The Public Involvement community of practice at Health Canada

A case study

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Executive summary

The story of the Public Involvement (PI) community of practice at Health Canada demonstrates how a department can approach the difficult challenge of building a strategic capacity across a complex organization. The team of the Secretariat in charge of the initiative decided that the most important task was to convene a department-wide community through which practitioners could learn from each other. Such a community-of-practice approach makes it possible to focus on a key department-wide capacity without the need for a correspondingly large formal structure. Rather it reaches across formal boundaries to build on shared passion and create peer-to-peer relationships among practitioners. This enables them to develop their collective and individual expertise, and thus to "manage" the knowledge they need for themselves.

To date, the community has produced surprising results, including a toolkit, which has gained a reputation not only within the department, but also across the federal government and beyond. Members report that their participation has made a substantial difference in their lives. But cultivating such a thriving community of practice in a bureaucratic organization is an art. It depends on a sense of belonging rooted in shared inquiry, truthfulness, and dialogue. Leaders can only foster these qualities through their own example since participation is voluntary. The work of the team illustrates several key elements required for successful community leadership. On the institutional side, the Secretariat team is also part of the hierarchy. This hybrid function provides the community with organizational sponsorship. It helps integrate the community in the organization while creating the space for the community to be generative. It provides the resources and the voice necessary for the community to reach its full potential.

The PI community is a work in progress. The challenges it still faces include expanding its reach, especially in the Regions, increasing its visibility, integrating the online component in the life of the community, and finding a voice in the strategic discourse on public involvement. Nonetheless its story is already worth telling. Its offers a useful window on the knowledge organization of the future and on the challenge of bringing it about in the public sector.

Introduction

How do you go about developing a strategic capacity across a large government department such as Health Canada, which has a number of "branches", focused on various aspects of health, as well as regional offices across the country? Challenges of this kind are common to many organizations. This case study documents an unconventional but promising approach to building strategic capacity. It is the story of the Public Involvement (PI) community of practice at Health Canada—a community among staff whose work includes public involvement and who have joined forces to develop their individual and collective expertise.

A community of practice is a group of people who have in common something they need to know how to do—a shared "practice"—and who interact regularly to learn together how to do it better. These people may not work together on a regular basis, but they can benefit from learning how others are approaching situations similar to theirs. Their involvement in their community is based on interest in the topic, not on formal affiliation. Their relationships are collegial rather than hierarchical. A community of practice is thus an ideal structure to foster learning across organizational boundaries. Such communities have always existed informally in organizations, but their value often goes unrecognized. This is the story of a work team that recognized this value and took intentional steps to illuminate and leverage it. Charged with the task of developing the public-involvement expertise of Health Canada, the team has adopted the strategy of cultivating a community of practice across the organization.

Their story is not finished, but it is already worth telling. It will benefit practitioners and managers in Health Canada and in other public-sector organizations who are looking for effective ways to develop strategic capacities. An in-depth look at a working example can help address some important questions:

> Is a community of practice a viable approach to capacity development in the public sector?
> What is significant about this approach? What does a community of practice look like? How does it build organizational capacity?
> How to go about developing one? What are the key ingredients of success?
> What are further challenges and opportunities?

To set the context, I briefly recount how the formal process of establishing a secretariat led to the formation of a community of practice. I go on to describe the key elements of this community and how they constitute a unique approach to capacity development. I then explore the ingredients that seem critical to the community's success so far as well as the challenges that remain. I conclude with reflections on what this means for an organization such as Health Canada.

To bring the story to life, I combine the voices of community leaders and members with my own observations, impressions, and analysis.

How did this community get started?

The story began in a usual fashion with an executive mandate. In response to the emphasis on citizen engagement articulated in the 1997 Speech from the Throne, the Department of Health Canada decided to create a Corporate Consultation Secretariat (CCS). It was intended to be a corporate center of excellence preparing policy, coordinating consultation efforts, managing stakeholder relationships, and providing a capacity-building function to public-involvement practitioners in the branches and regions. A formal Inter-branch Consultation Group led by two executive champions conducted a needs assessment that yielded four areas of focus:

> Developing a departmental policy for public involvement
> Producing a toolkit of practical resources for conducting public consultation
> Creating a mechanism for coordinating consultation events and access to stakeholders
> Organizing an annual conference on public involvement

Four working groups were formed with staff drawn from different branches. Without enough resources to commission the work to external consultants, the CCS staff person tasked to lead the project decided to write up a first draft of a policy statement. She used the knowledge of the practitioners in the working groups as well as information available in public documents. She also had strong support from the senior advisor for consultation at the Privy Council Office, who connected her with practitioners in other departments via the Federal Consultation Network. A participant in the working groups reflects on this direct involvement of practitioners:

> "We did have some help from the consultants, but at the end of the day we had to write it up ourselves because we were the only ones who could make sense of this. I thought that was really interesting."

They devised a model distinguishing between five levels of public involvement, from information sharing all the way to full partnership. This model still guides the work of the community today. Meanwhile, the working group focusing on resources was gathering information about case studies, tools, and techniques. This toolkit was then merged with the model of the policy statement to become the first draft of what is officially known as the "Health Canada Policy Toolkit for Public Involvement in Decision Making," or simply "the Policy Toolkit." The draft was then refined through a series of workshops. The executive champions took the toolkit on the road for comments and refinements by practitioners in the regions, sessions were organized at the Learning Center, and a video was made featuring the Deputy Minister who introduced the Policy Toolkit and encouraged uptake of the policy.

When it was finally approved and distributed, the Policy Toolkit was received very enthusiastically both within the department and beyond. It has been recognized as a valuable resource by the Privy Council Office, by other federal departments, and even by international institutions such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Originally compiled by and for practitioners within the Department, the Policy Toolkit has gained a wide reputation and CCS continues to receive requests for copies both nationally and internationally.

In the meantime, CCS had become formalized as a secretariat, with positions for a director, a senior advisor and an administrative assistant. Within 2 years the Director General (DG) had increased the Secretariat's resources and replaced the outgoing Director with the Senior Advisor, a seasoned public involvement practitioner, believing her experience would serve her well in reaching out to other practitioners across the department.

> "(The Director) came in and saw that many people were doing public involvement all over the department. The impetus would have to come from them. This is something that she did that was different. We were the experts, which we did not recognize. We could share what we knew, what we did by rote. We did not recognize the value of what we knew."

The early history of CCS pointed in the direction of inclusiveness and collective learning. The involvement of practitioners in all phases of compiling the Toolkit had been critical to its success; they knew what was needed and contributed knowledge from the strength of their own experience. Early on, the original inter-branch consultation group had decided to continue meeting as what became known as the Public Involvement Network Committee (PINC). They wanted to share experiences and help coordinate public involvement activities across the department. They did not want to be a formal committee reporting into a committee structure or a task force fulfilling a formal mandate. In fact, when a management committee did suggest that they become a formal committee reporting to them, they spoke out against losing the essence of their informal network. They wanted to remain a self-governed group providing an ongoing forum for open exchanges.

People wanted to work together and learn from each other's experience in practice. This is the perspective that the Director had in mind as she went about hiring a team to work with her. She would make sure that the candidates she selected were a good fit for a community-oriented approach and were practitioners themselves, with on the ground experience in public involvement work. The three people hired come from different backgrounds and contribute complementary skills, yet share common values around community development.

Their first task together was to further articulate how they were going to proceed and invest their energy. From two consultants they hired to help them think through a working model, the team heard about the community of practice approach and started reading about it. They realized that the model captured the essence of what they wanted to accomplish. Many elements of a community of practice were already in place. They could continue to convene the PINC meetings, revive the old speaker series, and further develop resources through the community. A good number of the people who had participated in the early working groups were still committed to the process.

> "Once we understood the spirit of what was going on, we amplified it. It was not an intervention, rather just amplifying."

Having a language allowed the team to be more explicit about its strategy. CCS would undertake to foster more intentionally the development of this emerging community of practice while honoring its inherent dynamics as a living, social system.

> "We did not change course, but we were more comfortable to let the community evolve, because it did validate a lot of our approach. It gave words to what we were doing. It gave us more confidence to do it a lot better."

What does it mean to take a community approach?

The community model remains true to the goals set up in the mandate, but with a subtle shift in focus. It promotes public involvement throughout the organization without the need for a correspondingly large bureaucratic structure. It builds on people's personal interest in the topic rather than on hierarchical mandates. And it places the emphasis on bringing practitioners together to develop collective capacities rather than on an elite center of excellence producing knowledge for others to apply. The model parallels good work in public involvement. It invites voluntary participation, connects people through dialogue, and engages them in mutual learning on issues they care about.

Stewarding a strategic domain of knowledge

One of the goals for establishing a secretariat was to promote public involvement in the department:

> "They have been able to elevate the profile of public involvement in the department, and that's a really good thing."

As the community promotes PI as a strategic domain of knowledge, it becomes a rallying point for people who are working on related projects, but who have not yet connected with each other because they work in different silos. A community of practice gives visibility to its domain by networking practitioners across organizational units, not by claiming a territory. People remain affiliated with their own units. They do not have reporting relationships in the community. Cultivating a community is thus not about empire building. It is about connecting people by creating a space for them. It calls on their identity as practitioners. It enables

them to take charge of their learning. In this manner it legitimizes interest in the domain across the organization without focusing on turf battles.

The growth of the PI community was not without struggles. You cannot shepherd such a broad, innovative initiative without awakening some suspicion and encountering some resistance. Rather than engage in turf battles, however, community leaders took the path of openness and collaboration. In their invitation to shared learning, they remained focused on the practice, on the needs of practitioners, on enabling meaningful exchanges among them. This approach has paid off and members from different branches now participate fully in the community, while maintaining a sense of their own unique capacity and continuing to offer their own services.

Practitioners usually care about the quality of their work more than about organizational boundaries. By bringing practitioners together around a domain they care about, a community promotes this domain across a large organization without having to become embroiled in changing organizational boundaries.

Cultivating a broad-based community across the department

Health Canada employees are used to being placed on task forces and working groups. In contrast to this tradition of mandated work, participation in the PI community is purely voluntary. Members feel free to participate in the meetings they find interesting and even within a given meeting, to come for the part they care about:

> "I can get my stuff there and get some good thinking. It was a good investment of my time. I would just stay there for the items I wanted to hear. I felt free to come and go. That was really nice."

Members insist that this is one of the most significant characteristics of the current community. They join because they care, not because someone told them to. And they know that others are there because they care, too.

> "I think the secret is the idea of people being there because they want to be there. They all want to be there. You can take this as an operating principle. This would have been quite heretical a few years back. But bureaucracies have to learn to support this and allow time for people to work in this way. People need to communicate."

It is therefore important for managers at all levels in the organization to recognize and support this kind of involvement, and indeed most members of the PI community reported that their managers knew about their involvement and recognized its value.

The voluntary nature of participation holds the community to a stringent discipline, which does not apply as much to mandated task forces: the community has to create value for its members so they will keep participating. It has to serve their interest and build on their passion. To many members, the community has become the primary locus of exchange:

> "I could say there is one indicator of success for the community: when I think of distributing something or of someone to ask, PINC comes at the top of my mind as an avenue to spread the information, with PI or related issues."

Of course, different members have different needs and expectations because they have different levels of involvement in the domain. PI is the main preoccupation of some HC employees. For others, it is something they have to do every few years. For others still, it is something they just have to understand enough to be able to advise policy makers.

The structure of community activities is meant to serve multiple constituencies with different levels of involvement in PI.

For the core members, the team started several working groups to address hot topics and build additional material for the Policy Toolkit.

The monthly PINC meetings have become the regular meetings of the community. They are for practitioners actively engaged in PI work and provide an open forum for free-flowing exchange. These practitioners enjoy the regular contacts and open conversations with colleagues, and they benefit directly from hearing what others are doing and learning. This need is so deeply felt that several Branches and Regions have created their own groups that meet and link to the broader community.

The Speakers Series takes place every other month and receives wide publicity. These events attract a larger number of people who are lightly involved and attend when a topic is of relevance to them. Invited talks also infuse the community with new thinking by bringing in outside perspectives as well as new faces.

And finally the newly developed website is open to any Health Canada staff who asks for an account. It gives access to the community's documents and supports interactions among practitioners through online discussions of hot topics.

The goal of building a broad-based community across branches differs from offering a centralized advisory service. CCS has not abandoned the idea of consulting services. It is still important to be involved with clients and to be in touch with the problems they face. But there is a figure/ground shift. Now the CCS team considers convening the community by networking and connecting people to be its primary responsibility and advisory services are seen as contributing to this goal. For instance, if someone requests some help, the team will strive to connect that person with someone who is using a similar methodology or facing a similar situation.

> "There are also the clients we serve who benefit. We are able to give them the resources from the community. We spend maybe

one or two hours advising a client. Then we can hook them up with someone who has done the same methodology. Maybe we become obsolete."

There is no indication that the team is becoming obsolete, on the contrary, but the open way in which they consider this prospect is indicative of their mindset. If your primary focus is to provide a consulting service, you want to remain at the center. You strive to be seen as the source of knowledge and you want people to keep turning to you. If you are building a community, requests for help are another opportunity to weave the community together and strengthen the network. It takes a different mindset to do this kind of work. As organizations increase their focus on communities, this mindset will need to be recognized as essential to the job definition of those who are to take leadership in the process.

Engaging practitioners in developing their practice

Through constant networking, the PI community encourages practitioners to help each other in their work. Having the opinion of a whole community gives members more confidence in their approach:

"One thing I was struggling with was how to get stakeholders involved in our consultation project. Should we use financial rewards for that? I brought the topic to PINC and we had a good discussion. Everybody pitched in. What we came to was what I had hoped: No, we should not pay people, just expenses."

As one community member puts it:

"It is a deep support system. After the phone call, if someone says help, I'll drop everything and help and stay late. I hope we absorb newcomers and they can get the same benefits."

But the development of the practice takes on more collective and intentional forms. The Policy Toolkit had been instrumental in pulling the community together. It gave it a common language and a view of the domain. It also gave it an identity in the organization. It contained a set of models and useful tools that made the practice visible. And perhaps most importantly, it was itself a product of the community.

Further work on the practice continues this tradition of developing tools for practitioners by practitioners. As a way to update and expand the Toolkit, the community is forming working groups that address new topics to be included. Members volunteer to participate in these working groups. One or two members of the CCS team take a leadership role, and in some cases a consultant is hired to do the writing. Still the basic content development is done by the practitioners in the working group.

So far, three working groups have been started. The first is creating tools to evaluate public consultation. The second is devising a learning strategy for people who need to develop their PI skills. The most recent addition is the tools working group. It is a response to the need to have short tools to put on the website for people who want a quick document about a specific question they have. What these occasional practitioners need most are quick tip sheets that will help them get started, unlike PI specialists who need all the depth of an extensive piece like the evaluation manual produced by the evaluation working group. .

> "We focused a lot on the core group. We worked with them to develop the pieces to serve the rest and populate the site. But then we had an epiphany. It is all in a format appropriate for the core group. It is appropriate for people with this kind of depth and commitment. We recognized that most people need something much simpler. The tools working group is preparing easy 1-2 page pieces for people who just want to take it, for instance, a one-pager on what a consultation will cost me."

These occasional practitioners do not want to learn from a treatise. They need small pieces of instruction that will let them get into action as quickly as possible so they can learn by doing. What is remarkable here is that the community has now reached a level of maturity at which more advanced members can start to pay attention to the needs of its more peripheral members.

Is there a secret ingredient?

Because the community approach is distinct from business as usual, it is worth exploring what it really takes to do this kind of work in an organization like Health Canada. The success of CCS so far reflects a complex set of conditions, but three key elements stand out: the community spirit they foster, the style of their leadership, and the subtlety of their hybrid role in the community and in the organization.

Community spirit

The first thing to appreciate is the spirit of community that creates a container for a high quality of collective inquiry among members. This community spirit reflects fundamental working principles that the team derived from their own experience in public involvement—inclusiveness, transparency, open dialogue, and working with people's realities.

The PINC meetings are a good example of the atmosphere that the community is trying to foster. New participants are often surprised by the candidness of exchanges:

> "We had a fellow come in. He was excellent and told stories about what went well and not. You don't hear this often. He was willing to say 'this really went wrong'."

When you come in, the room setup may include music playing, a candy bucket, and rocks or flowers. These elements suggest to participants that this is a different kind of environment. The relaxed atmosphere makes one feel welcome,

but it is not the relaxation of carelessness. On the contrary, it is an invitation to care. Here we care about the quality of the relationships and the quality of the work. There is no pretense. This is not a place for organizational posturing. Here, you can be yourself. You can bring your concerns for the work, your frustrations with the obstacles you meet, your impatience with systemic barriers. Here, we understand that public involvement is hard work. Everyone has a scar. Nobody is sailing through. Nobody knows it all. We all recognize that practice is difficult, but that the only satisfying attitude is to embrace this difficulty together. We are all learners.

> "We embrace complexity and problems. We don't react to problems. We view them as something to inquire and learn about. We like to talk about problems. In other meetings, you talk about problems and you are asked to shut up."

Listening engenders trust and trust leads to truth. At a PINC meeting I attended, one new participant (I will call him Harry) started to talk about some internal policy barriers he encountered in his work.

> "At the meeting, when Harry talked about [XYZ] regulations, he is a strong-spirited person and it is interesting to reflect on how he came into the room. He looked around, and then he got going. Wow, I found the right place."

Harry had been hesitant at first, but soon realized that this was a place where telling the truth was valued. This experience was a real inspiration for him.

> "For us it is truth. We value truth and people feel that they can speak the truth. That's what Harry was testing out. He would go deeper as people let him. His problem became a problem that we all faced. He became comfortable to talk about truth. The next day he was connected. He had asked for an account. He volunteered to be on a working group."

For the CCS team, this was an instance of how they try to work with people's realities:

> "He was grumbly, but we love the grumbly ones. Most people who do this are grumbly. They are the ones on the ground having to face the public. They live the inconsistencies. … He is the classic opposer. We embrace the opposer. Usually they are negative because they care. … We call this energetic Jujitsu. We take negative energy and make it positive."

The emphasis at PINC is on open discussion rather than on information transfer. The CCS team facilitates the meeting and there is an agenda, usually a main

topic and a few additional questions to be addressed. But there is also a lot of room for open conversation. Anyone with an issue can bring it up and engage the group. This open agenda invites participants to feel ownership of the process. It is not just work as usual. They are building a community of practice for themselves, even if it was originally an executive mandate. The spirit of the community makes it a special place for members:

> "All in all, the success they have had in creating a different culture: it's extremely successful. It sticks out in my mind. It is definitely a model that can be learned from."

Community leadership

Each member contributes to the spirit of the community, but the leadership of the CCS team is without a doubt one of the key factors making this possible. As I mentioned, community leadership probably requires a new job category in organizations, though it may be difficult to translate the essence of this leadership into the specific language of a job description. At any rate, no attempt to capture the attitude of the CCS team into a list of ingredients should take away from the irreplaceable personalities and intelligence they bring to their work. This is no recipe to be applied blindly. It is the kind of job that takes a personal engagement of one's being. With this caveat, here are some key observations about the team's style of leadership.

"Be the change you wish to see." First and foremost, the team is striving to live by Gandhi's famous phrase. They want to experience the kind of spirit they expect the community to have as well as the kind of relationships they expect good public involvement to foster. They have learned that when you are dealing with voluntary participation—as you do in both public involvement and community development—this "congruence" between means and end is essential. It creates trust and draws volunteers to become personally engaged with the same earnestness. Right now, for instance, the CCS team is exploring how to apply the practice of dialogue to facilitating conversations—suspending judgment, listening deeply, speaking with an authentic voice, and cultivating true respect. The dialogue approach is conducive to a collective understanding of the issues at hand, and thus has obvious benefits for PI work. To the CCS team, however, intentionally creating the conditions for true dialogue is not merely a technique. It is a stance to live by, something they strive to experience in their own work together. Living the dialogue approach genuinely has perceivable effects. As this community member reports, deep listening invites participation and truthfulness by valuing a person's perspective.

> "We sat around the table and I told them about my project from my point of view. I did not feel the need to sit there like a professional. I could tell them the real story about this file. This was good because sometimes when I talk about it, people look at me like I am from another planet."

Be inspired. The CCS team also makes sure that they nurture the inspiration that makes their work together personally engaging for them.   The people who come in contact with the team feel this personal engagement. They say that the

enthusiasm, joy, and genuineness are palpable, refreshing, and contagious. This is a comment you hear over and over again.

Be credible. The members of the CCS team are quite knowledgeable about public involvement. Their years of personal experience earn them the confidence of the practitioners, who feel they can trust their perspective.

Be available. They make sure they are available to answer questions, give advice, and direct people to others with useful information. They are perceived by community members as being "always available." This availability makes the community more present in the lives of these members.

Be smart with time. From the last observation, you would believe that they work 80 hours a week, but they insist on maintaining a good work/life balance. In a system full of urgent requests, they strive to keep some focus on the broader picture and leave some room to be creative and innovative. It is this sanity that attracts practitioners and encourages them to take a breath. Daily work may demand that they keep their focus on urgent matters, but in the community, they find an opportunity to reflect and deepen their understanding. Ultimately, this investment of time allows them to "work smarter."

> "Where does the time constraint come from? From the system and from our own choice. When I network, I offer people to go to coffee, and it seems like such an unusual thing. We spend more personal time and it is more successful than when it is more structured. We are modeling a new way to use time so it can be more productive."

Be facilitative. They are relentless networkers, but for the purpose of enabling connections among people rather that increasing their own visibility.

> "You never stop. The community work never stops. You are constantly networking."

They are fundamentally interested in helping people find their voice. They are expert facilitators. One of them is actually leading a facilitators network in parallel with the PI community. But again facilitation is not just a set of techniques. It is a lived experience:

> "I had this conversation about facilitating, why am I so into it. Some people do facilitation, they have their tools and tricks. For me it is being facilitative. It is being part of the group, making this synergy happen."

The point is to stimulate learning not so much by providing knowledge as by enabling people to learn from each other.

Be part of the process. They view the potential of the process as more important than the state at any given time. This is a crucial attitude, which is part of their orientation towards community—to trust the community process and become part of it as a way to foster it. This faith in the community process allows them to cultivate it without attempting to control it.

> "The community of practice model really became apparent to me because I'd be meeting with people over coffee and I knew enough people to connect people to one another. There was something bigger than just me."

Community sponsorship: hybrid roles and structures

Community does not come for free. The CCS team represents a substantial investment of resources and such investment requires sponsorship within the hierarchy that controls these resources. In this regard, the support of the Director General to whom CCS reports has been a key success factor. But sponsorship across the organization is also required because the community approach fosters horizontal relationships.

Community development in an organizational context is not achieved by ignoring the organization. The CCS team collectively represents a substantial amount of experience with organizational issues. The Director's experience at various levels within the system too is a critical success factor. When organizational tensions threaten the work of the community and the team responds by inviting collaboration among practitioners, their attitude is not one of naïve avoidance of the realities of the bureaucracy. Rather it is a careful process of keeping the focus on the work and on practice by navigating the system and being aware of its dynamics. You have to be strong in what you believe, yet detached enough to engage with the system. You have to be willing to speak the language of the system and find inventive ways to achieve your goals when you encounter structural barriers. You have to be persistent without being obstinate. The key again is relationships.

> "We do it through our relationships. We engage people in that process. I make sure they share my frustration. We help them see how crazy it is and they end up helping us more through the system. But it comes from the relationships."

Sometimes it is necessary to fulfill certain demands of the organization in order to create the conditions for community work:

> "We focus on the work and the work gets done. When we have to function within set timeframes, the timelines are sometimes sensical and sometimes non-sensical. What we are forced to do, we do."

In many ways, the CCS team is a hybrid entity that straddles the organization and the community structures. On the one hand, it has a place in the

departmental hierarchy. The Secretariat reports into a corporate Directorate. Each team member has a full-time position in the Department. The CCS has a mandate to build capacity for public involvement in Health Canada. This includes tasks and projects undertaken to meet corporate needs, such as working on a PI section for the Department's website or on coordinating stakeholder databases across the Department. These projects are driven by the system even though community members are invited to contribute. On the other hand, the community of practice is the primary vehicle for realizing the mandate. The team is fully part of the community, taking a leadership role by belonging to it, and using the resources of the Secretariat, in particular their own time, to support the development of the community.

To provide much needed sponsorship for the community, the team has found a way to live with the organization, helping it understand what the community is trying to do and finding support for the community whenever necessary. This double life is crucial because it connects the community to the organization while protecting it from it. On the one hand, it makes clear to community members that the organization cares enough to invest significant resources in a supportive infrastructure for the community to grow. On the other hand, it gives the community a voice in terms the organization understands. This function requires the ability to live in two worlds at once and to bridge between them.

So what's left to do?

So far, I have tried to convey the achievements of the PI community and the picture I have painted may give the impression that things are just too perfect. And of course, they are not. A lot of challenges remain, serious challenges, and along with them corresponding opportunities. Let me mention four of these challenges/opportunities pairs: the regions, the website, the strategic conversation, and the limelight.

Extend the community

At this point, the majority of active participants in the PI community are from the national capital region, at a rate as high as 85 percent. In communities of practice, it is natural to have various levels of participation, from a passionate core group, to active or occasional participants, to really peripheral members who mostly watch from the sidelines, but still benefit from the community. Yet, when participation levels reproduce a boundary that exists outside the community, such as the boundary between the national capital region and the other regions, this is usually a sign that some intervention is required.

There is of course a logistical challenge to involving the regions. Some members from the regions report staying away from meetings because they do not like teleconferencing in. The community has started to address these challenges. For

instance, CCS covers the travel expenses of regional staff participating in working groups. They have also developed some practices to facilitate participation in meetings by phone. They have purchased a wireless microphone for presentations so the speaker's voice carries better over the phone lines. They always have a team member present in the room ~~that~~ who explicitly assumes responsibility for minding people on the phone and facilitating their contributions. This way they have less risk of feeling marginalized. One day, they even tied a balloon to a speakerphone to remind everyone of a distant participant!

But there is also a deeper challenge to involving the regions, in part because of a sense of disconnect between Ottawa and the regions. For the community of practice to work, it is crucial that it not mirror this dynamic but on the contrary act as an antidote to it. The unique perspective and expertise of regional staff needs to be nurtured within a network that allows for both interregional and intra-regional community development.

The CCS team has started to run workshops in the regions and the response has been quite positive. Regional practitioners appreciated the opportunity to engage with people from Ottawa in a genuine dialogue. But it is going to take ongoing engagement and communication to create the necessary network.

The focus on the regions offers a number of opportunities. In some ways it is easier to connect people across branches in the regions because they are less in silos. They tend to work in the same building and have opportunities to interact. They often engage in projects together and deal with the same constituencies. The vision is to have a constellation of regional versions of the community. The process is already starting in a few regions. For now, the Ottawa team still acts as the connector between regions. Eventually, they hope that the local communities will develop direct connections to one another to form a rich network of local communities held together by a national community.

Enliven the online component

Early in the process of seeing the work of CCS as community building, it had become clear that in addition to the meetings and working groups, it would be essential to develop an online platform. This seemed particularly necessary to create stronger links with the regions. More generally, however, a website would give visibility to the community and make its work more widely accessible across the organization. It was to be interactive to allow members to communicate across distance and time and to serve as a dynamic space for resource sharing.

After considerable efforts, CCS has opened its Public Involvement Community Site (PICS). But the response to the website is still mixed. Some community members appreciate the community-generated nature of the site:

> "There is this big question about technology, the computer, going online. I am comfortable with technology. I am a policy researcher so I am used to going online to get what I need. Of course, having the info online is only as good as what the community puts in. Some parts are missing. … I consider it my community. I have been involved in PICS. It empowers employees to participate in

something that is self-generated. It is easy. You don't have to be part of a committee."

But PI practitioners tend to be very people-oriented and some are skeptical about online interactions. They want to make sure that the online platform does not become the primary focus of the community:

"The electronics dimension varies with individuals and some have been good. I have supported the e-component, but I function better and I learn better face-to-face. I am aware that for some people it is the reverse. For me, I have a hard time using it because of time. I use it but I should add to it a lot more. If someone calls and wants to have lunch I'll make time for it first. It is different strokes for different people, but I would be very upset if this became the only vehicle. It is an add-on vehicle."

The hope was to create a forum in which people can ask questions, get advice, and discuss important issues. One of the difficulties is to help people see PICS as more than a static website that provides access to information:

"People still think it's a one-way information flow, like an intranet. At first they do not think in terms of participation, just information taking."

There even seems to be a generation gap in the way people react to the system:

"When we talk with some younger people in government, they are familiar with this kind of tools and they go, wow, this is great. They let us know right away. We don't get this reaction from other people, who may still be getting comfortable with e-mail."

CCS has launched an awareness campaign with creative information packages advertising the site and a series of workshops in the regions to introduce the site. They have adopted new strategies for developing the site and its use. The first strategy is to populate the site with the kind of quick tools mentioned earlier for people who are not full-time practitioners and need specific guidance about issues they are facing. The second strategy is to focus on the working groups:

"The working groups are the hottest thing. They like to share their documents there. For them, it is really good that every thing is there. They appreciate the fact that they go to the site and have all the files there. It also makes them visible. The goodies are coming from there."

There are still design issues to make the site more user-friendly and information easier to find. But the main challenge is to make it shine with the same

community spirit as meetings. It is to make it an interactive platform that truly represents the community while remaining clear that it is not the whole community. Bringing this community spirit to the website is a real challenge.

Think strategically about the domain

Public involvement is a complex process that must include a number of perspectives. So far the community has been focused largely on the work and skills of PI professionals, but some members also aspire to a broader role for the community.

> "Citizen engagement is new, and as new waves of this come along, as demand and expectations for PI grow, the community will grow. What we will be involved in, is for people who do not do this full time, like I am, I am still learning and an advocate. If I become a manager or a policy person, the network should remain a resource."

These members see two directions in which the community needs to expand its scope: linking between PI and the policy development process and deepening the relationship of the organization with the public.

Having a community that develops a rigorous approach to public involvement can help strengthen the case for the benefits of PI to policy development so there is more consistent application of PI across the organization.

> "For many, the view of stakeholders is that we have already decided and consultation is for information out. A community can act as an advocate in this sense, arguing about the value of public involvement in the front end."

The community is also an opportunity to explore a new relationship with the public that would transform the meaning of public involvement:

> "Mutual engagement in thinking is as important as voting. … This is the next stage of thinking. To work with stakeholders who are passionate about the topic, you need a facilitative process to bring this forth. Instead of just going throughout the country and consulting in a big way, we want partners. We are one of several players. … If we represent a network, this is more powerful and more authentic."

Along these lines, some members are even musing about including the public in the community.

> "The boundaries do not stop at Health Canada. Then the public should be included. Our mechanisms of communication should not stop there."

This type of strategic thinking is only emergent and tentative at this point, but it is a sign of high maturity for a community of practice. At first, the community was

focused on connecting isolated practitioners and enabling them to further their art collectively. Now, these practitioners are also turning to the strategic question of what public involvement means for the organization. Such reflection by the community on its domain has a transformative potential both for the practice of public involvement and for the organization.

Increase visibility

The CCS team members joke that their lack of visibility has been a blessing in disguise. The Director General they report to has trusted their approach to capacity development. Her support has given them time, space, and resources to build a foundation for the community and develop a network of relationships. The PI community is now at the point where it will need increased visibility to fulfill its function.

> "We have to find ways to grow the community. It is not just a numbers game, but it is a bit of a numbers game. The more people we have, the more success we have at PI in Health Canada. I would never set a target. It is meaningless because we can only have the people who are willing. Now in PICS, for instance, we have 120-200 maybe. These are the people who want to be connected. A few years from now, if people know about us and join us, that means we are offering something valuable."

There are good reasons to believe that the PI community will gain increased visibility soon. Visibility and success could have a price, however, in terms of new demands and increased scrutiny. For instance, when managers consider the PICS website, one of the most immediate benefits they anticipate is the coordinating function of the calendar of PI activities around the department. But for this calendar to fulfill this function, people have to enter their events. Can CCS rely on a community model for such coordination? Or does this require a more formal mandate for participation?

> "What if there is no buy-in for PICS? People in this branch, everyone is busy. This calendar is there on this intranet. If you don't force people, they are not going to go there. That's the downside of PICS, convincing people that it is valuable."

And if the process does require a more formal mandate for participation, what effect will this have on the voluntary nature of participation that members seem to value so much? The same question applies to other coordinating activities such as the streamlining of stakeholder databases.

More generally, increased visibility, sustained sponsorship, and broader influence are likely to entail more focus on the community's ability to improve the quality of public involvement at Health Canada. Far from shying away from this challenge, the PI community is prepared to face it. The CCS has developed a PI Community

of Practice evaluation framework-, which will enable a more systematic account of the value that the community is creating for the organization. Still, will the system recognize how multifaceted this value is, with both tangible and intangible outcomes? Will it know how to integrate such a community into the organization while preserving the essential qualities that make it alive? Will it be able to embrace the strategic thinking that some members of this community are engaged in with respect to the meaning of public involvement for Health Canada and its ability to serve Canadians? All these are questions that confront a community as it becomes ready to move into the limelight of the organization.

And what is it all about?

In its capacity-development work, the PI community is applying the lessons and principles that come from good PI work: listening, holding a dialogic stance, building trust, addressing real problems, being genuine. This work takes exactly what it is meant to engender: genuine engagement, a collaborative spirit, a willingness to learn, trust in people, plus a good dose of organizational savvy to integrate the community into the organization while preserving its integrity as a community. Yet its significance could be overlooked if its story is not well understood.

Why is this work so significant? Why is it a story worth telling? Because it is about building a true knowledge organization. It is about enabling those who care about a domain to express their care through practical engagement in the development of their individual and collective capacity. It is about enabling the organization to be its best, sometimes in spite of itself, by seeing it as a complex living system, whose breath of life is the commitment of its people.

If the industrial model assumes that knowledge resides at the top of the hierarchy and employees are mere implementers, then the community approach turns this model on its head. In a knowledge economy, you have to entrust practitioners with the task of developing their practice. They are in the best position to develop the knowledge they need because their perspective is anchored in practice. For the same reason they are also in the best position to identify strategic directions in their domain and discuss the implications with senior officials. By putting the development of organizational capacities in the hands of practitioners, a mature community of practice will invite the type of broad strategic conversations that are emerging in the PI community.

This approach to developing organizational capacity has a transformational potential for organizations and for members. For the organization, it emphasizes a network of horizontal, boundary-crossing connections that complement the hierarchy of the formal organization. Developing a knowledge organization thus entails the ability to have these two aspects interact in productive ways. For members, taking charge of an organizational capacity entails a change in identity. One is no longer just a worker; one is now a knowledge manager, actively involved in directing one's learning as well as the community's collective learning. This shift in identity has the potential to change the meaning of work.

The PI community is a gem because it is starting to demonstrate very concretely what this shift in identity can achieve. It may be surprising to find such engagement in a bureaucratic context yet the spirit of meaningful engagement is definitely part of the PI community. Members say that it carries enough hope for them to suspend their cynicism. This is good news for a public-sector organization. Such organizations have a tremendous, though often underleveraged asset: the appeal of public service. Many people join public institutions with a calling to serve the public good. In these institutions, community work has the potential of resonating with the calling of public servants and reawakening their sense of mission.

Such reawakening is critical when the focus is on knowledge. An organization that is not intent on giving people a chance to express their care through personal engagement is not ready for the knowledge age. When you need people to produce knowledge, you need to involve their hearts because engagement of the heart is the font of knowledge and the source of creativity.

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

Appendix: Interviewees

I interviewed the following people in the course of writing this case study.

Wendy Atkin
Catherine Auger
Lance Beswick
Sylvie Cantin
Moffatt Clarke
Nicole Delisle
Angela Favretto
Timna Gorber
Tannis Grant
Kim Hannah
Corita Harty
Mary Hegan
Catherine Higginson
Marie Lalonde
Mary Jane Lipkin
Margie McDonald
Brenda Pichette
Joyce Racine
Tracy Schoales
Shari Silber
Kathryn Sullivan
John Topping
Sheila Watkins

Thanks to all of these interviewees for their time and their careful thoughts. This report is but a meager reflection of the fascinating conversations we had.