

Advance your Knowledge Management Outcomes with Communities of Practice

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Communities of practice: the key to tacit knowledge transfer

There is no doubt that every organization runs on knowledge. In a world of rapid change, leveraging knowledge and insights empowers people to act quickly, and organizations to be more resilient. Early AI investors and adopters often found that applying KM strategies and practices simplified their AI service deployments and generated faster ROI.¹

Organizations invest in a variety of approaches to ensure that the right knowledge gets to the right people at the right time. They form cross-functional teams and Kaizens, they form agile teams to develop new products, they create customer-focused business units – all with the goal of capturing and spreading ideas and expertise.

Historically, organizations have leveraged SharePoint to manage explicit knowledge assets such as documents. But organizational knowledge does not only exist in explicit formats. Critical knowledge also exists in the heads of your colleagues and employees. This *tacit* knowledge becomes *explicit* through conversation and interaction, two critical knowledge transfer mechanisms that are significantly more challenging to leverage in global, distributed organizations and in even smaller organizations operating in a hybrid mode.

Microsoft Teams helps organizations manage teamwork in a remote or hybrid environment and supports small groups of people working towards a common deliverable or project goal. Microsoft Teams helps support conversation and interaction in the context of the teams established for specific, targeted goals - among groups of people that you know.

But large and small organizations have knowledge and expertise in a much broader context, including people that you don't know. Without the informal opportunities to have spontaneous conversations in the office, even small organizations struggle to share tacit expertise and knowledge outside the context of a work team. This is where **communities of practice**, groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and a passion for a topic or discipline, can bring significant value to organizations. And where Viva Engage, part of Microsoft 365, is designed to foster community engagement and knowledge sharing across organizational, business, and geographical boundaries. It integrates with SharePoint and Microsoft Teams to provide a seamless experience for users.

In this white paper, we talk about how and why communities of practice can add value to your organization, the differences between communities and teams, how to create and sustain successful communities, and how to measure community success. We will also talk about how to leverage Viva Engage to support communities of practice and how, with Microsoft Copilot, organizations can tap into the tacit knowledge exchange that happens in open communities to bring that knowledge to you, in the flow of your work.

What are communities of practice?

Informal communities of practice exist in almost every organization. Sometimes, they are just email or chat groups of people who already know each other. But imagine the potential for sharing knowledge and experience if you can connect people who share a common interest or expertise – but may not know each other. Especially during times when so many people are working remotely, **communities help make organizations even**

smarter. Communities help organizations harness knowledge – to know what they know – and empower people to act quickly and organizations to be more adaptable and resilient. Communities help reduce friction. Whether formal or informal, communities help break down silos and encourage the free flow of knowledge from the people who have it to the people who need it. Communities also help experts exchange ideas and brainstorm, helping organizations innovate and engage at scale.

A community is not a business structure. Communities are groups of people who share an interest, passion, or expertise – from any part of the organization. Communities of practice are most often created organically, and membership is voluntary. Membership in a community is defined by knowledge and interest and roles are not based on the assignment of a task. Members often take on new roles based on their interests. A community exists while members believe they can contribute or benefit.

Communities can provide key benefits to organizations:

- **Solve problems quickly.** Posting a message in a community is a great way to raise awareness of a problem to a broad group of people in the organization. Even if someone is not a member of the community, colleagues can @mention people they think can help solve a problem – and the answer is visible for the entire community to review, enhance, and extend. (The premium Answers in Viva capability lets employees ask questions and connect to crowdsourced answers. Natural language processing helps match questions with available answers, and the experience rewards people who contribute to Answers.)
- **Identify best answers.** Viva Engage also includes the ability for Admins and Subject Matter Experts to designate a specific answer as the “best answer” to a question. This helps ensure that the same question doesn’t have to be asked (or answered) many times. Identifying a “best answer” to a question post does not require a premium license or the Answers in Viva feature.
- **Crowdsource ideas.** In addition to helping answer questions, communities can also provide a way to capture ideas and suggestions from a broad group of interested people, helping spur innovation and innovative solutions.
- **Transfer best practices.** Microsoft Search can help people who actively seek examples find company resources. But search results can’t directly tell you – “for your specific scenario, this example is the very best.” But a community can! People in the community can help direct you to the *best* resource for what you need to know – or help *qualify* search results. Communities support a closer connection between learning and doing – people seek advice from the community when they need to know, which creates an optimal “moment of engagement” for knowledge transfer.

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". (Lave, Jean and Wenger, Etienne, 1991)

- **Address informal tacit knowledge transfer.** In many cases, the most current knowledge about a topic isn't explicitly available in a searchable asset – because it's still locked in the heads of your colleagues. Communities, especially online communities, help transfer tacit knowledge – emerging expertise areas in the organization as well as the knowledge of new starters. And brings additional value to tacit knowledge transfer, through their conversations that put knowledge into context.
- **Attract and retain talent.** Communities can provide an immediate sense of belonging for new starters. Imagine starting work for an organization and immediately becoming part of a network of like-minded colleagues you may never encounter in your day-to-day work. This is a great benefit for people who are new. Moreover, organizations are easy to leave – *people* are not. Being part of a community provides a sense of belonging that can help encourage employees to stay – by providing a network with whom to share ideas or even provide new internal opportunities.
- **Develop professional skills.** Communities provide a way to create connections across geographies, organization units, and physical space. Communities are not limited to a specific building or floor. Communities are also not limited to a specific role, providing opportunities to learn from people with similar interests and expertise but applying it in different ways. This creates many opportunities to expand your perspective and develop professional skills by learning from a broad set of experts across the organization and making connections across all levels.

Teams and communities

Organizations form teams when there is a specific activity, process, or task that needs to get done within a set period. Unlike communities, which *may* have an explicit outcome goal, teams are formed because there *is* an explicit outcome goal – a deliverable to produce, a process to execute, a function to provide, or an event to plan.

Membership in a team is most often assigned, and team members have task-specific roles. As a result, most of the time, team members know each other – if not by name, then at least by role. These roles most often remain constant for the life of a team. Teams are often dissolved when the mission is accomplished.

Most importantly, while knowledge transfer often happens when you work on a team, knowledge transfer is not the primary goal of the team. For communities, knowledge transfer is the goal, and communities therefore have no “end date”, like a project does.

So, teams and communities have something in common – they both create opportunities to collaborate and have conversations in the context of our work. They both provide opportunities to transfer tacit knowledge. However, teams and communities are also very different, as summarized in the table below.

Teams and Communities - What makes them different

Teams	Communities
Driven by deliverables with shared results	Created organically with many objectives
Membership defined by task, assigned	Membership defined by knowledge or expertise, voluntary

Roles for members typically remain consistent	Members take on new roles based on interest and need
Often dissolved when the mission is accomplished	Exists while members believe they can contribute or benefit
Value delivered in the results produced	Value delivered in the exchange of knowledge and information

Creating and sustaining successful communities of practice

Communities are the most successful at leveraging the tacit knowledge in organizations when the right conditions are in place. These conditions fall into four major categories.

- Culture
- Process
- People
- Technology

Culture

Organizational culture has as much of an impact on community success as technology – maybe even more. Stan Garfield, KM thought leader and former Community Evangelist at Deloitte, once said, “Knowledge management doesn’t happen until somebody reuses something.”

“Knowledge management doesn’t happen until somebody reuses something.”

Stan Garfield, KM thought leader and former Community Evangelist at Deloitte

Reward and recognize collaborative

behaviors. Organizations that are the most successful with knowledge management care about content and knowledge *reuse*, not just creation. They recognize and reward sharing and collaborative behaviors. They take a lesson from hockey and give credit not just for goals, but also for *assists*.

Think about the skills and behaviors that are valued in your organization. How are people promoted? How are people measured? Knowledge management is not a solo process. If people don’t see any benefit to sharing and contributing, can you be sure that they will do it? A manufacturing organization uses metrics to decide which scientists and engineers will be named “fellows,” a high honor for a limited number of people. One criterion is to be the primary author of a patent that generates at least \$100 million in revenue. Another is if the candidate has worked as a *supporting* author on colleagues’ patents. This reflects a balance between recognizing individual accomplishment and collaborating with others – both are important. In a consulting organization, only employees rated as strong collaborators (able to demonstrate that they have used their knowledge and experience to help others) are considered for the Senior Principal promotion.

Celebrate success. Formal benefits such as time off or compensation for community work don’t correlate with better or more successful communities. However, having a process to formally *recognize* community contributors can demonstrate organizational commitment to participation. In one

organization, an executive was made aware of a valuable knowledge exchange in a community that resulted in significant work savings. Although the executive was not directly involved in the community, he contributed to the viral success of the community by sending an email to his peers showcasing what had happened in the community, the people who contributed, and the impact to the organization. In doing so, he actively promoted the contributions of the community and its members and demonstrated that it is “safe” to ask a question. In another organization, community members are given awards for especially valuable contributions at an annual conference. The awards are read by the CEO based on nominations contributed by community members. Though the award comes with a nominal cash prize, the stories shared and told by the CEO are much more highly valued by the members.

Provide a safe space. In addition to recognizing and rewarding reuse and collaborative behaviors, organizations that have successful outcomes with communities have a culture that supports open and honest feedback and look at occasional mistakes as learning opportunities. These organizations support diverse opinions and encourage respectful conversation in online forums, creating a safe space for people to ask and respond to questions.

Create a sense of belonging. Everyone wants to be seen, heard and understood. This is not just a matter of cultural anthropology; this is something that is embedded in our DNA since hundreds of thousands of years and hard-wired into our brains, as explained by e.g., Ph.D. Clinical Neuroscience [Daniel Lundqvist](#). Humans are social beings and (most of us) do not feel comfortable functioning in isolation. We need a group, or flock, to stay happy and (mentally) healthy. And happiness and health have a direct impact on our motivation, inspiration and creativity. A sense of belonging also tends to extend the tenure of employees, thus countering negative attrition.

“Everyone wants to be seen. Heard. And understood.”

Keith Barry, Mentalist | Author | Entertainer – Keynote Speaker, Knowledge Summit Dublin, June 2024

Process

Although communities of practice are at their core informal and self-organizing, they are most successful when key processes are nurtured within the organization.

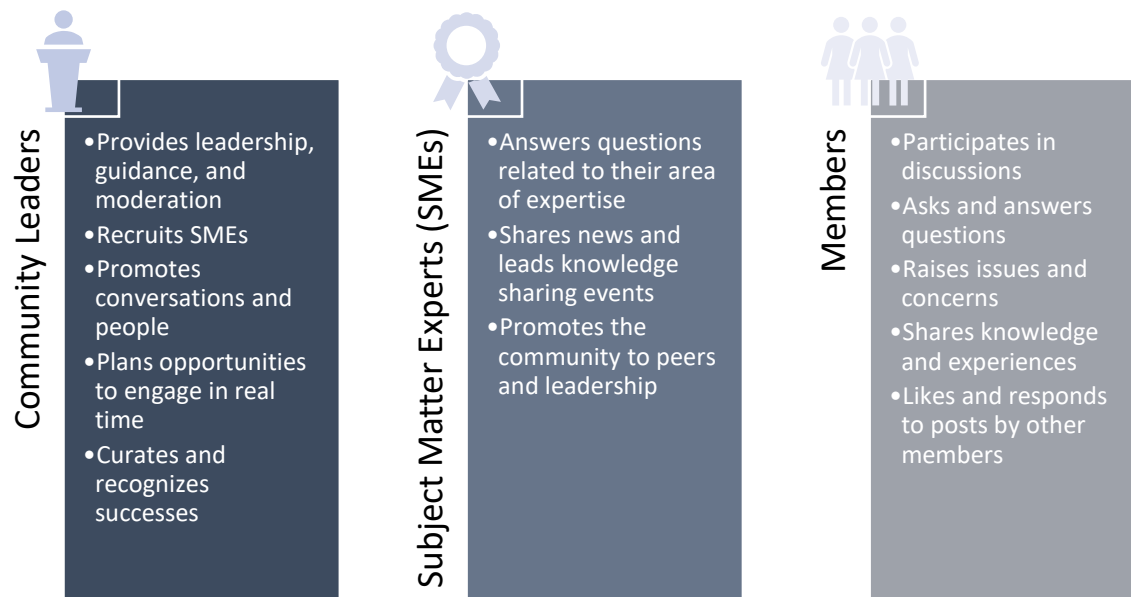
Clear identity and purpose. Each community should have a clear identity and purpose – centered around knowledge areas that carry a sense of urgency or importance for the organization. It can be helpful when organizational leaders identify potential communities of practice that will help enhance the organization’s strategic capabilities. Ideally, communities should be connected to the challenges members face in their work. This helps foster community growth and ensures that communities become part of the fabric of the organization.

Ensure that both knowledge seeking and sharing is built into work processes. Even with a clear identity and purpose, an important way to ensure that knowledge reuse happens in the flow of day-to-day work is to ensure that work processes encourage leveraging existing resources – people and content - *before* creating new ones. This means that sharing (during and at the end of projects) and reuse (at the beginning of projects) are built into work processes.

People

People are at the heart of all successful communities – and there are several key roles that help ensure that communities sustain value:

- Community Leaders
- Subject Matter Experts
- Members



Community Leaders

Community leadership is especially important when communities are in the early stages – but every community should have someone (or a team) committed to managing the community. Ideally, community leaders should have expertise in the community’s topic – but they do not have to be the top expert in the topic. Sometimes, the best community leaders are not the ultimate subject matter experts. The most successful leaders are often those who are *passionate* about the subject matter but also have a need and desire to learn more and leverage the expertise of the real experts.

There are several important roles for community leaders that help raise awareness and promote success:

- Planning
 - **Engage key leaders and influencers** to encourage them to promote and participate in the community and share community successes.
 - **Arrange a soft launch with early adopters.** Gather up a few initial prospective members (5-10) and seed the community with some initial conversations. When new users come to the community after you launch, they will get a sense of what to talk about and see examples of existing conversations.

- **Create an initial list of shared topics** to share with community members to help establish some structure for conversations or identify key areas of importance to the community.
- **Determine your default post type.** Some communities are established primarily as a Q&A forum – for example, a community called Ask IT or Ask Business Development. Community leaders can help drive conversations by setting the default post type for the community to be a Question.
- **Launch**
 - **Make some noise!** Depending on the topic and breadth of the community, it can be helpful to engage the communications team in the organization to help the community get discovered.
 - **Write a news article on a relevant intranet site.**
 - **Connect the community to an existing intranet site.** Some communities relate to an existing intranet site. For example, some organizations have a Leadership Corner intranet site. That site is a great place to add the Leadership Connection community with the Viva Engage conversations web part to embed the conversations right on the home page of the site.
- **Ongoing**
 - **Promote conversations and people** by @mentioning people and creating posts designed to elicit replies.
 - **Demonstrate collaborative behaviors** by starting discussions and sharing resources.
 - **Inspire members** to contribute to the conversation and share resources by liking their posts and replying to questions.
 - **Monitor conversations and questions** to ensure that “no questions are left behind” and posts have replies by @mentioning members and subject matter experts who may be able to “weigh in” on topics.
 - **Help members get to know one another.** For example, send a personal welcome message to new members.
 - **Plan regular opportunities to meet face-to-face or in real time** to solve specific problems, hear a guest speaker, etc. For example, set up a monthly knowledge sharing call, write news updates, and promote networking at conferences and community events.
 - **Encourage community members to review content to look for discussions that are outdated or no longer relevant or inappropriate.** If part of a post is no longer relevant, create a new post, combining content from the relevant parts of the old thread, and then delete the old post.
 - **Build an environment of trust** by monitoring conversations to make sure that all members are respectful to others – even when they disagree. Work with any member who posts an inappropriate comment or dominates a conversation and determine a course of action.
 - **Curate success stories** demonstrating the value of the community and celebrate members’ successes. Write an article for the company intranet talking about the successful outcomes in your community.

- **Look for key content.** Identify opportunities to create re-usable assets or best practices from the knowledge being exchanged in Viva Engage conversations by creating documents or pages shared on the intranet or connect conversations to Project Cortex by adding a Topic.
- **Regularly assess community viability** to ensure that the community is still delivering value and communicate the value to organization management and members.

When you are looking for community leaders, look for people with the following characteristics:

- **Strong organizational and multitasking skills**
- **Approachable, empathetic, and patient** – interested in engaging with other members of the community
- **Inspired by people** – willing to promote the success of others and, where necessary, work behind the scenes
- **Inspires others** – by demonstrating collaborative behaviors and showing their own interest in advancing the organizational knowledge about the topic of the community
- **Transparent and diplomatic** – able to handle negative situations tactfully
- **Expertise, interest, or experience in the community subject area** – but not necessarily the top expert in the organization
- **Confident and passionate** about the vision for the community
- **Comfortable with technology** – willing to invest the time to learn how to use the community tools in Viva Engage

Subject Matter Experts

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) are community members that are recognized for their deeper expertise in a specific area that is important to the community. Subject Matter Experts often find that by participating in a community, they can make a bigger impact because they only have to answer a question or post a resource once to make that knowledge available to the entire organization. Admins can formally designate any member of a community as a [Community Expert](#), which endorses their posts with a special label and allows them to mark an answer to a question as a “best answer.”

Subject Matter Experts support the community by:

- **Answering questions** related to their area of expertise – or by linking to existing documentation or answers for that question.
- **Engaging other SMEs by @mentioning** experts both within and outside the community
- **Sharing links to content** they have created or posted in other locations such as their blog or a page on the intranet.
- **Leading knowledge sharing discussions or live events** for the community.
- **Posting links to news articles** related to the community from within and outside the organization.
- **Serving as an evangelist** for the community by driving awareness among colleagues, peers, and leadership.
- **Making sure that their areas of expertise are identified in their Microsoft 365 profile** to help identify their subject matter expertise within the community

Community Members

There is a 90-9-1 rule of thumb when it comes to community participation. In a typical community, 10% or fewer of the members will tend to post, ask questions, present, or otherwise actively participate. In other words, 10% of the members will participate at all and only 1% will regularly be active in discussions and presentations. 90% will not post or speak up at all. In other words, 90% of the community members may be “lurkers.” Does it matter if only 10% of your community members actively participate? Maybe not – because the 90% can still be learning by paying attention to community discussions, shared content, and attending events. The goal for community membership should always be *quality over quantity* of participation – but every community needs a core group of members who actively engage to:

- **Share knowledge and experiences**
- **Participate in discussions**
- **Raise issues** and concerns regarding common needs and requirements
- **Alert other members** to opportunities to learn or engage
- Are on the lookout for ways to **enhance community effectiveness** (such as recruiting specific members, suggesting topics for events, and recommending processes to help engage members)

If your community is new or communities are new to your organization, it can be helpful to provide community members with some suggestions for how to get started. Here are some ideas:

- **Ask a question.** Remember to search before you ask to see if the question has been answered recently. If the answer is more than 3 months old, you may want to ask again!
- **Answer a question.** If you know the answer, be helpful!
- **Tag someone who might be able to answer a question.** Use the @mention feature to direct a post to specific people to get their attention.
- **Add a Topic to conversations.** Choose a key Topic to add to your post to make your comment or question more discoverable. Add a #hashtag to add personality to your conversation or associate your conversation to a temporary event such as a campaign.
- **Find a resource.** Use the community to find people and examples relevant to your work or people who can work on your project.
- **Recognize a colleague.** Use the Praise feature to congratulate or recognize a colleague.
- **Suggest an idea.** Participate in crowdsourcing activities.
- **Share a link to appropriate content that you are authorized to share with that audience.** Post about what you are working on that you can share, what you read, what you’re learning.
- **Acknowledge great ideas.** “Like” posts. Vote up posts that are particularly good answers to questions.

Technology

Communities of practice existed long before we had technologies to support them – but the value and reach of a community are multiplied significantly when they are supported by enabling technologies.

Viva Engage in Microsoft 365 is the key enabling technology for communities of practice. Viva Engage gives each community a home where members can share insights, work together to solve problems, and enable better decision-making. Viva Engage supports communities in many ways, but some of the key capabilities include:

- **Conversations:** Open communities in Viva Engage allow anyone with an interest or expertise to ask questions and contribute to threaded conversations – no matter where they sit in the organization or the world. Community members can @mention subject matter experts to help ensure that they have an opportunity to weigh in on key topics and questions.
- **Questions:** Posts in Viva Engage can be flagged as a question so that community leaders can ensure that “no question is left behind.” If there is a “best answer,” it can be identified and promoted to the top of the conversation thread. This feature helps streamline knowledge sharing and ensures that valuable information is easily accessible.
- **Collaboration:** Community members can indicate affinity by liking a response – but they can also “upvote” a response to boost it in the thread so that responses with more votes show higher up in the thread, ensuring that the best solutions and ideas are easily and quickly identified.
- **Ideation:** Viva Engage polls make it easy for community leaders to take the pulse of the community or elicit ideas and reactions. This feature supports innovation by capturing diverse perspectives and suggestions from community members.
- **Organization:** Topics in Viva Engage allow you to associate conversations with a list of topics – as they happen and for future reference. Users can see both the topic name and a brief description of the topic to make it easier to assign a relevant topic. New topics can be added if they do not exist already. Viva Engage topic pages provide a “pivot” from a conversation to bring all conversations related to a topic – across communities. Topic pages also show the description of the topic as well as the people who are following the topic – which can help identify potential new members of communities. They also allow visitors to filter the posts based on whether the post is a conversation or a question – additional support to make sure that no question is left behind. And, within each community, the home page shows the 5 most popular topics for that community – allowing community visitors and especially new members to quickly focus their attention on what is most relevant for this community or of interest to members.
- **Events:** Viva Engage helps communities connect asynchronously – but Viva Engage also supports real-time conversation – from real-time “Ask me anything (AMA)” events where key SMEs or leaders agree to participate live in the community to answer questions in real-time to live events using webcams and screen sharing or a full-scale professional production. You can use Viva Engage conversations to promote Q&A before, during, and after live events. Live events include powerful AI features like auto transcription and keyword search to help unlock content and make the event accessible.
- **Mobility:** Community conversations don’t always take place on the desktop or in an office. Viva Engage provides a mobile app for iOS and Android, to share videos, images, and ideas anywhere you are, while on the go. This ensures that community engagement is not limited by location or device.
- **Knowledge beyond the enterprise:** External collaboration is a key ingredient for the success of any organization. “Viva Engage guests” allow you to call in experts, such as consultants or vendors, from outside your organization to participate in your communities. If allowed by your organization, users can invite guests to a community and quickly start a rich conversation by sharing access to community resources like files. Learn about how to [collaborate with guests in a Viva Engage community](#).
- **Insights:** Viva Engage communities include a rich set of metrics to show activity trends for membership, posts, and questions and answers by members and non-members. Community

leaders can easily identify questions without answers and other key metrics to help drive participation and monitor outcomes. At the organizational level, community effectiveness can be aggregated across the entire organization as an indicator of organizational quality and performance – and how well the organization taps into the most valuable resource – people. Enhanced community analytics provide real-time data updates, expanded date range options, CSV export compatibility, and top conversations overview tables.

Viva Engage Integration

Viva Engage integrates with various related applications, seamlessly bringing community conversations and knowledge into the tools you use every day. This integration ensures that community-generated insights are accessible and actionable within the context of your daily work.

- **Teams:**
 - **Viva Engage App in Teams:** Viva Engage can be added as an app in Teams, allowing users to access community conversations directly within their Teams workspace. This integration helps bring community discussions into the flow of daily work, making it easier for users to stay engaged and connected.
 - **Storyline in Teams:** Storyline posts from Viva Engage are directly integrated into Microsoft Teams. While you are in a one-on-one chat with someone, you can access their storyline as a tab at the top of the chat. From there, you will see their existing posts and be able to react and comment on them.
 - **Real-Time Collaboration:** Users can participate in Viva Engage conversations, ask questions, and share insights without leaving Teams, fostering seamless collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- **SharePoint:**
 - **Viva Engage Web Part:** Viva Engage feeds can be embedded into SharePoint pages using the Viva Engage web part. This integration allows users to view and participate in community discussions directly from their SharePoint intranet, enhancing the visibility and accessibility of community content.
- **Outlook:** Viva Engage can send fully interactive emails to Outlook, allowing users to participate in community discussions, reply to posts, and engage with content directly from their inbox. This integration ensures that users can stay connected with their communities even when they are primarily working in their email client.
- **Microsoft Search:** Microsoft Search can surface relevant content from Viva Engage conversations and Q&A in public communities. This integration helps users find valuable community-generated knowledge across the organization, ensuring that important insights are easily discoverable.
- **Power Automate:** Viva Engage can be integrated with Power Automate to create automated workflows. For example, users can set up flows to post updates from other applications to Viva Engage, send notifications when new messages are posted, or automate responses to community questions.
- **Dynamics 365:** Viva Engage can be integrated with Dynamics 365 CRM to add a social layer to customer relationship management. This integration allows users to track CRM activities within Viva Engage and collaborate on customer-related tasks in real-time.

Microsoft 365 Copilot in Viva Engage

Microsoft 365 Copilot in Viva Engage is an AI-powered assistant that helps users communicate more effectively by generating and refining posts, suggesting where to post, and summarizing conversation threads. It leverages large language models (LLMs) and Microsoft Graph to provide personalized responses based on users' work emails, chats, and documents. Copilot gives users access to Large Language Model (LLM) technology with [Microsoft Responsible AI protections](#).

Copilot enhances user productivity in Viva Engage by assisting with written communications, generating conversation prompts, and summarizing threads. It also provides insights, trends, and other helpful information based on processed conversation thread. AI Summarization is a Viva Engage service that processes and stores conversation threads in the background. Certain features, such as Microsoft 365 Copilot in Viva Engage, require access to processed conversation threads to produce insights, trends, and other helpful information to users. When a feature requests summarized data, AI Summarization returns summaries from processed conversation threads to which the user has access. The [data, privacy, and security guidelines](#) that apply to Copilot also apply to AI Summarization. Processed conversation threads are stored in alignment with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements and are accessed the same as other Viva Engage data.

Technology is Only an Enabler

Technology alone cannot make a community successful. But great technology – along with a supportive culture, effective business processes, and people committed to leading and participating in communities – can drive the inclusive, innovative, and connected experiences that drive organizational resilience and change.

However, as with all search or AI service outcomes, only content for communities that are open to the entire organization, or to which you have access will be indexed, thus searchable. Private community conversations are only surfaced to its members.

Measuring success

It is a good idea to give communities a chance to develop and grow before you begin to measure their effectiveness. This is typically a period of **between three and six months**.

Consider two perspectives to measure community success:

- **Value to the members.** This perspective primarily addresses the value of the community to its members.
- **Value to the organization.** This perspective focuses on the value of the community to the organization. Since it is virtually impossible for an “unhealthy” community to provide any organizational value, these perspectives are not entirely distinct.

It is also a good idea to correlate metrics from your Communities’ engagement to other employee insights, like productivity, time savings and general wellbeing metrics. Are people who actively engage in communities happier, healthier and do they stay with the company longer?

Community success measures – value to the members

You can almost always find a sense of passion and energy in successful communities - a sense of *aliveness*. Communities that are “alive” do not *always* provide direct value to the organization (although

this is usually the case), but they are without question providing value to the membership because the vibrancy of activity comes directly from member involvement.

The measures of community health are somewhat different depending on where the community is in its lifecycle, not unlike the measures of health in people, which may be different at different ages. The table below summarizes measures of community health for early stage and mature communities.

Measures of community health can be captured using the rich set of [metrics provided within Viva Engage](#), through one-on-one interviews, surveys, or a combination all of the above, in addition to systematic counts of online activity and, if relevant, the number of community events.

	Measurement	Metric
Early Stage Communities	Growing number of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of members week by week
	Increasing level of participating by members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of posts overall and average number of posts per member
	Committed leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amount of time the community leader dedicates to community management
	Core group of members beginning to form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top “posters” in the community
	Frequent sharing or helping – high percentage of questions are answered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of posts per day Number of questions asked Number of questions answered Number of questions with best answers Number of questions with no best answers Number of questions unanswered Average time to get an answer to a question
	Members describe that what is being shared and exchanged is useful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of likes Member survey

	Measurement	Metric
Mature Communities	Stable or increasing number of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of members week by week
	New people participating and emerging as core members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top “posters” in the community

	Measurement	Metric
	Community leader still important, but role becomes more following up with question askers, identifying which interactions should get “raised” to the attention of the entire community – community management less of a time commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amount of time the community leader dedicates to community management
	Core group of members active – beginning to seek ways of getting new members into the core	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top “posters” in the community
	Rich relationships have developed that members attribute to the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member survey
	Members describe being involved as important when surveyed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member survey
	Q&A activity may level off, but all questions are answered – no question left behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of posts per day • Number of questions asked • Number of questions answered • Number of questions unanswered • Average time to get an answer to a question

Community success measures – value to the organization

Measuring the organizational value of communities requires a clear understanding of the business problem each community is designed to solve. The organizational KPIs for each community will be different – based on the focus area of the community. Moreover, the best KPIs leverage a balanced approach. KPIs should include system and business process measures – both quantitative and qualitative – to create a “balanced scorecard” for an online community.

Organizational value metrics almost always require a combination of direct surveys or questions of community members as well as online metrics that can be captured with the community platform (or a third-party product).

Perspective	Key Questions	Measures
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are people participating • How many? • Who (which departments or roles)? • Are communities truly cross-functional? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of participants in the community by department • Percentage of participants posting in the past 3 months • Number of posts • Number of likes • Number of replies to posts • Number of questions • Number of unanswered questions • Number of questions with best answers

Perspective	Key Questions	Measures
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average time to get an answer to a question • Number of questions with no best answer • Number of replies to community posts by people who are not specifically mentioned (demonstrates engagement that wouldn't be possible if the collaboration took place via email)
	Is usage sustained?	Trends over time for each of the key measures above
	What features are used the most?	Tracking and comparison of features such as activity posts, questions, praise, likes, and replies
Capabilities	Is usage supporting the identified business use cases?	"Serious Anecdotes" — stories from member surveys where members report specific use cases and value measures based on the key business challenges identified as part of the community mission or charter
	Do users perceive that they are getting value?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey questions asking members if they feel that they can collaborate more easily and get answers to questions faster • Survey questions asking whether members can find people with the expertise that they need • Survey questions asking members to rate whether they would like the collaboration tool removed (the "Don't Take it Away" metric)
Business Value	Is there a clear connection with respect to the overall business strategy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact on key organizational or business area performance metrics since the social tool has been deployed. One of the best ways to collect these metrics is by gathering member's stories in a systematic way. For example, send out a survey to ask community members to describe a scenario where the community added value in a measurable way. As the "storyteller" to estimate the value in time saved or revenue generated or in any other way that is meaningful to them. • Look for existing business metrics, which may vary based on the type of community and the type of organization, but could include metrics such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Average time for call centers to resolve customer issues ○ Average time-to-market for new products ○ Average proposal response time ○ Average "time to talent" for new employees (cost/time for onboarding) ○ Annual staff turnover

Perspective	Key Questions	Measures
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Customer satisfaction ○ Ability to handle “exceptions” — situations that don’t fit standard processes and require reaching out to experts or multiple departments for resolution ● Most popular / most used content

Conclusion

Communities of practice play a pivotal role in the effective transfer of tacit knowledge within organizations. By fostering an environment of collaboration, shared expertise, and continuous learning, these communities help break down silos and encourage the free flow of knowledge.

Communities can also play a crucial role in fostering engagement and creating a sense of belonging, especially in geographically dispersed organizations or those that have adopted a hybrid work model. Being part of a larger community and sharing knowledge with like-minded peers can boost motivation, creativity, and innovation. This contributes to employee well-being and can help reduce attrition and health-related costs for the organization.

As we have explored, the success of communities of practice hinges on a supportive culture, clear processes, committed people, and enabling technology. Leveraging tools like Viva Engage, organizations can enhance their knowledge management strategies, ensuring that valuable insights are accessible and actionable. By embracing these elements, organizations can drive innovation, resilience, and sustained growth in an ever-evolving landscape.

About the authors

Susan Hanley

Susan Hanley is an information architect and business analyst specializing in intranets and collaboration solutions. She is a recognized expert in the fields of intranets, knowledge management, collaboration, and information architecture and has helped organizations of all sizes to optimize their use of the Microsoft 365 platform.

Before forming Susan Hanley LLC, Susan led the Portals, Collaboration, and Content Management practice at Dell Professional Services (formerly Plural, Inc.). Sue joined Plural (which was acquired by Dell in 2002) after more than 18 years of consulting experience at American Management Systems, Inc. (AMS). In 1995, she became the first Director of Knowledge Management for AMS, a position she held for five years.

Since 2015, Susan's expertise has earned her the coveted Microsoft Most Valuable Professional (MVP) award for Microsoft 365/SharePoint and Microsoft Viva, which recognizes exceptional contributions to the Microsoft community. She is a frequent speaker at conferences and events, where she shares her insights and best practices on how organizations can build and manage intranets and knowledge management solutions.



Rebecka Isaksson

Rebecka is an experienced and visionary thought leader, with a passion for technology, people, and behaviour. Her specialty lies within people and culture change, and providing guidance for how smart use of knowledge can generate significant business value, when powered responsibly and ethically by AI-technology.

In addition to running KnowFlow Value, she is an active member and peer mentor in SIKM Leaders Community, a global community of KM-practitioners and experts, and a Community Manager & Evangelist at IntraTeam. She is a frequent keynote speaker at global events and conferences, and a sought-after guest on panels discussing relevant topics on how AI-technology accelerates and magnifies the value of KM strategies and solutions.

As the former Director of Knowledge Management, and Product Marketing Manager for Content AI at Microsoft corporate headquarters, she has spent the last 10+ years working with organisations world-wide as an industry expert on Knowledge Management. In July 2024 she was recognized with the Microsoft MVP award, for M365/SharePoint.



