



Rapid Guide

How to Use a Learning Community for Support

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In 20 minutes you will understand:

- Why you should establish an online learning community
- The benefits learning communities can deliver
- The critical success factors in establishing an online community
- The role of a community facilitator or moderator in a successful community
- The key barriers to be aware of and overcome.

Why establish a learning community?

Keeping staff up to date with the knowledge and skills to perform their roles effectively in a fast changing environment is a real challenge. To remain competitive, they have to be able to tap into knowledge resources quickly and efficiently, be flexible and learn faster than ever before. Many organisations face common challenges:

- Rapid obsolescence of skills and knowledge
- Skills shortages
- Loss of staff and associated knowledge to competitors.

How do you keep hold of key knowledge and allow people to tap into knowledge when they need? Online tools provide an infrastructure which allows people to access information quickly and efficiently. Organisations can use online technologies to support their staff by creating repositories of 'codified' knowledge (i.e. which has been sorted, chunked and categorised.)

They can quickly access this source and locate the right information at the right time through search tools.

However, that's only one part of the story. Much of the knowledge within organisations or communities is tacit; it can take too long to create learning content to keep up with changes. It is difficult to identify and codify it and place in a central repository with the speed that is required given the pace of change. This is why organisations are increasingly looking to learning communities and rapid e-learning.



Case study: Sales teams need information now

An organisation with a mobile sales force has set up a sales intranet and e-learning sales course. The sales course provides the formal skills training. The intranet site gives access to a range of information and tips shared by the team and gathered as they work.

On the community site they can add and locate up to the minute information on competitor changes; dealing with customer objections; special deals and offers.

Categories of community

There are two main forms of community include:

- **Expert communities**

These communities have a strong focus on knowledge exchange and learning from each other. Organisations need to be more flexible and accessible with their knowledge and information. They need to share it across operational, functional, and organisational boundaries.

Often experts in organisations will take the lead and share their knowledge (E.g. specialist engineering or IT skills.)

In other cases communities operate on the basis that 'nobody is as smart as everybody' and aim to generate knowledge through sharing. This is more common amongst sales communities where people need to share.

- **Learning communities**

These communities have a strong focus on learner support. These communities often support blended learning programmed where, in-between formal sessions, the learning community is sustained by online activity. The Open University pioneered learning communities in its distance learning work, recognising that there needs to be a lot of effort to support and motivate learners.

How do learning communities fit with rapid e-learning?

Rapid e-learning combined with a learning community can create a very cost-effective and powerful form of learning delivery.

Rapid e-learning provides a way of creating learning content quickly. It can be delivered to a large number of staff via an online learning community. Rapid e-learning can also involve subject matter experts directly in the content creation.

Learning communities can help provide support and structure to rapid e-learning. For example, using free software such as Moodle (www.moodle.org) or other learning community tools such as Mambo (www.mamboserver.com) or Joomla, you can create a community which includes:

- Learning resources, such as the rapid e-learning created
- Discussion forums
- Chat rooms
- Calendar of events.

The community site provides a focus for the learning programme. In the community, a subject matter expert or tutor can support learners through an online discussion forum or run scheduled chat sessions to cover specific areas.

Learning communities can be set up very quickly, even within a few days. They can enhance the value of the rapid e-learning solution by tapping into the knowledge of the learners themselves. We explore these benefits below.

The benefits of learning communities

Learning communities fill the space between formal and informal learning activities and can provide a wide range of benefits. We list some of the benefits and how to achieve them below.

Benefit	How to achieve
Capture knowledge in a way that it can be reused, transferred and accessed by the community	Provide PowerPoint templates for subject matter experts to author into and then create as online presentations
Utilise living knowledge not knowledge stored in a manual, ie knowledge about what is working on the ground today	Interview experts, capture their views as audio and podcast these or make available as audio files
Connect people to people who know	Create email expert lists
Support newer members through coaching in the community	Allocate mentors or buddies to newer community members
Utilise technologies to make the community and its resources scalable	Use internet delivery to ensure that communities can operate on scale globally
Build loyalty and encourage sharing	Recognise and reward members that contribute valuable content
Enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need	Provide community space for uploading useful documents and resources



Case study: Uses and benefits of community approaches

Problem solving	"Can we work on this project and brainstorm some ideas; I'm not sure what to do next."
Requests for information	"Where can I find the information on this?"
Seeking experience	"Has anyone dealt with an issue in a situation like this?"
Reusing assets	"I have a proposal for a local area network I wrote for a client last year. I can send it to you and you can amend."
Coordination and synergy	"Has anyone else purchased one of these? If so, can we combine our purchases to achieve bulk discounts?"
Discussing developments	"What do you think of the new system? Does it really help?"
Documentation projects	"We have faced this problem five times now. Let us write it down once and for all."
Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps	"Who knows what we have, and what we are missing? What other groups should we connect with?"

Free tools you can use for your learning community

There is a wide range of free tools available that you use to pilot or run a learning community. These include:

Moodle	Powerful, free open source learning management software. Requires installation on a Linux server. Contact Kineo if you would like us to install a version for you to use. E-mail rapid@kineo.co.uk
Wikispaces	Free online tool to set up your own password protected Wikispaces where learners can upload their own documents and take part in discussions.

What you need to do to build a successful community



Rapid angle: More than a portal, different from an LMS

A learning community is distinct from a learning portal or a Learning Management System. The key distinguishing feature is the ability of community members to contribute to the community and own its development as a knowledge repository.

For people to feel part of a community though they need to be able to help shape it and contribute. This means learners require:

- A sense of belonging
- A feeling it is their space
- The ability to contribute.

Online communities need tools which enable learners to contribute and feel part of the community. These might include:

Tool	Suggest activity
Discussion forums	Run weekly/monthly discussion, get respected person to lead discussion and pose key questions
Wikis	Set up a Wiki and specific task e.g. how to ensure quality on x
Ask an expert	Get group of people to agree to be experts and answer questions
Ask the community	Allow people to pose questions to the wider community and allow everyone to answer
Shared project spaces	Provide shared space for projects
Upload files and links	Allow users to upload document and suggest links
synchronous events (using chat, virtual classroom tools)	Start synchronous events with free tools such as Skype chat and teleconferencing. Try a ten minute brainstorm using Skype chat on a particular issue

Use of technologies and content for rapid e-learning communities



Rapid angle: More than technology...

Technology is a powerful enabler to help build and nurture the relationships necessary for a learning community to be successful. A sophisticated and integrated web-based “solution” might include some or all of the functionality listed in the previous section. However, the key to building successful online learning communities is more than the technology itself. It is highly dependent on social factors, not just good usability design.

A learning community needs:

- A common purpose and objective
- A clear group identity
- Trust and commitment
- A sharing culture
- Governance rules
- Peer to peer communication
- Management and facilitation
- Integration with offline activities.

We explore each of these below.

Success Factor	Advice
Clear purpose	It is important that the online learning community has a shared purpose which is directly relevant to the members. In our experience the tighter the focus of the community the more relevant its content and discussions; and the more it is visited by members
Community identity	Community identity is important because most of us “relate” to how we belong to communities or groups. Membership needs to be kept to a manageable size. If the community grows too big to effectively share relevant know-how, think about setting up another sub-community
Trust	<p>Members must be able to build trust over time with other members and the community facilitators. Members know with whom they are dealing and that it is safe to do so. Members have reputation based on their activity and the expressed opinions of others</p> <p>eBay (www.ebay.com) pioneered peer-to-peer commerce reputation building through aggregating customer and seller approval ratings</p> <p>Membership profiles are vital to building and enhancing not only community reputation, but relationships as well</p> <p>In an online community a good member profile lets you know something about the person with whom you are communicating. By building member profiles, members get to know the people within the community. If you are an expert in something and share a lot, people will know that and seek that help when they need it</p>
Commitment	There is a need to seek commitment from members of the community to their participation
Sharing culture	The more there is a sharing culture the more this will build trust and relationships. Encourage senior people to share and promote the benefits

Success Factor	Advice
Governance	A community needs ground rules and norms of behaviour. Will leaders be appointed by 'management' or self-selected by the community?
Peer to peer communication	Members must be able to interact with each other, to share information and ideas. They should be able to contact each other directly through email and participate directly in discussions. Consider making email details available
Management	<p>Someone needs responsibility for managing the community and ensuring:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular interesting articles and news are added • New discussion topics are proposed • Old content is purged • Feedback is monitored. <p>If the needs and requirements of the community are not being met, people will abandon it. Feedback must be frequent and acted upon quickly. The feedback plan doesn't have to be elaborate, but it has to be delivered 'often' 'acted upon,' and 'visible' to the members of the community</p>
Facilitation and moderation	Experience has shown that successful communities are heavily facilitated. The facilitator might continually seed new information, news and activities and provoke member involvement. A facilitator should call people in the community and get feedback, check their progress and motivate them
Offline activities	There is no substitute for some face-to-face interaction to build relationships. However, technology can complement and enhance such relationship-building over time

Sustaining communities – the role of a moderator

It is difficult to drive people to an online community and even harder to get them to engage and participate. One of the key ways of ensuring engagement and sustaining the community over time is to appoint a facilitator or moderator.

Planning and design of discussions

This involves carefully taking into account scope, purpose, length, and audience of the discussion. Many discussions are planned according to weekly topics.

Introducing new topics and questions

The content moderator is responsible for posting new messages that introduce new topics, usually weekly, and for asking questions related to those topics.

Facilitating, focusing, and stimulating

A good moderator knows when to step in. For example, when the discussion slows down, when someone contributes an interesting message but no one responds, when the discussion starts to stray from the topic, or when expanding on a participant's previous message.

Writing regular summaries

After discussing a topic for awhile, it is helpful for the moderator to summarise the points that have been made. For some members, reading the summaries may be the extent of their participation. Summaries can form a useful part of the 'knowledge base' of the discussions.

Recruiting specialist contributors

It can be very worthwhile for the moderator to encourage content specialists, who are familiar with the topic under discussion, to contribute their insights and experiences. From the very start, it may be useful for the moderator to invite selected resource persons to intervene at key moments. In fact, the success of any online dialogue depends on the recruitment of a critical mass of experienced individuals who are willing to play an active role in the dialogue.

Setting the overall tone

If the moderator is able to establish at an early stage an atmosphere of openness and high quality contributions, as well as demonstrate that s/he is willing to put as much time into the endeavour as the most active participants, this usually indicates the likelihood of the discussion's success.

What makes communities fail

The biggest single barrier to participation in learning communities is the learners' own lack of time. Learning communities thrive where there are active members contributing ideas and views.

Successful learning communities have recognised what Malcolm Gladwell called Mavens in his book *The Tipping Point*. These are people with extensive knowledge and experience who are very happy, indeed enthusiastic, about sharing such knowledge. Communities such as Microsoft recognise the role of such people and reward them through schemes such as "most valuable member" programmes and other benefits.

New learning communities will clearly need to make it easy for members to participate, to engage the Mavens and most fundamentally to prove the value of a learning community to the members and their employers.

Key actions



How to Use a Learning Community for Support:

- Identify the purpose of the learning community
 - Be clear about the benefits you are seeking
 - Pay attention to the critical success factors
 - Appoint a moderator or moderators to sustain the community
 - Be aware of the barriers to participation and address these.
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Take it further

What do you want to do?	Check out these Rapid Guides
Set up a Moodle or Mambo community website	Contact rapid@kineo.co.uk
Find out how to sustain learning and performance including through the use of online communities	How to Sustain Performance from Rapid E-learning
Explore the potential of online tutoring in your community model	How to Tutor Online for Rapid E-learning
How to engage and maintain stakeholders' interest	Rapid Approach to Stakeholder Management

All these and more are available at Kineo's Rapid E-learning Store:
www.rapidelearningstore.com

For more information on Kineo's rapid e-learning services:
email rapid@kineo.co.uk, or call +44 (0) 870 383 0003.