**The Henry
Halloran Trust**

Research Report

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Communities of Practice:
Getting to the Heart of Workplace
Learning, Sharing and Innovation.

Donald Proctor
A Practitioner-in-Residence Project

With a case study for establishing a community
of practice amongst social housing asset
managers across Australia and New Zealand

CONTEXT

This project was prompted by the author's involvement with a group of Australian and New Zealand social housing asset managers, who share information and research on public housing maintenance.

This group, while usefully sharing information by emails and meeting in person very occasionally, had much more to offer. This research aimed to see how the literature on communities of practice could help to guide the establishment of a stronger forum of social housing asset managers across Australia and New Zealand.

A literature search revealed to the author the abundant writings on communities of practice. These writings focused on a broader range of groups than just mono-professional associations or practice networks within a single corporation. They also focused on the critical importance of interpersonal or social aspects of communities.

Establishing and maintaining successful communities of practice is a challenge across professional and research communities of interest to the Henry Halloran Trust. While demonstrating findings as they relate to social housing asset managers, the intention of the document is to provide a foundation for any group to improve its community practice.

SOURCES

- Literature search on key words: professional networks, knowledge management, professional communities, professional practice, and communities of practice.

- Interviews with community of practice convenors

MAIN FINDINGS

How are communities of practice investigated in the literature?

Extensive literature is available to inform practitioners on the following features of communities of practice: defining characteristics; key principles for success; guidance on cultivation; measuring success; and explanations for failures, or downsides of communities of practice.

What are the key concepts that can help to understand and encourage communities of practice?

Several principles for achieving 'aliveness' in communities of practice are espoused, including: designing for evolution; maintaining internal and external perspectives; recognising varying levels of participation; facilitating private and public domains; focusing on value; maintaining excitement; and creating rhythm.

What are the benefits, challenges and downsides of communities of practice?

The literature offers many approaches to measuring and promoting the value generated from communities of practice to members, sponsors and other stakeholders.

Key challenges identified include time constraints, lack of leadership, and poor definition of goals or scope.

Are there current examples of communities of practice that demonstrate concepts from literature?

Examples abound in the literature of communities of practice from many different fields.

Specific local examples related to housing were investigated and clearly demonstrated the principles and characteristics found in the literature.

Does the literature provide a useful guide to establishing a community of practice for asset managers in social housing?

The literature provided a valuable guide for developing a prospectus for establishing *The Home for Asset Managers In Social Housing* (The HAMISH).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Successful collaboration is increasingly recognised as a foundation of good practice and enhancement of the body of knowledge and depth of expertise in our society.

Communities of Practice provide a model for like-minded people to share information and develop value through developing trusting professional and personal relationships.

This paper adds to the body of knowledge by examining Community of Practice literature from the point of view of a particular planning and housing related challenge.

Lessons identified in the literature can be readily adopted by practitioners to assist in establishing a new community, or perhaps diagnosing and fixing problems with an existing community.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This paper is based on The Henry Halloran Trust Practitioner in Residence Project

The full paper from this project can be found on The Henry Halloran Trust website:
http://sydney.edu.au/halloran/programs/index.shtml

For further information about the Practitioner-in-Residence Program please contact:

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About the Trust

The University of Sydney, through the generous gift of Warren Halloran, has established the Trust in honour of Henry Halloran who was an active advocate for town planning in the first half of the twentieth century.

The objective of this trust is to promote scholarship, innovation and research in town planning, urban development and land management. This will be achieved through collaborative cross-disciplinary and industry research that will generate innovative approaches to urban and regional policy, planning and development issues.

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