



# **Planning for Communities of Practice:**

## **A Guide for Model Systems Grantees**

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**Produced by:**

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# Planning for Communities of Practice: A Guide for Model Systems Grantees

## Introduction

This guide is intended to support model systems (MS) grantees in their efforts to engage stakeholders through communities of practice. Along with your fellow MS grantees, you are already part of an existing CoP with a shared purpose: research in the areas of SCI, TBI, and Burn injury. Your existing CoP uses various modes of communication: listservs, emails, conference calls, in-person meetings, and cross-collaboration among injury areas. Many members of the audiences for your work are also engaged in their own CoPs. Through linking the community of MS grantees with a constellation of audience communities, you have the opportunity to significantly enhance the relevance and broaden the reach of your research, bringing it closer to the lived experience of those who could inform, benefit from, and apply it.

There is tremendous potential to bring existing communities of practice into the circles of MS grantees to support your research and recruitment efforts and your priority planning. Connecting with CoPs may help you to define and plan your research, expose you to a pool of potential participants in research studies, or broaden the reach of MS research results.

In this guide you will find descriptions of a community of practice, including its purpose, participants, and modes of communication. Additionally, the guide offers step-by-step guidance on how to connect within an existing community of practice, identify what information you would like to share, what kinds of interactions you are seeking, preliminary questions you may have, and ways to track your engagement and evaluate the results of your efforts.

You can use the worksheet at the end of this guide to create your plan for CoP engagement. Please input your responses on a copy of the worksheet as you read through the guide.

In addition to creating this guide, the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center (MSKTC) provides technical assistance to help you plan and effectively engage with CoPs. For more information, please contact us at [MSKTC@air.org](mailto:MSKTC@air.org).

## Part I: Basics of a Community of Practice

### What is a community of practice?

A community of practice (CoP) is a set of relationships and ongoing interactions among a group of individuals with common interests. In other words, it is a group of people who meet to discuss a topic of common interest. For example, a professional CoP may involve clinicians who meet in person to share practices and address common challenges in treating patients. In this example, the CoP may meet monthly with a different clinician presenting a practice and challenges in treatment, and then the group would discuss how these challenges might be addressed. The focus of this group is shared learning. Additional resources such as research and online tools may enhance that learning and sharing. In a CoP, participants develop their own shared goals, agenda, and timeline, while the members of the group share leadership and

responsibility for each meeting. Also, the members will determine how long the CoP will continue. When the goals of a CoP are met, the participants may end the CoP or they may redefine a focus and goals and continue in a new direction. It is important to note that participants may join or leave the CoP at any time, and the size of the group may fluctuate over time. Although communication will occur electronically in an online CoP, the steps needed to establish goals and activities for the group remain the same.

There are many existing communities of practice whose membership includes people you may want to engage to strengthen your research in spinal cord injury (SCI), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and burn injury (Burn). Online communities of practice are likely to be most accessible to you and allow you a broader reach. Medical professionals, individuals with SCI, TBI and Burn, and their families and friends are all already regularly interacting over the Internet in forums to which you may be able to fruitfully connect. For example, as you see in the table below, the *PatientsLikeMe* website hosts communities for individuals with TBI as well for those with SCI. On Allnurses.com, practitioners in the burn injury area are linked.

**Table 1. Selected Sample\* of Existing Communities of Practice**

CoP Name	Participant type	Location (on- or off-line)	Type	Activity
PatientsLikeMe	Individuals with SCI	<a href="http://www.patientslikeme.com/conditions/271">http://www.patientslikeme.com/conditions/271</a>	Online forum and blogs	80 members
PatientsLikeMe	Individuals with TBI	<a href="http://www.patientslikeme.com/conditions/150">http://www.patientslikeme.com/conditions/150</a>	Online forum and blogs	368 members
Allnurses.com	Nurses working with Burn patients	<a href="http://allnurses.com/burn-nursing/">http://allnurses.com/burn-nursing/</a>	Online forum	571,885 members

\* The MSKTC has developed a list of online and face-to-face CoPs in the areas of SCI, TBI, Burn, and general health. Contact the Center for more information.

### Are CoPs always online?

CoPs are **not** always online. As noted in the definition above, a CoP is a community, not a location. A CoP might interact online, over the phone, face-to-face, or through some combination of these means. Social media has enhanced opportunities to collaborate asynchronously, but the availability of one-to-many social media does not replace the need for personal contact. This personal contact can be done by email, phone call, or in-person meetings. Fortunately, technology can enhance the ways in which we can collaborate. However, the heart of a CoP is its members who have a shared interest and are engaged in conversation and collaboration with each other.

### Who participates in a CoP?

A CoP may involve any number or type of individual. In Table 1, we see CoPs for individuals with an injury and a CoP of nurses. There are also communities of practice for family members, caregivers, other practitioners, and researchers. Anyone can participate in a CoP; however, your choice of CoP in which to participate will depend on your personal or professional goals. There are several types of groups that MS grantees will want to interact with, including individuals with an injury, family members/caregivers, nurses, doctors, physical therapists, and researchers

in the field of that injury area, general practitioners who treat individuals with an injury after they leave acute care settings, advocacy groups, and policymakers.

### **How will we know if our participation in a CoP has any results?**

The indicators you will want to track will depend on the goals you set for engagement through a CoP. In many cases, you may seek to increase the frequency of two-way communication with stakeholder groups. In this case, some basic indicators might include:

- Number of meetings of the CoP (if in person)
- Number of participants in the CoP
- Number of replies to or comments on your online posts
- Ratings of content you contribute (if the technology used has a rating feature)
- Number of messages (emails, IMs, tweets, etc.) exchanged between you and community members
- Number of downloads from the MS website
- Number of visits to the MS web pages

As you can see, some measures can be used for online or in-person interactions. Creating a simple tracking mechanism to capture “contacts” and other indicators is helpful and can be done in Excel or other software.

However, you want to know more than just numbers—you want to know whether the information you shared with consumers is useful to them or used by them and how. And as you gather input from consumers, you want to let them know how the information they have shared with you is being used by the Model System. For these data, you need to consider what qualitative information you would like to gather. Analyzing the content of members’ posts to the community is an easy place to start: Do they mention your research and your participation in the community? Are they positively disposed to it? Do their contributions suggest that they are applying what they are learning from you or that they feel you are being responsive to their needs in your planning?

## **Part II: Step-by-Step Guide to Getting Started**

### **How do I begin a CoP with other interested participants?**

This guide presents ways to enter into relationships with established groups to create a community of practice around topics of interest to you. The MSKTC has identified a number of online and face-to-face communities of consumers that exist to discuss issues of health care generally, or specifically about SCI, TBI, or Burn. We present establishing your presence in an existing CoP through seven steps:

- Step 1: Goals
- Step 2: Audience

- Step 3: Mode and Frequency
- Step 4: Identifying MS Information to Share and How
- Step 5: Identifying Questions for Participants
- Step 6: Feedback and Measurement
- Step 7: Sharing Results

The remainder of this guide will walk you through activities using the Worksheet in Appendix A to create your CoP engagement plan. Pull out the Worksheet when you are ready to begin and read on.

### **Step 1: Goals**

Your first step will be to determine your goals for a CoP, which will help to clarify whether you would like to engage with an injury-specific or a general health group, and whether you would like to find (or create) an in-person or online group.

#### ***Sample goals:***

- Engage consumers in our Center’s research projects
- Get feedback on materials we develop
- Get input to our research topics for study
- Recruit advisory committee members
- Disseminate information developed by our Center and other MS grantees

You should identify 2-5 goals for your CoP. These goals will drive your engagement throughout the process and will inform the types of information you share and the questions you ask of other participants. Note that your goals may change over time.

### **Step 2: Audience**

Both setting your goals and selecting your audience go hand in hand at the start of your planning. Which audience do you intend to engage with? It depends on your goals. For example, if your goal is to help clinicians to improve their evidence-based practices, your audience may be a CoP of therapists. If your goal is to recruit participants for your research studies, then your audience may involve a CoP of individuals with an injury or patients in general.

#### ***Sample audience:***

- People with SCI
- Caregivers of persons with SCI
- Family members of persons with SCI

In this example, we have listed 3 distinct but related types of participants. In fact, you may find that existing CoPs tend to serve only individuals with an injury, or primarily family members of a person with an injury. To begin, select just one primary audience and note that you may expand reach or ask those CoP participants to share information with secondary audiences.

### **Step 3: Mode and Frequency**

Now that you have determined your goals and primary audience, how would you like to interact and how frequently? The MSKTC has gathered a list of online and face-to-face CoPs for you to peruse, or you may have identified another CoP. Select the mode that will allow your staff to best interact and then determine how frequently staff will be required to participate in the CoP.

#### ***Sample mode:***

- Join an existing online community of practice on PatientsLikeMe that has 80 patient members

#### ***Sample frequency:***

- Two staff members join the group
- Each staff member checks discussions weekly
- Each staff member posts at least once per month

Note that you may need to change the frequency or number of staff involved, depending on how engaged the participants are. You may also decide to join more than one group, or participate in both an online forum and an in-person group nearby. Also, the MSKTC staff will be available to help with initial contact to CoP moderators to introduce the MS grantees, if requested.

### **Step 4: Identifying MS Information to Share and How**

As you plan your approach to engaging in a CoP, consider what specific information you want to share, how you want to interact with participants, and what questions you may have. Remember—joining an existing group will require some time to build relationships and trust with the group members. Allow time for interactions among the members and your staff to grow. First, your MS project staff will introduce themselves to the group. Then, your staff will find ways to interact with the group periodically that advances the goals of the community while also advancing those of your research. It is important when joining a CoP, as with any new group, to get familiar with the community including the individuals who participate, their goals, and the common ideas and information that they share. As you engage more frequently and over time in the CoP and build trust with members, you may begin to influence those discussions and goals of the group.

***Sample information to share:***

- Two staff members will introduce themselves and describe their work for the MS, what is a Model System, how to reach us, and our goals of learning from patients about their questions and concerns to help inform the research we are doing
- We have several factsheets on SCI topics that we will share
- We will generate interest in joining our advisory committee by sharing what the committee does, time commitment, and some results we've had

***Sample interactions:***

- We will "listen in" on conversations by lurking to learn what patients are talking about
- We will learn who the frequent posters are and how people respond
- Based on comments, we will link to factsheets or other resources we know about to build our reputation as a reliable source for members
- If questions come up that another MS can answer, we will bring those questions to the MS listserv.

It may seem unnecessary to specify exactly what types of interactions you will engage in; however, having clear expectations for your staff means that they will know how much time to spend given the limited resources and heavy workload of your team. In addition to interactions as shown above, you may also build in some reporting time at your regular team meetings to share the results of your staff engagement.

**Step 5: Identifying Questions for Participants**

In addition to sharing information and resources that your MS can offer, you may also have questions that you would like to ask of the CoP members. These questions might reflect current research, or ideas and interests you have for future research. Or, your questions might relate to whether clinicians use a particular evidence-based practice, for example. Consider your questions and whether you can ask a question every few weeks, or if you would like to develop a brief survey for members to complete.

***Sample questions for participants:***

- We plan to ask the CoP members some questions about pain management
- After a month or so of active participation, our staff will start to ask questions and gather feedback
- As we see interest building, we will ask members if they would be interested in participating (if they are local; near another SCI MS as a referral) in our study or on an advisory committee.

Continue to use the worksheet to identify your next steps.

## Step 6: Feedback and Measurement

Gathering feedback from participants of the CoPs can help make the CoPs more useful. In addition, to determine the effectiveness of your CoP activities, you will want to measure the results of your engagement in some way that is helpful to you without creating undue burden on your research team. Consider the various metrics your MS would like to have in hand at the end of six months. You will want to gather both quantitative and qualitative measures where possible.

### **Measures:**

Examples:

- Number of participants in the CoP at the start and end of the 6-month period
- Number (or types) of replies to our postings in the forum (or level of interest in topics and documents we bring to the face-to-face groups)
  - *Save quotes and comments from participants to help us share and understand the use and usefulness of information we have provided*
  - *Save comments and input to our research agenda*
- Number of telephone or email contacts outside the online forum to our MS center requesting information
- Number of participants who responded to our request for study participants
- Number of participants who responded to our request for advisory committee participants
- Number of visits to the MS web pages (if analytics available)
- Number of click-throughs for references to our websites and online publications, through using a link shortener such as \*bitly.com to track URLs distributed via email or social media (or number of requests made for information through face-to-face and phone contacts)

\*bitly.com – MSKTC staff will provide a brief tutorial on using bitly.com to MS grantees. Bitly.com links may be included in emails (or other types of electronic messages) and then tracked through the bitly.com website to determine how many recipients of that email clicked through to view online resources. This simple, free tool may also show how far the communication has progressed. For example, PatientsLikeMe: SCI has 80 participants, but my email to this group led to 140 click-throughs to my web page, which may mean that the emails I send are reaching a broader audience (i.e., members are finding them valuable enough to forward them to others).

In addition to sharing information from your MS and gathering input from the CoP, you will want to share back with the group new knowledge or projects that reflect their interest or input. For example, if you ask the group to participate in a brief survey, then plan to share results. If you have questions related to your research, reflect on how the CoP's input has helped to shape your thinking or link to results of your work. Where possible, share preliminary results and other information to enhance your role as a source of useful, reliable information.

## **Step 7: Report on Activities of CoPs**

The MSKTC staff will contact you monthly to learn about progress and to hear any stories you may share about successes and challenges. We will be available to help with initial contact to CoP moderators, collect information from all the MS grantees involved, and create a 6-month report on progress for NIDRR. This report will include any data that you are able to collect and report—both quantitative and qualitative measures as identified through your plan. In addition, we will interview one person from your team who is leading the engagement with CoPs for your Model System. We are interested in your staff reflections and impressions of your efforts—in particular, we would like to know whether the CoPs have a new or greater understanding of the MS and the work that you do.

Your responses will help inform NIDRR and other MS grantees about the potential for outreach and engagement through CoPs, contribute to the broader growing research around CoPs, and help us to refine this guide.

## Worksheet: Planning for Communities of Practice

Use this template to create your plan for establishing linkages within an existing CoP. Refer to the Guide for examples in each area below. Contact [MSKTC@air.org](mailto:MSKTC@air.org) and reference “Communities of Practice” with questions.

**Goals:**

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**Audience:**

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**Mode:** (see list of existing online and in-person groups provided by the MSKTC)

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**Frequency:**

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**Information to Share and How:**

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**Interactions:**

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**Our Questions for CoP Participants:**

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**Feedback and Measurement:**

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**Sharing Results:**

Date/time for calls with MSKTC staff: \_\_\_\_\_

Our tracking process to record progress will be: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Support Needed From MSKTC Staff ([msktc@air.org](mailto:msktc@air.org)):**

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