The Henry
Halloran Trust

Research Report

Communities of Practice:
Getting to the Heart of Workplace Learning, Sharing and Innovation.

Donald Proctor
A Practitioner-in-Residence Project

With a case study for establishing a community
of practice amongst social housing asset
managers across Australia and New Zealand

Initiative of Henry Halloran Trust

This project was made possible through support of the Henry Halloran Trust, University of Sydney. The Trust was established with a donation from the Halloran Family with the aim of advancing research into livable cities and sustainable development, bringing together scholars, practitioners and students to work on global issues of urban planning and development.

Intended readership and use by practitioners

Initially, this research project was intended as a resource to support social housing asset managers in strengthening their existing networks. It then developed the broader aim of providing insights into communities of practice to a wider range of practitioners working in associated fields of housing, planning or community development. Further, the project explores links between research and practice, scholar and practitioner. It demonstrates how solutions to workplace problems can be found through a scholarly approach.
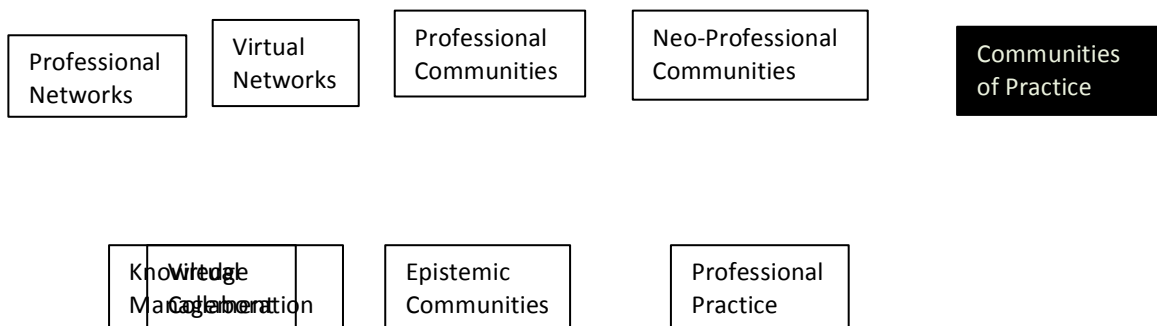
CONTENTS

1. Introduction

For some years I have been involved with a group of Australian and New Zealand social housing asset managers from the State, Territory and New Zealand housing authorities, who share information and research on public housing maintenance. Being a federation of States and Territories, under a common Australian social housing system with New Zealand a close cousin, comparisons are important for benchmarking and identifying best practice. Research carried out in one jurisdiction is usually very pertinent and applicable to others, for example where it might apply to management of health and safety risks such as management of asbestos or lead in paint.

It seemed to me that this group, while usefully sharing information by occasional emails and meeting for two days each year when possible, had much more to offer. I wanted to see how the literature could help to guide the idea of establishing a stronger forum of social housing asset managers across Australia and New Zealand.

On commencing a literature search along the lines of professional networking, knowledge management and epistemic communities, I was quickly drawn to the abundant writings on **"communities of practice"**. These writings focused on a broader range of groups than just mono-professional associations or practice networks within a single corporation. They also focused on the importance of interpersonal or social aspects of communities, which in my experience was a critical factor. My challenge then became to search the literature on communities of practice for insights into the dynamics of multi-disciplinary networks, that would inform the establishment of a stronger social housing asset managers' network.

Also, this is a much broader problem across professional and research communities that are of interest to the Henry Halloran Trust. While demonstrating findings as they relate to social housing asset managers, the intention of the document is to provide a foundation for any group to improve its community of practice.

Professional Networks	Virtual Networks	Professional Communities	Neo-Professional Communities	Communities of Practice

Knowledge Management / Virtual Collaboration	Epistemic Communities	Professional Practice

Author's background
The author studied Architecture at the University of Sydney in the 1980s, and went on to complete a Masters in Urban & Regional Planning in 1992. Early in his studies the author developed a particular interest in the field of social housing, community housing and co-operative housing communities. As an architect, planner and asset manager working in Housing NSW, the author participated in numerous teams, networks and forums, both within and outside the public housing authority.

2. Background to project

This section explains the specific practitioner problem that provided a catalyst for the project. It is the story of an informal network of social housing asset managers from around Australia and New Zealand, who met to discuss maintenance management in their respective organizations.

2.1 Experiences networking with social housing asset managers across Australia & New Zealand.

Social housing in Australia has mostly been managed by State and Territory governments, guided by key Commonwealth Government policy and funding mechanisms. Certain institutional arrangements are in place to facilitate national level policy development and sharing of best practice across the federation of States and Territories. In the main however, these cross-jurisdictional arrangements are limited to government ministers, chief executives and senior policy staff.

Asset managers working in State and Territory housing authorities are not often included in such formalized arrangements. However, informal intermittent networks have operated to share information on matters such as asset portfolio planning, maintenance contracting arrangements, approaches to evaluating asset performance, establishing asset standards, dealing with changing building regulations, estate renewal or community expectations. New Zealand housing colleagues have often participated in these networks due to their geographical proximity and comparable government and public housing systems.

Achieving continuity and evolution of these public housing asset managers' networks has proven difficult for several reasons. Budget cuts and sudden staff changes have resulted in several of the constituencies not attending meetings. Public housing authorities are being restructured on such a regular cycle[1] with asset management positions being abolished or merged, that people who had built relationships and shared knowledge have moved on and new contacts have to be built from scratch. The new directors in charge of new divisions have to be convinced all over again of the value and benefits in staff participating in networks outside the immediate organization.

So what are the benefits?

Given that the value of social housing assets is approximately $100 billion nationally, and the annual budget for asset portfolio maintenance and upgrading is about $1 billion, just a 1% improvement in asset utilization would provide a $1 billion benefit to the economy. A 1% efficiency gain in annual capital or maintenance expenditure would provide a benefit of $10 million per year.

The major Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) study into public housing asset management practices across Australia. (Kenly, et al, 2010) concluded:

> **" Asset management in social and community housing is inconsistently understood and diversely applied. Across government jurisdictions in Australia, practices vary considerably and, more importantly, understanding of practices and terms is also variable." (Kenley, et al, 2010: p. 3), and**

---

[1] As an example, in 2008 Housing NSW was merged into the Department of Human Services. In 2009 it became the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS). In 2011, it was split into two departments, with asset management functions (Land & Housing Corporation) moving to the Department of Finance & Services under a different government minister. Over the next couple of years, new organizational structures were devised with many people working in interim acting positions. New managers were appointed and other managers were moved or offered voluntary redundancies. In 2013 the two state public housing authorities were moved back under the one Minister, but at the time of writing, were still two separate organizations. A major restructure continues within FACS at time of writing.

"The researchers believe that social housing asset management should develop processes and procedures to identify good housing asset management practices and propagate them across the social housing sector." (Kenly, et al, 2010: p. 5)

The AHURI study indicated that the current type and level of communication or co-operation between State & Territory constituencies, has been ineffective in achieving important goals of a common language on which to base comparisons, performance benchmarking, or at least basic definitions of key asset management terms in the social housing context.

"How much does your state housing authority spend per dwelling on maintenance each year compared to mine?"
"Well that depends"
"On what?"
"What do mean by "maintenance"?"
Well, let's say responsive repairs, planned maintenance and upgrades. Leave out vacants"
"And what do mean by upgrades?"
"I get the feeling you don't really want to tell me?"
"Well, if I'm spending more than you, I might get my budget cut, and if it's less, that might embarrass the Minister. And anyway, what do you actually mean by "spend"?"

Specific benefits to social housing provision would arise from improved comparisons and benchmarking in several ways, for example:

- By developing a consistent set of definitions and measures across the country for effective performance benchmarking[2], the Commonwealth Government could better allocate its resources to greatest need, in ways that provide incentives for housing providers to improve efficiency. At the same time each State or community housing provider could have access to national performance benchmarking information to help with finding their own opportunities for service improvement.

- Public and community housing providers across Australia and New Zealand are increasingly using the same private maintenance contractors. Sharing information on costs of comparable work items, maintenance response times, and issues with contractor performance, would enable housing providers to look more closely at areas where they are paying more, and find help to manage performance issues.

- Every year a multitude of housing providers are spending a huge amount of time and money on writing specifications, contracts, plans, policies and procedures. By sharing these documents and the ideas behind them through a trusted network, organizations could make considerable savings by avoiding re-invention of the wheel.

---

[2] Comparing performance between organizations doing the same thing requires co-ordination and agreement on several factors: What performance criteria are most important to measure? How to define those criteria? How and when to measure them? How to share the findings? Do differences in results infer better or worse performance, or just show the effects of different situations? **Example 1: Which housing provider has the biggest maintenance backlog?** How do we agree to define and measure backlog? Is the housing provider with the biggest "comparable" backlog performing poorly, or is it under funded by government, or does it just have the type of asset portfolio that would have the biggest backlog no matter how well managed? **Example 2: Which housing provider has the highest asset management staff numbers compared to dwelling numbers?** Do we count in-house staff and contractors? What about people who do other things as well as asset management? Do we count all dwellings owned or leased?

If the preceding picture of social housing seems complex, it's getting more so, quickly. From the early 1980s, social housing provision began to diversify with the establishment of the community housing sector. Not for profit community based housing organizations[3] have proliferated and grown to manage social housing as an alternative to government managed housing (public housing). This has been achieved with a mix of housing leased from the private market, and dwellings transferred from public housing management. Community housing in Australia is set to grow very quickly over the next decade. The Commonwealth Labor Government set an aspiration for 35% or more (up from less than 10% in 2013) of social housing assets coming under ownership or management of not for profit community based organizations.

The Queensland Government has gone further:

> **"Our aim is to….see up to 90% of social housing dwellings managed by (8 to 10) community housing providers…by 2020…These reforms represent some of the biggest changes to the social housing system since its creation…" (Department of Housing and Public Works, 2013)**

With this growth, more asset managers working for community housing providers are facing increasingly complex challenges, often in quite isolated situations with modest internal resources. The need for effective cross sector support will grow with the sector.

> **"Housing associations operate in a complex, connected environment, forming partnerships and exchanging information with a wide range of actors…Associations learn from each other, building strength through mimicking good practice, transferring staff and forming coalitions to lobby governments." (Gilmour, 2009)**

The author's experience of being part of a loose network of public housing asset managers across Australia and New Zealand, re-enforced by AHURI's findings of a lack of cohesion in practice, has prompted the proposition that a stronger network of asset managers is necessary and its benefits would justify the time, effort and cost required.

Specific benefits to be gained from more effective networking across organizations would be:
- Greater efficiency within **organizations** through sharing information, not investing time and money in re-inventing wheels, saving money through avoiding mistakes.
- Greater efficiency across the **social housing sector** by building a cohesive practice where sector strategies are integrated and complementary, sector language is common and performance indicators are comparable.
- Greater **individual** professional satisfaction and effectiveness through making closer personal contacts and learning in a social, enthusiastic and inspiring collegiate environment.

The proposed "Home for Asset Managers In Social Housing - (The HAMISH)" will be used as a case study in this research project. The community of practice model as described in the literature will be tested to see if it is helpful in guiding a conceptual design for a stronger forum in the future.

---

[3] Not for profit community based housing organisations are established to provide low cost housing for people who find it difficult to compete in the private housing market. They are usually governed by a voluntary board of directors. They may head-lease private rental properties and sub-let them at subsidised rent to people in need. They may manage housing on behalf of government housing authorities, or they may own their own property. In NSW they are regulated and accredited by The Registrar of Community Housing, an independent statutory officer responsible for administering the regulatory system and Regulatory Code for Community Housing Providers under the Housing Act 2001 (NSW).

3. Research questions

The research questions below map a path to understand community of practice fundamentals, explore how those fundamentals are demonstrated in current examples, and apply those fundamentals to a real world case study (The HAMISH).

1. **How are communities of practice investigated in research literature?**

2. **What are the key concepts relating to communities of practice that can help in the understanding and encouragement of such communities?**

3. **What are the benefits, challenges and downsides to communities of practice?**

4. **Are there current examples of communities of practice that demonstrate principles from the literature?**

5. **Does the communities of practice literature provide a useful guide to establishing a community of practice for asset managers in social housing in Australia and New Zealand?**

4. Exploration of communities of practice literature

The focus on communities of practice began with the aim of better understanding a particular type of professional network, but not really those large professional institutes that govern lawyers, planners, engineers and architects. Instead, the interest lay with the less established groups characterized by a diversity of members with different professional backgrounds, but with a shared interest in a common field of work.

The thought, research and writing about humans as social animals, formations into families, tribes, communities and societies forms a large, expanding universe of ideas. Within this universe can be found extensive reference material specifically concerned with communities of practice. The author has found it possible, through a limited search of internet research databases, to get a useful sense of the subject; guided through key words from knowledge management, professional networks, learning theory, business innovation and even Macrowikinomics (Tapscott & Williams, 2010).

Wherever a researcher looks for a better understanding of communities of practice, citations will inevitably lead them to Etienne Wenger and his collaborators, who wrote a seminal paper- Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), followed by a book- "Cultivating Communities of Practice: A guide to knowledge management" (Wenger, et al, 2002) and their further exploration of the subject in a series of articles, blogs and YouTube videos.

The literature on communities of practice contains common themes including:
1. Definitions
2. The contexts within which communities of practice appear in literature
3. Guiding principles for successful communities of practice
4. Structure and elements common to communities of practice
5. Differentiation from other types of communities
6. Guidance on cultivation (starting up, stewardship, maturing and evolving)
7. Measuring benefits and awareness of downsides
8. Case studies

These themes are explored in more detail below.

4.1 Definitions
Wenger provided a definition (Wenger, et al, 2002) to which slight variations were made over time in various other sources. A combination of two of these variations is stated below:

> **"Communities of practice are groups of people who share:**
> *   **A concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.**
> *   **a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly"**

The definition above is a useful starting point. However, we need to differentiate communities of practice from other communities, networks or groups and to more fully describe the elements and dynamics of communities of practice.

Distinctions from other types of organizations
Wenger included in his book (Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 42), a table that provides a view of how communities of practice can be differentiated from other types of organizations such as formal departments, operational teams, project teams or informal networks. Each differ according to factors such as purpose, membership, boundaries and longevity (see Appendix 2). The table is useful in providing a snapshot of differences between types of organizations and communities, and

9

in further defining communities of practice.

The table is also useful as a tool to help a group of people identify where they fit into the model, and perhaps what characteristics of their group they may aspire to; e.g. what would be the pathway from an "Informal network" to "Community of Practice"?

> *"We've been meeting in this broom cupboard talking about asset management for far too long. It's time we stepped out and showed everyone what we can do in a more organized way.*
> *You're right! We might even find out who's been using the other broom cupboards. We could all get together in the kitchenette. "*

Also useful is Wenger's table below (Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 28) differentiating between different types of communities of practice, through their relationships to official organizations:

Types of communities of practice described by relationship to official organizations		
RELATIONSHIP	**DEFINITION**	**TYPICAL CHALLENGES**
Unrecognized	Invisible to the organization and sometimes to the members themselves	Difficult to see value and be aware of limitations, may not involve everyone who should participate
Bootlegged	Only visible to a circle of people "in the know"	Getting resources, having an impact, keeping hidden, gaining legitimacy
Legitimized	Officially sanctioned as a valuable entity	Broader visibility, rapid growth, new demands and expectations
Supported	Provided with direct resources from the organization	Scrutiny; accountability for use of resources, effort, and time; short term pressures
Institutionalized	Given an official status and function in the organization	Fixed definition, over-management, living beyond its usefulness

The table above not only highlights that communities of practice can exist in many different guises, but the challenges they face can be better understood and acted on by understanding what type they are, what should really be expected of them, and if there is a shared desire to change.

> *"Why aren't we getting the recognition we deserve for the good work we are doing?"*
> *"Because if our bosses found out what we're doing, we wouldn't be doing it any more!"*

4.2 The contexts within which communities of practice appear in literature

Most of the writings on communities of practice refer to a context, based on the authors' backgrounds, or the frame of reference through which they wish to explore the subject. I found that several of these contexts explained below, offer useful insights for the practitioner:

- Knowledge management
- Learning theory
- Network theory
- Business management
- The Internet revolution

Knowledge management

The field of knowledge management relates to communities of practice in several ways. The Journal of Knowledge Management, MCB University Press, was a key source of articles on communities of practice.

A central idea is that knowledge management has shifted from a focus on the science of classifying, storing and retrieving knowledge, spurred on by advances in information technologies; towards the idea of knowledge sharing and enhancement through personal interaction (Adams and Freeman, 2000).

A model for finding, enhancing and disseminating knowledge that can be applied to communities of practice has been termed "Sequential Knowledge Transactions" (Davenport and Prussic, 1997). The following table uses the four steps of this model and relates them to considerations of communities of practice:

Sequential Knowledge Transactions	Relating to communities of practice
1. Access	How effective is the community in facilitating access to knowledge that is held in records or in the heads of community members?
2. Generating	How effective is the community in recycling and generating new ideas, knowledge and innovation through collaboration?
3. Embedding	Is knowledge effectively embedded in the community, in shared expertise of current members, in resources for outside stakeholders, and in records (artifacts) for future access?
4. Transfer	Is the community's knowledge effectively shared and transferred to others in ways that support the community's goals?

Learning theory

Building on the field of knowledge management, learning theory is discussed in numerous papers on communities of practice. The core of the idea is that:

> **"Knowledge is something that is actively constructed in a social setting. People learn and retain knowledge and skills better through group activity." (Adams and Freeman, 2000: p. 39)**

Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991) wrote about "situated learning theory", meaning when people learn and develop ideas together, not necessarily in a geographical or corporate situation, but in any form of structured situation that may be face to face or dispersed, for example over correspondence; phone or internet; temporary or more permanent.

From this examination of how people learn and build knowledge in groups, come insights into people's behavior in groups; how people can feel wary, timid, fearful or threatened by groups, why people look, but don't contribute. (Ardichvili, 2003, Preece, 2004))

A key point relevant here is the importance of building close ties and trust. The dichotomy between the strong ties of community (Gemeinschaft) and the weaker ties of society (Gesellschaft) were written about by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft). For example, communities are characterised by common mores, or beliefs about the appropriate behaviour towards each other, strong personal relationships, strong families, and relatively simple social institutions. In such communities there is seldom a need to enforce indirect social control, due to a direct sense of loyalty an individual feels for *Gemeinschaft*. In contrast, *Gesellschaft* (often translated as society, civil society or association) describes associations in which, for the individual, the larger association never takes precedence over the individual's self-interest, and these associations lack the same level of shared mores.

Preece (Preece, 2004) wrote that while individuals in communities of practice can benefit by learning from the knowledge and experience they share, they get more than information:

> **"They get support, reassurance, insights and exposure to different value systems and beliefs. Both explicit and tacit knowledge are exchanged."** (Preece, 2004: p. 1)

Building personal trust is described as a critical factor in enabling the free, honest and enjoyable discourse in a community of practice. A community would find a discussion on trust very useful and could be guided by the Mishra's (Mishra, 2008) "ROCC of Trust" model, which states that trust is based on:
- **R**eliability- When leaders or people in a community build a dependability to do what they say they will do.
- **O**penness- Openness and honesty toward others will build the same in return.
- **C**ompetence- People are open about their skill / knowledge level and are willing to learn
- **C**ompassion- People empathize with each other and place the interest of others at least at the same level as their own. Building compassion in a community is very powerful.

> *"Why don't you contribute more to the community chat room?"*
> *"Well, I'm not sure if I really have anything interesting to contribute, you know with those people much more experienced than me having their say."*
> *"Look I'm sure you can trust them, but why don't you prepare something, and I will give you my own opinion first before you post it on line!"*

Network theory

Network theory is concerned with how networks operate to capture, share and enhance knowledge, with reference to strong and weak bonds, high and low volume interaction pathways, nodes or hubs, satellites, etc. This can be useful in conceptualizing or mapping relationships between community members and related stakeholders.

Network theory can demonstrate that many people with few connections and a few with many can form a closely linked network with only a few degrees of separation between any members. In other words, a community connecting through just a few high profile nodes can potentially gain great access to influence or information, or least facilitate and foster many strong relationships.

Another aspect of network theory is that the individuals in the network are affected by the network, as is the network affected by the individuals. Even peripheral members are likely to affect the community, and be affected themselves.
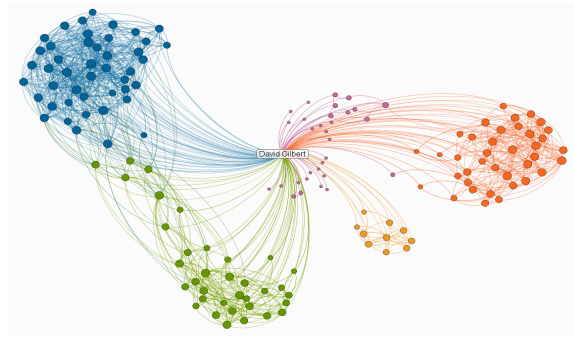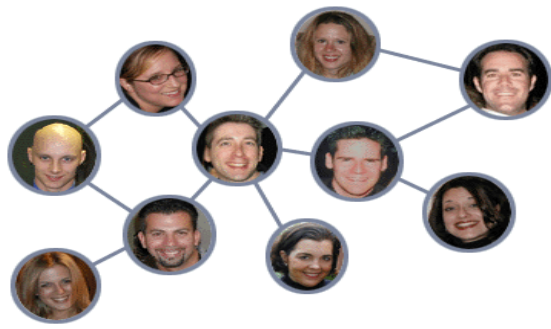
Professional networking

The literature contains many examples of various workforce groups such as field nurses, veterinarians, I.T. professional posted in overseas locations, who connect with each other crossing formal managerial lines.

Professional organizations such as the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA), Architects Institute of Australia, Engineers Institute of Australia are in the main long established, highly structured single profession communities of practice. They are organizations that do other things, such as accreditation programs, but have communities of practice within them. They also tend to be highly structured, bound in rules and traditions and have a necessary level of rigidity. Professional institutes are well placed to foster communities of practice that fit within their own boundaries. The PIA for example has established several subjects specific "Chapters" involved with areas such as social planning, planning law or transport.

A community of practice such as The HAMISH, may find a home base in such a professional institute, while recognizing that its membership would come from diverse origins such as housing, planning, asset management, facilities management, project management, building or maintenance contracting.

Business management

Popular in the literature are accounts of communities of practice established and operating within dispersed corporations. These accounts may claim that processes were improved, or that innovation and product development cycles were accelerated (Scarso, et al, 2009). The literature also examines corporate management intervention in communities of practice. The upside being that effective sponsorship supports involvement of staff members to devote company time to communities of practice. The downside being that over involvement by managers can limit communities to incremental, rather than radical innovation (Borzillo and Kaminska-Labbe, 2011).

While the studies on communities of practice within organization are interesting in their own right, they can also inform the operations of more dispersed communities that operate across corporate boundaries. For example, the principles regarding sponsorship will be relevant whether in an internal corporate context, or a broader sector context.

The internet revolution

A large body of writing is being generated about impacts of the internet and its applications, e-mail, databases, weblogs, wikis, and social media. Richardson (Richardson, 2006) writes of opportunities to bring school communities across the world together in learning communities and explains the emerging tools such as Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, Webinars and Social Media. Appendix 1 contains a table explaining internet tools that can be used by communities of practice, with notes relating to The HAMISH.

Tapscott and Williams (Tapscott and Williams, 2010) show examples of how social, economic, business and political dynamics are being revolutionized through the internet.

"Drawing on their experiences on sites such as Facebook and YouTube, young government professionals are using blogs, wikis and social networking tools to create communities that are bringing a new ethos of innovation and collaboration to life." (Tapscott and Williams, 2010)

Communities of practice are raised in this context. Often however with the message that virtual communication without adequate opportunities for personal contact can be quite limiting in developing trust and openness in sharing information and ideas.

In conclusion, communities of practice are discussed widely in the literature from diverse contexts. Investigating some of the main themes provides useful practical insights into defining communities of practice and differentiating them from other types of organizations, understanding how they work, and the technological and social theory advances that can help to foster them in the future.

4.3 Structural models

Wenger (Wenger, et al 2002) proposes a common structure to explain what communities of practice are and how they work. Domain / Community / Practice.

- **"Domain"** is described as defining a set of issues, creating common ground and common identity.
- **"Community"** describes the people who care about the domain and form a social fabric of learning, fostering strong relationships, based on mutual respect and trust, willing to share ideas and expose ignorance, mixing intimacy with openness to enquiry.
- **"Practice**" describes how the community conducts itself, building and sharing experiences and knowledge, adopting particular rules, tools, formats, language and documentation.

The structural model above is applied later on to examine components in greater detail.

Another interesting model through which to consider communities of practice is the following Head / Heart / Hand model, reflecting a holistic approach to learning and practice styles

Head	Inquiry	Identity
Heart	Interactions	Relationships
Hand	Craft	Competence
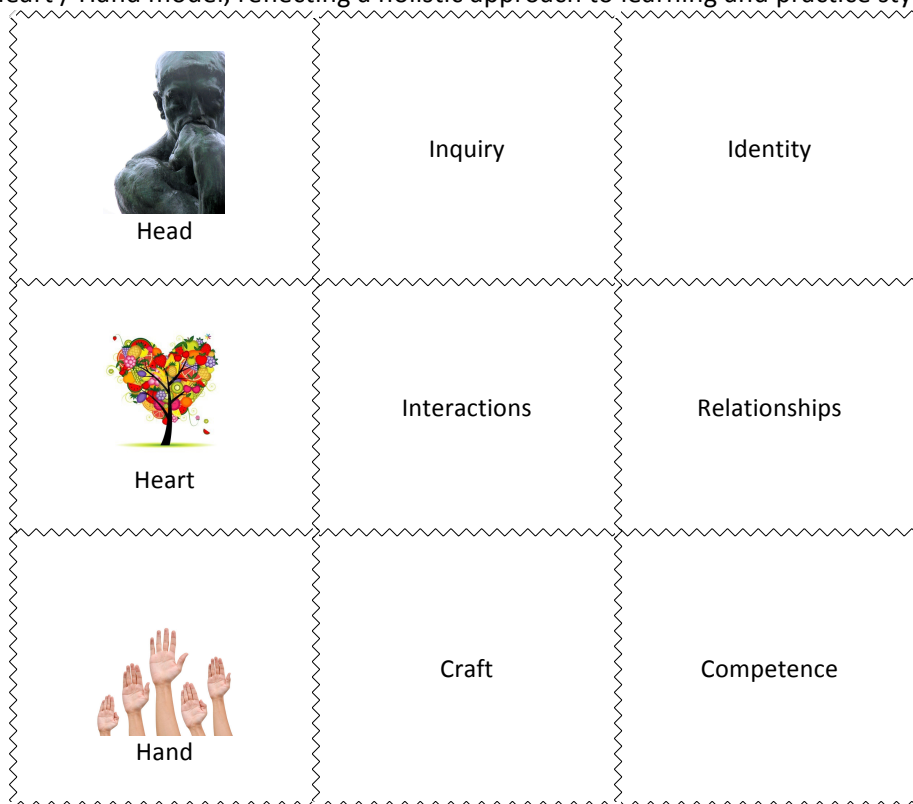
The inference here is that a well functioning community of practice would exhibit a productive balance of intellectual (Head) enquiry, resulting in clearly considered sense of identity for the community, with the emotional, personal (Heart) interactions fostering close and trusting relationships, and the practical (Hand) practice or craft that demonstrates competence and reliability that garners respect in the community. Tests could be applied to communities using this model to identify strengths and gaps.

4.4 Key Principles for communities of practice

Wenger (Wenger, et al 2002) found that the common fundamental factor across all the successful communities of practice he encountered was "aliveness", the phenomenon that occurs when the chemistry between "head, heart and hand" is balanced and reacting. While arguing that "aliveness" cannot be designed or contrived, he derived seven principles that embodied his understanding of the conditions where communities were more likely to be dynamic, active, productive and engaging. In the right column below are notes relating the principles to the HAMISH.

Key Principles for communities of practice	
	Relating to the HAMISH
Principle 1. Design for evolution. The key principle here is to adopt a facilitative or enabling approach to design of a community, to set up a dynamic that re-designs itself spontaneously as members come and go, and as issues or knowledge progresses or shifts in new directions, perhaps however within some constraints or framework that define the community's overall mission, domain or agreed practice guidelines.	• **Don't over design the initial proposal. Rather, bring people together with a strong but broad vision.** • **You can't really predict how it will pan out.** • **Raise possibilities that open up ideas, rather than specific proposals that may shut out better ones.**
Principle 2. Inside and outside perspectives. It is stated that good community design and leadership requires an insider who really understands in depth the issues at the heart of the domain, the knowledge that needs to be shared and the latent potential of emerging ideas. However, it is also noted that an outsider is often required to see the value or relevance of the community's work in the broader context, to help forge new linkages and relationships and to help built legitimacy for the community with related fields.	• **Assemble a small but influential team of subject matter experts, and match them with acknowledged housing sector leaders who are not necessarily "assets" people, but who are good "people" people.**
Principles 3. Different levels of participation. Different levels of activity in a community are inevitable and therefore should be fostered appropriately. High energy bursts of activity by small groups indicate that important current issues are being worked on to tight deadlines. More regular rhythms of activity around predictable recurring events are the bread and butter that sustain the community at a level that is comfortable for the majority of members. More irregular, sporadic type of activity can be reflective of special issues or events that come up from time to time. These should be seen as opportunities to attract new entrants or more peripheral members into the community, or perhaps to become more involved with the regular events.	Set up a program of projects and events that foster different types of participation: • **An annual national meeting** • **Quarterly local forums for special interest groups** • **An ideas competition with prizes** • **A moderated Blog for discussions** • **A sponsored project of national significance that provides value to key stakeholders** • **Encourage asset managers to participate more publicly in other existing forums such as Australasian Housing Institute, Facilities Management Association of Australia.**
Naturally in any community, people will have different roles that require different activity levels. The smaller core groups will be highly active (hopefully) on managing and leading the	• **Don't underestimate the effort needed to foster the core group, before diluting effort to initiate broader membership and events.**

community, a slightly larger "active group" might be involved in several regular activities concurrently or may be coordinators of particular activity cells. Probably the majority of members will be peripheral members who become active from time to time. The community should cater for all these groups and also the outsiders who are not community members, but who may drop in to observe occasionally.	• **Be strategic about attracting key experts and influencers at the first instance.** • **Concentrate on a just a few nationally significant outcomes to begin with.** • **Lure participants to the community with attractive projects, networking and learning opportunities, rather than chasing them.**
Principle 4. Public and private spaces Dynamic communities of practice are rich with activity both in their public spaces such as face to face and web linked meetings, and the private spaces such as one on one or small group networking of community members. Wenger notes the ritualistic nature of public community meetings where people meet to discuss and learn about issues, but also cement themselves into a group, see who else is there and to develop contacts.	• **Use the attraction of exclusivity in a positive way, by starting with secure but visible gateways to private group spaces.** • **Develop clear rules of engagement to provide a sense of safety for people to actively engage in issues.**
"Communities are more than a calendar of events"	
Successful communities of practice will foster the one to one personal relationships. Community coordinators should actively engage with individuals, checking their concerns and making linkages.	• **Encourage and support participants to meet up one to one with others, either using the communities platforms, or quite separately.** • **Community leaders should be explicit about the dynamics of building trust and therefore meaningful exchange through personal relationships.**
"The heart of a community is the web of relationships among community members"	
Principle 5. Focus on value A successful community must provide value for its members and sponsors that makes the effort worthwhile and more. The full value derived from a community may not be apparent when it is first formed, but it is suggested that aiming for some quick wins is a good strategy. It is suggested that rather than plan out the expected longer term value in advance, creating events activities and relationships will help potential value emerge.	• **Devise a simple "what's in it for me" tool, to help motivate participants and check whether ideas for projects to work on have value.** • **Develop a "what's in it for the sector" tool to test the value of projects.** • **Develop a "what's in it for the sponsor" tool to help attract sponsorship (in kind or financial) and maintain sponsor support.**
Where value emerges from one to one interactions by community members, it may be quite modest, and not many people may even find out about it. But given this will happen many times the overall value is significant. Often value is not specifically realized and appreciated by community members until the	• **Don't forget to maintain regular check in sessions among participants to discuss the community's current and potential value generation.**

matter is specifically raised and discussed.	
"Look, what are we getting out of this community? It's all meetings and talk but we haven't achieved anything!" *"Well actually, after chatting with Janine I sourced a document that saved me a week's work, and didn't you meet your last client at our annual breakfast event last year?"* *"Oh yeah, and I did see one of our community award winners using their gong as promotional material on their letter head. We must be getting some credibility."*	
Principle 6. Familiarity and excitement Regular, interesting and varied events that keep new ideas and people cycling through a community create familiar, comfortable places where people can interact and discuss ideas in a way they might not be able to in their work places. On the other hand, the invitation of controversial people into community activities from time to time, or impromptu celebrations of success serve to enliven the community, spark new interest and create new directions.	• **Create regularly scheduled drop in spaces, real and virtual, where people can feel comfortable with peers that are differentiated from the normal workplace.** • **Create flash events. Something fun and maybe controversial. Limited notice. Spontaneous.**
Principle 7. Create a rhythm A community's liveliness depends on the rhythms it creates. If the heart of a community is the human interactions it fosters, then the heart rate is regulated by the tempo of meetings and events. When the tempo is strong and rhythmic then the community feels stimulated and alive, too hectic and the community becomes exhausted, to slow and irregular and the community become lethargic.	• **Think of starting off the HAMISH as a drum beat. Add a base line and a rhythm. As activity is established, melodies and harmonies appear. What sort of band do you want to be? What sort of music do you want to play?**
"Finding the right rhythm at each stage is key to a community's development."	

4.5 Elements of communities of practice

Communities of practice have many common components /characteristics / elements that further explain the definitions. These elements are listed and explained below, and build on the seven principles discussed previously. They are structured within the fields; Domain / Community / Practice. Any community of practice that demonstrates all the following elements could claim to be a fully fledged community of practice. However, a community that only partially exhibits the following characteristics would not be excluded to any claim, as it may be in a developing stage or may not have requirement of all elements to do what it wants to do.

Elements of communities of practice

Domain

D.1 Negotiated process to decide scope, topics, issues. The process amongst the initial key members to discuss and agree on scope, main topics and current issues that define the community of practice is important to building ownership amongst members and getting the scope right.

D.2 Strategic intent and future agenda. The Domain should state or reflect longer term goals espoused by the field, or members' work places. From a well defined agreed initial scope, the Domain should be dynamic so as to encompass current issues as they arise, maintain a place at the cutting edge of evolving knowledge or issues, and flag future projects.

D.3 Private and public domains. It can be helpful to segment the Domain into more specific interest groups, some of which may be public and others closed to registered users.

D.4 Domain linkages to members' organization or broader encompassing domains. No domain exists in isolation or without context. A well defined domain will have clear boundaries but acknowledge context and related fields.

Community

C.1 Membership. Clarity on membership, qualification for membership or exclusivity should be clear to engender a sense of belonging, trust and therefore participation.

C.2 Building on pre-existing networks. Building on pre-existing networks will kick start the community and minimize risk of duplicating effort introducing unintended competition or cannibalizing other communities.

C.3 Role coverage & clarification. Member roles in leadership, governance, community leadership, coordinators of sub-groups, subject experts, discussion moderators etc. should be nurtured and made explicit.

C.4 Sponsorship. Strength and capacity of the community will be dependent on the degree of sponsorship from member workplaces or contributing organizations.

C.5 Frequency and type of contact. The right frequency and type of contact is fundamental to achieving a sense of vitality, trusting & enjoyable relationships, and productive interaction that translates to achievements and value.

C.6 Balance. A mix or balance of activities should be designed to reflect multiple desires of members, for social interaction, professional networking, information sharing, longer term agendas and short projects with quick payoff. A tone and rhythm of activity should be conducted to achieve both familiarity and excitement.

C.7 Strong connections. A community will be sustained only if strong relationships among a core group are maintained and nurtured.

C.8 Conflict resolution. Disagreements on ideas, content or even conduct may be healthy for a community, but will more often require resolution between parties or by a moderator. Rules and conflict resolution procedures may be required to address concerns, or disputes that may arise through interaction or content.

C.9 Introducing new members. Good byes to old members. Active strategies to attract and facilitate smooth induction of new members, and to acknowledge members who leave.

Practice

P.1 Platforms for interaction. A balance and variety of practice platforms would cater for face to face, remote, real time and asynchronous communication modes, with facilities for meetings, email, wikis, blogs, chat rooms etc.

P.2 Type of knowledge resource / documentation. The type and format of knowledge capture and distribution should be guided by the defined domain and dynamics of community interaction.

P.3 Knowledge development projects. A community can aim to carry out knowledge development projects to develop or retain a cutting edge position in the field.

P.4 Learning activities. A community should utilize the expertise within the community and from related contacts to facilitate learning / training or professional development activities.

P.5 Knowledge access & confidentiality levels. Recognition of the challenges in dealing with the need for confidentiality and closed areas of practice should be reconciled with principles of openness and access from outside the community.

P.6 Focus on and measuring value. Practice leaders should regularly reflect on and make explicit the value to community members, sponsors and broader society. Even most passionate committed members require return on their investment of time, travel, membership fee or intellectual input. Less committed members may need a more immediate, tangible return for their effort. Sponsors will usually require a clear, structured demonstration of value to continue their commitment. As a community of practice grows and matures, the need for value measurement is also likely to increase (Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 161).

The above list of elements is a useful extension to the seven principles as it provides a more comprehensive guide or checklist for diagnosing an existing community or establishing new one.

4.6 Measuring value

The literature approaches value measurement in several ways that would be useful for community members to consider.

Looking at overall health. The following diagram illustrates a view of the health and vitality (aliveness) of a community as a whole, through a cycle of Commitment- Aspirations- Effectiveness – Recognition.
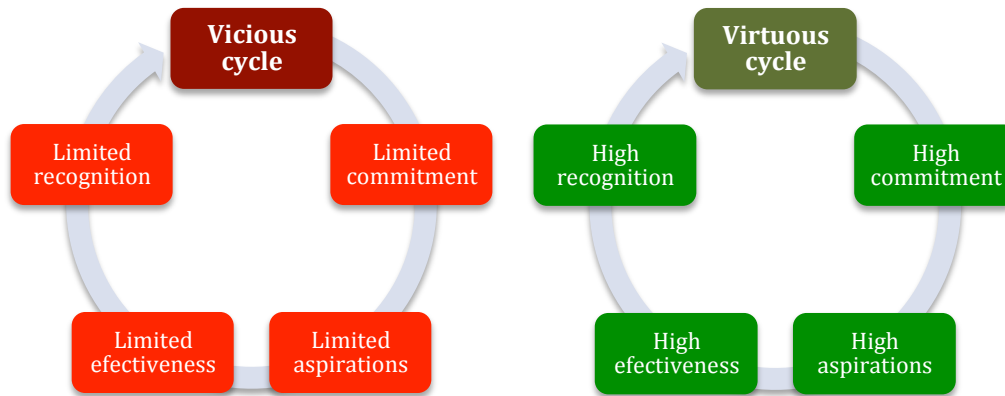
(Source: N Foote. "Linking communities of practice and performance" reproduced in Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 165)

A community's value is clearly going to be higher in the virtuous cycle, and members would generally be able to recognize which cycle is operating in their community. However, the reasons why it happening, and what to do about it may not be so clear. Recognizing this condition, then referring back to the principles and elements would provide a source of guidance. External expertise may be required to help a community out of a vicious cycle.

> **"Communities generally need coaching and methodological support"** (Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 206)

Corporate style performance evaluation. Typical corporate evaluation approaches such as monitoring Key Performance Indicators or cost/benefit analysis can be used to assess the value of communities. The risk is however that the community interaction and personal relationship building (the heart) aspects may be given less prominence or get lost in the search for more tangible outcomes they may be more readily measured. The consequence is that the distinctive part of the community, the learning, mutual support and inspiration from close personal interaction, can become under valued and therefore neglected.

Goal setting. Goal setting is a conceptually simple approach to measuring value for any community; agree on one or more goals, and later on see if you have achieved them. The challenges with goal setting are agreeing on the goals, having the discipline to follow up, and if they are not achieved doing something about it. A simple tool for setting goals is to use the SMART model: **S**pecific / **M**easurable / **A**chievable / **R**ealistic / **T**ime based.

> *"Our goal for this community is to have at least one core active member from each state and territory of Australia, and New Zealand within a year. Lets put it in the diary for next year and check if we made it."*
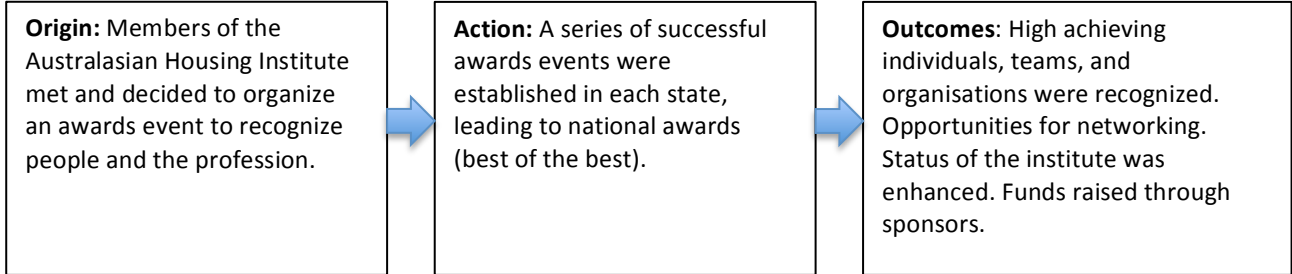
Systematic story telling. After many years of observing communities of practice, Wenger (Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 168) proposed a model to measure value creation by
> **"Starting with the activities of the community, following their effect through the**

application of knowledge resources in business processes, to create value for customers and other stakeholders."

The approach involved collecting stories from communities, in a very systematic way that demonstrated causation from people meeting and discussing ideas, through generation of ideas into a knowledge resource, to the adoption of that knowledge into a tangible outcome for business.

Example of story telling to illustrate community value creation

Origin: Members of the Australasian Housing Institute met and decided to organize an awards event to recognize people and the profession.	Action: A series of successful awards events were established in each state, leading to national awards (best of the best).	Outcomes: High achieving individuals, teams, and organisations were recognized. Opportunities for networking. Status of the institute was enhanced. Funds raised through sponsors.

The Davenport and Prusak – knowledge work sequence model- Access, Generation, Embedding Transfer, mentioned earlier, could be used in a simple way to gauge effectiveness of certain communities by asking a set of questions as follows:

Effectiveness of a community of practice using "knowledge work" sequence	Evaluation Questions
Access	How effective is initiation into the community so that members can access the events / web platform, have confidence in using tools, and feel safe and welcome to join in and contribute?
Generation	How effective is the recycling, sharing, collaborating, generating new knowledge in the community?
Embedding	How well does the community document its activities, outcomes, produce reports create lasting artifacts of value to future participants?
Transfer	How effectively does the community transfer knowledge (ideas, products, goodwill etc.) between members, and to and from external stakeholders?

In conclusion, literature on communities of practice provides practical guidance and examples to assist with value measurement.

Probably the greatest challenge for a community measuring its own value is finding the motivation to do it. Perhaps scrutinizing the value of networking or socializing may seem to be self indulgent, but it is a fundamental driver of community value generation. The perils of not focusing on value are clearly stated in the literature and not hard to understand in practice.

Participants need to reflect on the value for themselves, and hear about the value they provide to other members of the community, not just in what they do, but how they encourage or inspire others.

Focus on value for sponsors is crucial for their continued support.

As an example of value measurement related to The HAMISH, three possible outcomes are listed, along with some suggestions for how they could be measured. These outcomes have been selected because they would provide value to social housing funders, regulators, housing providers and the asset managers themselves.

Measuring outcomes and value of The HAMISH
Outcome 1: Standardized approach to dwelling assessment. A group of asset managers has created a standardized approach to dwelling condition and amenity assessment, and maintenance backlog liability assessment. **Measure of achievement:** • A dwelling assessment form and process is agreed, documented, disseminated and adopted for use by several major housing providers. • Estimates of maintenance backlog and ongoing maintenance liability are comprehensible, comparable and tractable across different organizations' asset portfolios. • Individuals involved have benefited from the networked learning experience and have established relationships for future collaborations.
Outcome 2: Standardized manual of asset management definitions. A group of asset managers has developed a standard manual of asset management definitions, service standards (i.e. maintenance response times), and Key Performance Indicators for asset management. **Measure of achievement:** • A manual is produced, widely disseminated, and adopted for use by several major housing providers. • A committee is established to maintain and update the standards through a community of practice model.
Outcome 3: **On-line policy and procedures library**. A group of asset managers has developed a shared weblog to post ideas and resource material on new staff induction, professional development, workforce planning, job opportunities, course reviews etc. **Measure of achievement:** • The weblog has a wide ranging suite of documents that are accessed regularly by users. • Individual organizations save time and money by building from existing ideas and documents. • Individuals with responsibility for team management are linked with others from different organizations. • An independent workforce-planning consultant monitors the improvement in quality and consistency of professional development across the organizations involved.

4.7 Challenges and downsides

While most literature on communities of practice focuses on positive potential, success factors and benefits; the downsides are also discussed. At the most obvious level, a community may simply be going badly because of a lack of commitment, energy or leadership, and not be abiding by the principles espoused earlier. However the downsides of communities can be more subtle and insidious, and therefore useful to explore further.

> **"It is important not to romanticize communities of practice or expect them to solve all problems without creating any."** (Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 139*)*

In a paper "Scratching beneath the surface of communities of (mal) practice" (Pemberton et al, 2007) the authors play devil's advocate to highlight potential downsides. Wenger (Wenger, et al, 2002) also includes a chapter on downsides. These are summarized together as follows. At right are my thoughts on how the challenges and downsides might relate to The HAMISH. Members of any community of practice may find this of value as a self-checking exercise.

Communities of practice: Challenges & downsides	Relating to The HAMISH
Time: A community can take many meetings and a lengthy period before value is realized. Participants can feel a real burden of time consumed. Communities can begin to dissipate over a long time before realization that it has run its race and should be disbanded.	• **The HAMISH will need to be launched with strong incentives for participation in the form of clear short term benefits, to justify the time investment.** • **The idea of creating a lively rhythm of activity for the community runs counter to the time constraint for members. Achieving the right balance is critical to success**
Follow the leader. Leadership of communities is a difficult balance between facilitating ideas and activity amongst members, while maintaining focus on the core domain and quality of interaction. As communities are often quite democratic, relatively unstructured and voluntary compared to other organizations, it may be difficult to detect that the leadership has gone walkabout until it's too late.	• **Leadership for the HAMISH concept will require identification of a core group with a commitment to persevering with the establishment phase.** • **Each of the core group members should be encouraged to be the leader of their own special interest or sub-group, and regularly discuss progress with fellow leaders.**
Outside In. Where a community emerges from within an organization or a broader professional sector, then issues of resentment through intended or accidental exclusion can arise. The use in the literature of words; imperialism, narcissism, cliques and factionalism among others illustrate the nature of problems.	• **The HAMISH should be wary of promoting its expertise in a way that excludes others.** • **Any claims to being leaders in the field must be justifiable, as well as achieve a purpose.**
Dominant forces. In a traditional established company, people don't expect to be equal, and the hierarchy is usually well understood and accepted. This may not be the case in a community of practice where all members may be invited to participate on an equal basis, and then find that a hierarchy is present or does emerge in a non-transparent or counter productive way. A community that brings	• **The HAMISH should have a space that is welcoming and inclusive to all people interested in participating or observing.** • **At the same time it should make clear where there is a specialized or expert group running a private space or project.** • **People should be able to promote where they have a particular area of expertise.**

together specialist expertise may grow to act or be perceived as superior, arrogant or dogmatic.	
Port in a storm. Communities of Practice may be seen by participants as refuges or safe places where they can explore radical ideas freed from constraints of their normal workplaces. They may be surprised however, that someone in the community may find their views inappropriate, or that confidentiality is broken and those views are transmitted negatively back to the workplace.	• **A supportive community should welcome non-conforming views of individuals and create a safe space for discussion of those views.** • **At the same time, a supportive community will be aware and privately provide counsel to a participant who is offering views inappropriately or in way that may affect reputations inside or outside the community.**
Core rigidity and competency traps. A Community can become closed to external views to the extent that they preserve status quo, foster inappropriate knowledge sets, and resist change that is happening around them (Scheele and England, 2008).	• **The HAMISH should continually strive to bring in views from outside the group and invite debate and criticism from a wide range of sources.**

Some of the challenges with working in virtual communities were highlighted by Due and Robe (Dube and Robey, 2008) through a set of five paradoxes. These can be directly applied to any dispersed community of practice:

Virtual community paradoxes (Dube and Robey, 2008)	Coping strategies
Virtual teams require **physical** presence	Invest in face to face meetings when possible
Flexibility of teamwork is aided by **structure**	Define clear objectives and structure but maintain flexibility
Interdependent work in teams is accomplished by member's **individual** contributions	Encourage collaborative culture, but maintain emphasis on personal responsibility
Task-oriented teamwork succeeds through **social interactions**	Use regular face to face, or at least real-time virtual working groups
Mistrust is instrumental in establishing **trust** among team members	Explicitly conduct activities to build and maintain trust

5. Establishing, growing and sustaining communities of practice

The following guiding steps to establishing communities of practice are compiled from several sources but primarily Wenger (Wenger, et al, 2002) and the Communities of Practice Resource Kit, Centers for Diseases Control and prevention in the USA (www.cdc.gov/phcommunities/resourcekit). Communities of practice are so many and so diverse that a step by step guide may seem rather presumptuous and linear. Indeed, communities of practice may start in different ways, becoming established out of disorder or conversely, from an already existing organization. However, judging by the processes described in literature and the author's own experiences, setting out a generic logical path is useful guide, even if the core steps are taken out of sequence.

ESTABLISHING.1 (E.1) Discovery and imagination. One of the very first and most exciting steps in establishing a community of practice may be in the creation of the idea, discovery of a need and imagining the possible ways forward. A key step at this stage is to harness the interest and enthusiasm of potential key members to see if it grows into something that captures the imagination of the group.

> *"Look what AHURI said about social housing asset management in Australia! Reading between the lines they said it was a dog's breakfast. You know, they were right, and we could do something about it!"*

E.2 Determine primary intent. Once a small core group of potential members has been at least loosely drawn together, then a process might occur where the group scrutinizes the idea, debates it, pulls it apart and re-constructs it in different ways from different points of view. The desired outcome from this stage is to evolve the initial idea into the primary intent, or vision, that is accepted by the group to guide it forward.

E.3 Define domain and identify engaging issues. The primary intent should be descriptive enough so that it can support a common understanding and attract interest, but not be so prescriptive that it closes off further options or ideas at this still nascent stage. Defining the domain, scope or boundaries of the proposed community may be approached in different ways depending on context. For example, if the primary intent of the community is quite focused within an already busy field of endeavor, the boundary issues might be the driving factor in defining the domain. Perhaps a strategy for merging with existing groups is required, or gaining the support or recognition from similar groups so that they understand the differences or complementarity of the new group, rather than interpreting it as duplication or competition.

E.4 Build case for action. One way suggested for formalizing a community's purpose and creating an action plan is to collectively meet and begin drafting an outline of a charter, manifesto or prospectus. While the draft charter is expected to evolve once the community is launched, coming together to begin laying out the mission, scope, goals and objectives will help all prospective members to understand and participate in setting the future direction.

E.5 Identify potential leaders. Snyder, Wenger and de Souza (Snyder, et al, 2003: p. 8) say: **"the key to successful communities of practice is an appropriate leadership infrastructure that guides, supports and renews the community initiative over time. In every case we are familiar with, leadership is the most critical success factor for community participation and effectiveness.**" It is suggested that two primary leadership roles need to be filled at the time of community initiation. One is the "Community Leader" who "owns" the charter and is the driving force for bringing the community together, and focuses the community on the particular domain and achieving goals. The other primary role is the "Community Sponsor", who focuses outwardly to champion the community's successes and advocate for the community. These positions need not be held by one individual, but shared amongst the group. It is recognized that while leadership is key, effective leadership is not easy and can be a challenge to attract into the community or develop from within.

E.6 Interview potential members. Interviewing potential members is suggested as an effective way of learning how the community should be developed and at the same time creating interest and commitment to the idea.

E.7 Connect community members. As potential members may span many organizations and geographic locations, communication and collaboration tools should be identified and put to use as soon as possible. Face to face meetings are significantly preferred, however clearly only occasionally achievable in dispersed locations. Real time events over the phone or internet are the next best thing and increasingly inexpensive.

However, there are pitfalls with relying too much on these media, as they may not be as effective in sustaining the necessary community bonds on their own. Asynchronous communication is required in any community, but is even less sustaining on it's own than synchronous teleconferencing.

Growing The previous section outlined and discussed key steps to initially establishing a community of practice. The section below looks at steps to building or growing a community, and then upon reaching a state of maturity, sustaining it.

GROWING.1 (G.1) Incubate and deliver immediate value. Just after the initial energy and excitement of establishing, communities of practice can become fragile. Members may pull back from their initial levels of commitment and leaders may feel disillusioned. At this stage it is important for the community to develop the right balance of relationship building and demonstrating value.

G.2 Build case for membership – target different groups. Once the initial ground work of domain, mission and rudimentary infrastructure is established, community leaders will need to invest time and energy to attract members and establish immediate examples of fruitful collaboration. Using existing social or workplace networks, new members would be encouraged to contact other potential members from within their own networks. Experts are important people to attract, at least as intermittent contributors or sponsors.

G.3 Launch community. Once a critical mass of members is on the way to being achieved, a launch event or kick off meeting is an important step, to mark a specific time and place where people can say "that was where it started, all those years ago, and look where we are now!" A kick off meeting should be followed closely by regular meetings so as not to lose momentum.

G.4 Initiate events & spaces. As well as regular events, spaces are also important in generating an image and understanding of the community. These can be in the form of a regular meeting place, perhaps belonging to a sponsor, or in virtual terms the meeting place could be a website.

G.5 Legitimize coordinators. Much of a coordinator's work in a community will be invisible and unappreciated. Even worse, if a coordinator does not have adequate skills to develop the community, networking, listening and managing conflicts, members may not even be aware why their community is not as vibrant as expected. A community is more likely to attract talented, effective coordinators when it legitimizes the coordinator's role by recognition and reward.

G.6 Build connection between core group members. During the time just after launching, communities may feel driven to spend their time finding new members and growing. Wenger suggests instead that working on the bonds between core members as a priority will help sustain the community under the pressures of growth that may come.

G.7 Find the ideas / practices worth sharing. In the growth phase, communities should be sharing ideas, insights and practices in order to discover what knowledge is most important and valuable. While members might have anticipated what is most important at the launch, they may find that a different agenda and picture of true value emerges from the initial growth phase.

G.8 Engage managers and sponsors. Continuing engagement of managers and sponsors at the growth phase legitimizes the community. The allure of access to them through the community might not be the best motivation for joining, but nevertheless, their endorsement does say to members that their efforts are worthwhile and appreciated.

> *"When I joined I thought it would put me at the table with the top decision makers. But they seem to have disappeared and left things to the committed worker bees"*

Sustaining So what signals the differences between "Growing" from the initial stage to "Sustaining" a community of practice?   Perhaps it is a leveling off of new members or rates of activity, or the introduction of new discussion groups or issues. It may be demonstrated by a cyclical waxing and waning of interest. Wenger (Wenger, et al, 2002) suggests that maturing of a community does not imply stability or an ability to run on auto, but rather the need for even greater focus on core purpose, achieving value and maintaining the strength of personal bonds (the heart) within the community.

> *"A nationally based community of practice was started up to establish greater professionalism in its members' field of work. It was thought that developing a credential that members must qualify for would achieve this. However, this was not achieved. Instead it successfully developed a range of professional development seminars, a magazine, networking functions and awards ceremonies. Some considered this a failure and left the community, while others liked what they had achieved. The important thing for the organization was to openly discuss the successes and failures."*

SUSTAINING.1 (S.1) Identify gaps in knowledge, develop learning agenda and maintain cutting edge. At this stage communities might look more externally to identify knowledge gaps within their domain and set agendas for research and information sharing. Communities should actively canvas sector / professional / industry leaders and through this process, enhance community contacts and capacity, and maintain active involvement with cutting edge innovation in the field.

S.2 Define role in broader organization / sector or society. Redefine boundaries actively. What is seen as an appropriate place for a new, niche community in an already active sector or industry might later be seen as a source of duplication, competition or irritation as it grows larger and more influential? A maturing community of practice should therefore actively review its domain boundaries and relationships with other organizations with similar or complementary purpose.

S.3 Measure value. Return to measuring value. New members in a maturing community, who were not around at day one where life long bonds may have formed, are likely to need more tangible, traditional measures of value to get and stay involved. As a community matures and evolves, the approach to measuring value will change also.

> *"For the greater good? Yeah right! But what do I get for all the time I put into this community?"*

6. Examples

Examples of communities of practice abound. A small number were examined for this project, primarily to see to what extent they demonstrate the principles, contain the elements or indicate their effectiveness, as is suggested in the literature. Two communities operating within Australia and connected with social housing are briefly described below.

NSW Federation of Housing Associations Asset Managers' Forum

www.communityhousing.org.au

- 30 asset managers from about 16 community based social housing providers are facilitated by the Federation to meet face to face twice a year and have a web based forum on which to discuss issues in between meetings.
- Face to face meetings are usually two days in duration, allowing time for informal discussions at breaks. In the evening after day one, some participants may get together over dinner.
- The forum agenda includes an array of issues common to all providers, such as asset standards, workplace health & safety, asbestos management, often with guest experts brought in to conduct presentations.
- Members indicated, through a survey conducted by the convener (May 2013), that they valued the forum highly, especially the face-to-face contact that helped members realize they were not facing unique issues alone. They felt that work pressures allowed insufficient time to get best value from the forum. While meeting for two days, they were burdened by the thought that work was mounting up back in the office. The convener thought that while the forum is valued by participants and their organizations, the on-line discussion activity was generally lower than expected.
- **Lessons from the literature**: The NSW Federation's forum of community housing asset managers exhibits several of the characteristics of communities of practice discussed in the literature. Face to face contact was valued much more highly than on-line interaction. While time saving and risk minimization were viewed as very valuable, the burden of time commitment was felt strongly by some participants. Although only a brief exploration was possible, there was little evidence of longer term strategic intent or innovation projects coming out of the forum. Examples of competition and confidentiality concerns were raised.
- **Lessons for The HAMISH**: Firstly, the proposition that community housing asset managers want and need a forum to discuss issues and obtain mutual support is well demonstrated by this forum. Secondly, it is a significant challenge for this group to allocate time and energy to such forums, and therefore sponsorship and encouragement from their organizations will be vital to enable their contribution. Local hubs for face-to-face interaction will be important to this group, as interstate travel will rarely be sponsored, if at all. Active on-line social media type interaction is unlikely to be adopted by this group unless directly relevant to their jobs, supported by their superiors and strongly supported by training, technological support, and an active moderator.

Home Modification Information Clearinghouse www.homemods.info

- The Home Modification Information Clearinghouse has been established for about 10 years and provides a platform for sharing best practice in the disability home modifications industry.
- The Clearinghouse has a strong emphasis on evidence based research which is provided to practitioners in multiple formats
- The website provides a platform for a library of reference material, records of committee meetings, contacts for industry experts, discussion groups and Q&A. A series of meetings and seminars are organized around Australia and promoted through the website and email applications. A high level of activity occurs through the clearinghouse in numerous forms.
- Based within the University of NSW, it is managed by a group of dedicated experts who are supported by several long standing government sponsors. Homemods.info is supported by a well structured and nurtured system of governance. Sponsor relationships are strongly

maintained with a comprehensive system for measuring and reporting KPIs. It is linked strongly with associated professional groups, industry, and academics.

- **Lessons from the literature**: The Homemods.info Clearinghouse is an example of a mature and thriving community of practice, demonstrating many if not all the principles and elements espoused in the literature.
- **Lessons for The HAMISH**: The Homemods.Info clearinghouse provides a gold standard for what the HAMISH could become. The convener indicated however it was not an easy road to get there and it requires a lot of time, commitment and sponsorship to maintain it.

In conclusion, looking at the above examples through the prism of community of practice principles and elements as described in the literature, does aid in understanding their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for them to developed further should they desire to do so.

The examples above also inform the concept of the HAMISH. For example, the NSW Federation forum example reinforces the view that a wider forum for social housing asset managers is warranted, however that the challenges of time commitment and organizational support will need to be carefully considered. The Homemods.Info Clearinghouse provides a living and thriving example of a multi-faceted center for best practice in a field closely related to social housing asset management.

7. Approach to case study: The Home for Asset Managers In Social Housing (The HAMISH)

This section sets out the author's approach to applying lessons from research to the case study.

7.1 Planning the project

Plan A: This plan has not really gone to plan.
To be truly honest about my naivety I had envisaged jumping in from the beginning of this project, rounding up my old asset manager colleagues from around the country, and getting them enthused about a grand vision for a national network for best practice in social housing asset management, sharing insights, benchmarking, and improving practice in a consistent way across Australia just like the AHURI report said (Kenly, et al, 2010).

As I went further into the communities of practice literature however, I held off on my campaign as I began to realize what there was to learn about doing it better, and also that my original plan was doomed to failure.

The communities of practice literature got me thinking more about the environment within which The HAMISH would prosper. Who might form the initial core group? Who are the stakeholders and potential sponsors? What conditions would be in place to enable active participation of the time poor people in cash strapped organizations dispersed over thousands of kilometers? Who else could be brought to the table to enrich the community and offer a better chance of its sustainability past an initial adrenaline fueled fit of enthusiasm? How would I be perceived and what credibility would I have in proposing the idea given that I don't even work in a state housing authority any more?

Plan B: This might work.
A more restrained approach to developing the HAMISH concept is delivered below, guided by the community of practice principles, elements, and processes harvested from the research.

This will take the form of a considered proposal or prospectus for The HAMISH that provides a basis for discussion with key people and groups in the social housing sector. Hopefully it will serve to attract the interest of the *Core Group (see Principle 3, Element C.6)*. As in the previous sentence, aspects of the prospectus will be referenced to the relevant principle, element, process step or other section of the research, to demonstrate how the research has aided development of the concept in practice.

That done I will draw some conclusions about the usefulness of my exploration of the communities of practice literature in application to a case study.

7.2 Prospectus for The HAMISH

> **PROSPECTUS for The HAMISH**
> **The Home for Asset Managers in Social Housing**

This prospectus has been prepared by Donald Proctor, Practitioner in Residence, Henry Halloran trust, University of Sydney, forming part of a sponsored research project into communities of practice, with a focus on a case study for establishing an effective network for social housing asset managers across Australia and New Zealand.

The HAMISH prospectus is a proposal to establish a community of practice to enhance the practice of social housing asset management in Australia and New Zealand. The prospectus includes a vision, strategic context, aims, objectives, as well as propositions for value, governance and steps to establish the community (see E.4). It concludes with an invitation to participate in, or support the community.

This document is intended as a discussion starter to spread and test the concept, gauge interest and develop ideas further. In the first instance it will be taken to a range of key individuals and organizations, and then disseminated more widely by email, web site or blog.

The VISION
People working in the social housing sector understand the meaning and value of home. Home is a safe place. A secure home is a foundation for finding purpose in life, raising family, engaging with and contributing to community. A generator of relationships, productivity and creativity.

"Home is where the heart is" [4].

The Home for Asset Managers in Social Housing will be a place where members of the community can move in and around, get to know and trust each other, work together on projects, and build a center of excellence.

The HAMISH is a home away from home. It will provide asset managers with an opportunity to work with others from a wide range of organizations, freed from at least some of the constraints of their primary organization or job. Their employer organizations will benefit from their exposure to new ideas, the inspiration they gain from colleagues, and the solutions they develop or discover to improve efficiencies and outcomes in their own organizations and the wider housing sector.

This community will work together to build a cohesive practice of social housing asset management so that the homes of some of the most under privileged people in society will be managed in the most expert way they can be. "Social housing will deliver optimal return in terms of financial investment, service delivery and meeting housing need[5]"

The HAMISH will provide a meeting place for new ideas, building a common language, consistent practice, comparable performance measures, mutual support, professional development, time saving resources, innovation and advancement of the sector.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT
Social housing in Australia and New Zealand can be described as over 330,000 dwellings owned or

---

[4] Attributed to Pliny the Elder of Rome AD23-79. Who was killed in the eruption of Mt Vesuvius when away from home?

[5] From the National Community Housing Standards Manual Third Edition May 2010. Housing NSW. Department of Housing, Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). p.47

managed by government or not for profit organizations, to provide homes for people who are disadvantaged when competing for housing in the private sector. Social housing assets are valued at approximately $100 billion, with about $1 billion spent on their upkeep annually.

Social housing asset management involves strategic planning of asset portfolio related activities, managing new supply, maintenance, upgrading, re-configuration and disposal programs, guided by the appropriate policies, procedures and analysis that support optimal service provision[6].   More than 1000 people from a diverse range of professions and backgrounds are employed in primarily asset management roles by Australian social housing organizations. Many more people work as contractors involved in planning, designing, building, maintaining, or selling social housing assets.

Social housing is currently facing difficult challenges, such as a financially unsustainable social housing funding system where asset portfolios can not be adequately maintained, let alone grow to keep up with demand. Management of public housing is undergoing a stop start process of transfer from government to non-government providers. This means that asset managers need to be equipped with the skills to solve great challenges, and play their part in the complex transfer process. As community based housing providers multiply and grow, their asset management capacities need to grow as well. In many cases these asset managers are making their first transitions from local management of a relatively small number of dwellings, to strategic planning for extensive and complex asset portfolios.   Likewise, government housing authority asset managers need to manage the challenges of their large and complex, yet slowly shrinking portfolios, and dispersal of state wide management control.

VALUE PROPOSITION

Improved capacity and practice in social housing asset management has significant potential benefits for individuals, organizations, government, social housing consumers and society.

If the effective utilization of social housing assets were improved by just 1%, it would represent a value gain of $1 Billion[7]. A 1% efficiency gain in annual maintenance and upgrading expenditure would save $10 Million per year. [8]

While significant resources are applied to professional development and practice improvement within organizations now, the evidence shows that internalized approaches are not achieving a consistent or optimal practice at either state or national levels.[9] Asset managers from NSW Federation of Housing Associations clearly stated the value they derive from conducting regular forums outside their primary workplaces.[10] More and more, asset managers need to understand best practice in the wider social housing sector to properly serve their own organizations.

---

[6] There are many ways to describe social housing asset management (AHURI p.16). This is a summary that attempts to gather the main concepts into one paragraph.

[7] 1% has been used as a fairly arbitrary small number, and applied to the asset value in round numbers of $100 Billion. Asset utilization through better asset management could come in many ways, for example improving match of assets to demand, re-aligning stock to reduce cost of capital per dwelling, pursuing non-asset alternatives to meet client need.

[8] 1% here is applied to the approximately $1 Billion annual maintenance spend. Savings could be achieved from improved contractor procurement strategies, better knowledge of property condition, more informed prioritization and works programming.

[9] The 2010 AHURI report on best practice in social housing management stated, " Asset management in social and community housing is inconsistently understood and diversely applied. Across government jurisdictions in Australia, practices vary considerably and, more importantly, understanding of practices and terms is also variable." (p.3), and "The researchers believe that social housing asset management should develop processes and procedures to identify good housing asset management practices and propagate them across the social housing sector." (p. 5)

[10] From survey of its asset management forum participants conducted by NSWFHA.

Specific, short term tangible outcomes that could be achieved by The HAMISH, that would be of value to housing providers and government include improved, consistent, agreed and accessible definitions of key social housing asset concepts. This would enable organizations, their funders and regulators to obtain better comparable information with which to drive efficiencies. Just a few examples include:

- What is meant by maintenance backlog, what does it include and how is it calculated?
- What is the appropriate "asset standard" for social housing dwellings. How is the standard assessed and how is compliance reported?
- What do the terms responsive repairs, planned maintenance, upgrading, and vacant maintenance actually include?
- How is strategic asset value measured?
- Are there ways to measure and compare maintenance contractor performance over different constituencies? What are the key, universal KPIs?

Longer term measureable outcomes could include:

- Better, more consistent approaches to longer term asset management strategies.
- More consistent, understandable and comparable methods of asset portfolio data management, analysis and reporting.
- More effective and efficient procurement and management of new supply procurement and maintenance contracting.
- Improved practices in partnering with the private sector on new development.
- Improved approaches to asset management workforce training, planning and management.
- More consistent approaches to disposal of assets in line with sector wide priorities.

For the asset managers themselves value would be derived from:

- Opportunities to develop contacts and relationships with a broader range of like minded professionals.
- Opportunities to enhance their knowledge, skills and job satisfaction, while maintaining commitment to their primary workplace.
- Saving time and effort by obtaining information from trusted sources who have solved the problem before.
- Collaborating with people from different locations and with different skill sets to find new innovative solutions to new problems.

MEMBERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Membership

The HAMISH would be open to anyone working in, or interested in social housing asset management (including government and non government sectors) and willing to participate in the community's projects or events. The community would recognize that:

- Members may have varying interests, perhaps in only a very specialized area, and which fostering would cater for contained niche groups **(See Principle 3, D.4**).
- Members will have varying level of commitment that will ebb and flow according to their needs. **(See Principle 3)**
- Members will be burdened by constraints, or bring opportunities, that come from their employment or contractual status with employers or clients. **(See Practice.5)**
- Many members will be limited in opportunities to access face to face events either locally, or nationally, so virtual meetings will be facilitated.
- Membership will be offered to individuals from a broad range of organizations covering the social housing sector (see Attachment 2 to HAMISH prospectus), but it will be recognized that some of those members may have limited or specialized niche interests. While The HAMISH will encourage broad participation, it will establish itself with a core group which may not exhibit broad encompassing interests in the establishment phase **(see Growing.6).**
- The HAMISH will aim to be people, rather than outcome focused, through development of

close personal bonds and trust, the outcomes will flow.

Governance

The HAMISH will need the committed involvement of a small group of core members in the establishment phase. Past this, governance arrangements will be kept open to allow flexibility in how the community develops.

At the beginning, the community will seek to find one or more umbrella organizations with complementary goals to help with required infrastructure and support facilities. It is important at this prospectus stage to assure existing organizations who operate in the space, of the intention to consult widely, so as to avoid duplication or undue competition to achieve desired outcomes **(See appendix 4: Attachment to HAMISH Prospectus- Potential stakeholder organizations and sponsors)**. This should not however be presumed to be a tension or conflict free process. In fact any debate generated about that should have the running of particular agendas should be seen as an opportunity to learn about and clarify respective roles **(See Community.8)**

The development of governance arrangements will be in response to the level of interest that emerges, the particular people, issues or projects that get going, the existing organization that show interest, and the priorities or requirements of potential sponsors.

SCOPE OF INTENT

Without over-prescribing a scope of activity (see Principle1, D.1) that The HAMISH might pursue, a framework for social housing asset management practice is attached (Appendix 3: Attachment to HAMISH Prospectus) as a guide to potential areas for practice improvement initiatives. A brief summary of this framework is provided below:

Social housing asset management framework for practice improvement opportunities. (Adapted from National Community Housing Standards Edition 3, May 2010 Section 2 – Asset Management)

- ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY- Improving strategic management of housing asset portfolios to ensure they deliver optimal return in terms of financial investment, service delivery and meeting housing need.
- RESPONSIVE MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS- Improving systems to enable the effective delivery of repairs and maintenance so that housing is well maintained and the assets are protected.
- PLANNED MAINTENANCE- Better planning for the maintenance and upgrade of housing assets to ensure accommodation quality and overall value is sustained.
- STOCK ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT- Acquiring and developing new and existing housing stock in accordance with strategic growth objectives and to meet identified need.
- PARTNERSHIPS AND NEW BUSINESS- Ensuring growth strategies are based on sound financial planning, ethics, probity and long term custodianship of social housing infrastructure.

INITIAL STEPS

The first steps in establishing the HAMISH will involve harnessing the interest and enthusiasm of a core group of key people **(See Establishing.1)** to brainstorm the idea, pull it apart and re-construct it **(See Establishing.2)** until it captures the imagination to the extent that it will draw people in and generate a will to invest further energy.

This core group would be tasked with identifying the core intent of the community **(See Establishing.2)**, defining the initial domain and boundaries, and deciding on the first issue or issues to engage with **(See Establishing.3)**. It will be important in determining scope and boundaries to consider the relationships with existing groups and opportunities for joining, merging, recognition, support or even perhaps competition **(See Community.2)**.

How would this core group be drawn together? One approach is to put out the idea by word of mouth and see if existing networks bring out interested people. Another is to approach known key people in the sector (network nodes) and ask them to suggest people or contact them directly. Articles can be placed in housing related publications (AHI Housing Works, Shelter newsletter, NSWFHA newsletter etc.) along with an invitation to get involved. Letters to CEOs of key organizations would let them know about the idea and provide them an opportunity to suggest an interested staff or board members. The idea could be pitched to the boards or executive of key organizations. Potential organizations that could be approached to establish the initial core group and test the value propositions have been listed in a table **(See Appendix 4)**.

INITIAL IDEAS FOR ACTIVITIES

A few ideas are proposed below, to spark some initial interest **(See Principle 4, Community.6)**. A more comprehensive action plan is more appropriately developed at a later stage when a core group has come together.

QUICK IDEA 1 - The HAMISH WIKILYMPICS:

Event 1: Asset Management Strategy Gold Medal. A competition to find out that has the best Housing Asset Management Strategy. Strategies are posted on a website, with prizes offered for say, best government / non-government and best overall strategy. Comments are invited about the posted strategies and prizes are awarded to the best critiques as well. Some prizes are awarded by votes and others by a panel of experts.

Event 2: Maintenance Backlog Bonanza. Who has the best definition and process for measuring maintenance backlog? Entries are posted on the web. People comment on and improve each other's contribution. At the closing date, prizes are awarded to the best contributions, again, by vote and by an expert panel. Bonus prizes for the organizations with the biggest and smallest backlogs.

Event 3: Tenant Participation on Parade. Who has the best approach to tenants participating in asset management decisions, or in construction / maintenance of their homes.

Prizes will be supplied by sponsors and awarded at an on-line ceremony and real live party.

QUICK IDEA 2 – WHAT HAVE YOU GOT ON?

This is a great pick up line for information on asset management problems, for example:
What have you got on Workplace Health & Safety Policy?
What have you got on Asbestos Management?
What have you got on investment return benchmarks for proposed acquisitions?
The HAMISH could moderate a space on the web (BLOG) where requests for assistance can be posted either publicly or privately. These requests can be forwarded automatically or manually to people who may be able to help. The ensuing discussions can be public or private.

QUICK IDEA 3 – ASSET FLASH PARTIES

The HAMISH sends out notices to gather at a local bar or coffee shop this Thursday night. The rules are: no one is allowed to talk about asset management.

INITIAL HOST

To provide adequate credibility and administrative support at the initial phase, a sponsoring organization will be identified. This organization will need to provide an electronic mail box at least, and perhaps a weblog for initial expressions of interest and discussions that follow dissemination of the prospectus. Possible hosting organizations could be found among professional institutes with an interest in housing, a university faculty, a peak community based group, or a government department.

Invitation to become a founding member or supporter of:

"The HAMISH: The Home for Asset Managers In Social Housing"

? **Are you involved in or responsible for social housing asset management, either in practice, research or as a consumer.**

? **Are you interested in and committed to improving the practice of social housing asset management?**

? **Do you believe that networking with likeminded people from outside your immediate organization would help you and your colleagues work smarter and achieve more?**

If you answered **YES** to any of these questions, here is an opportunity for you to be part of the start of something exciting.

Just email Donald at TheHAMISH@****institute.org or ring 0411***111 and we'll start building from there!

8. Conclusions

This research project has investigated some fundamental principles that help to explain why some workplace or practice networks thrive and others don't. The project was inspired by my experiences with a number of networking groups that have not reached their full potential. In working through several concepts such as professional networking, knowledge management, and virtual communities, I found the writing on "**communities of practice**" provided the most comprehensive and relevant answers to the problem.

The real world example that drove this investigation was a group of asset managers working in the field of social housing, and in particular maintenance management. Public and community housing sectors are under great financial pressures and undergoing major ongoing re-structuring. As shown by the findings from a major AHURI study (Kenly, et al, 2010), this challenging environment makes the strengthening and networking of asset management capacity even more important to ensure high quality and consistent custodianship of the nation's $100 Billion social housing infrastructure into the future.

The national public housing maintenance forum mentioned above will not meet in 2013 because the intended host department could not find the resources to run it. My thesis is that this maintenance network is failing, not because there is insufficient value in it, but because the network has been missing key elements needed to keep it alive and thriving. For example, there has been no leadership structure **(see Community.3)**, no statement of strategic intent **(see Domain.2)**, insufficient activity between annual meetings to maintain close bonds and trust levels **(see Principle 7)**, nor any investment into providing a cohesive case to sponsors of the value of previous and future meetings **(see principle 5)**.

Some current, housing related examples of communities of practice were examined to see if they demonstrated the principles or characteristics identified. I found that any problems evident in the example communities were well explained in the literature. Hence, it would be quite possible for members of those communities to gain better awareness of their issues and find solutions, if they seek out the explanations and act on them.

Finally, I demonstrated the useful application of the literature by applying it to a proposal to establish a new community of practice, The Home for Asset Managers in Social Housing (The HAMISH). The proposal is in the form of a prospectus[11] which is part of this research report **(see section 7.2)**.

8.1.   How are communities of practice investigated in research literature?
The literature on communities of practice contains common themes including:
1. Definitions
2. The contexts within which communities of practice appear in literature
3. Guiding principles for successful communities of practice
4. Structure and elements common to communities of practice
5. Differentiation from other types of communities
6. Guidance on cultivation (starting up, stewardship, maturing and evolving)
7. Measuring benefits and awareness of downsides
8. Case studies

Investigating some of the main themes provides useful insights into defining communities of practice, differentiating them from other types of organizations, understanding how they work,

---

[11] Prospectus: A document that describes an enterprise in order to attract and inform members and investors.

and the technological and social theory advances that can help to foster them in the future.

8.2. what are the key concepts relating to communities of practice that can help in the understanding and encouragement of such communities?

Wenger's (Wenger, et al 2002) seven principles for achieving "aliveness" in communities of practice are a useful tool for diagnosing problems with existing communities and for pondering the design of new ones. The structural model of domain, community and practice is effective in describing the essential elements of communities. Useful step-by-step process guides and tool kits for establishing and sustaining communities are available in the literature and freely available on the internet.

Some of the most powerful concepts focus on building close personal relationships, developing trust, which then enables honest, open, creative, fearless, inspiring, enjoyable interaction, and therefore valuable and sustainable communities. In fact, a key finding of this research would be how the importance of developing and nurturing the "heart" of the community, the close personal relationships, took precedence over other factors such as use of technology to communicate across dispersed communities.

8.3. What are the benefits, challenges and downsides to communities of practice?

The literature offers many approaches to identifying, measuring and managing the good and bad aspects of communities of practice. In looking at the importance of measuring and promoting benefits, the literature emphasises that both community members and external sponsors need to focus on and appreciate value generated from the community. Value measurement in communities of practice is shown not to be just about end outcomes, but importantly about explaining and acknowledging the process of generating trust and co-operation that sustains outcomes.

This research essentially asks why don't communities of practice work like they are supposed to. Challenges and downsides of communities of practice such as time constraints, the challenges of effective leadership, motivation, competition, lack of trust are discussed extensively in the literature.

Paradoxes are used to illustrate the fine line between a thriving or declining cycle of commitment, aspirations and effectiveness. For example, a community needs leadership and structure, but can be killed under the weight of same. People feel burdened by time constraints while collaborating with colleagues to improve efficiency of practice.

For me, the main lesson is that "It is important not to romanticise communities of practice or expect them to solve problems without creating any" (Wenger, et al, 2002: p 139). Communities of practice should not expect success without effort, or progress without setbacks. Awareness of this lesson, combined with guidance from the literature, can equip established and new communities to better recognise and act as difficulties occur.

8.4. Are there current examples of communities of practice that demonstrate concepts from the literature?

Many examples of communities of practice are discussed in the literature, precisely to demonstrate the principle that each author wishes to espouse. Unsurprisingly, articles do not generally conclude the principle dis-proven.

My approach was to choose two examples of networked organisations that were housing related, operating in Australia and where I could gain access to at least one key person with insights to the

community. I found that after researching community of practice fundamentals in the literature, the characteristics of the two example communities were readily explained in the terms of the literature. For example, the superior value of face-to-face interaction over virtual networking was clearly stated by one community. The second community clearly demonstrated that the establishment phase can be a long hard slog with barriers to be expected and over come, the value in effectively fostering sponsor relationships, and the benefits of a well supported internet site supplemented by multiple levels of face to face activity.

In fact, I found that looking at communities in the light of the frameworks offered by the literature, seemed to clearly highlight the DNA of those communities.

8.5. Does the communities of practice literature provide a useful guide to establishing a community of practice for asset managers in social housing in Australia and New Zealand?

I began this report by setting out the practitioner problem that started me off; the seemingly difficult challenge of establishing an effective network of social housing asset managers across Australian public housing authorities.

Throughout my exploration of community of practice principles, value measurement, challenges and downsides, I related the lessons in the literature to The HAMISH concept to test their potential relevance. When preparing a prospectus for The HAMISH I made notes where such lessons had been taken into account.

This clearly demonstrated that the concepts in the literature were a useful guide to establishing a new community of practice.

Conversely however, the challenges and downsides discussed in the literature also highlighted the challenges that could be expected in establishing the HAMISH, acting somewhat as a dis-incentive to proceeding further.

Overall though, readers of this investigation into communities of practice should find it useful, as I have, in developing greater insights into communities in which they practice.

Hopefully it will provide some guidance and inspiration to make your community of practice effective and alive.

9. Appendices

Appendix 1: Internet tools for communities of practice		
Tool	**Explanation**	**Relating to The HAMISH**
E-mail	Electronic mail to single or multiple recipient inbox on web connected computer, smart phone.	• **"Everyone uses email" high level of acceptance. Problem is with too much traffic into inboxes, controlling stream of info, time management**
Weblog (Blog)	Easily created, updateable websites that allow authors to publish instantly from any internet connection. They can be interactive, allowing for conversations to occur or for information to be added by permitted users.	• **Needs organization and adequate level of activity to come alive. Otherwise bloggers can feel like they are talking to themselves.**
Wiki	A collaborative web space where anyone can add or edit content.	• **As above, sharing protocols for sensitive information as required. Reliability and currency of information can be of concern.**
Social / professional networking	Social networking web sites such as Facebook, Google+ and Linked In have become almost ubiquitous where people or groups can join up and share views and information.	• **Not so accepted by older demographic as yet. Issues with security and sharing protocols.**
Webinar	Seminar on the web, using a moderator, with functions for multiple users to share presentations, video and audio, and support discussion.	• **Needs service provider, organizer, computer headphones etc.**
Podcast	Audio / video file recorded and placed on internet for users to access and download to phone or computer. Subscribers can receive automatic feeds.	• **Great opportunity for information dissemination if producers are adequately resourced and recipients are in the habit of accessing / watching / listening**

Appendix 2: Distinctions between communities of practice and other types of organization					
	Purpose	**Who belongs?**	**Boundaries**	**What holds them together**	**How long do they last?**
Community of Practice	To create, expand and exchange knowledge, and to develop individual capabilities.	Self selection based on expertise or passion for a topic.	Fuzzy	Passion, commitment and identification with the group and its expertise	Evolve and end organically (last as long as there is relevance to the topic and value and interest in learning together.
Formal Departments	*To deliver a product or service*	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Clear	Job requirements and common goals	Intended to be permanent (but last until the next reorganization)
Operational teams	To take care of an ongoing operation or process	Membership assigned by management	Clear	Shared responsibility for the operation	Intended to be ongoing (but last as long as the operation is needed)
Project teams	To accomplish a specifies task	People who have a direct role in accomplishing the task	Clear	The project's goals and milestones	Predetermined ending (when the project has ben completed)
Communities of interest	To be informed	Whoever is interested	Fuzzy	Access to information and sense of like-mindedness	Evolve and end organically
Informal networks	To receive and pass on information. To know who is who.	Friends and business acquaintances, friends of friends	Undefined	Mutual need relationships	Never really start or end as long as people keep in touch or remember each other.

(Source: Wenger, et al, 2002: p. 42)

ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY- Improve management of housing assets to ensure they deliver optimal return in terms of financial investment, service delivery and meeting housing need.

- Organizations have a documented and up-to-date Asset Management Strategy that ensures housing stock is of appropriate size, condition and specification and is financially sustainable
- Databases and analyses supporting the Asset Management Strategy are maintained accurately and kept up-to-date. Any cost implications are evaluated and integrated into the financial planning process.
- Organizations monitor progress against the objectives of the Asset Management Strategy.

RESPONSIVE MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS- Improve systems to enable the effective delivery of repairs and maintenance so that housing is well maintained and the assets are protected.

- Organizations have documented systems for responsive maintenance and repairs that ensure transparency of decisions, provide good service in a timely manner, and are equitable between tenants and across properties.
- Organizations budget an appropriate amount for responsive maintenance and repairs.
- Organizations provide tenants with easy-to-use information on repairs and maintenance
- Organizations procure contractors to ensure that the interests of the organization are protected and, in particular, that the contractors respect the tenants and their home and property, deliver good quality work in a timely fashion and are competitively priced and represent value for money
- Organizations measure performance in the area of repairs and maintenance, using indicators such as tenant satisfaction, timeliness, quality and price.

PLANNED MAINTENANCE- Plans for the maintenance and upgrade of housing assets to ensure accommodation quality and overall value is sustained.

- Organizations have documented systems for planned maintenance and upgrading of properties that includes a plan for each property, linked to financial planning and budgets

STOCK ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT- Acquire and develop new and existing housing stock in accordance with strategic growth objectives and to meet identified need.

- Where funding arrangements allow such activity, organization have a documented strategy for stock acquisition, disposal and development that is consistent with its organizational mission and corporate plan.
- Before deciding on the best method to acquire new stock, the organization researches the feasibility of the various options.
- Where possible organizations involve tenants / members in the design process of developing new housing stock.
- Organizations monitor and review acquisitions and development processes to ensure they are efficient and effective.

PARTNERSHIPS AND NEW BUSINESS- Growth strategies based on sound financial planning.

- Organizations write documents to guide development of property partnerships, which include a statement of ethics.
- Organizations assess the viability of potential partnership arrangements.
- Organizations explore and utilize the full range of planning incentives set by state and local governments to maximize potential in developing financial partnerships.
- When entering into partnerships with other organizations to develop stock, formal contractual agreements are signed which include sound risk management strategies.

Appendix 4: HAMISH prospectus: Potential stakeholder organizations and sponsors

Government authorities
• FaHCSIA
• Industry Commission
• State & Territory housing authorities
• Housing New Zealand

Non-government sector peak bodies
• Community Housing Federation of Australia
• NSW Federation of Housing Associations & other similar state based groups
• NSW Common Equity
• Aboriginal Land Council organizations
• NSW Shelter

Professional institutions
• Australasian Housing Institute
• Planning Institute of Australia
• Facilities Management Association of Australia
• Building Owners and Managers Association

Community housing providers across Australia & New Zealand

Academic institutions
• University of Sydney, Architecture, Design, Planning
• University of NSW, Faculty of the Built Environment
• Swinburne University
• AHURI

Tenant organizations
• Tenants' Union
• Social Housing Tenant Advisory Committee NSW
• Regional Tenants' groups

Industry
• Asset management, property, planning & design consultants
• Maintenance & construction contractors

10. References

Adams, E. C. and Freeman, C. (2000), *Communities of Practice: Bridging technology and knowledge assessment*, Journal of Knowledge Management Vol. 4 – No.1. Pp38-44.

Ardichvili, A., Page, V. and Wentling, T. (2003), *Motivation and barriers to participation in virtual knowledge sharing communities of practice*. Journal of Knowledge management Vol.7 No.1. pp6.4-77).

Borzillo, S. and Kaminska-Labbe, R. (2011), *Step in or step-out: supporting innovation through communities of practice*, Journal of Business Strategy Vol. 32 No. 3. Pp. 29-36

Community Housing Federation of Australia, (2010), *National Community Housing Standards Edition 3*.

Davenport, T. and Prusak, L. (1997), *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston MA)

Department of Housing and Public Works. (2013), *Housing 2020 - Delivering a flexible, efficient and responsive housing assistance system for Queensland's future*, **Queensland Government**.

Dube, L. and Robey, D., (2008), *Surviving the paradoxes of virtual teamwork*, Information Systems Journal, No. 19, pp. 3-30, Blackwell Publishing.

Kenly, R., Chiasor, M., Hall, J. and Heywood, C. (2010), *Good practices for managing Australia's public and community housing assets*, AHURI Final Report No. 148. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

Gilmour, T. (2009), *Network Power: An International Study of Strengthening Housing Association Capacity,* PHD thesis, Faculty of Architecture, Design & Planning, University of Sydney.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991), *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Mishra, A. & K., (2008), *Trust is Everything*, Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press, www.lulu.com/content/2196924.

Pemberton, J., Mavin, S. and Stalker, B., (2007), *The Learning Organisation: Scratching beneath the surface of communities of (mal)practice*, The International Journal of Knowledge and Organisational Learning Management Vol. 14 No. 1, p.p 62-73)

Preece, J. (2004), *Etiquette, Empathy and Trust in Communities of Practice: stepping stones to social capita*l, Journal of Universal Computer Science, Vol.10, no.3, pp294-302.

Richardson, W. (2006), *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and other powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. Corwin Press

Saint-Onge, H., Wallace, D**.**, (2003), *Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advantage: (MA): Butterworth-Heinemann, p.89.*

Scarso, E., Bolisani, E. and Salvador, L. (2009), *A systematic framework for analyzing the critical success factors of communities of practice*. Journal of Knowledge Management, Vol. 13 No.6 pp. 431-447.

Schenkel, A. and Teigland, R,. (2008), *Improved organisational performance through communities of practice*. Journal of Knowledge Management Vol 12 No.1 pp. 106-118.

Snyder, W.M., Wenger, E. and de Souza Briggs, X. (2003), *Communities of Practice in Government: Leveraging knowledge for performance*. http://wiki.nasa.gov

Tapscott, D. and Williams, A.D. (2010), *MacroWikinomics: Rebooting Business and the World*. Penguin.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., Snyder, W.M. (2002), *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business School, Boston, MA