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Corporate communities

A state-of-the-art review

In a context where physical and digital dimensions are increasingly interconnected, we are now living a **new paradigm of hybrid and flexible** work. This paradigm involves rethinking organizational logics and models, which include new technologies as well as **experiential, environmental, and human factors** (what we have called "New Ways of Working" for years). This fluid scenario makes it crucial for organizations to **rethink how people operate and cooperate internally**. And to do this, we must start from the **needs** of the people involved in the organization's life.

In the February 2022 article ["Networking and Knowledge Exchange in New Business Contexts: The Value of Business Communities"](#) we referred to three types of employee needs (being informed, feeling part of an internal network, having all the elements to grow and work better) and a tool that many organizations deploy to meet these needs: *Communities*.

Whether engagement or practice communities, entirely digital or hybrid, supported by platforms like M365 (Teams, Viva Engage) or custom CMS, **Communities represent a vital means of collaboration and engagement**. In the business context, they enable organizations to design and support true **cultural evolutions**, promoting participatory logics of **inclusion, innovation, and exchange** inspired by social networks.

Corporate Communities help build and strengthen valuable relationships at various levels, forming collaborative networks where teams are effectively interconnected. Through Communities, it's possible to transcend role or function boundaries by activating peer-to-peer collaborative logics, allowing people to spread ideas, experiences, and best practices that might otherwise go unheard.

Communities: an open reflection

To provide an accurate snapshot of the present, avoiding reliance on partial views and ineffective benchmarks, we felt the need to tap into the experience of those who manage Communities daily and understand their potential and benefits within companies. OpenKnowledge, with contributions from several significant companies and the academic partnership of Alessandra Mazzei, Director of the CERC (Centre for Employee Relations and Communication) at IULM University in Milan, has produced a **current state and future perspective of Internal Communities**.

Below are the leaders who participated in the joint reflection, with whom we had the pleasure of initiating an open conversation on these topics:

- **Alessandra Cappello**, Head of Internal Communication and Digital Workplace and **Vittorio Verdone**, Director of Communication and Media Relations at **Unipol Group**
- **Giovanna Di Bacco**, Head of Corporate Communication, Media Relations, Internal Communication, Employee Engagement at **E.ON**
- **Valentina Uboldi**, Head of Global Internal Communications at **Eni**
- **Isabella Pacifico**, Head of Internal Communications at **Carrefour**
- **Marialaura Agosta**, HR & Internal Communication Manager Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Champion at **Danone Italy**
- **Davide Ciullo**, Senior Manager Internal Communication & People Engagement and **Ornella Castellano**, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Expert at **Snam**

We listened to their ideas, content, and best practices firsthand, gathering virtuous experiences and insights that enriched our perspective and led us to summarize some "foundations" for a current reflection on corporate Communities.

1. Having a clear starting point and objectives

In addition to fostering employee engagement and a sense of belonging, an internal Community can promote knowledge sharing, collaboration, and innovation, which are enablers for achieving business results. And much more. From disseminating corporate information to developing a culture based on values like care and performance improvement, it's essential to **initially define the "reason why" that allows a corporate Community to exist and thrive**.

Outlining the goal and the added value to be provided to people from the start allows for better management of the subsequent support phase, which is vital for the Community's growth. As Alessandra Mazzei points out, *"engagement communities are very complex; we can liken them to continuously adapting and evolving organisms that need to be nourished (...) This underscores the importance of a strategic approach to their creation and management: defining an architecture, designing supportive actions, animating, monitoring, and measuring."*

> *"The main goal for us is definitely to reinforce engagement: to build a solid base of ambassadors who can not only disseminate certain issues in the company, but also "test" certain projects or ideas before they are disseminated to the entire corporate population."*
>
> **Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON**

"The purposes of our internal community are multiple and go in the direction of increasing engagement and a sense of belonging to the company. First, we aim at sharing key company news to ensure alignment on strategy, values, culture, goals and projects/activities. In addition, we want to create communities of practice through specific groups by Directorate, by Team, and by Job, automatically populated by role. These groups are designed to facilitate the exchange of useful information for each person's work. We also offer the opportunity to participate in engagement communities on relevant topics such as Digital Transformation, Sustainability, Training and Development, and E-commerce. This allows you to learn about the main initiatives pursued by the company even outside your direct area of expertise."

Isabella Pacifico, Carrefour

"We think that through internal Communities we can really help colleagues in their daily work, allowing them to learn about and manage workflows in a collaborative way, promoting constant cycles of conversation and an exchange of knowledge and best practices learned "in the field." All aimed at an organic growth in the productivity of all teams involved: when we design a Community, we must always have well in mind the business objectives and related KPIs that measure its success."

Alessandra Cappello, Unipol

2. Building purpose: psychological motivations, corporate context, and organizational culture

In increasingly challenging and fragmented organizational contexts, recognizing **the strategic importance of a shared culture and cultivating employee engagement** is essential. Through social logic, corporate communities **reflect the organizational culture** and serve as a reliable thermometer of the company and a litmus test of how deeply the corporate purpose is permeating the organization and its behaviours.

Communities enable the development of internal networks and help companies build a "power of convocation" that allows leadership to truly promote corporate culture. As Alessandra Mazzei always says: *"where a company has a good level of organizational well-being, the opportunity of communities could be a strengthening element."*

"A company's culture always influences its internal dynamics. Eni's Internal Comms Global Community was created precisely to consolidate the culture of inclusion, dialogue, and exchange, and we are already starting from a solid foundation. Leaders need to be more and more aware of the relevance of their role as leaders, communicators, agents of culture, and we are also working on this in small steps."

Valentina Uboldi, Eni

"Internal Communities reflect corporate life and purpose: if the value of engagement and listening is not inherent in the culture and way of working, it is very complicated to replicate this dynamic within the community."

Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON

"The dynamics of working in retail – especially in stores – can be very challenging in terms of hours and availability, sometimes compromising the efforts the company makes to ensure people's well-being and work life balance (...). What we can do is to use all the channels at our disposal (first and foremost Communities) to keep the direct thread between organization/top management and employees/collaborators firmly in place by sharing the company's performance and motivating strategic choices, even the unpopular ones."

Isabella Pacifico, Carrefour

"With reference to ERGs, personal motivations are the first lever that leads people to approach and feel represented. Of great importance then is the organizational culture: the more proposals manage to find support and a real space for implementation, the more people feel engaged in participating."

Ornella Castellano, Snam

3. Promoting people care: caring for employees as a differential element

People Care within companies is crucial for fostering an inclusive and sustainable organizational culture. Investing in employees' needs and well-being promotes trust, motivation, and productivity, creating a sense of belonging and connection with the company.

This attention to human capital, which materializes in the **development of internal Communities supporting employees in areas beyond core business activities**, not only improves the working climate but also fosters retention and stimulates innovation through the exchange of diverse perspectives.

Concrete examples are numerous: from internal communities addressing Diversity & Inclusion issues to colleague communities around topics like parenting, healthcare, social responsibility, where internal projects and initiatives are proposed directly by participants.

"After the lockdown, we needed to reactivate people's engagement and participation in corporate life, so we activated a community of People Ambassadors who could magnetize and foster exchanges and interactions among people, including in play and entertainment contexts. More recently, however, we have activated a community of practice, appointing some "D&I Ambassadors." These are colleagues who, with a spontaneous application, spearhead and put diversity & inclusion issues into practice (and discussion). The D&I community is very relevant for us, because thanks to the work of the community

members we decide which projects or initiatives to implement in the company, choosing among the different emerging instances."

Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON

"We have created communities of parents and caregivers who provide mutual support and share experiences regarding the care and support of their loved ones. In addition, we have also established a community dedicated to people with cancer disease, who can share information and support for each other. The main goal of these communities is to create an environment of support, understanding and sharing."

Marialaura Agosta, Danone

"The ERGs (Employee Resource Groups, ed.) are communities of colleagues who have banded together around specific topics that are outside of business in the strict sense of the word - gender issues, parenting, STEM subjects, generational confrontation, and so on - and that today involve as many as 450 people, a significant number in relation to a total corporate population of about 3,700. The purposes are many: to listen to and intercept people's needs, to promote an internal culture of "alliance" and participation, and to strengthen relationships and ties even in the face of physical distance."

Davide Ciullo, Snam

4. Reflecting on technological adoption and "Virtual Communities"

By offering a familiar and intuitive interface, corporate digital platforms can facilitate employee integration and engagement, promoting effective communication, knowledge sharing, and collaboration through formats and dynamics already established in the social online sphere. For this reason, many companies have adopted platforms like Workplace from Meta (Eni, Carrefour) and Viva Engage (Unipol) to build increasingly open environments for (free) dialogue and discussion.

In this sense, Communities must truly **find the ideal space to grow and embed themselves within existing touchpoints**, rightfully securing a place in the daily employee journey. With one caveat: technology must serve the organizational context and work models, not the other way around. According to Alessandra Mazzei, *"the ideal would be to start with a clear strategy and, with the support of technology, give communities the most suitable configuration for the specific context."*

"Being able to use specific features that borrow characteristics from the world of social networks (before) and social media (now) means using tools that have stood the test of time, adoption and engagement of billions of people over the past two decades. It is an issue of cognitive ergonomics, and thus of tools designed and selected to be intuitively adapted to the way we act in everyday life. We talk about hashtags

to indicate topics, or mentions (@) to draw the attention of a colleague, we talk about CTAs to engage and reactions to understand whether or not a topic has attracted the attention of our readers (likes, comments, shares)."

Alessandra Cappello, Unipol

"As Internal Communication, we studied the architecture of the platform to adapt it to a use that would make the most of our desire and need for dialogue and closeness, in a world as vast and heterogeneous (professionally, geographically, culturally, linguistically) as Eni is."

Valentina Uboldi, Eni

5. Finding the right balance to promote and maintain communities

Over the years, in the numerous Community experiences we have designed with our clients, we have observed that all the most successful Communities shared certain critical success elements: the clarity and solidity of the perceived value proposition by participants, top management sponsorship, a clear governance definition, and ensuring the usability of the technological solution.

Being able to manage all the critical success factors, **valuing the initiative within the organization, and overcoming prejudices and access barriers** allows internal communities to grow organically and generate value. In Alessandra Mazzei's words: *"communities need spontaneity and authenticity, which emerge from specific actions. They must be seeded and cultivated."*

"The main obstacle is not so much to create the internal community (driven by enthusiasm, colleagues participate very willingly in the first phase), but more to keep it alive by making sure that members are constantly participating and active. This means keeping communications active and fostering opportunities for exchanges and meetings, both online and physical."

Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON

"The main challenges we encounter when designing, promoting and "bringing to life" internal Communities are mainly related to their management in the day-to-day and the perception of their added value within the business context (...) We know well that Communities are not self-sustaining but, in order to grow, they need to be continuously nurtured: in this sense, Community Management is an activity that, if well manned, is vital for the success of the initiative."

Vittorio Verdone, Unipol

"Going in no particular order, the main goals we give are: to reach as many point-of-sale colleagues/colleagues as possible, who do not have company devices and who, by the very nature of their work, do not have a fixed location; to overcome the prejudice that Workplace is just social networking, and not a work tool; to overcome the disconnect between the reality shown in Community and the perceived reality (i.e., between the celebration of successes and the drudgery of everyday work); to achieve a more mature use of Community, which is not limited to just posting photos/videos, but leads to a real exchange of value by sparking conversations and debates."

Isabella Pacifico, Carrefour

6. Hybridizing interactions: from "Virtual Community" to "Hybrid Community"

Virtual communities, often born in response to the need for connection during post-pandemic remote work, still play a vital role in the current hybrid environment of the "new normal."

The combination of physical and digital interactions enhances engagement and cohesion of geographically dispersed teams, allowing for greater flexibility and inclusivity. However, the transition to "phygital" modes requires **organizations to ensure that the tools used are accessible and inclusive for all**, as well as the language adopted within them, maintaining an equitable and participatory workplace.

Concrete examples of hybridizing Community conversations are numerous. Virtual coffee sessions with real-time quizzes and polls, online call-to-actions that materialize in physical meetings during lunch breaks or coffee machine encounters, in-person workshops with remote participation options: in general, all actions that allow dual-mode virtual and physical participation, in as inclusive a logic as possible.

"Despite this return to normality, it is clear that geographic distances and hybrid ways of working will remain a reality: from this point of view, we try to orient our Communities in such a way as to offer a mix of physical and digital interactions, making the most of the potential of technological platforms to support and enrich more informal moments of contact."

Alessandra Cappello, Unipol

"For sure, the case has changed, meaning the space where we create sharing opportunities, but not the content. We have created an inclusive way of working that considers the different needs of our people. In this sense, whether we organize a webinar or other engagement activities, we always ensure the dual mode of participation, in-person and remotely."

Marialaura Agosta, Danone

"It is important to combine the physical mode of meeting and exchange, perhaps in the form of a workshop or discussion, with an online mode, exactly as one is used to in the day-to-day. But above all, it is essential to make sure that the tools used are usable both by those who are physically present at the meeting and those who are connected from home (e.g., interactive whiteboards). Finally, it is critical to make sure that members working remotely do not feel isolated or less involved, thus rethinking how the community itself engages."

Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON

7. Promoting engagement, strengthening involvement and sense of belonging

To value participation and contribution within an internal corporate Community, it's essential to reflect on the **sociological dynamics that foster engagement**. **Creating open and inclusive dialogue spaces**, where members feel heard and encouraged to actively contribute to a culture of collaboration and mutual support, facilitates the sharing of knowledge and resources, ultimately contributing to collective growth. **Expanding existing connections between the physical and virtual community**, as well as creating new communities starting from virtual ones, further strengthens member engagement and involvement.

The levers to act on through Communities? **Sense of belonging and group identity, recognition and rewards, empowerment, and ambassadorship**.

"It is necessary to make the members of a Community feel important, to entrust them with a valuable purpose and the tools to achieve it. In this framework, I believe it is decisive to act on openness to the new, on the courage to try one's hand at new experiences, on new skills that go beyond the predefined role, on the desire for something different and of which to be a cog in a higher, but always concrete, tangible design."

Valentina Uboldi, Eni

"Certainly, it is essential to foster a sense of belonging and make community members feel part of a group that shares common interests, goals and identities.

(...) Giving recognition and rewards can also lead community members to stay engaged and willing to take part."

Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON

"I would also talk about group identity, to be stimulated through communication, socialization and team building initiatives, and active participation and involvement, which we enhance through collegial decisions, participatory projects and recognition of contributions."

Davide Ciullo, Snam

"A corporate social network provides a virtual space for sharing ideas and resources, promoting community activities and events, engaging a wider audience and facilitating networking and exchange. Examples are the Superheroes group (point-of-sale figures active in promoting sustainability events and initiatives, a community that already existed before the birth of Workplace and found a common space for expression there) or the School of Leaders group (the training program dedicated to future Carrefour leaders)."

Isabella Pacifico, Carrefour

8. Measuring impact: assessing the maturity and health of a community

Evaluating the impact and value generated by internal Communities on the Business requires a holistic assessment that goes beyond the mere usage data of the virtual platform. When we talk about ROE (Return of Engagement), we mean measuring the value generated through activation, interaction, and commitment of internal and external stakeholders: a high ROE indicates a positive working environment where employees are motivated, collaborative, and oriented towards achieving corporate goals.

It is crucial to consider the primary objectives of the Community and assess its maturity and health through the **frequency and quality of interactions, in addition to the consistency of the content generated by these exchanges**. Only in this way can we get a complete indication of whether or not its "reason why" has been achieved.

"Monitoring is developed through a combination of key indicators of use and adoption of the virtual environments developed on Viva Engage (e.g., number of posts published, reads, comments, reactions etc.), but above all by considering the main objectives that substantiate the existence of the Community itself.

Alessandra Cappello, Unipol

In addition, we assess its maturity and health through the analysis of the quality of interactions, the consistency of content and the growth of the active user base. Based on what we gather, we actively support the development of effective editorial plans and incentivize peer participation by encouraging spontaneity in content creation."

"We monitor participation (% and rate of participation in meetings and exchange opportunities); the growth of participation (if planned - in other cases they are limited communities); the impact on business KPIs (e.g., with the introduction of projects designed and developed by the community itself); innovation and the community's ability to withstand external changes and organizational changes."

Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON

"Generally speaking it depends on the tools you use (...) For the Internal Comms Global Community we measure the achievement of the goals we have given, e.g.: constant participation in editorial meetings, creation of storytelling in Subsidiary Groups, adherence to and dissemination of Global campaigns, ability to engage with their management."

Valentina Uboldi, Eni

9. "When AI meets communities": the new frontiers of Artificial Intelligence

When discussing virtual communities, we cannot overlook the future developments of Artificial Intelligence and the potential benefits. The study of how AI can influence engagement and collaboration dynamics among corporate community members is an open topic, but several considerations are already being made.

There is certainly the theme of **valuing tacit and informal knowledge**, generated by experiences and practices learned in the field, then codified and formalized in corporate communities. AI can help synthesize and return such knowledge, creating a common and usable knowledge base within the company.

Artificial Intelligence will also enable achieving **dual objectives of automation (of processes, analysis, information retrieval...) and personalization (of content, approaches, and interactions)**, significantly increasing the added value for the employee and the company itself.

"Thinking about an AI that, ten years from now, is able to synthesize, group and reproduce in an easily accessible format (natural language) the knowledge layered and shared in communities, I believe is a huge asset for companies like ours, where almost a quarter of today's employees will be of retirement age in the next ten to twelve years."

Vittorio Verdone, Unipol

"AI will be able to help us better measure interactions in the community, to extrapolate meaningful qualitative KPI such as sentiment from language. I also think AI can bring new life to communities, innovate the way of being together, it can make us "play" and experiment with new approaches, and this will generate new curiosity, new motivation and desire to be part of the community."

Valentina Uboldi, Enel

"The implementation of artificial intelligence technologies in the Workplace community could lead to greater personalization, quality of content, efficiency in searching for information and automation of repetitive tasks, significantly improving the user experience and the overall functioning of the platform."

Isabella Pacifico, Carrefour

"AI can work in two main directions: automation and personalization. With respect to automation, AI can support the analysis of emerging data and sentiments, can categorize ideas, it can schedule events, collect sign-ups, and it can provide frameworks of business and world trends and tendencies on certain topics. With respect to personalization, however, it could provide community members with customized training paths, tools for acquiring specific skills, as well as examples of existing projects on specific topics."

Giovanna Di Bacco, E.ON

So What: corporate communities through the OpenKnowledge lens

Reflecting on corporate communities, we can now sum up some key elements. Specifically:

- Both during the launch phase of a Community and throughout its entire lifecycle, **it is crucial to never lose sight of the purpose for which a community exists and the value it brings to its participants**.
- **Organizational culture influences internal communication and collaboration dynamics positively (or negatively)** and consequently the company's predisposition to embrace Communities.
- **Having leadership open to change**, which advocates values of openness and collaboration and takes on the role of an agent of corporate culture, is a key element in determining the success of a community and generating returns in terms of productivity and motivation.
- **Community members must feel useful and important** and must feel legitimized to share insights and ideas knowing that they will be heard.
- **The supporting technology must primarily be an enabling factor**, allowing people to participate in the life of internal communities in a hybrid mode.

To close the loop, after learning from the experiences of our clients and collecting valuable insights and academic reinterpretations, we try to answer the question of all questions: why should an organization take care of its internal Communities? As OpenKnowledge, the answer can start from a critical reading of the first pillars of our **Open Manifesto**, a series of statements that tell our corporate culture and our way of designing the future.

We refer to "Openness to others," where **the culture of inclusion, accessibility, and the promotion of diversity** leads to the creation of environments where every person can feel welcomed and valued. In our Open Manifesto, we also emphasize how ecosystems are "drivers to Open new Opportunities": for us**, the creation and "nurturing" of synergistic relationships among people in the corporate ecosystem** open up new opportunities for innovation.

Finally, we always propose an approach that we define as "Open Culture," in which **adopting a culture of dialogue** prepares companies to embrace change and new perspectives, ultimately helping them achieve business results. Internal Communities, at least those born and grown under the auspices of the "foundations" outlined above, go precisely in this direction.

Driven by a clear purpose, enabled by technologies, fostered by hybrid connections, and by personal and cultural dynamics inherent in the company, **the employee immediately perceives the benefits of participating in the community, recognizes a new sense of belonging to the organization, and makes their voice heard** through the activation of cycles of continuous conversation and collaboration, assuming (as an individual and in their network) an active role in corporate life.

This white paper was produced in collaboration with CERC @IULM University.

Source from which the quotes were taken:

- [Marco Minghetti](#), Prolegomeni al Manifesto del Pop Management 14 – Collaborazione Pop. Le community aziendali: uno stato dell'arte, parte prima. 10 Giugno 2024, NOVA100 - Il Sole 24 Ore. *https://marcominghetti.nova100.ilsole24ore.com/2024/06/10/prolegomeni-al-manifesto-del-pop-management-13-collaborazione-pop-le-community-aziendali-uno-stato-dellarte-parte-prima/*

- [Marco Minghetti](#), Prolegomeni al Manifesto del Pop Management 15 – Collaborazione Pop. Le community aziendali: uno stato dell'arte, parte seconda. 13 Giugno 2024, NOVA100 - Il Sole 24 Ore. *https://marcominghetti.nova100.ilsole24ore.com/2024/06/13/prolegomeni-al-manifesto-del-pop-management-15-collaborazione-pop-le-community-aziendali-uno-stato-dellarte-parte-seconda/*