

Enabling Transformation with Communities of Practice

Transformation initiatives often face challenges communicating and coordinating with staff across large organizations. Communities of Practice are a proven mechanism for collaboration, coordination, and information sharing that can address these challenges by linking key staff and stakeholders on an ongoing basis. Communities of practice are virtual networks of people tied together by a common job function or focus area. These networks provide a home base for coordination, ongoing learning, knowledge sharing, and rapid response to new issues. Communities of practice may reach across the organizational chart, across locations, and even across organizational boundaries. This collaboration mechanism can enable transformation in two phases:

- **Phase I:** Speed the pace of change during the transformation process
- **Phase II:** Enable efficient operations and continuous adaptation in the transformed organization

“It’s not the strongest or the most intelligent of the species that survive, it is the most adaptable to change.”
–Charles Darwin

Phase I: Speeding the Pace of Change

Successful organizational transformation initiatives depend upon successful transformation leaders and implementers. These key stakeholders may work in different locations but face common challenges and need a common set of information, guidance, and tools. By establishing communities of practice for these groups, transformation initiatives can provide a mechanism for rapid coordination and adaptation to changing circumstances as well as an ongoing means to share lessons learned, questions and answers, and sample work products such as briefings and communications materials. As a result, the transformation initiative can operate more efficiently, identify and respond to obstacles more quickly, and keep critical stakeholders plugged-in throughout the transformation period.

Recommendations for Phase I include:

- Identify key transformation leaders and implementers in advance and involve them in community of practice planning
- Begin the transformation to the community of practice with a real-time event such as a web conference, teleconference, or face to face meeting
- Provide an online means to stay connected and share information
- Use the community for multi-way communications: push new information to the network, ask for feedback and direction from the network, and enable members to share information directly with each other

Phase II: Enable Efficient Operations and Continuous Adaptation in the Transformed Organization

Communities of practice are emerging as a horizontal information-sharing device that complements the hierarchical structure of the organizational chart. This horizontal structure enables staff to utilize the collective expertise of the organization to find answers quickly, marshal knowledge and resources, and adapt to changing priorities and conditions. Communities tie together staff in similar job roles, disciplines, or topic areas for ongoing learning and performance support. They can also serve to support initiatives or partnerships involving staff from multiple organizations.

Recommendations for Phase II include:

- Identify groups of staff and expertise areas that will be critical to the transformed organization
- Identify key partner organizations and external stakeholder groups with which your organization must collaborate to be successful
- Establish communities of practice in 3-5 priority areas to demonstrate the model
- Expand to incorporate additional areas where there is a driving need for ongoing collaboration
- Support the communities of practice as they adapt and grow to meet new challenges over time

As transformation efforts continue to progress, ICF International (ICF) expects collaboration through communities of practice to emerge as a central tool for coordination and communication and for addressing new business issues between other agencies

Communities of Practice Case Study: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)

The FHWA operates in a complex stakeholder environment of state and local governments, academia, and industry. Effective collaboration among these organizations and FHWA offices nationwide is critical to success. ICF has partnered with FHWA to bring innovative approaches to stakeholder outreach and internal operations to FHWA's Knowledge Sharing Initiative Internal FHWA communities span the organization to improve effectiveness, capture knowledge from retiring staff, and speed the learning curve for new staff. FHWA's external communities tie together over 4,000 staff members in partner organizations in ongoing information sharing on common solutions to common problems. An example of FHWA's community Web tools can be found online at: <http://nepa.fhwa.dot.gov>.



Project Background:

The FHWA collaboration initiative is an award-winning, multi-year initiative to improve customer service, increase organizational effectiveness, and develop human capital at FHWA and the larger transportation community. ICF supports the initiative with strategy, planning, program management, performance measurement, knowledge management systems development, IT management, stakeholder outreach, change management, and communications.

The initiative has launched 25 knowledge sharing projects fostering dynamic, multi-party collaboration among Federal, state, local, industry, and research organizations. The objectives of the initiative are to speed adoption of innovations, increase technical competencies, and improve effectiveness of the U.S. Highway system by creating mechanisms for multi-way knowledge exchange among transportation stakeholders.

The initiative's overall approach is to establish, promote, and manage online knowledge-sharing networks of transportation stakeholders. These Web-based "communities of practice" create a sustainable home-base for sharing lessons learned, success stories, good practices, Q&A, and resources in key transportation areas such as safety, environment, real estate, high performance concrete, traffic control devices, and air quality. A parallel set of internal communities support needs for human capital development, capturing knowledge of senior staff, and improving customer service across FHWA's 62 offices. In addition to providing the online collaboration tools, the initiative supports collaboration projects by planning and conducting periodic Web conference sessions for real-time knowledge sharing. As part of this initiative, FHWA has launched 25 collaboration projects addressing over 200 critical business topics. There are more than 80,000 visits to the collaboration sites every month with this number growing rapidly. The projects tie together networks of over 4,300 registered members (and thousands more non-registered users) who are partners from state governments, local governments, municipal planning organizations, other federal agencies, industry, academia, and international organizations. These networks provide an ongoing mechanism for sharing successes, good practices, new ideas, and other experiential knowledge that would otherwise not be shared. Internally, there are 1,700 FHWA staff registered for similar knowledge exchange.

Key Tasks:

The FHWA Collaboration has addressed a full range of initiative start up, management, and measurement components:

- **Strategy and Assessment**—The initiative began with an assessment of priority stakeholder needs for knowledge sharing and the development of a strategy for improving knowledge management inside FHWA and between FHWA and other governmental and non-governmental organizations. The strategy has been updated frequently to align with DOT and Federal-wide goals and objectives, including the President’s Management Agenda.
- **Knowledge Management**—Concept, design, and implementation of over 20 knowledge management systems aimed at improving effectiveness, capturing lessons learned, gathering knowledge from senior staff, and speeding the learning curve for new staff.
- **IT Management**—Support for a range of IT management areas such as security certification and accreditation, privacy assessment, Section 508, tool evaluation, IT planning, and EA.
- **Business Case**—Support and analysis for the both the OMB 300 business case and development of a broader mission-focused business case for knowledge management.
- **Performance Measurement**—Develop and implement a balanced scorecard methodology for measuring performance of individual KM projects as well as the overall initiative.
- **Program Management**—Supports multi-year planning, process development, and multi-organizational task oversight and tracking.
- **Change Management**—Design of change management strategies, incentives and rewards, and facilitated workshops to build consensus for adopting change.
- **Stakeholder Outreach/Communication**—Stakeholder assessment, outreach tactics and meetings, communications development (newsletters, posters, brochures, case studies, and executive communications). Plan and facilitate KM Advisory Council to gain stakeholder input and buy-in.

The resulting initiative has garnered external recognition and rewards, including the ACT/IAC 2006 Excellence.gov Finalist Award and recognition by the American Productivity and Quality Consortium (APQC) as a Best Practice Organization for Communities of Practice.

About ICF

ICF International (NASDAQ: ICFI) partners with government and commercial clients to deliver consulting services and technology solutions in the energy, climate change, environment, transportation, social programs, health, defense, and emergency management markets. The firm combines passion for its work with industry expertise and innovative analytics to produce compelling results throughout the entire program life cycle, from analysis and design through implementation and improvement. Since 1969, ICF has been serving government at all levels, major corporations, and multilateral institutions. More than 3,000 employees serve these clients worldwide. ICF’s Web site is www.icfi.com.

For Information

Mark Youman
ICF International
9300 Lee Highway
Fairfax, VA 22031-1207 USA
+1.703.934.3974 (p)
+1.703.218.2718 (f)
myouman@icfi.com