

Communities of Practice to enhance continuous professional development

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Abstract

An effective continuous professional development (CPD) programme for agricultural extension staff is important for the development of new skills, knowledge and experiences so as to keep up to date with new developments and technologies in agriculture to ensure the delivery of a professional service to their clients.

The CPD programme in Teagasc is delivered through in-service training (IST) and a customised advisor professional development programme. A review of its in-service training in 2017 identified a need for the use of a variety of methods for delivery, more time for discussion and interaction and a need to incorporate topics selected by education officers and teachers in their IST.

In addition to the review, management observed that advisors/education officers/teachers were beginning to adopt a new approach to knowledge sharing in the form of communities of practice (CoP). These groups were forming organically from a need for knowledge sharing in their specific areas.

The purpose of this study was to determine if these CoP groups could be aligned with the Teagasc CPD programme for agricultural advisors, education officers, teachers and specialists.

An audit was carried out using a questionnaire to identify the existence of CoP groups in Teagasc nationally using six characteristics identified in the literature review. The audit found the existence of 38 entities: 20 project teams, 10 communities of practice and 8 working groups. The study found that six of the ten CoP's groups were in operation in Teagasc at the time of the audit (August/September 2019). The study examined why the members participated, the difficulties and challenges members faced, and if communities of practice could be expanded to be integrated with the CPD programme. A case study was also conducted on the Irish Primary Principals Network to determine how communities of practice were working as part of a CPD structure for school principals and to determine if any of the findings could be applied to further the development of CoP groups in Teagasc.

Members of the CoP groups identified the benefits of being a member while also acknowledging some of the difficulties. Benefits identified were: a sense of belonging to a community; having a mutual sense of purpose; and sharing experiences or resources. The members valued the CoP group

interaction as it allowed them the space to share and to discuss information and it gave them a sense that they were operating as part of a community rather than in isolation. Although these CoP groups exist in the organisation there is a lack of awareness of the benefits they can provide for members.

The CoP provided the members with the confidence “that there was no issue too big or too small to be discussed”. This form of engagement provides for a mutually beneficial relationship between the less experienced members and the more experienced members of the community of practice through this sharing of experiences. These regular interactions, joint enterprise of members learning from one another and achievement of mutual goals allowed the advisors, education officers and teachers to shape their CoP groups as well as their knowledge domain and their practices and they believed it allowed them to carry out their job more efficiently through collective problem solving on a regular issue.

The IPPN case study showed that CoP groups are incorporated in an overall CPD structure and although they form organically, they benefit from the input of a coordinator to support the groups.

Effective CPD for agriculture extension staff needs to be self-directed, goal-oriented and consist of active modes of learning. The study concludes that CoP groups can be aligned to effective CPD in that they unite staff so that they are more connected, engaged and empowered. They provide staff with the opportunity for peer to peer learning by sharing knowledge and expertise while working together on self-directed projects. They provide an environment where staff have access to relevant and flexible learning that is not time constraint and allows for the opportunity to reflect on their practices. Communities of practice contribute to continuous professional development which in turn supports agricultural extension staff in delivering a high-quality professional service to their clients.