

Communities of service

Local Government professionals have access to a new networking site to help them share ideas, as John Hayes, Director of the Improvement and Development Agency explains...

The Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) Communities of Practice website (www.communities.idea.gov.uk) supports professional networking across local government and the public sector.

Once someone has registered they can join communities, create their own, connect with their peers and domain experts, arrange meetings, participate in forums, upload documents and participate in conversations.

Imagine a local government networking club with more than 15,000 members, expanding so rapidly that around 60 new people sign up every day. Imagine that the professional members-only organisation also offers a 24 hour policy and reference library along with instant access to best practice from around the country and personalised emails alerting you to forthcoming events. Now imagine being able to access all this at the click of a mouse without having to leave your desk, and you have IDeA's Communities of Practice (CoPs).

CoPs, which was launched last spring, is an internet-based networking resource that includes some 410 separate online communities ranging from equality and diversity to healthy communities. There are also wikis – web pages that allow users to modify content – and blogs, as well as event calendars and document libraries. Once registered, members can join communities or create their own, contact peers and experts from around the country, participate in forums and conferences, upload information or chat online.

In a recent research exercise carried out by IDeA, 28 CoPs members – chief executives, graduate trainees and policy officers among them – discussed their use of the resource. Many described the website as a professional Facebook for local government while others said the networking site was a 'one stop information shop', acted as an 'extra tool in the box' or was similar to 'a coffee break at a conference'. For all of the members, it was a useful and time saving complement to meetings with peers and experts.

Broadly speaking, it is the multi-faceted nature of CoPs that makes it so attractive, as Jessica Linacre, Project Support Officer at Stevenage Borough Council, explains: "With other websites you might be able to access



information, but you don't get the other pieces of the jigsaw like being able to ask questions or having peer support to hand under one roof."

One advantage that sets IDeA's resource apart from existing methods of research is the fact that users can search for information in a much more focused way compared to using internet search engines. For example, CoPs members say that instead of spending five minutes searching for a policy document on the internet, they can instantly access specific reports via hyperlinks posted by their peers. Another benefit is the ability to share

information by uploading or downloading it within a community, thereby avoiding emails, attachments and sending documents in the post.

However, by far the biggest benefit of CoPs is the way it allows users to save time. One member, James Winterbottom, Performance Improvement Officer at Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council, calculates he has saved up to six months worth of time in informal feedback on policy ideas. Winterbottom says he has posted items relating to performance management in order to test out proposals and get feedback from peers – almost like an informal mini-consultation exercise. “It’s possible to post something and get responses back from other members over a couple of weeks. Previously, you would talk to a few confidantes, then share things at conferences and it might be six months before you have the same level of strength in terms of that idea.”

Local government officers are also saving themselves time by sharing best practice via CoPs instead of wasting time reinventing the wheel. Silvina Katz, Policy Team Leader at Northampton Borough Council, estimates that she saved around two days in researching equality impact assessments on CoPs. She used material from other authorities that she found on the online resource to develop, update and remodel her own council’s assessment guidance. In terms of swapping best practice, the website is invaluable. Paul Dodds, Performance Officer at South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council, adds: “We’re all serving the same cause and trying to serve the public. If a document, policy or strategy on CoPs works in one area, chances are it will work in yours.”

The online network can also be preferable to physically attending conferences or meetings, according to members. For example, Pete Thomson, Business Architect at Wolverhampton City Council, says one of the advantages of CoPs’ online conferences over the real events is that at a conference “you nearly always come away wishing there had been more time for discussions, but on CoPs it was unconstrained by time”. Other members suggest that the medium is more user-friendly for those reluctant to raise questions at meetings or workshops. “People speak out who perhaps would not speak out otherwise,” says Jason Higgs, Systems Integrator at Caradon District Council. “It’s not like being in a meeting and having to argue a point or be interrogated, there is the chance for you to feel more confident in discussions so it’s easier to open up.”

In the long term, the website offers the potential for making local government more cost-efficient. As Kanza Ahmed, National Management Trainee at Warrington Borough Council, says: “It cuts down on meetings, so in an age when local government is all about value for money and efficiency, it fits in well.” Other members suggest that groups of local authorities could even organise and carry out joint training online – thereby cutting costs and time. It could



Informal feedback from other professionals can strengthen the decision-making process

even transform the way in which councils interact with contractors, doing it together online instead of individually to get better deals.

In the context of the online world, CoPs is still a young resource. Ultimately, the power of its user-generated content and its true potential to save local government time and money will only be realised as its membership grows. Creating dynamic online dialogues and uploading and downloading the wealth of ideas and good practice that exists across the sector has the potential to create what could be the richest interactive online database of information and idea sharing in local government. Jane Greer, Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager at Harlow District Council, echoes the sentiments of many CoPs members: “We’re all floating around in our own areas, sometimes feeling very isolated. It’s a way to share and stop that isolation. Instead of one mentor, you have the potential experience of hundreds.”



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