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## Improve Maturity with a Community of Practice

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The issue of project management maturity is an active topic within the PM community. Regardless of the organization's project management framework or methodology, PM maturity levels vary among business units, departments and individuals. Departments can be compliant with a methodology; however, their individual project artifacts may differ entirely from one project to another. The methodology may have specific schedule development standards or status reporting requirements, yet organizations will still find status reports and project schedules that lack consistent milestones and deliverables. These issues stem from project management immaturity and consistent practices within the organization.

A project management maturity model has been published by J. Kent Crawford in his book *The Project Management Maturity Model*, which serves as a useful tool to define an organization's project management maturity. PMI's Project Management Maturity Model (OPM3) standard provides an assessment tool to help organizations determine their project portfolio management maturity. These models help assess an organization's current state and define the future state for PM maturity. In addition to these models and assessments, organizations also need to adopt tactical approaches to improve PM maturity.

One approach to improve project management maturity is through a project management community of practice. According to PMI's Organizational Project Management Maturity Model (OPM3), a project management community of practice is an important component to an organization's growth in project management.

A project management community of practice is an informal group of project management practitioners who share advice, tips, techniques, lessons learned and promote relevant topics in the project and program management domain. The community of practice is not a formal organization found on an organization chart, but rather it is a self-directed team comprised of individuals interested in sharing, promoting and improving the project management domain.

According to Etienne Wenger's article "[Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System](#)", a community of practice is a segment of the organization's structure that emphasizes the learning people accomplish together instead of the within their reporting unit, current project or immediate personal network. Members learn through voluntary participation and interaction with each other instead of a top-down communication cascade. Membership can include employees, contracted staff augmentation resources, suppliers and even business stakeholders.

Wenger's article highlighted the benefits a community of practice provides including:

- Provides a cost-friendly solution for knowledge sharing and information exchange. New project management techniques can be piloted within the community of practice and feedback can be obtained before a large corporate rollout. Best practices, project management tips and lessons learned can be promoted and shared through a community of practice. Members of a community of practice can also pilot new project management training courses and advise on the pros and cons of the courses before approving them for the larger pool of project management resources.
- Provides proactive knowledge retention within the organization. Unlike a database of lessons learned or thick manuals full of project management process, a community of practice can provide effective methods to apply project management practices to a local organization. The community of practice becomes a fluid body of knowledge that can quickly convey knowledge instead of pointing novice project managers to reams of project management theory and process flows. New project managers benefit from a community of practice by quickly learning applicable techniques and processes that work well within an organization and can find project management mentors to guide them.
- Champion project management competencies to encourage growth in project management maturity. Members within a community of practice learn about project management techniques inside and outside their immediate firm. They collaborate with other project managers and discuss new ideas to improve the project management discipline.
- Provides a sense of identity within the organization as the community of practice is organized around the topics that matter the most to their team members. The community of practice builds an identity and reputation

as a useful mechanism to share, communicate and broadcast new project management ideas. In one organization, the enterprise PMO would review upcoming process changes with the community of practice to promote change management and awareness, and to generate buy-in.

An organization's project management culture and maturity improves as project managers come together to share lessons learned, apply tactical approaches to accomplish work and cultivate an organization of continual learning. Encouraging ideas from inside and outside the organization helps to increase awareness of new project management concepts and provides a platform for future learning. The next few articles in this PM Community of Practice series will provide guidance on how to create, promote and support a new community of practice.

Andrew Makar is an IT program manager who is focused on effectively translating project management theory into actual practice. Additional articles and musings on project management technique can be found on his website at <http://www.amakar.com>.

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