

CoPs leading the way in public service networking

Three years on, local government professionals continue to benefit and contribute to the Communities of Practice (CoPs) networking site. Robert Whiteman, Managing Director of Local Government Improvement and Development shares the experiences of users from a recent research exercise...

The CoPs website is a professional networking platform created by Local Government Improvement and Development that allows its 70,000 registered members to connect, learn and share. Launched in 2007, it has grown to host over 1,500 different communities, from policy and performance and healthy communities to member development and the Big Society.

discussion forums, a document storage facility and more. It offers a free, collaborative and secure space to share experiences and solutions and develop ideas. With the public sector under enormous pressure to deliver services at less cost, CoPs presents you with a vital tool that can save you time and money.

CoPs helps with research for new projects, gives quick access to specific policy information or best practice, and links like-minded peers and national experts on a wide range of topics and discussions.

Many of us are familiar with social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter; CoPs offers a similar service to the public sector, but with a professional purpose. It is a one-stop-shop that combines networking opportunities,



Networking – the platform’s most obvious function - is something that Leah Lockhart, Housing Advice and Information Officer at Edinburgh Council, is a fan of. Lockhart is a facilitator of the Edinburgh Housing Advice and Homelessness Network (EHAHN) community. “Before CoPs, our network of housing and homeless advisors was run through email,” explains Lockhart. “Often messages got bounced back because email addresses were out of date and I found myself becoming the sole port of call sending out information. It wasn’t the best way to communicate.”

Lockhart says online networking through CoPs has made her working life easier and more efficient, and adds: “Sometimes you can get stuck in your own small world, in your own office, with your own client group. You’re too busy and think you know as much as you need to know – but CoPs widens your horizons.”

Sign up to the online Communities of Practice (CoPs) for Public Service at www.communities.idea.gov

Kristin Warry, Geographic Information Manager at Swindon Council, agrees. Warry has exploited CoPs’ potential for offering immediate access to unbiased and trustworthy expert advice, and uses the network to find the right technology for her job. She recently posted a question online about which GPS (global positioning system) would best suit her needs and within a few hours had a clutch of responses, all suggesting the same product. She bought a new GPS the next day.

Warry estimates she saved around two hours in internet research time and telephone calls and adds: “I trusted that advice because it

came from my peers – not the marketing section of a manufacturer’s website.”

Using CoPs for research is something that Richard Menhinick of Hart District Council is familiar with. Menhinick, Senior Performance and Innovation Officer, says benchmarking is easier and quicker with CoPs. Researching value for money in refuse collection, he found some comparable information collated by another council and used it to draw up detailed benchmarking areas for Hart. “Without CoPs,” he admits, “that kind of work might well have taken a week to put together.”

Menhinick has also taken part in a conference hosted in a CoP. These online conferences are hugely popular, particularly in the current financial climate. “The concept of online conferences is a winner. Instead of spending hours on a train to sit through various PowerPoint presentations, you can access the conference when it’s convenient to you.”

Public sector professionals are also using the resource to avoid that well-documented problem – reinventing the wheel. When North Lincolnshire Council’s Rachel Johnson was reviewing the framework that her authority



uses for its business plans, her task was made easier and quicker thanks to CoPs.

She was reviewing the framework for each of the council's departments and began her research on CoPs. Not only did she discover information on the subject posted by other councils, but she invited feedback on her own ideas on how to change the framework. She explains: "Instead of us writing it from scratch ourselves or relying on just our existing contacts to deliver feedback and help shape the framework, we were able to get input from half a dozen new people and geography is no barrier to contact when you get in touch online." Johnson adds: "Before, we were just 10 similar sized authorities talking to each other, and now we can reach the whole of the local government sector."

CoPs is also about making it easier, quicker and more cost-effective to set up a working group, particularly for a new specialist work area. Tim Ellis, Head of the Corporate Programme Management Office at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, facilitates the Project, Programme and Portfolio (PPPM) Collective Voice CoP, and says: "I don't think we would have the PPPM Collective Voice without the CoP. Setting up a professional network from the grassroots by letter, email and phone would have taken a huge amount of time but using CoPs, I think it has brought forward the creation of a professional body by two to three years."

In addition, CoPs can help with career progression or if you want to widen your professional skills and interests. For example, Iqbal Husain, Cultural Services Manager (Policy and Projects) at the London Borough of Sutton, has discovered the benefits of blogging as a result of his CoPs membership. "Writing blogs about my work has allowed me a reflective space," he explains, "not only to go over what I've

learned, but to enter into dialogue with people who read my blogs and comment on them. If I hadn't joined CoPs, I'd never have started blogging."

Husain finds that blogging focuses his mind and allows him to think more clearly about his work. "I find that the clarity I have about my work often comes from thoughts that I crystallise in my blog so I feel that being on CoPs is actually helping my career progression."

Joining the network allows you to widen your professional horizons. Simon Parsons, National Management Trainee in ICT Services, Finance and Resources at the London Borough of Lambeth, agrees that involvement with CoPs can put you at an advantage when it comes to exploring your future career.

Parsons, a member of the National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) CoP, explains: "Through the NGDP CoP I've got links with officers like me around the country and by following what they're doing through a particular piece of work or when they join a different department, I get to see other aspects of local government that I might not have considered or even known existed."

However, the online facility is not just for local government officers or those new to the sector. It's for anyone working for public service improvement, including councillors. Councillors can use it for online dialogues with peers and to stay up to date with policy and news. Among the communities aimed at councillors is the National Member Development community, which currently has over 460 community members and enables councillors and others with member development responsibilities to access a range of development materials, share and discuss good practice and get details

of member development events such as the Local Leadership conference and the Leadership Academy programmes.

Former councillor John Andrews of Chichester District Council says the CoPs website has started to help boost local democracy, make more transparent decisions, and increase officer productivity. Andrews led the Members Governance Review at the council and participated in the Chichester District Council Members Bulletin Board community. Before the use of CoP, only a small proportion of members could contribute to decisions. Due to 10-year old processes and a sketchy short-term three-month forward plan, opportunities to participate early enough to influence decisions and initiate proposals were limited causing frustration and wasted effort. The CoP helped to implement a 12-month forward plan with an issues and options summary mandated for each item, which allowed the council to reduce the numbers of routine formal meetings held, while enabling more effective interactions between members and officers. Andrews says: "I'm sure that to serve as active ward councillors all members will need to use the Chichester Bulletin Board community."



As Kit England, a Planning and Performance Officer at Newcastle City Council, says: "The old adage that 'two heads are better than one' pretty much sums up the usefulness of CoPs. If you have something you are

struggling with as a council or as an individual, then go onto the CoPs platform and you will find like-minded people who are struggling with and thinking of exactly the same sorts of things."

As those already signed up to CoPs testify, the resource has fast become an integral part of their work, enabling them to access knowledge, collaborate on ideas, ask for help, share good practice and take part in online conferences. Not only do CoPs breed a culture of professional support and progressive thinking, but it can help boost efficiency – and ultimately save money.

*** Register on the Communities of Practice (CoPs) for Public Service website at www.communities.idea.gov.uk to gain access to the growing list of communities covering a wide array of subject areas.**

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