

What's the Difference?

Community of Interest (Col) vs Community of Practice (CoP)

“Great discoveries and improvements invariably involve the cooperation of many minds!” – Alexander Graham Bell

	Col	CoP
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A community of people gathered together who share a topic of common interest. In a Col, members work to exchange information, obtain answers to problems, and/or improve their understanding of a subject. Cols bring together stakeholders from different <i>communities of practice</i> (Wenger, 1998). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A group of people gathered together who share a craft or a profession and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly – practitioners who work as a community in a certain field undertaking similar work (Wenger, 1998) to connect to solve problems, share ideas, set standards, build tools, and develop relationships with peers and stakeholders. A CoP is typically broader in scope than a Col and tends to focus on a common purpose, follow-on actions, and information exchanges.
Nature of Problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common task over multiple fields. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different tasks in the same field and a uniform representation.
Knowledge Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Synthesis and mutual learning through integration of multiple knowledge areas. “Learning when the answer is not known” (e.g., the answer to a unique design problem) (Fischer, 2003). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refinement of one knowledge areas; new ideas coming from within the practice. “Learning when the answer is known” (by the expert) (Fischer, 2003).
Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members are stakeholders from different fields, and are also the owners of the problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members select the topic themselves, create their own structure, and develop their own culture (Wenger et al,

Evidence Exchange Network (EENet; formerly OMHAKEN) actively promotes the use of research evidence in decision-making by providing an infrastructure to connect research and researchers to mental health and addictions research stakeholders across Ontario, develops targeted KT products and tools, and supports interactive exchanges. The EENet Management and Resource Centre is located in the Provincial System Support Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members share an identity, an experience, or a concern and work together to highlight that identity, share the experience, or address the concern (Fischer, 2007). • Members take part in community to exchange information, to obtain answers to problems, to improve their understanding of a subject, or to share common passions (Henri, 2003). • Members are considered <i>informed participants</i> who are neither experts nor novices, but rather both: they are experts when they communicate their knowledge to others, and they are novices when they learn from others who are experts in areas outside their own knowledge (Fischer, 2003). • Generally cannot be easily defined by a particular geographical area. 	<p>2000).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CoPs exist rarely in any one organization's setting (Zarb, 2006) • Members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information and experiences. They build relationships that enable them to learn from one another, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally. • Includes beginners and experts. • The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular field or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their fields.
<p>Challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different languages and different conceptual knowledge areas (Fischer, 2003). • Lack of shared understanding. Building a shared understanding of the task at hand, which often does not exist at the beginning, but is evolved incrementally and collaboratively (Fischer, 2003). • Members might have different ideas about the problem/issue and might not be able to arrive at a unanimous definition, until members come to a common language and interact with one another. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group-think. • Subject area limitations. • Lowering barriers among members to get involved in knowledge-sharing activities (Tarmizi, 2006) • Recruiting the right members: e.g., knowledgeable members who have enough time for social interaction (Tarmizi, 2006) • Sustaining members' participation, since "participation is central to the evolution of the community and to the creation of relationships that help develop the sense of



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaching a common understanding between stakeholders/members in a CoI, due to the communication divide that exists between their respective cultures/perspectives/languages. 	trust and identity that defines the community” (Tarmizi, 2006).
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social creativity. Diversity. Making all voices heard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared knowledge as a set of concepts within a field, and the relationships among those concepts.
Lifespan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variable lifespan; some degree of permanence as long as members stay interested. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Permanence continues often as long as an issue requires learning and improvement (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seniors Health Knowledge Network, Arts and Humanities Community of Interest - goal is to infuse arts and humanities into the education of all health care providers. Includes a community of researchers, academics, clinicians, artists, students, and community members engaged in dialogue, research, and networking. A team interested in software development that includes software designers, users, marketing specialists, psychologists, and programmers, etc. (Fischer, 2003). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge Transfer and Exchange (KTE) CoP – brings together knowledge brokers from different sectors to share their experiences and solve problems they encountered in their own work. Copier Repair Personnel who work primarily in the field but meet regularly to share “war stories” about how to solve the problems they face in their work (Orr, 1996).

Additional References:

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