Who values your knowledge? Why Communities of Practice and knowledge-sharing need each other

A thought piece by Steve Glovinsky

In this thought-piece I will make a case for the interrelationship between the Community of Practice and knowledge-sharing, simply because knowledge has no value unless it is in the context of a CoP.

Well, almost none. I suppose you could make a good living these days as a knowledge expert.

Some of your readers may remember me as an "early adopter" of one of the original knowledge-sharing technologies, the e-mail group. In 1998, soon after the United Nations Development Programme discovered e-mail, I applied this disruptive technology to connect our field-based professionals[i]. UNDP programme officers in 136 country offices suddenly discovered that because they all had the same job descriptions, their knowledge and experience was valued by their peers. Eventually we created nine knowledge-sharing mail groups, organized around UNDP's thematic areas of concentration – poverty, governance, environment etc. When they were e-mail groups they were all extremely vibrant, as staff eagerly shared their knowledge and experience. Several remain active still, having survived all kinds of technology obstacles thrown in their way by website purveyors.

Being social networks, the e-mail groups grew organically as professional colleagues discovered that their peers were benefiting from the conversations, becoming better informed about the experiences faced in their jobs and the lessons learned from them. Importantly, the conversations were organized thematically – if you were a programme officer working in environment you were likely to find that knowledge shared by your environment peers was more interesting to you than what the governance people were interested in. UNDP moved on and I landed in New Delhi, where I adopted a similar principle for "Solution Exchange" – a knowledge-sharing service convened by the Agencies of the UN Country Team for the professionals associated with their areas of work – FAO for Food and Nutrition Security; ILO for Work and Employment; UNESCO for Education and for ICT for Development, etc. Where in UNDP the network members had the same job descriptions, in India they had the same job objectives – in other words, they may have worked in different organizations – NGOs, Government, donors, academia, private sector – but they were all part of the same profession. They were, in other words, a "Community of Practice", and they thought that Solution Exchange was one of the best things the UN had done for India.[ii]

In the 17 years since we introduced our first e-mail group, I have observed many attempts at knowledge sharing. You can go on Dgroups and count 7,000 networks, and there are many

thousands more on Ning, Google groups, Yahoo Groups, etc., etc. But how effective are they at actually sharing knowledge that someone else values? Solution Exchange uses six performance measurements to gauge its value to community members: membership growth, balance and vibrancy; number and turnaround time for its knowledge products (Consolidated Replies); and a user satisfaction survey.[iii] Our numbers for India were quite impressive over the three years we tracked them (2005-2007)[iv] – 12,000 total subscribers, with growth averaging 16.4 subscribers per week; vibrancy (percentage of members contributing) reached 23.8%; 536 Consolidated Replies were generated (2.5 per month per Community) and 8,000 knowledge assets recommended. The quarterly satisfaction surveys averaged 3.7 out of 5 "stars". I would challenge any other knowledge network to match these scores.

Why were these e-mail groups so successful?

Let's unbundle the term "Community of Practice". A "Community" can be defined as a group of persons coming together around a common interest.[v] And a "Practice", in my interpretation, is a collective term for the individual practices - the processes and conventions - that define a profession, such as the medical practice; law practice; etc. A Community of Practice, in this sense, is the group of persons who share a common interest in learning, sharing knowledge around and improving the set of practices related to their profession.

Within an organization, Communities of Practice, like the UNDP example, can be a part of a knowledge management strategy, drawing on its thematic professional groups for converting individual knowledge into organizational learning.[vi] Within a profession, Communities of Practice can be the forum for sharing knowledge, experience and innovation about the practices used in their chosen careers.

For example, let's say you are, like me, a specialist in facilitating change. In a decision support system I developed for UNDP in 1998 on how to design successful institution-building projects (now known as "capacity development"),[vii] I laid out six prerequisites needed for success in making an organization "fit for purpose" (for example, "management buy-in"). My system included knowledge-sharing forums where users could share stories and document how they succeeded in achieving management buy-in and the other five factors. As successes build up, others would draw on these successes in their own work. In other words, they would build up a body of practice based on empirical cases that improved prospects for success. With enough success cases, this body of practice could be codified into *practice standards* – which could be mastered. And if the complete set of practices in a profession were subject to practice standards, subject to certification by the top masters in the field, the CoP could evolve into a *professional association*, with peer-based authority for developing practice standards and certifying mastery.

I don't know if there is a professional association on change facilitation; at least I am not a member. But in principle there could be. In my work defining Solution Exchange Communities, my approach has been to develop a "leaflet" that defines the Community identity, with four elements: Who we are; what we talk about; who are our members; and who is our leadership. The topics we talk about – in other words, the knowledge we share – are the different dimensions of the Community's practice. These members want to learn and benefit from the tools,

techniques and tactics used by their professional colleagues to be more effective and successful in their career.

Let's recap:
1. Conversations in knowledge-sharing networks are about sharing experiences and learning to continually improve a practice.
2. Professional knowledge resides in professional Communities of Practice, and codified, standards-based professional knowledge resides in professional associations.
3. A professional Community of Practice, if successful, evolves into a professional association – or provides a knowledge-sharing service to an existing professional association.

Now we are ready to come to my original point: because it concerns a profession's practices, knowledge is only of value in the context of a Community of Practice. Most of the knowledge of a Community of, say, wooden boat-builders would be quite useless to a Community of, say, governance specialists. While governance specialists wax eloquent on the best techniques for community participation, wooden boat builders wax just as eloquent on the best techniques for bending oak plank.[viii] Think of the employability of the Master Builder of a fairly large class of catboats whose unique and unparalleled knowledge is the precise placement and torque for each of the 136 bronze screws holding that boat together, when he retires.

So, what are some implications of this insight?

First, if successful and vibrant Communities of Practice are the goal, it is advisable to anchor CoPs around knowledge-sharing networks of persons in a common profession, and to plan for their evolution into professional associations; or alternatively to seek out professional associations and provide them with knowledge-sharing services (if they don't already have one.)

Second, one can envisage a global knowledge-sharing architecture organized around the world's professional associations, with regional and country chapters reflecting local priorities and contexts. Not all professions yet have professional associations, and new professions are evolving as society evolves and transforms. But by starting out as Communities of Practice with the potential to grow into professional associations – country-level up or global-level down - it would be possible to canvas the world. For example, let's look at KM4Dev itself as our very own CoP. We could adapt our already vibrant knowledge-sharing network and use it to sharpen our emerging practice as professional knowledge brokers.

Finally, if knowledge is only valuable in the context of Communities, what is the prognosis for the "Knowledge Sharing Society", a new concept being actively promoted among KM4Dev'ers? Knowledge Management Austria is leading this one, having showcased it at the Knowledge for Development Global Partnership Conference (UN Geneva, 3-4 April 2017). It is promulgating an "Agenda Knowledge for Development", with thirteen goals intended to promote the application of knowledge towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and a "Knowledge for Development Partnership," a "platform for individuals, organizations, corporations and public bodies committed to developing prosperous, sustainable, peaceful and inclusive knowledge societies". In Geneva we all signed a Declaration, waxed eloquent about

Knowledge, and received a fine button, for pledging to "join efforts in further developing knowledge societies and sharing knowledge, experiences and ideas in a fair and trustful way with the other partners of the K4D Partnership."

Upon consideration, I would say that the concept is a very worthy one. Not so much the implied assumption that all knowledge – like, say, grandma's cheesecake recipe – would be of interest to and in demand by all of society. But certainly as an advocacy platform that makes a strong statement about the value of knowledge for improving the effectiveness of a practice, and the need for professions to continually improve their craft, be it policymaking, boatbuilding or baking. Because decisions made better as a result of collective learning will help ensure that we have not just a knowledge sharing society, but a society at all.

About the author
Steve Glovinsky has worked for the UN system since 1975 on all aspects of development and change. He is on his second UN career, having retired from UNDP in 2010, and after an assignment with the UN Economic Commission for Africa as Special Advisor to the Executive Secretary, is now back with UNDP as a knowledge expert. E-mail: steve.glovinsky@gmx.com

---

[i] See my other KM4Dev article, "The story of knowledge networks at the UNDP", in the Knowledge Management for Development Journal, Vol.8, Nos. 2-3, September-December 2012, 186-189. .

[ii] SE India had two very positive independent evaluations, finding Solution Exchange "unique in the world of communities [of practice]", and concluding that Solution Exchange had "impacted programme implementation, influenced national policies, improved capacities of individuals, enhanced knowledge and changed attitudes."

[iii] The six metrics, derived quarterly, are: (1) member growth: average number of subscribers per week; (2) member balance: percentage gap between the largest and smallest "pie slices" of (usually 5 or 6) organizational and locational categories; (3) vibrancy: percentage of contributors to the total number of subscribers; (4) average number of Consolidated Replies issued monthly; (5) turnaround time: ratio of days a query is open for comment to the days taken to issue its Consolidated Reply; (6) user satisfaction: sample survey of members rating the value of Solution Exchange to their work on a 1-5 star scale.

[iv] Gloinsky, Steve."Solution Exchange End-of-Assignment Report, January 2005-2007", \, June 2008.

[v] There are more precise definitions espoused by Etienne Wenger and the other acknowledged authorities in the field, but this one works as well as any.

[vi] See another article of mine about KM strategies, "How Knowledge Management Could Transform the UN Development System", Briefing 45, February 2017 of the Future United Nations Development System (FUNDS). project, Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, CUNY Graduate Center, New York NY, www.futureUN.org. Download at
https://futureun.org/media/archive1/briefings/FUNDS_Brief45_KnowledgeManagement_Feb2017.pdf

[vii] CAPBUILD. If anyone wants to try it out let me know; it's a simple tool, proprietary to UNDP but long ago overtaken and overwhelmed by the "development effectiveness" industry.

[viii] Hint: http://forum.woodenboat.com/showthread.php?94327-Bending-Oak-Without-Steam