Best practices for communities at GIZ

Success factors: what we have learned so far

Abstract

In times of uncertainty, the ability to learn rapidly, connect widely and share knowledge efficiently becomes even more important. Over the last 25 years, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH has gained extensive experience and a deeper understanding of sector networks and communities of practice. These communities are currently going through a time of great challenge and digital transformation, which underpins their ability to manage knowledge flows better and deliver higher added value to business goals. A community at GIZ is a group of experts and development practitioners who share knowledge of development themes and challenges and work together on effective, innovative and sustainable solutions based on their sectoral and methodological experience and expertise. In this case study, we analyse the success factors we have so far identified from best practices for communities within or supported by GIZ. In so doing, we want to differentiate between internal communities within GIZ and communities within cooperation systems with partners.

Success factors from best practices for communities at GIZ

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH is a global service provider in the field of international cooperation for sustainable development with more than 17,000 employees. GIZ has over 50 years of experience in a wide variety of areas, including economic development and employment, energy and the environment, and peace and security. As a public-benefit federal enterprise, GIZ supports the German Government – in particular the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) – and public and private sector clients in around 130 countries in achieving their objectives in international cooperation.

In times of uncertainty, the ability to learn rapidly, connect widely and share knowledge efficiently becomes even more important. Over the last 25 years, GIZ has gained long-standing experience and a deeper understanding of sector networks and communities of practice. These communities are currently going through a time of great challenge and digital transformation, which underpins their ability to manage knowledge flows better and deliver a higher added value to business goals.

A community at GIZ is a group of experts and development practitioners who share knowledge of development themes and challenges and work together on effective, innovative and sustainable solutions based on their sectoral and methodological experience and expertise. In order to work together, it is not absolutely necessary to be in the same place at the same time.

In this case study, we analyse the success factors we have so far identified from best practices for communities within or supported by GIZ. In so doing, we want to differentiate between internal communities within GIZ and communities within cooperation systems with partners, as well as variants in between. This case study includes exchange and systematization of experiences from eight best-in-class communities of practice and at that beginning 19, now 21 sector networks which together comprise a major part of GIZ's professionals in the partner countries and in Head Offices.

'Organisations and inter-organisational cooperation systems follow very different logics.'[1] Capacity WORKS was therefore developed in response to the following question: 'How can we help make a success of cooperation between different organisations that are jointly seeking solutions to societal needs, problems or challenges?' To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at the differences between working in the context of inter-organisational cooperation systems and working within single organisations.[2]

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1 GIZ GmbH, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2015: Cooperation Management for Practitioners: Managing Social Change with Capacity WORKS. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler. p. 9.
2 Ibid.

1. The use and added value of the community should be clear to all members

Members/experts will participate only if they recognise that the community's collaboration represents a clear added value for their work and the projects on which they are working. Usually, it is a community manager's task to clarify and communicate the community's focus and the value it adds for all members. The range of consulting services should be well defined.[3] This sounds quite basic, but it is often overlooked.

Once the positive incentives are evident, community members will be able to find further reasons for collaboration within the community and to manage the costs and risks involved. These include a reasonable time frame in accordance with the project on which an individual is working or managing, opportunities for closer cooperation with partners, opportunities for a deeper understanding of the specific field, enabling them to do a better job, etc.

2. Overlapping purpose and integration of processes/interdependence of tasks

The community's results are relevant for all stakeholders: staff, partners, programmes and organisation. There is mutual enrichment and gain from the shared results and products of the community's collaboration. The question that many ask, though, is 'What is in it for me?' The answer to this question has at least four different levels:

1) For me as a GIZ employee, examples for benefits are being up-to-date (current information from commissioning parties, partners, Head Offices, etc.); transfer of lessons learned and tried and tested tools and methodologies (what worked, what did not work and why, etc.); information and comments/feedback on current papers in the sector, etc.); knowledge exchange (who is working on a similar topic?); further development of personal skills and further training opportunities; availability of information related to project management (model terms of reference, etc.); and career opportunities, etc.
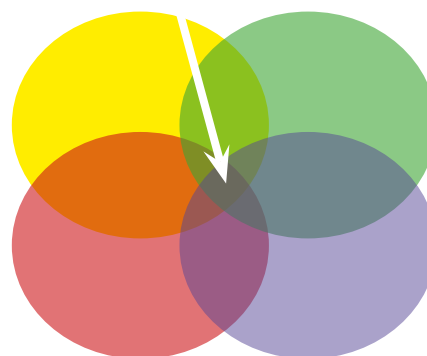
2) For my programme/project, examples for benefits are availability of state-of-the-art information and solutions for partners; peer review as an internal quality assurance tool; possibility of joint programming and implementation for advisory approaches (training concepts, etc.); cooperation on practical issues (who knows a consultant

with experience in a specific area? etc.); quicker updating of knowledge in times of uncertainty; lower travel costs and a reduced carbon footprint due to online working formats, etc.

3) For my partners, examples for benefits are that jointly developed results can be made available to partners offline and online; transfer of best practices and solutions (what has worked in other cases, etc.); higher quality of implementation through peer to peer counselling; faster updating of knowledge under rapidly changing conditions, etc.

4) For my organisation, examples for benefits are that the community allows a deeper understanding of a project which facilitates the gathering of knowledge of products and its feedback into new projects. A community also facilitates onboarding of new staff, inclusion of all employee groups, etc.

Overlapping purpose / interdependence of tasks

This list can be extended depending on the area on which the community is working in order to include the general public or to improve channelling into well-defined target groups, for example in the case of communities working to engage groups committed to or interested in specific topics including adaptation to climate change, market access for producers of specific products, etc.

In case of corporate communities, this can translate also into overlapping functions of key stakeholders as connectors:

» Individual connectors, for example where a planning officer is the community manager, working group spokesperson in a sector network and product manager at the same time

» Connectors in the community core team, for example where three or four Head Offices staff share roles and offer service packs for colleagues working abroad or planning officers share their role with supporting junior planning officers.

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3 Wegner / Wenger-Trayner 2015: Communities of practice. A brief introduction. http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice

3. Community management

Simply providing an online platform for sharing and cooperating with colleagues is not enough.[4] A community manager is needed to organise the virtual knowledge exchange and moderate group discussions. Community management is a method that supports management and facilitation of groups/communities whose members come from different teams, business units or partner organisations and are located at one or more locations. And most well-functioning communities have at least two community managers, a (senior) subject matter expert and a junior, tech-savvy expert.

Community management is like developing a city. New issues are constantly arising, and there is always something that needs to be fixed, adjusted or cleaned up: streets, lighting, parks, buildings, pipework, etc. Communities can exist in the offline world, in the online world or in both. Because GIZ works in many different countries, best practices for communities are usually a transfer of an existing community from the offline into the online world or build a link between the offline and the online world. The building where you have been holding the community's face-to-face meetings and the software that you are using for the community platform are like the city. But the most important component is still the people living in the city – that is, the members of the community – and what they want to do or have planned to do. No city – and no community – will ever be 'finished'.

That brings us to virtual collaboration. Virtual collaboration has three dimensions: people, processes and tools. It can be compared to a table with three legs: if one is missing, the top of the table will be unstable. In such situations, it is therefore useful to adjust or redefine the work processes within the community so that members agree on which communication channel should be used for what: one-to-one, one-to-many, less-to-many, etc.

4. Commitment from both sides, from the top down and from the bottom up

The 'energy' of a community comes from its members but requires commitment from both sides, the members and management. We call this management attention or support from management.[5]

Management attention is essential for in-house communities because it involves the organisation's resources, which increase according to the strategic importance to business goals; direct outcomes include financing, members' working time and direct sponsoring where necessary. A community that cannot demonstrate results to its organisation will lose resources in the long term.

Management attention is also essential for communities within cooperation systems with partners. After clarification of the community's added value, leaders and management of participating organisations keep abreast of the community's work and results, identify critical situations, and support and steer in such situations.

5. Resource allocation

This refers to funding or staff time, e.g. through direct mandate, commission, work order, innovation funds, challenge funds, etc. and is the result of the smooth interaction between clear added value and management attention, producing a clear mandate, which in turn determines the resource allocation.

6. Goal and results-oriented

The best practices for communities formulate work plans jointly and produce results jointly. This requires a monitoring system that is easy to update and includes explicit responsibilities and accountability.

7. Link between the offline and the online world

Experts work better with experts they already know. Best practices for communities organise one face-to-face meeting once a year linked to sector days, international or regional conferences, etc. These build a link between the offline and the online world.

Best practices for communities build trust first and then transfer an existing community into the online world, including hierarchy, intercultural practices, customs and traditions.

As far as intercultural communication is concerned, best practices for communities are to keep posts short, genuine and natural. Online communication is a conversation.

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4 McAfee 2013: Shattering the Myths About Enterprise 2.0. In: Harvard Business Review 2013: HBR's 10 Must Reads on Collaboration. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013.

5 Probst / Borzillo 2008: Why communities of practice succeed and why they fail. In: European Management Journal (2008) 26, 335– 347.

https://www.journals.elsevier.com/european-management-journal. McDermott / Archibald 2013: Harnessing Your Staff's Informal Networks. In: Harvard Business Review 2013: HBR's 10 Must Reads on Collaboration. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013.

Would you say something that way if the person were in front of you right now? We all speak differently to a President and to our friends. Communities need to match the language the members speak with each other. It is not appropriate to use very informal language simply because communications are online or to write newspaper article-length texts.

8. Organisational anchoring

The work in the community is linked to annual targets, annual staff talks, debriefings and consultancy agreements. Experts not only send their final reports by e-mail but also post them in the respective online working space. This sends a clear message, above all to new staff: 'This is how we work.'

The community ecosystem also plays an important role in the setting up of a new community or the analysis and development of an existing community. A community is part of an ecosystem comprising a wider cooperation system with (other) partners, greater sector discussion, a network within a company, etc. Seeing the bigger picture enables community members to find interesting people who could contribute to the conversation taking place in the community and whom they could invite to give their inputs in an online community meeting or as part of longer-term cooperation.[6]

Communities such as those handling cross-sectoral topics can exist in more than one ecosystem, such as earning opportunities for women and women's rights, green cities, the green economy, governance structures in the water sector, etc.

9. Knowledge transfer within the organisation

Communities' work is linked to other groups' goals with a major emphasis on involving colleagues working on the field. This may include: involvement of other business units; inclusion of human capacity development (HCD) in the development of training for partners; transfer of new content developed within the organisation to GIZ's

Academy for International Cooperation (AIZ) to be offered as courses for experts, interested groups and the general public, etc. Ultimately, the updated information from the community is important not only for partners, but also for other experts, donor organisations and the wider public.

In terms of community management, all relevant experience is bundled, analysed and fed back into online training community management by GIZ's Academy for International Cooperation (AIZ)

10. Offer an efficient operational mode and good value for time spent

Efficient working methods and operation will show community members that their limited resources are invested well and avoid feelings that time has been wasted. This includes fully developed, user-friendly technology.

The community topics or the processes under way within the community represent just part of all the topics and processes in which its members are involved.[7] They take this into consideration and customise their knowledge flows to try to avoid information overload. This results in fewer online meetings and/or newsletters, which are then even more productive and/or have a higher quality.

If you are starting to support a community right now, then congratulations! You are offering the members of that community the joy of getting connected. You have some ideas to offer that could be worth their scarce time and pay off. Now it is up to them to accept your invitation.

6 Manville 2014: You Need a Community, Not a Network. In: Harvard Business Review. September 2014. https://hbr.org/2014/09/you-need-a-community-not-a-network. Göhring / Perschke 2015: Der Corporate Community Manager als Schlüsselrolle im Enterprise 2.0. In: Geißler / Kruse (eds.) 2015: Das vernetzte Unternehmen: Wie der Digital Workplace unsere Zusammenarbeit neu gestaltet. Communardo Software GmbH, 2015

7 Wegner / Wenger-Trayner 2015: Communities of practice. A brief introduction. http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice

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