



# Modern Communities of Practice

Recommendations for Building, Maintaining and Measuring Impact



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This brief contains recommendations for modern communities of practice. The content is informed through a literature search (scholarly and grey literature), expert interviews and personal experience.

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# Executive Summary

Modern communities of practice (CoP) built on a foundation of technology and social media are emerging on a global scale. Considering the speed at which technology evolves, best practices also continue to evolve for building, maintaining and measuring the effectiveness of these modern communities<sup>1,2,3</sup>. This report attempts to outline and discuss key lessons learned to date and provide several recommendations based upon available evidence and expert opinion. But each CoP – defined here as a group of professionals with similar interests – is unique in purpose and must find its own path to success.

While communities once interacted entirely face-to-face, modern communities interact both in person and online, though some purely virtual communities do exist. Typical in-person interaction includes activities such as meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences. Virtual interaction leverages various internet-based tools to simulate similar interactions: social networks to link members to each other and interest groups; social media to share content and materials; listservs to facilitate conversation and exchange; and websites to create their “home” on the Web and provide an opportunity for others to learn about them. While face-to-face interactions provide a depth not easily recreated online, virtual ones provide greater access for those unable to attend in-person events. Successful modern communities find a way to integrate both approaches.

Three broad categories are discussed in this report: building a community, maintaining a community and measuring the impact of a community. After each section, a mini case study illustrates some of the report’s recommendations.

Recommendations for building a community are centered on conducting thorough research and setting expectations around the timeline and purpose of the community. Although a working and appealing technology platform is integral for reaching a broad audience, technology is not the most important facet for building a strong community base. High-quality content, participation incentives and meeting the needs of the community must be preeminent.

After a community is built, community managers must work hard to maintain and expand membership. Recommendations for effectively managing a community

include ensuring the community manager has a visible role and actively facilitates the development of content. In order to keep the community engaged, it is also important to have periodic events, face-to-face or virtual, to keep the momentum of the community going. Even though the community may never transition to being “community-owned,” rotating responsibilities and involving members as often as possible will enhance community members’ experiences and a sense of ownership. Providing ongoing incentives will also keep the level of engagement high.

Methods for monitoring and evaluating communities vary depending on the ultimate goals of the community and how it functions. Several resources are available that discuss specific indicators and methodologies for measuring a community’s success. A mixed-methods approach serves the complex nature of community building well; quantitative data on membership and activities can be supplemented with qualitative measures exploring user satisfaction and the application and use of information shared through the community. While there is no definitive methodology that fits the monitoring and evaluation needs of every community, methods used for social network analysis, website engagement and social media monitoring can be helpful when applied to measuring community impact.

## Methods

This report was developed by the Health Communication Capacity Collaborative (HC3) - a five-year, USAID-funded global project designed to strengthen the capacity of organizations to conduct social and behavior change communication programs.

A review of peer-reviewed literature was conducted using Medline, SCOPUS and SocINDEX. Grey literature was obtained from K4Health and KM World.

Additionally, HC3 conducted twelve 30-minute semi-structured interviews with experts in community building. Interviewees were asked a series of 12 open-ended questions covering three broad categories: building a community, maintaining a community and measuring the success of a community (Appendix A).

# Introduction

Modern communities of practice with strong online components are increasingly prevalent within a variety of sectors. In private business, for example, it is now common practice to build a community around a brand to sell products<sup>4</sup>. Modify Watches improved communication with its customers and drove significant traffic to its e-commerce site with a Facebook fan page. The company's data shows 40% of customers heard about Modify through word of mouth, with Facebook as the major driver of information.

On the consumer side, the average internet user does not need to look far to find a community for his or her interests, no matter how niche the topic. The science fiction community, for example, has had great success creating online social platforms where fans mull over story plots, post fan-written fiction and discuss the large number of related fan conventions held each year. This community's frequent engagement, both online and in person, helps to continually boost its movie and merchandise sales<sup>5</sup>.

But what is a community exactly? Broadly defined, the term community means a group of people with a shared interest. In this report, the term refers to professional communities with vested interests, not online learning communities in the academic context. An example of a professional community is one made up of health communication practitioners. This community includes individuals plugged into various social media networks, that are also part of several listservs focused on health communication and regular attendees of face-to-face meetings and conferences.

In a more formal sense, a community of practice (CoP)<sup>5</sup> is a group of people connected with the explicit purpose of sharing resources and expertise. In fact, communities

of practice have been described as a platform for closing the so-called "know-do" gap – the gap between what is known and what is done in practice – and translating knowledge into effective implementation. Experts argue that communities of practice are an effective mechanism for knowledge management and provide an opportunity to bring stakeholders together, which ultimately leads to programs that are executed more effectively on the ground<sup>6,7,8</sup>. In this report, the terms "communities" and "communities of practice" are used interchangeably.

It is also common for the term "community" to be confused with the term "audience." One of the key components to building a community is acknowledging the difference between community building and audience building<sup>9</sup>. Audience building is transitory and simply provides a platform for selling products or services; it "pushes out" information. For example, if the main benefactor is the manager or the product, then it is considered audience building. Community building, on the other hand, is meant to be ongoing and requires listening to and connecting with people – a two-way exchange of information. If the main benefactor is a group of people, then it can be referred to as community building<sup>10</sup>.

According to Etienne Wenger, an educational theorist and practitioner, some of the key activities of community building stem from questions such as "Where can I find an answer to this question," "Can we combine our skills to develop a new project," and "What are we missing?"<sup>11</sup>.

Successful modern communities of practice should provide answers to such questions as well as a "home" for professionals with a shared interest.

# Building a Community



## Recommendations

1. Know your target audience
2. Do not duplicate efforts
3. Identify and engage new members
4. Interact face to face
5. Define your objective
6. Consider the timeline
7. Offer incentives
8. Have a clear value proposition
9. Use social media
10. Find a versatile web firm
11. Beta test your platform
12. Be aware of technology's limits

Building a successful and thriving community requires several key steps. Thorough research prior to launch will help identify the target members and determine how they may interact within the community. Setting expectations for how long the community is expected to exist and the purpose of the community is also important. Meeting the needs of the community – whether through virtual or face-to-face mechanisms – is one of the most important aspects as detailed in the recommendations below.

### 1. Know Your Target Audience

Knowing the target audience is a key first step. This can be accomplished by researching the audience and its needs, speaking with experts and attending events relevant to the audience. Potential influential leaders for the community will also become evident through this initial research. The target members of a community should fit specific criteria, such as those who exhibit a passion for the topic and are likely to be active and engaged with ongoing activity. A more cohesive community will form if community managers clearly communicate the expected commitment of membership and scope of the community. Specifying exactly who a target user is can establish community end goals and direction, and help define the gap the community intends on filling<sup>12,13</sup>.

### 2. Do Not Duplicate Efforts

Thorough research can help avoid duplicating community-building efforts for one interest. Multiple communities with the same focus and similar roles and resources can be redundant in the aggregate. The global health community, in particular, has increasingly struggled to minimize this type of fragmentation over the past decade.

Managers building new communities must research the current landscape: identify similar communities that already exist<sup>14</sup>, analyze their purposes and, if the purposes align, contact their organizers to see if there is potential for collaboration. For example, if two communities are interested in similar topics, they could co-facilitate



meetings or workshops. They could also potentially share resources on their virtual platforms. However, if multiple communities exist on the same topic, it will be difficult to attract a sizable audience to several communities<sup>15</sup>.

### 3. Identify and Engage New Members

A pragmatic approach to identifying and engaging new community members will help start the process of populating a new community. While each community will have its own unique trajectory, listed below are several methods of engagement.

- **Host a high-level kick-off event:** Launch the community with a high-level, face-to-face event. This event should include popular speakers and presenters from the field and respected knowledge experts. In addition, invitations sent from highly visible organizations or leaders in the field can help ensure community interest and participation<sup>12</sup>.
- **Host frequent events:** Hosting events frequently, both face-to-face and virtual, is a great way to introduce new potential community members and demonstrate that the community is current and knowledgeable about the latest industry developments. Events also are great ways to engage large groups of people on specific ideas, topics and



trends, with an additional opportunity to follow-up and continue that engagement online<sup>12</sup>.

- **Involve influential thought leaders in the field:** Personally contacting influential experts in a particular sector and engaging them will improve the likelihood of attracting potential “super users” – those who start discussions and are very engaged with the community – as well as daily users – those who frequent the community on a regular basis but may not interact as much as super users – to the community<sup>16,17,18</sup>. The community can provide an opportunity for super users to not only stay up to date on the latest thinking from influential experts, but also provide potential access to and engagement with these influential experts.
- **Improve the community’s ranking in search engines:** When building a website, invest in a firm that has a solid background in search engine optimization (SEO). When people are searching for topics related to the particular community, SEO influences if the community website ranks high on search engine result pages or not. This can help potential members find it and give it the image of a top-notch resource<sup>19</sup>.
- **Make use of social media:** Utilizing various social media outlets is a great way to spread community news and communications as well as reach broader audiences<sup>2</sup>. Potential members may see your post through another member’s activity (retweet or Facebook share) and become interested in what your community offers. See recommendation 9 (page 6) for more on social media.
- **Photos or other personal touches:** Virtual platforms can also provide a way for community members to interact “face-to-face.” For example, by allowing members to upload photos or create profiles of themselves, community members gain a personal investment, visibility and a greater connection with one another<sup>20</sup>.

## 4. Interact Face to Face

Face-to-face interaction is important, particularly in the beginning stages of community building, because it provides members with an incentive to join and stay engaged, it encourages members to be more invested in the community’s purpose, and it facilitates new relationships between community members. It is vital to have goals for each face-to-face event. Avoid “get to know each other” events, but rather provide venues for key speakers and experts to share their thoughts and recommendations<sup>17</sup>. This will provide greater incentive for members to attend

because it will offer a learning opportunity, in addition to networking.

- **Meetup Group:** Create a Meetup ([www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)) group to enhance face-to-face interaction. For example, in global health there are five Meetup groups currently active in the Washington, D.C./Baltimore area. In addition, several specific groups are focused on information and communication technology (ICT) and development. Groups with the most membership and most attendees at events tend to have more regularly scheduled Meetup events (at least once a month). In addition, they also have very active Meetup sites, especially discussions.

## 5. Define Your Objective

Defining the objective for a community sets its overall direction. This would likely happen at the initial meeting



of the group if the community first met face-to-face. But if the community begins online, it is up to the community manager to pre-set objectives and form cogent questions that set the direction. In either case, community objectives include the type of expected discussions and resources, the timeline of existence, the breadth and reach of the community and goals for the community’s level of visibility<sup>21</sup>. Some examples include<sup>22</sup>:

- Sharing relevant tools and resources with community members
- Developing best practices and innovative solutions to pressing problems
- Improving skills and disseminating knowledge
- Providing a social and professional network

Established objectives and goals make promoting the community easier and provide a structure for the community managers. It is vital, however, for community

members' voices to also contribute to the overall objectives and goals. The process should be iterative, with expectations set that all pre-determined goals will evolve with expanded membership. Thus, taking surveys, having personal interviews or convening focus groups are suggested to ascertain whether the initial goals and objectives need to be adapted<sup>22,23</sup>.

## 6. Consider the Timeline

Another aspect of planning a community is having a flexible timeline for how long the community will exist<sup>10</sup>. Communities not centered on one specific question or task may have a longer lifespan that covers several different questions and focuses<sup>12</sup>. But a more tightly focused community can become inactive if it no longer meets the needs of its members. This may be the case if, for example, the necessary products have been created and questions have been answered. Purely virtual communities tend to have a timeline of two years, but the timeline is largely dependent upon the initial user base and objectives.

A community can remain active by ensuring that new objectives are identified and that new questions are asked, or even by targeting a different user base<sup>12, 22</sup>. If a virtual community becomes inactive before it achieves its objective, it may mean a loss of credibility for the hosting organization, which could be seen as not properly researching the need for the community or misgauging interest in the community's area of focus.

## 7. Offer Incentives

A community must benefit the individual member as well as the entire community. Therefore, be sure to establish objectives for the entire community while also tailoring incentives for individual members. Offering incentives will help attract new community members and keep existing ones engaged<sup>14</sup>. Without incentives, new users will not join and existing members will not be fully engaged in the community.

Although monetary incentives are often out of the question, it is feasible to persuade new members to join and engage with other incentives<sup>14</sup>. A few ideas for incentives are below:

- **Host face-to-face events:** Hosting face-to-face events produces an opportunity to meet others, engage with experts and create a communal sense of cohesiveness<sup>12</sup>.
- **Offer networking opportunities:** Face-to-face and virtual interaction provides networking opportunities to members. In addition, acknowledging the efforts of individual members

offers more targeted networking – with focus given to shared interests, like-minded positions or similar challenges<sup>12</sup>.

- **Acknowledge members:** Incentivizing existing users for being “super users,” or engaging on a daily basis either through discussion forums, comments or posting resources, can increase engagement and new membership. This could be done by featuring “super users” on a homepage or announcing them at a face-to-face event. In addition, asking “super users” to speak at a webinar or a face-to-face event gives them a platform to share their ideas and promote their work<sup>24</sup>.
- **Provide high-quality content:** Ensure from the beginning that content on the virtual platform is curated and of high quality. Creating a collection of reliable research and dependable materials will provide an incentive for members to engage with a site and utilize the resources available<sup>21,12,24</sup>.
- **Identify champions and leaders:** An important aspect of building a community is ensuring that there are leaders as well as champions among community members. Champions are users who are experts and well-known in that interest area. They increase the credibility of the community. Although community managers can start conversations and post high-quality content, active champions within the community are an incentive for increased engagement from the entire community<sup>21,24</sup>.
- **Hold competitions with prizes:** A competition can be created on just about anything: a great new blog post, innovative ideas, etc. The prize does not have to be large – just a t-shirt or maybe even simply a pen. People often participate and compete no matter how big or small the prize<sup>19</sup>.

## 8. Have a Clear Value Proposition

In the business world, a value proposition clearly defines why a consumer should buy a product or use a service. According to Cindy Barnes, Chief Innovation Officer of FutureCurve, the following six-step process builds a value proposition<sup>25</sup>:

- **Market:** For which market is the value proposition being created?
- **Value experience or customer experience:** What does the market value most?
- **Offering:** Which products or services are being offered?

- **Benefits:** What are the benefits the market will derive from the product or service?
- **Alternatives and differentiation:** What alternative options does the market have to the product or service?
- **Proof:** What evidence is there to substantiate the value proposition?

For example, the CrisisCommons' value proposition states: "CrisisCommons seeks to advance and support the use



of open data and volunteer technology communities to catalyze innovation in crisis management and global development." Because CrisisCommons has clearly stated their mission, technologists and innovators know they offer resources and support specific to their open-data-driven projects. They currently have 1,331 articles connecting people, tools and resources to support crisis response, as part of their Wiki.

Value propositions should be tailored to different types of users because each type of user engages at a different level. These different levels of users include: the super user, the daily user and the occasional user (the ones who only visit the site on an as-needed basis, perhaps once or twice in a month)<sup>16</sup>.

## 9. Use Social Media

Social media can be used effectively to help build a community because millions of people are plugged into social media. Social media provides a platform for reaching various groups of people with minimal effort and establishes cohesion on a particular subject on a global scale<sup>19</sup>. However, before implementing a social media strategy, it is necessary to understand the strengths of the various options to use them effectively. It is also important

to have shareable graphic content, such as videos or infographics, on a virtual platform such as the community website to allow people to tag and share such content<sup>12</sup>. This can help drive new users to the community. The following are examples of current popular social media platforms, but more platforms are likely to emerge in the future given the evolving nature of social media.

- **Facebook:** Although arguably the most well-known and most popular social media tool, Facebook is not recommended as a primary means of communication. Although its fan pages are ideal for sharing recent developments, such as new blog posts or news stories, Facebook does not seem to provide the right space to engage a community in dialogue since page managers are the only users that can pose main questions. It also does not offer the ability to thread comments. Often, users see Facebook page updates mixed within the stream of all their friend updates, significantly reducing the likelihood that those updates will be seen and will gather substantive comments<sup>24</sup>. Facebook does offer Groups – which provides a space for group members to post messages, photos, events and comments. Group notifications can also be turned on, so group members can receive alerts or emails when there is new activity.
- **Twitter:** Twitter offers TweetChats to help jumpstart an online discussion with many users. TweetChats allow a group of people to all tweet about the same topic using a specific hashtag and have the potential to bring a different dimension to an existing discussion. Twitter is also an easy platform to use to send out announcements, or connect with other users and organizations on shared interests<sup>20</sup>.
- **LinkedIn:** LinkedIn has many groups for people to join on specific topics. These groups do not have in-depth discussions, but rather provide a platform for people to announce events, post blogs and ask short questions. This is a good way to engage a new audience, and have people link back to the virtual community.
- **Pinterest:** Increasingly, people use social media networks to share images, videos and other graphic content. Pinterest allows users to share such materials easily and have other users click back to the original source.
- **Google +:** Google+ functions much like Facebook, with the ability to share posts and graphics. It has grown rapidly since its launch in 2011 with



more than 540 million users. It also offers Google Hangouts, a free video chat service that enables both one-on-one and group chats that could be useful to communities. Given it is a smaller network and encourages users to place contacts into 'circles', it makes sense to have a specific manager for Google+ who invites specific users to join the group<sup>19</sup>.

## 10. Find a Versatile Web Firm

Use a web design firm that does more than just web design. To create a successful virtual community platform, it is important to have a web design firm that works very closely with the team that is managing or hosting the community of practice.

Since a website is a reflection of its organization, the developers building the site must have a clear understanding of the scope and objectives of the organization and the community.

The web design firm should regularly meet with key stakeholders in the community and the managing staff, be actively involved in focus groups and workshops, and help roll out the vision for the website<sup>1</sup>. The following list will help identify a web design firm appropriate for your needs:

- Develop a clear scope of work
- Define initial expectations
- Conduct interviews and obtain references
- Seek firms with experience in community building in general or a specific health domain or geographic focus

Exploring a plethora of options will ensure the best virtual platform is chosen.

## 11. Beta Test Your Platform

Roll out a beta version of a virtual platform at least three to six months prior to the official launch, and actively send invitations for team members or trusted users to test functionality and review the community's objectives. Trusted users include those who have a prior relationship with the hosting organization, are aware of its mission and goals, and know the community's area of focus. Creating an effective virtual platform takes time and requires community buy-in.

Once the website base is established, have a beta period during which the site is open to the broader community and members can give their feedback on the infrastructure, the interface and other key components of the site. To ensure feedback on the virtual platform, solicit feedback from online surveys as well as email campaigns that offer an easy way to submit comments and suggestions. In addition, remind the audience the site is in beta form and will be evolving with time<sup>17</sup>.

## 12. Be Aware of Technology's Limits

Although certain features on a website can encourage membership and engagement (such as having a quick and easy way to register and sign in), technology is not a 'silver bullet'; a community with a beautifully executed website can still fail if it lacks strong objectives and content<sup>3,10</sup>.

Although every community manager should have the goal of creating a visually appealing and structurally sound website, the technology base is not likely to make or break the community. Many technology platforms have the same potential and capabilities, so community mobilization and sparking engagement are more vital to the success of a community of practice than the technology.

## Building the Food Security and Nutrition Network

<http://www.fsnnetwork.org/>

Based on an interview with:

**Patrick Coonan**

Knowledge Management Officer

TOPS/FSN Network

The Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS), an entity which strengthens the capacity of Food for Peace (FFP) grantees, created the Food Security and Nutrition Network (FSN Network) to promote knowledge sharing and collaboration among professionals implementing food security and nutrition programs. The FSN Network is an open community of practice – one that does not require an invitation to become a member – that creates opportunities for food security and nutrition implementers to come together in-person and online to share information, shape agendas, understand and influence donor priorities, build consensus on promising practices and diffuse technical knowledge.

TOPS initially built an online community for the FSN Network because members expressed an interest to stay connected with one another after face-to-face knowledge sharing meetings and trainings. TOPS began by creating listservs for each “interest group” to keep them connected. Then, TOPS thoroughly researched what other communities were doing with this specific audience so it would not duplicate their efforts. TOPS then worked over the course of several months to conceptualize and build a versatile website in Drupal that allows these “interest groups” to start and participate in online discussions. Once the platform was finished, interest groups were migrated to the website so they could use this space to share experiences, seek recommendations and strengthen one another’s capacity in cross-cutting and emerging implementation areas through online discussion.

Once the platform was launched, the FSN Network newsletter and social media networks were utilized to advertise the community and generate interest. Highly visible partner networks also promoted the online community of the FSN Network through their newsletters and listservs in order to reach a broader yet relevant base. TOPS began to use the newsletter and social media to highlight specific discussion posts and direct people to the website to join these conversations. Discussions on the FSN Network started using a bottom-up approach. Even though a manager or facilitator always had a visible role, community members consulted on topics they wanted to discuss, or specific problems or issues for which they sought solutions. The online community manager built and maintained strong relationships with community champions, which are FSN Network members invited by the manager to seed online discussions, join specific conversations and spread the word to their own networks. This method of generating discussions worked well because the community is more likely to be engaged in discussions that they have chosen.

As discussions continued and membership expanded, the online community manager used a database to keep track of all members of the FSN Network. This allowed the community manager to monitor the growth of the online community and keep detailed information on specific members, including their needs, interests and level of participation. This also ensured that certain communications were not duplicated and relationships between members of the FSN Network were well managed.

In order to properly build a community, the online community manager of the FSN Network worked with champions and TOPS staff to seed conversations that reflect the needs and interests of members; this placed emphasis on intrinsic motivation rather than external rewards to drive participation. The community manager promoted participation by hosting regular events with guest speakers and making sure emerging issues in food security are discussed. By using this thorough approach, the FSN Network continued to expand membership and engage the community in vital discussions of interest to the food security and nutrition field.

# Maintaining a Community



## Recommendations

1. Appoint a community manager
2. Revisit objectives
3. Communicate frequently
4. Continue regular face-to-face events
5. Hold at least four virtual events a year
6. Strike a balance with ownership
7. Set structure within the community
8. Keep it lively and engaging

With an established community, maintenance is essential to keep the community active with an engaged membership. A community needs a strong manager who frequently posts high-quality content, sparks discussions among members and holds regular in-person and virtual meetings. Structure is also important, so after selecting a community manager, create sub-communities or taskforces for specific subtopics. Interactive features and multimedia content will keep the online community exciting and enjoyable to keep members coming back.

### 1. Appoint a Community Manager

A visible and knowledgeable community manager is recommended. Although the role and visibility of a community manager can fluctuate as membership expands, having a designated manager to facilitate, curate and organize discussions and content helps continue member engagement. Depending on the size and scope of the community, a community manager could be a designated full-time job or be engaged with the community in a more limited capacity. Either way, the community manager (or managers) should be an expert in the community's area of focus and able to provide resources and start discussions around different topics<sup>12,10,18</sup>.

### 2. Revisit Objectives

Be flexible with community objectives. Even after a community base is built, and there is steady member engagement, periodically have discussions with members to revisit and potentially adapt community objectives. Objectives can change with new membership, and as new questions arise, it will be important to capture all of these subtle evolutions<sup>21</sup>.

### 3. Communicate Frequently

Although no one wants to spam their community members with too many emails and newsletters, regular contact is important. While open rates for email newsletters may not be high, a simple, one-paragraph email update at the end of the week with a content update, poll or resource can

be effective; the shorter the better, and if the email has a specific ask, then it is more likely to elicit a response<sup>24</sup>.

### 4. Continue Regular Face-to-Face Events

Hold a face-to-face event at least once a year in order to provide the community the opportunity to discuss issues in person and rejuvenate their interest in the community and its area of focus. Holding a face-to-face event less than once a year leads to unfamiliarity among participants, giving the sense that the community does not have an established, dedicated user base. If all members cannot be present, a virtual point of connection to the event maximizes inclusion. Featuring topical experts and popular opinion leaders will also provide an incentive for community members to come together<sup>2</sup>.

### 5. Hold at Least Four Virtual Events a Year

Webinars and online discussion forums are easy to organize and convenient for community members to attend. Virtual events like these should be held at least once every quarter so that members are continuously connected and able to regularly interact with other members. Again, it is important for the event to feature a high-level speaker or to focus on a new development in the field to provide community members with an incentive to participate<sup>12</sup>.

### 6. Strike a Balance with Community Ownership

There is a common belief that an ideal community will eventually transition from "manager owned" to completely "community owned." In reality, the community will likely never be completely "community owned" because without monetary or other strong incentives for community members to take on active management, it can be difficult for them to continue all the tasks community managers perform. The following methods can help ensure increased community involvement over time<sup>10, 24,20,22</sup>:

- **Have community members organize local face-to-face events:** If the community is global, consider asking community members in different areas to organize local events. Working closely with

the community managers, members can take an active role in putting together an event, seeking out speakers and conducting further networking activities<sup>12</sup>.

- **Ask “super users” to facilitate online discussions:** Members who demonstrate a vested interest in a certain topic can be asked to facilitate an online discussion. The position of discussion facilitator can rotate and switch between managers and engaged members. Again, members should work closely with managers but can be spotlighted, providing an incentive to keep them and others engaged<sup>19</sup>.
- **Have a call out for community members to contribute blog posts:** The majority of blog posts should be community contributions that are vetted by managers. Posting a regular request for blogs is a good way to advertise when posts are needed. In addition, posting information to social media about new blog posts and their authors gives community members visibility, providing an incentive for them to contribute<sup>22,13</sup>.

## 7. Set Structure Within the Community

Creating “task forces” or “working groups” within the community will provide the community with structure. Task forces or working groups refer to a smaller group of members focused on a specific topic, one that is still of interest to the entire community but garners a tiny, yet passionate, following.

Decide on specific deliverables or end products for these groups that members can work toward. Task forces and working groups facilitated by a community member should also have their own face-to-face and virtual events.

The timeline for task forces or working groups may be

short, as they exist to fulfill a certain goal. Community members should be surveyed and interviewed to determine what topics and deliverables the task forces and working groups should focus on<sup>12,24</sup>.

## 8. Keep it Lively and Engaging

Your community should be enjoyable and have its own personality. In order to keep members engaged, make sure the content is personal, dynamic and generally interesting. Many sites make the mistake of being too text heavy, so including multimedia will help content become more engaging and less boring. Try a variety of digital



content, such as videos, podcasts, pictures, animations, infographics, etc. Different types of content will engage existing members and attract new ones as well.

An added benefit of multimedia content is that community members can post the content on Pinterest and other social media sites focused on graphical content<sup>15</sup>. Other methods of livening up content are to ground it in practical application, integrate gaming mechanics or start a debate that engages the audience.



## Maintaining the mHealth Working Group

<http://www.mhealthworkinggroup.org/>

Based on an interview with:

**Laura Raney**

Senior Technical Officer

FHI 360

The mHealth Working Group is a network of practitioners and those interested in mHealth, which is the practice of medicine or public health supported by mobile devices. Since its founding in 2009, the mHealth Working Group has grown from 20 members in the Washington, DC metro area to over 1,250 members in 52 countries. The working group started with the aim of sharing knowledge among public health professionals – mainly working in the areas of family planning and reproductive health – about opportunities to apply mobile technology to field challenges. The guiding approach, stated early on, was to apply public health standards and practices to the use of mHealth in programs and thus strengthen capacity, encourage collaboration and share knowledge about appropriate mobile technologies in resource-poor settings. The conscious decision was made to not focus on mobile technology or device hardware; for example, the managers decided against inviting guest speakers representing mobile service providers.

One of the main incentives for the participation in the mHealth Working Group is the monthly face-to-face meetings with internationally recognized experts who present and discuss cutting-edge innovations, theories and emerging issues in the field. Recently, the group began utilizing webinar technology. In addition to a dial-in number, each meeting has a web conferencing tool that allows participants to virtually participate. All presentations are also posted on the group's website, [www.mHealthWorkingGroup.org](http://www.mHealthWorkingGroup.org). The mHealth Working Group is also committed to organizing other face-to-face events and engaging members in high-level conferences and workshops. These frequent events are an important opportunity for members to come together and analyze solutions for pressing challenges in mHealth.

To keep members engaged, task forces were created to focus on specific topics and achieve certain goals. For example, a small task force, led by Abt Associates, developed the BCC Field Guide: A Resource for Developing Mobile Behavior Change Communication Programs. The mHealth working group helped direct the development of the guide, which examines what is known about the power of mobile communication tools to influence health behaviors for consumers and health care providers.

In addition, the mHealth working group has worked to figure out the most appropriate frequency of personal communication. The working group managers adjusted the amount and timing of emails as demand changed. For example, emails used to be sent out as a weekly digest, but lately members send out emails more frequently and responses have been elicited almost immediately. It appears that members continue to read the emails even if they are sent out at a more rapid pace.

The question of ownership is integral for any community, but it is particularly important for a large and ever expanding one such as the mHealth Working Group. The mHealth Working Group is manager-driven, co-founded and co-chaired by Laura Raney and Kelly Keisling, who devote significant time to planning, coordinating and facilitating member meetings, discussion forums and the general logistics of the group.

In order to keep the group cohesive and continually engage the members, the managers are flexible with their objectives and actively listen to community members to ensure the frequency and focus of meetings, discussion forums, events and other communication is appropriate.

# Measuring a Community's Impact



## Recommendations

1. Develop a conceptual framework
2. Set meaningful expectations
3. Use existing tools for evaluation
4. Assess the value created
5. Take advantage of online analysis tools
6. Leverage social media

Measuring the impact of a community – whether virtual or face-to-face – can demonstrate how effective it is at reaching its goals and engaging its intended target audience. A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan should be developed in tandem with the initial community design. This plan should clearly define the goals and objectives of the community and outline a strategy for data collection and analysis of outcomes.

M&E data collection can help answer important questions for the continued success of the community, such as what types of members are the most active, what kind of content members want to interact with, and which tactics most effectively engage members. Continuous monitoring of key indicators such as these will allow for informed adjustments to be made to community activities and objectives as necessary. Many tools are available to help with this task, as detailed in this section.

### 1. Develop a Conceptual Framework

The first step in developing an M&E plan is creating a conceptual framework that details the inputs, outputs and outcomes of the community. A conceptual framework developed in the early stages of the community's lifetime will help to define milestones and aid monitoring of progress towards goals. It will also set reasonable expectations for outcomes.

### 2. Set Meaningful Expectations

Using the conceptual framework as a guide, indicators should be developed to track outputs and outcomes of the community. These goals should be established early on in community development, taking into account concerns such as donor and partner involvement, available M&E funding, and the community development and/or reporting timelines.

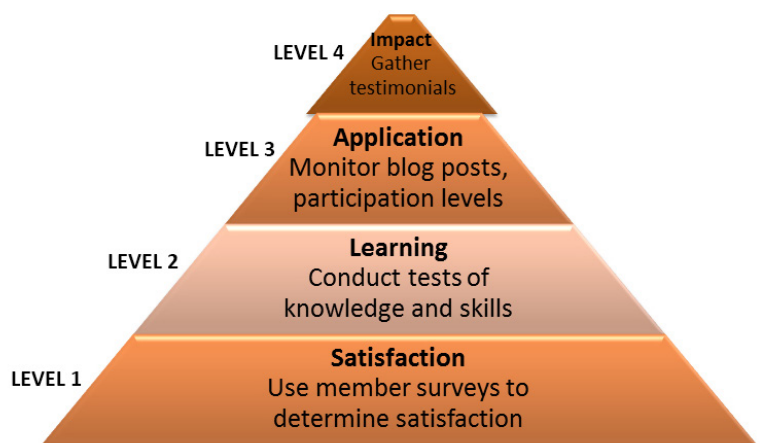
Each indicator should also have an associated target against which success can be measured. While it will be tempting to set ambitious expectations for community involvement, it is important to do some background research on similar communities in order to have an evidence base on which to set reasonable expectations.

Be careful when setting goals for indicators such as the number of members who will be regularly engaged in the community. The literature demonstrates that the “90-9-1” rule is an important metric to keep in mind when setting site use expectations. Specifically, this metric states that 90% of the visitors on a site are just lurkers (those who register for membership but will not actively participate in the site's activities); 9% will occasionally participate; and only 1% will be highly engaged super users<sup>21,22,26</sup>.

### 3. Use Existing Tools for Evaluation

Existing tools can be adapted for evaluating a community, such as Donald Kirkpatrick's Model for Training Course Evaluation. Although Kirkpatrick's model is primarily used for evaluating learning, Wegner and Trayner note that the categories used in the original model can be adapted for evaluating communities of practice, according to the pyramid below<sup>2,19,27</sup>.

Figure 1: Kirkpatrick's model adapted for community evaluation



**Level 1 – Satisfaction:** Do community members find the community useful? Surveys to assess satisfaction should be conducted at the end of all major events and on random samples of community members on a regular basis, such as quarterly or semiannually.

**Level 2 – Learning:** Are community members learning new knowledge or skills from community activities? End-

of-workshop assessments and quality measurements of community content can provide insight into what skills members are gaining from being part of the community.

**Level 3 – Application:** Are members using their skills and knowledge to participate in the community? Monitoring member-contributed blog posts, participation in discussion forums and roles in face-to-face events can help to answer this question.

**Level 4 – Impact:** What kind of impact has the community made on its members and/or the broader community? The best way to ensure the impact of communities varies. Anecdotal evidence, such as testimonials from community members, is one method of seeing how the community made an impact. Measures of application, such as individual contributions, are most likely the highest level of qualitative evaluation a community will achieve<sup>2</sup>.

## 4. Assess the Value Created



Communities create value when they are used for social learning activities. Those activities include sharing information, learning from each other's experience, helping with challenges and offering new types of professional development opportunities. Value can be measured on multiple levels in a community. Wenger and Trayner outline five levels of value creation and illustrate typical indicators within those levels<sup>12,25</sup>. The five levels include:

- **Immediate value:** Participation, level of engagement and level of activity.
- **Knowledge capital:** Information received, skills acquired, types and intensity of social relationships.
- **Change:** Use of tools and products, innovation in practice, use of social connections, etc.
- **Performance:** Individual performance, organizational performance and organizational reputation.
- **Reframing:** Change in community agenda, new frameworks in the field and relationships with stakeholders.

## 5. Take Advantage of Online Analysis Tools

Communities of practice that have a significant web presence can take advantage of several online analytics services such as Google Analytics or Crazy Egg. Google Analytics offers a wide variety of metrics such as visitors per day, pageviews and document downloads. However, these analytics platforms also provide metrics that allow you to look deeper into the functioning of a community to find meaningful trends and patterns<sup>24,2,10,15,28</sup>. In particular, pay attention to:

- **Bounce rate:** How many people came to the site but left within 30 seconds? If it is more than 20%, that can indicate that the site is either confusing, being advertised in the wrong arenas, or simply not what people are looking for<sup>16</sup>.
- **Time spent on each page:** How much time are visitors spending on each page? Anything over two minutes is considered a fairly long time for a visitor to stay on a page. That can indicate that visitors are really taking the time to read the information and perhaps even to add their own content<sup>24,10</sup>.
- **Location of users:** Where in the world are users visiting from? It will be important to take note of new clusters of users forming throughout the world. This may give more clarity on who is promoting the site and why<sup>7,15</sup>.

## 6. Leverage Social Media

Social media networks can be a useful way to promote and extend the community. Doing an assessment of what different social media platforms have to offer can help you decide what to use to gain followers and grow your network. For example, by creating a Twitter handle or a Facebook page you can reach more potential members of your community than by a listserv alone. Once your community presence has been established on one or more social media platforms, you can subscribe to a social media monitoring tool to track those accounts and measure their impact. Most tools allow for every message to be tracked, providing useful feedback such as which type of message garners the most comments, re-tweets or reaches the most people.

That kind of information can help increase the success of future social media campaigns. For example, the social media tool SproutSocial displays social profiles – which are snapshots of connected social media accounts – and details increases in followers, engagement scores, influence scores and other activity-driven metrics. Tools such as this will make it easier to measure whether objectives were met on each of the networks<sup>18,28</sup>.

## Measuring the Impact of a Face-to-Face Community: NTEN

[www.nten.org](http://www.nten.org)

Based on an interview with:

**Amy Sample-Ward**

Membership Director

NTEN

Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN) is a membership organization of technology professionals who share the common goal of helping nonprofits use technology more effectively. The face-to-face and virtual communities thrive on the exchange of knowledge and information that supports members in using technology to make the world more just.

To evaluate the success of the face-to-face components of NTEN, managers look most closely at the 501 NTEN Tech Clubs. The NTEN Tech Clubs act as mini working groups or taskforces in support of NTEN's overall mission. These local groups are created informally and gather regularly to discuss issues of interest. NTEN managers use several methods to gauge the success of the Tech Clubs, including measuring things like: How many clubs are there? How many members do they have? And most importantly, how active are their members?

NTEN also emphasizes gathering evidence regarding the benefits individuals gain from participating in these clubs. For example, an individual group member's report on a web design tip he or she learned at a presentation led to a 20% increase in traffic the following month.

Of course, the face-to-face events have virtual outgrowths, too, including blog posts and other content created by members. These materials provide managers with additional opportunities to gauge the activity and engagement of members and the impact of the Tech Clubs.

Community participation across different parts of NTEN's network is also a strong indicator of engagement. For example, leaders of one Tech Club may meet with leaders from a neighboring club; or, an attendee of a local Tech Club may submit content to NTEN's global site for others to access. Such examples demonstrate that not only are NTEN Tech Club members engaged with one another, but they actively promote and support the broader mission of NTEN.

By monitoring the outputs and outcomes of people coming together in person, NTEN is able to ascertain the organization's impact on many levels. Since Tech Clubs are created continuously, they also provide an opportunity to observe the evolution of NTEN and its mission.



## Conclusion

Today's communities of practice have a variety of innovative options available for engaging and retaining members. In addition to traditional face-to-face interactions, communities can now "meet" online via webinars, discussion forums or social media venues such as Google Hangouts. Members can stay engaged through regular events (in person or virtual), but also exchange information and resources via the online community at any time.

When planning to build a community, following the recommendations in this report can help determine its objective and identify target members. Thorough research will help ensure the community fills a need. A good technology platform with high quality content for online activities is also key but it cannot guarantee a community's success.

Maintaining an engaged membership depends heavily on a strong community manager who is an expert in the community's field of focus. The manager can ensure frequent communications, active discussions and regular events. The manager can also be responsible for setting structure within the community. Active members are also necessary because these so-called "super users" can serve as advocates, or champions, to continue to build membership outside of the community. Super users can also help retain members by keeping the community lively

and engaging because they participate at higher levels than the average member.

A monitoring and evaluation plan will help measure how effective the community is at reaching its goals. Indicators, such as the number of members, are helpful but having many members doesn't necessarily mean resources are being used or discussions are occurring. Content and conversations also have to be analyzed over time. A good M&E plan will help answer questions such as "Are resources being added by the community members themselves or only the manager?", "Are discussions and comments waning in quality or remaining consistent?" and "Which topics are gaining the most traction?" Monitoring the types of content and content areas that elicit the most conversation will allow for mid-course adjustments in the community's progress towards goals.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, consider the lifespan of the community in the initial stages of planning as well as in the maintenance stage. A shorter lifespan can mean the community had a single area of focus or task and met its objectives within a limited timeframe. Communities with broad areas of focus can exist much longer. Keeping a community active and engaged for the long term, though, requires ongoing monitoring and maintenance to ensure the community continues to meet the needs of its members.

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## Appendix A

### List of Expert Interviewees

**Patrick Coonan** – TOPS/FSN Network

**Allison Kelley** – Institute of Tropical Medicine

**Neal Lesh** – ICT4CHW

**Jonathan Metzger** – NetHope

**Lisa Mwaikambo** – K4Health

**Angela Nash Mercado** – Global Health Knowledge Collaborative

**Neil Pakenham-Walsh** – HIFA 2015

**Ajay Puri** – BC Patient Safety and Quality Control

**Rohit Ramaswamy** – Center for Global Learning, UNC

**Laura Raney** – mHealth Working Group

**Amy Sample Ward** – NTEN

**Joan Whelan** – CORE Group

### Interview Guide for Community Building Best Practices

#### General community questions

1. What does community mean to you?
2. How does one go about establishing a community?
3. What does one have to do to keep a community active and thriving?
4. How does one monitor and evaluate a community?

#### Questions about your community

1. Why did you decide to establish a community?

2. What methods did you use in the beginning to identify your audience niche?
3. Did you formulate objectives or goals for your audience before building a base, or was it an iterative process as your audience was formed?
4. What is the role of face-to-face events (conferences, meetings, workshops, etc.) in building and supporting your community?
5. What is the role of technology in building and supporting your community?
6. What is the role of social media in building your community?
7. What is the role of personal communication (such as emails to potential super users) in building your community?
8. How frequently do you have large scale mailings and other communication to your community? How about events (face-to-face or virtual)?
9. Do you have other mechanisms, such as working groups, within your audience base for more specific work?
10. What sort of measures do you have in place to monitor and evaluate the success of the community? What are your virtual measures (web site and social media)? What are your non virtual measures?
11. Has your community transitioned from “manager owned” to “community owned” or do you plan on facilitating this kind of transition in the future? If you plan to transition the community or have already done so, how did you determine that the time was right to do so? And how would one facilitate this kind of transition?
12. Do you have any other thoughts?

## Appendix B

### Glossary of Terms

**Audience building** – Pushing out information on a platform with the intention of selling products or services.

**Bounce rate** – The percentage of web visitors who enter a website and “bounce” (leave the site) rather than continue viewing other pages within the same site. A high bounce rate indicates visitors are not immediately finding what they want on the site or they do not like what they find.

**Champions** – Users who are experts and well-known in their interest area and who increase the credibility of the community by their frequent participation.

**Community** – In this report, the term refers to professional communities with vested interests, not online learning communities in the academic context.

**Community Manager** - The accepted term for an individual who helps build, grow and manage online communities around a particular topic or focus area.

**Community of Practice** – A group of people connected with the explicit purpose of sharing resources and expertise. (see Community)

**Crazy Egg** – A web-based tool used to visualize where visitors are clicking on a website.

**Drupal** – An open-source content management system for websites.

**Google Hangouts** – a free video chat service offering both one-on-one chats and group chats with up to ten people

at a time. Google Hangouts focus on “face-to-face-to-face” group interaction, as opposed to one-on-one video chats, and can seamlessly switch the focus to the person currently chatting.

**“Know-do” gap** – The gap between what is known and what is done in practice.

**Meetup** ([www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)) – Meetup defines itself as the “world’s largest network of local groups.” Meetup is an online service for organizing a local group or finding one that is already meeting face-to-face.

**Open Community of Practice** – A community that does not require an invitation to join.

**Search engine optimization (SEO)** – The process that employs various tactics and strategies to improve a site’s ranking in search engine results.

**SproutSocial** – A social media monitoring and measuring tool.

**Super Users** – Community members who demonstrate a vested interest in a certain topic by way of a higher than average participation rate.

**TweetChats** – When a group of people all tweet about the same topic using a specific hashtag.

**Value proposition** – A statement that clearly defines why a consumer should buy a product or use a service.



