.fixmystreet.com>

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