

A REAL-LIFE

A community of practice is one offshoot in a learning organization and one way to share intellectual capital.

Here's how a community of practice at Andersen Consulting

Education was created and how it works day to day.

COMMUNITY

Time: March 1997.

Place: Fifth-grade classroom at the Goodwin Elementary School, Aurora, Illinois.

As you walk down the hall, you notice a sign featuring a stagecoach and the words, "Westward Bound." In the classroom, you see 10 tables; each is under a wagon cover suspended from the ceiling. You also see 40 students working in teams on a variety of tasks as they plan a simulated journey across the plains

to Utah, Oregon, or California.

You also observe several adults guiding students to learning resources when they have questions and helping them resolve team disputes. You learn that only two of these adults are teachers at the school. The rest are professionals from Andersen Consulting Education—the 400-person educational organization of the global consulting firm, Andersen Consulting. These professionals spend a few

OF PRACTICE

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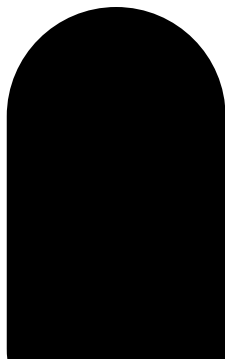
hours a week away from the office in the classroom as part of a professional self-development initiative. What's going on here?

The scenario is an example of a community of practice in action. Westward Bound is just one of many projects spearheaded by Andersen Consulting Education's Community of Practice initiative. It is organized into smaller groups, called Interest Groups, of 15 to 25 people who explore issues and share knowledge about a theme or topic. Westward Bound was created by an Interest

Group focusing on developing a goal-based learning curriculum for students in grades K through 12. The group tries to expand Andersen Consulting Education's knowledge and skills in the design and delivery of goal-based learning environments, which place learners in realistic simulations. Through the Westward Bound project, Interest Group members gained valuable lessons about classroom learning and contributed to the larger learning community of the students, teachers, and administrators at the Goodwin Elementary School.

Other Interest Groups meet regularly to focus on a variety of topics, including motivation, culture and learning, demographics, the virtual classroom, Web technology, usability issues in educational product design, problem-based learning, and software analysis and design. Those topics have a direct impact on the learning products Andersen Consulting Education creates for Andersen Consulting professionals.

Andersen Consulting Education's employees across all areas benefit professionally from the ideas, approaches, and knowledge sharing generated in the Interest Groups. But the major purpose of the Community of Practice program is self-development: Who knows better what kind of skills need to be developed in individuals than the individuals



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themselves? Moreover, approaches or research produced by the Interest Groups have the potential to enhance the quality and effectiveness of Andersen Consulting Education's learning products. In turn, improved learning products can benefit Andersen Consulting's 52,000 employees.

Defining a community of practice

What is a community of practice? The idea is often invoked in academic and professional settings. A community of practice at a company

could be a loosely organized, informal gathering of like-minded professionals who share ideas during coffee breaks, at lunch, or at the company softball game. In this era of electronic communications, a community of practice could also be a virtual group of people who share ideas and post best practices on discussion databases. In fact, Andersen Consulting has many virtual communities of practice. Professional associations—business or academic—also function as communities of practice. At Andersen Consulting Education, the Community of Practice program has been patterned to a large extent along the lines of a professional association, with aspects of the other variations just described mixed in.

Like a professional association, Andersen Consulting Education's community of practice has a formal structure:

- ▶ an advisory committee made up of members of Andersen Consulting Education's leadership that sets direction
- ▶ a management champion who provides leadership and direction
- ▶ an administrative team that handles communications and organizes activities
- ▶ a written charter with a basic set of rules and guidelines for participation and time commitment
- ▶ a team of Interest Group leaders who work together to build and

maintain leadership skills and discuss ways to continually energize the Interest Groups.

Also like a professional association, this community of practice holds conferences. Andersen Consulting Education's first annual one-day conference in June 1997 featured a guest keynote speaker and a series of presentations and demonstrations by Interest Groups. But unlike a professional association, there are no annual dues.

One aspect of the Community of Practice program calls on another definition of *community*. The book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Cambridge University Press, 1991), describes "legitimate peripheral participation" as the core process for learning in a community of practice. In the anthropological and sociological sense, a community of practice provides the context in which elders pass on important knowledge. In other words, learners enter a community of practice and, over time, move closer to full participation at their own pace as they gain knowledge and learn the community's customs and rituals. That's one key goal of Andersen Consulting Education's community of practice.

Why now?

In the past, there were attempts at Andersen Consulting Education to generate and sustain dialogue and reflection among employees on topics germane to their different professions. For example, employees were encouraged to meet informally to raise questions and share knowledge about educational methods in general or about specific design and development approaches. Inevitably, those informal groups met once or twice and then died. People lost interest because there didn't appear to be any organization-wide sense of direction or purpose to the groups. In addition, there were no clear leaders within the groups to encourage participants to form a common goal.

Nevertheless, Andersen Consulting Education's leadership believed that, if organized differently, groups of people could collectively address issues of importance to the organiza-

tion as a whole. By doing that, they could learn something new and valuable that would contribute directly to their own professional development and indirectly to the success of the organization. In other words, Andersen Consulting Education wanted to build a community of practice that would benefit both the organization and employees. It determined that it had to put financial resources where its vision was.

In spring 1996, Andersen Consulting Education launched its Community of Practice program, announcing that all employees were eligible to participate in Interest Groups. Andersen Consulting budgeted administrative and training funds (and time) to support the community. That meant, on average, each employee could spend about two hours of chargeable time per week involved in community of practice activities. Participation would be purely voluntary. Leadership would not put pressure on employees to join Interest Groups. It also wanted the community's culture to develop and mature at its own pace.

The community of practice charter featured a statement of mission and goals.

The mission: "Andersen Consulting Education Community of Practice is a professional self-development association. The community's success depends primarily on participants working together effectively for a common purpose: learning. Moreover, the community of practice helps develop employees by assisting and encouraging them in their efforts to find resources and knowledgeable individuals who will help them develop in their professions and help them build job-related knowledge and practices that may deliver value to Andersen Consulting Education."

The goals:

- ▶ Have groups of Andersen Consulting Education employees come together to network, collaborate, experiment, and share learning-related ideas and skills and current experiences in a safe environment—an environment where people can think "out of the box" and try new approaches on Interest Group projects before those approaches are attempted on actual learning products that

will be used by Andersen Consulting's employees.

- ▶ Continuously communicate the best ideas and practices to Andersen Consulting Education.

- ▶ Offer activities that encourage reflection on Andersen Consulting Education's practices.

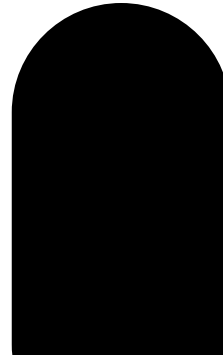
How it works

The Community of Practice program makes it simple and easy for employees to become members of existing Interest Groups or form new groups.

All of Andersen Consulting Education's several hundred full-time employees—from executive assistants to partners—may participate. The community of practice is made up of Interest Groups. If a person has an idea for a group, he or she gathers colleagues to flesh out the idea and determine whether enough people (eight to 10) are interested. Then, the prospective group leader submits the Interest Group's one-paragraph mission statement to the community of practice advisory committee, which reviews the proposal to ensure that it is relevant to Andersen Consulting Education's work and to verify an appropriate level of interest. If the proposal is accepted, then the formation of the new Interest Group is announced to the entire organization. People can join by contacting the Interest Group's leader directly.

The activities of each Interest Group differ, but all groups are self-governing. The members collectively determine roles, expectations, goals, schedules, and so forth. Some groups meet for two hours every week; others (especially some of the larger ones with 20 or more members) divide into subgroups with different schedules, depending on members' goals and project deadlines.

Each Interest Group forms its own culture. The advisory committee strongly recommends, however, that



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each group produce a tangible outcome of its own choosing (for the short- or long-term)

in order to focus its activities and discussions. For example, one group conducted a survey and analysis on what motivates Andersen Consulting employees to take computer-

based courses. Another group wrote a white paper on classroom learning issues. Another developed guidelines for graphical-interface usability. Another produced a proof-of-concept prototype for a virtual course.

Some groups work internally, involving only Andersen Consulting Education em-

ployees; others involve a wider community, as is the case with the Westward Bound project. In the past year, there were Interest Group projects involving local chapters of Junior Achievement and the Red Cross. In short, merely talking about an issue in an Interest Group isn't sufficient; members have to produce something or address issues of importance to Andersen Consulting Education.

Guidelines from the advisory committee encourage Interest Groups to remain in existence for at least three months to ensure a stable membership and have enough time to produce something. There's no maximum time limit that groups can stay intact. In fact, all of the six original Interest Groups are now into their second year. Several new groups have formed.

Interest Group members can phase out of a group or move to another group at any time. People can also belong to more than one group, as long as they remain within the administrative guidelines regarding time spent on Interest Group activities.

Administrative support

A team of two people coordinates and facilitates the regular communication and administration of Interest

Groups, in addition to other project duties. So far, administering the community of practice hasn't required hiring additional full-time staff.

The administrative team provides consultation on various community of practice matters, Interest Group ideas, budgets, and so forth. All discussions are geared towards positioning a group for success.

Specifically, the team

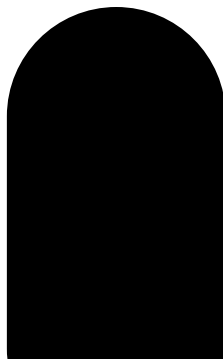
- ▶ publishes a guide on the processes for forming and administering Interest Groups
- ▶ conducts regular meetings with Interest Group leaders to share best practices in leadership and group decision making
- ▶ facilitates focus groups for feedback on the Community of Practice program as a whole
- ▶ sets the agenda for the advisory committee and implementing the committee's decisions
- ▶ publishes an organization-wide electronic newsletter that highlights Interest Group news, activities, and accomplishments
- ▶ produces and maintains an electronic database for Interest Group communication and documents for use by everyone at Andersen Consulting Education
- ▶ plans and coordinates special events for the Community of Practice program.

Benefits to date

Andersen Consulting Education's Community of Practice program now has more than 195 employees; that's about 50 percent of the current number of eligible employees. A Community of Practice Conference was held on June 4, 1997, during which all employees (Interest Group members or not) could sample from a "marketplace of ideas" generated in the community. The goals of Market Day, as the conference was called, were to

- ▶ showcase the work of Interest Groups
- ▶ provide a forum for people to exchange ideas
- ▶ spotlight Interest Group leaders
- ▶ give people the opportunity to join or switch Interest Groups.

Market Day showcased the collaborative work of the Interest Group members, who approached Market



■ *Interest Groups encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas* ■

Day as if it were a professional conference, preparing presentations and demonstrations. They also had fun. Each group had its own presentation room, decorated in different themes. One room had a Spanish theme, one had a nautical theme, and another had a safari theme.

Market Day also created a venue for employees to interact with colleagues from different areas. In any large organization, there can be a tendency for people to develop a silo mentality: Computer programmers stick with computer programmers, finance people stick with finance people, and so forth. Interest Groups, however, encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas. A community of practice enhances an organizational culture of collaboration and teamwork.

Moving forward

As part of an overall continuous improvement effort, the advisory committee and program office wanted to build on the successes during the initiative's first year. So, two focus groups formed, organized and run by an outside facilitator. The focus groups determined that Interest Group activity delivered such benefits as enhanced opportunities to learn and collaborate with different colleagues. It also rejuvenated

people's enthusiasm about work.

But there are challenges. They include developing better leadership skills among Interest Group leaders so that they can keep the groups vital and energized and creating more opportunities for Interest Groups to share accomplishments with the appropriate project leaders and managers at Andersen Consulting Education.

The focus groups also found that Interest Group members understood and liked the professional self-development focus but wanted to try out their ideas on actual projects to see whether there was any real value to their Interest Group work.

The Community of Practice program will continue. Both the leaders and other employees say they want it to continue. Andersen Consulting Education would like to get more people involved (both inside and outside of the organization) and tighten the links, where appropriate, between Interest Group activities and the organization's educational strategic direction.

As for the Goodwin Elementary School, the relationship between it and Andersen Consulting Education continues. Another group of fifth-grade students will participate in an expanded and upgraded Westward Bound learning experience. Another group of people at Andersen Consulting Education—some new and some veterans of last year's project—want to develop instructional design, coaching, research, and other skills by working at the school. It wasn't difficult getting employees involved when their clients (the students) wrote notes like this: "Thank you for helping us learn. I really had fun when you were here." ■

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