


**GUIDE FOR THE  
ESTABLISHMENT, ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF  
LEARNING NETWORKS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE**

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## 1 Introduction

Only twenty percent of the knowledge in an organisation is ever captured, leaving eighty percent in the hearts and minds of employees (Botkin & Seeley, 2001).

Knowledge is not a "thing" that can be "managed". It is a capacity of people and communities, continuously generated and renewed in their conversation, to meet new challenges and opportunities. People responsible for knowledge value creation can be inspired and supported, but they cannot be "managed" as people were managed in the industrial era, as mere extensions of the machinery. Organisations obsessed with extracting and measuring knowledge will not have much to measure unless they shift the focus of their knowledge initiatives to developing an open culture of communication and collaboration that is supportive of the sharing of innovative work and business practices.

Communities of practice (COP) offer an effective and powerful tool to mobilise knowledge and the energy of public service practitioners to meet organisational goals. Synder et al. (2003) note COPs are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." They operate as "social learning systems" where practitioners connect to solve problems, share ideas, set standards, build tools and develop relationships with peers and stakeholders. Therefore, a COP is a particular type of network that features peer-to-peer collaborative activities to build member skills and steward the knowledge assets of organisations and society. A variety of terms are used to describe similar phenomena, such as "knowledge communities", "competency networks", "thematic groups" and "learning networks".

The National Treasury's Technical Assistance Unit (TAU) and Government Technical Advisory Centre (GTAC) have taken the COP concept and developed it into the practice of "learning networks" – applied to the unique context of the public service in South Africa. The challenge of building sustained and effective capacity and capability in government organisations is well known. Learning networks offer a cost-effective way of bringing together practitioners in a defined area of government – be it regional economic development or municipal capacity building – to leverage and build on the knowledge and skills of individuals (tacit knowledge) in the learning networks to advance their personal, team and organisational effectiveness. The GTAC's role in these learning networks has been to act as the "holder of the space" and learning network "cultivator". In other words, to be a neutral but interested party who can support the group to shape its work and social interactions, i.e. to cultivate the network.

There are a variety of ways in which the GTAC or other organisations can play this role and facilitate the consolidation and learning process of the group. This learning network practice note presents the elements and features of an effective LN, the process to establish a LN and the roles that the GTAC or other organisations can play as the LN “cultivator”. Regardless of the specific role that the “cultivator” plays, what is clear from the research and practice is that LNs do require a “holder of the space” in order to function effectively.

## 2 Key dimensions and elements of learning networks

Synder et al. (2003) note that a community’s effectiveness depends on the strength of its three core structural dimensions, viz. domain, community, and practice, as defined below:

- **Domain** refers to its focal issues and the sense of members’ identity with the topic (so defining and clarifying the focus of the learning network early on is important).
- **Community** includes its member relationships and the nature of their interactions—levels of trust, belonging, and reciprocity (helping to build these relationships and trust is a key facilitative role which the GTAC can play and where methodologies such as the Gestalt organisation and systems development play an important role).
- **Practice** consists of a repertoire of tools, methods, and skills—as well as members’ learning and innovation activities (this builds on the first two points and where the members themselves help develop and deepen their practice and skill in an environment where experimentation and trying out approaches is supported).

The defining elements of a COP or LN are as follows:

- **Voluntary association:** Synder et al. (2003) go on to note that these structures are essentially informal; they cannot be mandated from the outside. A crucial characteristic of a learning network is voluntary participation, because without this a member is less likely to seek or share knowledge; build trust and reciprocity with others; or apply the community’s knowledge in practice. Members’ willingness to learn and relate together is what drives value in learning networks.
- **Strategic partner role:** External sponsors and stakeholders (such as the GTAC) could guide or influence a community—in fact, an organisation like the GTAC (or another support organisation) has an important role to play. The role is similar to a strategic partner who helps “cultivate” and “coordinate” the network.

- **Complementary role to formal organisation:** A benefit of learning networks is their ability to bridge formal organisational boundaries in order to increase the collective knowledge, skills, and professional trust and reciprocity of practitioners who serve in these organisations. Because they are inherently boundary-crossing entities, learning networks are a particularly appropriate structural model for cross-departmental and cross-sector collaborations.
- **Building organisational capacity:** Wenger et al. (2002) note that the knowledge-based, network structures that government needs are not new. They have always existed on an informal level wherever practitioners—whether farmers, artists, or engineers—have gathered to swap stories, solve problems, or just hang out together. In recent years, however, it has been recognised that there is an opportunity to create these connections in ways which support individual learning and creativity – which in turn impacts on their effectiveness in the organisation.

### 3 Key elements that support and sustain learning networks

Based on the core structural dimensions of the learning network outlined above (its domain, community, and practice), three key elements are required to support and sustain LNs, viz.:

- Building community and community interaction;
- Information sharing; and
- Deepening practice.

#### a) Building community and community interaction

Synder et al. (2003) make the point that because learning networks are voluntary, what makes them successful over time is their ability to become exciting, relevant and value adding spaces – to be “alive”.

How do you design for aliveness? You do not. Instead you need to invite the interaction that makes them alive. This is the role of the “cultivator/coordinator”.

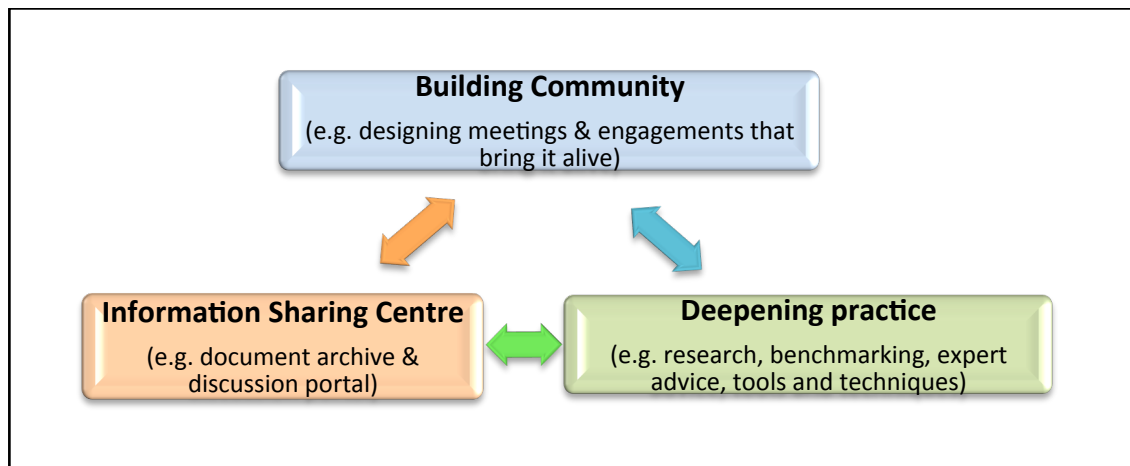


Figure 1. Key elements are required to support and sustain

This is not complex and given the right “space” will occur. For example, meetings that contain some open time during a break or lunch, with enough space for people to mingle or confer privately, invite one-on-one discussion and relationship building. Designing the engagement programme that allows for group discussion and having one-on-one conversations or watching experts duel over cutting-edge issues is useful, as is building a portal where members can read about new ideas.

The aim of the “cultivator/facilitator” is to evoke the network’s own internal direction, character, and energy and to create the space for this to find expression. This is the foundation of the learning network, and decisions need to be taken as how best to build community. An essential aspect of this is face-to-face interaction comprising both formal and informal engagement opportunities, and the strategic and selected use of expert inputs complimented by practitioner interaction and engagement. The facilitation of these meetings is the primary role of the “holder of the space” and learning network “cultivator”.

In building the learning network community (Educase, 2013), the aim is to:

- **Connect people** who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact, either as frequently or at all.
- **Provide a shared context** for people to communicate and share information, stories, and personal experiences in a way that builds understanding and insight.
- **Enable dialogue** between people who come together to explore new possibilities, solve challenging problems, and create new, mutually beneficial opportunities.
- **Stimulate learning** by serving as a vehicle for authentic communication, mentoring, coaching, and self-reflection.

- **Capture and diffuse existing knowledge** to help people improve their practice by providing a forum to identify solutions to common problems and a process to collect and evaluate best practices.
- **Introduce collaborative processes** to groups and organisations as well as between organisations to encourage the free flow of ideas and exchange of information.
- **Help people organise** around purposeful actions that deliver tangible results.
- **Generate new knowledge** to help people transform their practice to accommodate changes in needs and technologies.

#### **b) Information sharing**

The sharing of knowledge, tools and information is where the value lies in learning networks. Mechanisms and ways to capture, share and distribute key learning and information is necessary. This is ideally some type of web-based platform that will primarily allow for online access to and sharing of information/ data/ research/ reports and so-forth. This may be complemented by some form of group think-space – to complement (but not replace) the face-to-face community interaction.

#### **c) Deepening practice**

An important component of the learning network is to have access to, and input from, experts and professionals who can help deepen knowledge and practice, help develop tools and build content knowledge. This would be a way to complement the experimentation and idea development of the learning network.

How these three elements work to support the evolution of the learning network is key to the role of the learning network facilitator.

## **4 Key roles and role-players in a learning network**

The key to a successful learning network requires appropriate leadership that can guide, support and renew the LN initiative over time. Facilitation in terms of “holding the space” and “cultivating” the learning network is the most critical success factor for participation and effectiveness. This role is important in overcoming the typical obstacles that government face, such as silo mentalities, lack of administration mandates or support and initiating authority.

Based on categories defined by Wenger et al. (2002) the key roles required for a LN are as follows:

- Learning network “cultivator/coordinator”;
- A core group; and
- A sponsor.

#### **4.1 Learning network “cultivator/ coordinator”**

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The “cultivator/coordinator” makes the success of a community. Cultivator/coordinators nurture the community through shared activities, connecting members, incubating initiatives, and helping to solve problems. Ideally, for an active network, the cultivator/coordinator is dedicated up to 50% or more of their time. It is not only the time and commitment of cultivator/coordinators that are crucial, but their level of technical and interpersonal competence. To quote from Wenger et al. (2002):

There has to be someone whose sole responsibility is to keep the network going, to bring the issues to the table [...] It has to be someone with connections, with access to decision makers who will return their calls and respond to requests that come to the table.

It is not necessary to be an expert in the field, but it helps to know enough in order to appreciate who should be involved, who should talk to whom and to have legitimacy with members who feel it is important to know the business.

For larger learning network initiatives (e.g. the Economies of Regions Learning Network – ERLN) the role of “cultivator/coordinator” is shared between different GTAC or organisational members. Whilst all roles are interchangeable, one person provides the connections and access to decision-makers, another helps drive the content and research aspects, while another member drives the learning space and meetings. In the case of the ERLN, the team also manages the relationships with research and information service providers.

#### **4.2 The core group**

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Another important role is the “core group”. It supports the launch and development of the learning network by providing content and intellectual support at an overall initiative. Core group functions include identifying and offering good practice/information, initiative planning and coordination, leading discussion amongst community leaders, and acting as a liaison among communities and with sponsors to facilitate ongoing learning and alignment.



In all organisations where there is a significant community-of-practice initiative that is getting results, there is also a strong core group.

On this point it is important to note that not all members of a learning network should be expected to play equal roles. This is addressed in the next section.

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### **4.3 Sponsor**

Typically the sponsor, in the GTAC instance, is the government department that provides the funding. The project sponsor role is one that GTAC is well placed to play, especially if its activity is aligned to areas which are supported by GTAC's donors and/or partners.

Learning networks exist in all organisations. The question is how important it is to cultivate key communities to address strategic objectives that cannot be achieved otherwise. The GTAC's (or sponsors) investments, guidance, and legitimacy are crucial to both core group and cultivator/coordinator roles—and therefore to the success of the community initiative overall.

Sponsors are even more important in a government context where the communities' contributions to bottom-line objectives may be less visible because there are no reliable performance indicators—and yet service delivery relies (now more than ever) on cross-sectoral and inter-sphere coordination for good government.

## **5 Initiation, design and cultivation of a learning network: Key steps**

The Gestalt cycle of experience (Nevis, 1987) offers one framework for approaching the initiation, design and cultivation of a learning network.

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### **5.1 Enquire**

Typically the impetus for a learning network will come whilst working on a support project or programme (in the case of the GTAC). It may be recognition that there are areas that require exploration, innovation and refinement. It may also be a sense that many different people are grappling with similar challenges but in different contexts or locations.

From a GTAC perspective, the question to explore at this stage is whether there is an identifiable “core group” and a clear “domain” or area within which the learning network will function. Some informal discussions with possible core group members to ascertain their interest and support for a learning network should occur. The first step is thus to identify the core group and to explore the broad scope and define the domain or focus of the learning network (Snyder et al., 2003).

## KEY QUESTIONS

- **Domain:** Given the intended impact area, what are the key issues and the nature of the learning, knowledge, and tasks that the community will explore?
- **Community:** Who is this learning network for? Who are the network's core group? Who are important stakeholders?
- **Purpose, Goals, and Outcomes:** Given the impact and domain, what is this learning network's primary purpose? What are the benefits to the stakeholders? What specific needs will the network be organised to meet?

## 5.2 Design

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With a core group and, a domain and purpose identified, continue the process by starting to design the network. The design phase should not try to anticipate all aspects, but rather broadly address some of the key management questions.

The design process can be used as a way of building the learning network and could be structured as part of the first engagement. However, the cultivator/coordinator should spend some energy in planning for this and considering various options.

As Synder et al. (2003) note that because communities of practice are organic, designing them is more a matter of shepherding their evolution than creating them from scratch. Design elements should be catalysts for a network's natural evolution. As they develop, communities usually build on pre-existing personal networks.

The dynamic nature of learning networks is key to their evolution. As the network grows, new members bring new interests and may pull the focus of the community in different directions. Changes in the membership place new demands on it. Because learning networks are built on existing networks and evolve beyond any particular design, the purpose of a design is not to impose a structure but to help the network develop in line with its potential and members interests.

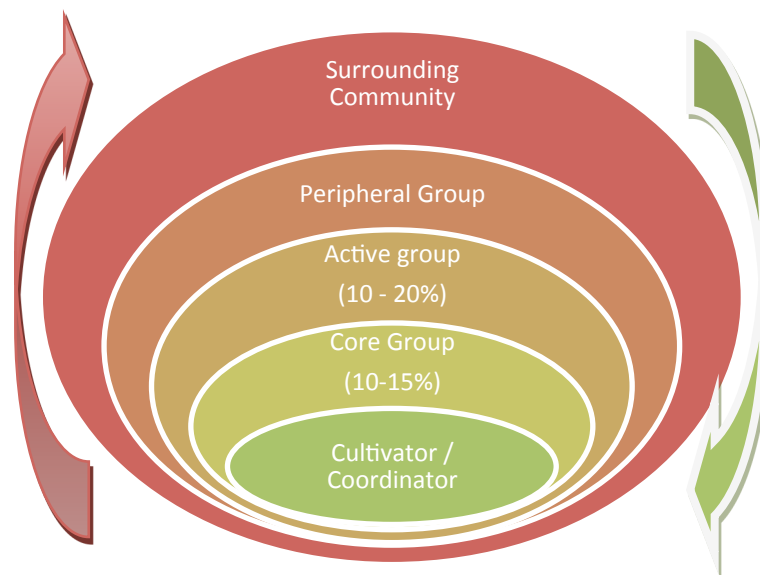
### 5.2.1 *Allow for different levels of participation*

To draw members into more active participation, successful communities build a fire in the center of the community that will draw people to its heat.

- Snyder et al. (2003)

Good learning network architecture invites and allows different levels of participation (Figure 2). As Sybder et al. (2003) note, people participate in learning networks for different reasons—some because it directly provides value, some for the personal connection, and others for the opportunity to improve their skills. The danger is in thinking we should encourage all network members to participate equally. But because people have different levels of interest in the community, this expectation is unrealistic.

We can expect different levels of engagement. There is the “cultivator/coordinator” who organises events and connects people. The “core group” who (typically) participate in discussions and debates. They may also identify topics for the community to address, and move the network along its learning agenda. This group is the heart of the learning network. The core group is usually small, only 10 to 15 percent of the whole community. At the next level outside this core is the active group. These members attend meetings regularly and participate occasionally in the community forums, but without the regularity or intensity of the core group. The active group is also quite small, another 15 to 20 percent of the community. Members will move and participate as it best suits their needs and interests. The design must encourage this and allow membership to engage at their pace and level of interest



**Figure 2. Levels of participation in a learning network.**

A large number of network members will be peripheral and rarely participate. Instead, they keep to the sidelines, watching the interaction of the core and active members. Some remain peripheral because they feel that their observations are not appropriate for the whole or carry no authority.

Others do not have the time to contribute more actively. Indeed, the people on the sidelines often are not as passive as they seem. They may have private conversations about the issues being discussed in the public forum. In their own way, they are learning a lot. In one community, a peripheral member attended nearly all meetings for two years, but almost never contributed. Then he was transferred to another division and, to everyone's surprise, started a similar community there.

Finally, outside these three main levels are people surrounding the community who are not members but who have an interest in the community, including aligned departments and agencies, private sector, non-government players and educational institutions. Network members move through these levels. Core members often join the sideline as the topic of the network shifts. Active members may be deeply engaged for a month or two, then disengage. Peripheral members drift into the centre as their interests are stirred. Because the boundaries of a community are fluid, even those outside the community can become quite involved for a time, as the focus of the community shifts to their areas of interest and expertise.

The key to good community participation and a healthy degree of movement between levels is to design community activities that allow participants at all levels to feel like full members. Rather than force participation, successful communities "build benches" for those on the sidelines. They make opportunities for semi-private interaction, whether through private discussion rooms on the community's website, at a community event, or in a one-on-one conversation. This keeps the peripheral members connected. At the same time, communities create opportunities for active members to take limited leadership roles, such as leading a development project that requires a minimal time commitment.

#### *KEY QUESTIONS*

- **Activities:** What kinds of activities will generate energy and support the emergence of community presence? What will the learning network's rhythm of meetings and engagements be? Who and how will organise and pay for them.
- **Communication:** How will members communicate on an ongoing basis to accomplish the community's primary purpose? Who will facilitate this and play the role of "cultivator/facilitator"?
- **Interaction:** What kinds of interactions (with each other and with the content of the community) will generate energy and engagement?

- **Learning:** What are the learning goals of the community, and how can collaborative learning be supported?
- **Knowledge Sharing:** What are the external resources (people, publications, reports, etc.) that will support the learning network? How will members share these resources and gain access to them?
- **Collaboration:** How will community members collaborate with each other to achieve shared goals?
- **Roles and Social Structures:** How will community roles be defined (individuals, cultivator/coordinator, core group, support or partner organisations, etc) and who will take them on?

### 5.3 Launch and pilot

Taking the initial discussions and engagements and translating them into the launch and pilot of the learning network should be a process of building on the energy being generated and then giving it concrete form in the establishment of the systems that give the network structure. Whilst by definition a learning network should be open and flexible, structure also creates some boundaries and gives members a sense of security and confidence in the process.

"Alive" learning networks reflect on and redesign elements of themselves throughout their existence. For example, with the ERLN the GTAC cultivator/coordination team with the core group had some ideas of what was expected, but the first engagement started with a very simple structure. The main goal was to draw potential members to the network. Once engagement started growing and members had begun to build relationships, we began introducing other elements – the research support, the web portal and also debates about who should and should not be involved. The key for the cultivator/coordinator is to play with the elements in a way that catalyzes community development.

Synder et al. (2003) stresses the importance of focussing on value and this should be explored at this stage. Communities thrive because they deliver value to the individual and to their organisation. Value is key to the learning network, because participation is voluntary. But the full value of a learning network is often not apparent when it is first formed. Moreover, the source of value often changes over the life of the network. Frequently, early value mostly comes from focusing on the current problems and needs of community members. As the network grows, developing a systematic body of knowledge that can be easily accessed becomes more important.

Rather than attempting to determine their expected value in advance, communities need to create events, activities, and relationships that help their potential value emerge and enable them to discover new ways to harvest it.

The most valuable community activities are the small, everyday interactions—informal discussions to solve a problem, or one-on-one exchanges of information about a tool, supplier, approach, or database. The real value of these exchanges may not be evident immediately. When someone shares an insight, they often don't know how useful it was until the recipient reports how the idea was applied. The impact of applying an idea can take months to be realised. Thus, tracing the impact of a shared idea takes time and attention.

In fact, a key element of designing for value is to encourage community members to be explicit about the value of the community throughout its lifetime. Initially, the purpose of such discussion is more to raise awareness than collect data, since the impact of the community typically takes some time to be felt. Later, assessments of value can become more rigorous.

#### *KEY QUESTIONS*

- Why should someone join the community? What are the benefits?
- What is the business model behind the community?
- How do new members learn about the community?
- What are the community's norms for behaviour?
- How do new members become oriented to the community environment?
- Based on insights from the pilot, what kinds of community activities will generate energy and engagement and support the emergence of community “presence” (activities, communication, interaction, learning, knowledge sharing, collaboration, roles and social structures)? What will the community's “rhythm” be?
- Based on insights from the pilot, how will roles and community social structures be defined and supported over time?
- How will success be measured?

## **5.4 Engage and sustain**

Maintaining and sustaining a learning network is about creating and building connections (Synder et al., 2003). Learning networks are rich with connections that happen both in the public places of the community (meetings, discussion blog or portal) —and the private space (the one-on-one networking of learning network members). At public events or meetings the space is created to exchange tips, solve problems, or explore new ideas, tools, and techniques. These events are public

in that they are open to all network members, though they are often closed to people outside the community. Sometimes they include formal presentations, but most often they are informal discussions of current problems and issues. Network meetings serve a ritualistic as well as a substantive purpose. Through such events, people can tangibly experience being part of the community and see who else participates. They can appreciate the level of sophistication the community brings to a technical discussion, how it rallies around key principles, and the influence it has.

Learning networks are much more than their calendar of events. The heart of a learning network is the web of relationships among community members, and much of the day-to-day interaction occurs in one-on-one exchanges. Thus, a common mistake in learning network design is to focus too much on meetings or events.

The “cultivator/coordinator” needs to “work” the private space between meetings, dropping in on community members to discuss their current technical problems and linking them with helpful resources, inside or outside the community. These informal, “back channel” discussions actually help orchestrate the public space and are key to successful meetings. They ensure that the spontaneous topics raised at the meetings are valuable to the whole and that the people attending will have something useful to add. The one-on-one networking creates a conduit for sharing information with a more limited number of people, using the coordinator's discretion as a gate. Every phone call, e-mail exchange, or problem-solving conversation strengthens the relationships within the community.

The public and private dimensions of a community are interrelated. When the individual relationships among community members are strong, the events are much richer. Because participants know each other well, they often come to community events with multiple agendas: completing a small group task, thanking someone for an idea, finding someone to help with a problem. In fact, learning network events usually allow time for people to network informally. Well-orchestrated, lively public events foster one-on-one connections. The key to designing learning network spaces is to orchestrate activities in both public and private spaces that use the strength of individual relationships to enrich events and use events to strengthen individual relationships.

#### *KEY QUESTIONS*

- What are the ongoing practices that will contribute to the liveliness and dynamism of the network and keep members engaged?
- How does the network support members across a wide range of roles?

- How are new potential network leaders going to be identified, chosen, developed, and supported by the community?
- How is persistent learning network “presence” maintained in the minds of the community members?
- To what extent is the community serving its intended audience and accomplishing its stated purpose and goals? How might it do a better job?
- How does the community demonstrate return on investment (ROI) for its sponsor(s)?
- From the perspective of each individual community member and from that of the community as a whole, what is the perceived return on participation?
- How should the knowledge and products created by the learning network be shared beyond the community?

## **5.5 Maintain a rhythm**

All learning networks have a life span. Some may go for many years, other may run for a brief, glorious period (e.g. the Provincial Learning Network of local government capacity building support practitioners – one year) and then subside (sometimes to awaken again years later when the need arises). There is no right or wrong length or duration of a learning network. During its life-time what is important is to establish a rhythm for the network.

As Synder et al. (2003) stress, vibrant communities of practice have a rhythm. At the heart of a network is a web of enduring relationships among members, but the tempo of their interactions is greatly influenced by the rhythm of community events. When that beat is strong and rhythmic, the community has a sense of movement and liveliness. If the beat is too fast, the community feels breathless; people stop participating because they are overwhelmed. When the beat is too slow, the community feels sluggish. Events give the community a beat around which other activities find their rhythm. Sometimes key projects and special events create milestones for the community, breaking up the regular rhythm.

The rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its aliveness. There are many rhythms in a community—the syncopation of familiar and exciting events, the frequency of private interactions, the ebb and flow of people from the sidelines into active participation, and the pace of the community's overall evolution. A combination of whole-community and small-group gatherings creates a balance between the thrill of exposure to many different ideas and the comfort of more intimate relationships. A mix of idea-sharing forums and tool-building projects fosters both casual connections and directed community action. There is no right beat for all communities, and the beat



is likely to change as the community evolves. But finding the right rhythm at each stage is key to a community's development.

According to Synder et al. (2003) successful learning networks offer the familiar comforts of home, but they also have enough interesting and varied events to keep new ideas and new people cycling into the network. As learning networks mature, they often settle into a pattern of regular meetings, projects, portal use, and other ongoing activities. The familiarity of these events creates a comfort level that invites candid discussions. Like a neighbourhood bar or café, a community becomes a "place" where people have the freedom to ask for candid advice, share their opinions, and discuss their half-baked ideas without repercussion. They are places people can drop by to hear about the latest tool, exchange technical gossip, or just chat about technical issues without fear of committing to action plans. Unlike team members, community members can offer advice on a project with no risk of getting entangled in it; they can listen to advice with no obligation to take it.

Lively communities combine both familiar and exciting events so community members can develop the relationships they need to be well connected as well as generate the excitement they need to be fully engaged. Routine activities provide the stability for relationship-building connections; exciting events provide a sense of common adventure.

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