Introduction to Community Development

This guide is about how to successfully bring together communities of practice over multi-year periods.
It focuses primarily on the tools side, rather than on culture or facilitation.

Feel free to share this on social media etc! You can use this link:

📄 https://bit.ly/introduction-to-community-development (this doc)

If you'd like to chat about community development with me & others, feel free to join this WhatsApp group:

🟢 https://bit.ly/intro-to-community-development-whatsapp

Who wrote this?
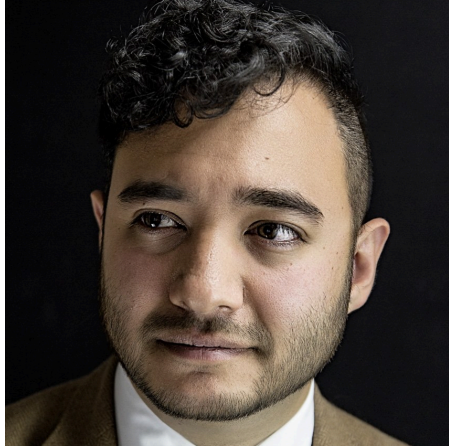
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Why make community infrastructure?

First, what are communities of practice *for*? What happens in them? Why might you want to develop one?

Most people do community development without ever thinking about this question!

Community development takes an undifferentiated set of individuals, and creates a shared context that magnifies the differences between them.

This creates the conditions for two useful things:

1) Discovery of Best Practice

Participants can more easily compare with each other.

This mostly looks like

- learning from each others' mistakes ("horror stories")
- being impressed by achievements ("role models")

This creates camaraderie, but can also lead to alienation as the culture commodifies.

2) Development of Specialisations

Participants can form associated sub-communities, which facilitate specialisation.

Specialisation allows for **valuable transactions**, increasing the overall sophistication of the output.

This creates efficiency, but can lead to polarisation as the sub-cultures streamline.

Many people think of collective action as a primary benefit of setting up a community, but in reality this is just one kind of specialisation!

The Current Meta

This is a template for effective community infrastructure, for communities in the 50-500 size range, as of Summer 2024, focused on the UK.

The details change as the tech landscape changes; you should review in 3 years or so.

There are lots of trade-offs, typically:
- formal vs informal
- security vs barrier to entry

Some details may change depending on specifics of your population, but less than you'd think! For most participants, community activity is extra-curricular, so there must be a huge emphasis on efficiency and low barrier to entry. This is true even in professional environments.

Overview

- Branding
- Organisers
- Onboarding doc
- Register of "Members"
- Whatsapp Community
- Monthly Email Newsletter
- Quarterly Events

Branding

Open Brands vs Closed Brands

An **open brand** is one where it's obvious to people whether they should join or not.

Typically the name is of the form: Scope / Focus / Role.

e.g. London Service Designers

These are good for **growth** - you'll attract beginners, vendors, laypeople, cranks, haters, etc.

A **closed brand** is one where the meaning is obscure.

Typically the name is a meme or in-joke from the community.

e.g. The Acorn Club

These are good for **moderation** - you'll have better retention of time poor participants - but recruitment will be much slower as it's via word of mouth.

In practice, you'll typically have layers of closed spaces nested inside open spaces.

Organisers

1-3 organisers is ideal.

They should be members of the community themselves, the more credible the better.
If you're an individual and don't have obvious co-founders don't go searching - just get started.

Activities
- promotion & [community mapping](#)
- producing core events
- writing the newsletter
- onboarding, moderation, dealing with conflicts

Channels
- secret WhatsApp group
- meetings every 1-4 weeks to work on the activities, ideally in person

Onboarding Doc

A google doc set to comment only
Make a bit.ly link for it
This is your "homepage"
It doesn't need to have very much content on it!

If you make a flashy website you'll regret it
The onboarding doc **must be extremely easy for all the organisers to update**
The lo-fi nature of it is actually good, it will make it seem more exclusive

Contents
- Title ("Crumpet Lovers Community")

- Brief orienting mission statement ("this group is for people that like / hate x")

- List of organisers ("if problem please contact…")

- Link to google form for Register of "Members" (next section)

- Overview of major events (pictures are nice)

- Link to event calendar

- Link to join mailing list

- Link to join WhatsApp community (if you want it open)

- When you need them:
    - Code of conduct

○ Privacy policy

Register of "Members"

To begin with you will probably skip this, but it's a good idea.
In the future this will be useful for democratic processes, fundraising, handover, etc.

A google sheet will do fine, use a google form for people to sign up.

Fields
- Name
- Join date
- Contact details
    - Email
    - Phone number
    - Socials
    - Homepage
- Org
- Role

You should also add a field for notes (e.g. organises the picnic, admin of the whatsapp group) which the organisers fill in. Don't write anything there you don't want to be public.

WhatsApp Community

For all of its shortcomings, WhatsApp is simply unbeatable for engagement in the UK.

WhatsApp communities are a welcome addition to the toolkit:
https://faq.whatsapp.com/495856382464992

Channels to start with:
- #general
- #random
- #events
- #jobs

Try and resist making new channels. Good candidates for new channels are:
- patterns of regular transactions, e.g. if you have lots of people regularly looking for houseshares
- very polarising issues

You can try and facilitate activity in these channels if you want, but if you have designed things correctly engagement should be pretty spontaneous; people will have things they want to share, and will recognise this channel as one where they can do that.

The best thing to do is model the behaviour that you want yourself. Also, don't be shy about kicking out people that are engaging in ways you don't want.

Monthly Email Newsletter

Use a google doc to draft together with the team - you can just have one giant one with every issue in it.
Use Substack to publish.

Make sure everyone on the register is subscribed

It can and should be short! Content should be driven by community activity.
If you're worried about "what to say" then you're over-editorialising.

- upcoming events
- jobs (from whatsapp #jobs)
- links shared in whatsapp

Assume the newsletter will be forwarded to people that don't know the community, so include a standard header block that introduces the community and links to the onboarding doc.

Eventually, you can monetise with job postings.

Quarterly Events

Don't commit to organising too many events. They can be a big drain on organiser capacity, and peoples' capacity for in-person events is low since Covid. If there's demand for more events, the community can organise more themselves. There will also very likely be existing events for the community that you can leverage.

Suggested schedule:
- xmas party
- spring retreat
- summer picnic / bbq
- autumn conference / prize / competition

Make a google calendar for these that people can subscribe to.

The events should be self-funding; you might be surprised at peoples' willingness to pay for events.
For registration / event page, use [lu.ma](lu.ma). It can do "pay what you want" tickets.

People judge the success of an event by the ratio of attendees to space, so run these in the smallest possible place that you dare to, such that you feel absolutely confident about selling out.
Expect a 50% drop-out rate for registrations vs attendees.

Handbook

If you have a productive community and design appropriately, your onboarding doc can evolve into a sophisticated repository of community outputs.

Here's an example: https://electiontechhandbook2024.uk

Get in touch if you'd be interested in making something like this - it's an active area of research for me.

Growth

In your register of members spreadsheet, you should create a second tab for "community channels".

Community channels are places where people are doing relevant community activity, e.g. newsletters, WhatsApp groups, discords, LinkedIn groups, publications, event series, Facebook Groups, mailing lists, slack teams, podcasts, conferences, etc.

Before even creating the community, the organisers should populate this with as many examples as they can think of. Then, you should keep up a practice of noticing and adding these to the sheet. Over time, you should be able to find hundreds of these. This activity is generally called "community mapping".

A solid approach to community growth is systematically using these channels to promote your quarterly events.

Note that size of membership probably isn't a great metric for evaluation; much better metrics are:
- liquidity of the jobs board
- events being organised by community members

Engagement & Lifecycle

I tend to think that if you use appropriate channels, choose a meaningful topic, and follow the process described in the [Growth](#) section, engagement will follow. However it's good to remember that size isn't everything, nor is engagement frequency. Community activity follows "real world" activity; some topics just move slowly, or are of niche interest, and that's fine.

The other thing to remember is that community turnover is normal. People join communities, get what they need, and then leave. Even great community members usually only hang around a few years. Ideally you want a steady stream of new joiners.

Questions?

Write here!