

## **Creating a Community of Practice for E-learning Professionals**

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<p>The objectives of this thesis project are to understand the user behaviour and development opportunities in Ireland in terms of E-learning and to design a community of practice framework which can be implemented and managed by the target organization of this study. The target organization which the study was conducted for, is located in Finland.</p> <p>The need for a community of practice framework as a knowledge sharing community was identified via research process. The actual research for the study was conducted in three phases, including initial exploratory research, online survey and 9 semi-structured interviews taking place in participating organizations' premises in Ireland.</p> <p>The study seeks to develop a community of practice design for E-learning professionals in Ireland with a neutral scope, so that both the target organization as a founder as well as members organizations will gain value via this community. The thesis work summarizes the development work done and provides detailed development plan, design and guidance for the future activities.</p> <p>As a result of this study, the target organization has been able to develop a structure and framework for the community work in Ireland, to start expansion process with business networks and to make decisions in terms of the future activities in the market. At the same time, the participating organizations involved in this study have gained both learning opportunities as well as have expanded their professional networks.</p>	
<p><b>Keywords</b> E-learning, communities of practice, knowledge management, knowledge sharing network</p>	

## Table of contents

1	Introduction .....	3
2	Background of the study .....	8
2.1	Definition of research problem and study objectives .....	8
2.2	Benefits gained from the community of practice.....	10
3	Conceptual framework and relevant theories.....	14
3.1	Literature review.....	14
3.2	Conceptual framework .....	15
3.3	Adapting theories of knowledge management into CoPs.....	17
3.4	Emphasis on external participation .....	19
3.5	Importance of relationships in CoPs.....	21
4	E-learning defined.....	23
5	Research phases and methodology .....	29
6	Research findings .....	35
6.1	Validity and reliability of the research .....	38
7	The scope of the development work.....	41
7.1	The meaning of knowledge sharing community .....	41
7.2	Designing the CoP for E-learning Professionals (EPN).....	44
7.3	Five natural stages of a community .....	46
8	Preliminary design for EPN Community .....	53
8.1	EPN Community practice: Activity plan .....	56
8.1.1	Knowledge sharing workshops.....	56
8.1.2	E-learning Seminars .....	59
8.1.3	Training sessions.....	59
8.1.4	Online meetings.....	60
8.1.5	Informal meetings .....	61
8.2	Activity rotation.....	61
8.3	EPN Community coordination .....	62
9	Implementation of EPN Community .....	66
9.1	The E-learning Seminar & Workshop in Dublin.....	66
9.2	Attracting members.....	67

9.3	Managing the community aliveness .....	68
9.4	The communicative strategy .....	68
9.5	Return on Investment.....	73
9.6	Overcoming community obstacles .....	76
10	Future opportunities .....	78
10.1	Co-operation with universities and research institutions .....	79
10.2	Multiplying communities across Europe.....	80
11	Conclusions and reflections .....	82
	Bibliography.....	86

## Appendices

Appendix 1.	Survey questions .....	93
Appendix 2.	Interview questions (onsite) .....	99
Appendix 3.	E-learning Seminar & Workshop agenda .....	101
Appendix 4.	Research website sample .....	102

## List of Figures

Figure 1.	Understanding local user behaviour, themes and questions .....	4
Figure 2.	Typical examples of learning network's practice .....	12
Figure 3.	Development of EPN Community conceptual framework .....	16
Figure 4.	Success estimation in mobile learning introduction plan.....	26
Figure 5.	Five stages of community .....	47
Figure 6.	The structure of a community of practice (CoPs).....	54
Figure 7.	Structure and interaction of different communities.....	80

# 1 Introduction

This study is supporting a Finnish company to establish and deploy E-learning community of practice in Ireland and to expand their networks in Ireland. The target company of the study is a leading developer of digital learning solutions and a provider of engaging, media-rich learning content solutions in Finland. They provide web-based and mobile solutions for various learning needs and contexts, including self-study, blended learning and on-the-job learning. Some examples of training programs and topics in which their solutions have been applied: management and leadership, well-being at work, corporate safety and security, sales, processes, ICT and vocational training in various topics.

The target company's customers include corporations in all major industries, public organizations, authorities, training institutions and universities. The organization is also intensively involved with many national and international development projects, EU-funded Lifelong Learning projects and technology development initiatives. During the operative years, the target organization has established an international marketing and cooperation network together with its international partners. This network gathers together leading experts in learning and technologies to pioneer new and innovative methods in learning design and -delivery. This existing network in this paper is called as "LD Pros Group" and the target company has been named as "Lexellence".

LD Pros Group focuses primarily on the European market, especially in Ireland and UK. The target company Lexellence has been involved in certain development projects in Ireland via co-operation with the existing partner network. Before this study, from Lexellence side there had not been created strategy for expanding business or networks in Ireland. However, as there is huge potential for E-learning in Ireland, Lexellence has been interested to strengthen their involvement in the market. This is how the need for this study was identified and via this study it was started to look for opportunities to expand their position in the market.

The objectives for the study were defined based on the needs of the Lexellence. By the time of defining the objectives for the study, the main challenge for the target organization in terms of strengthening operations in Ireland, was the lack of knowledge in terms of the local user behaviour and the E-learning specific needs. They already had gained some experience about the market via their existing co-operators, but no actual market research had been conducted. In order to be able to understand the market opportunities in Ireland, Lexellence wanted to gain more knowledge about the E-learning end user behaviour and decision making process in the market.

The local user behaviour could be understood better by focusing on the following questions in the market:

- What kind of key drivers can be identified in terms of E-learning development?
- How E-learning is used/utilized in organizations operating in Ireland?
- What kind of role E-learning plays in training practices and personnel development in the market?
- Can we forecast changes in the future E-learning development processes?
- How is E-learning managed in different type of organizations?
- Is there opportunity to co-operate in the market as a Finnish service provider?

Each of the themes relate to sub-questions as demonstrated in the below image:

Key Drivers	Utilization	Emphasis	Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of key drivers can be identified in terms of E-learning development in Ireland?</li> <li>• What is the main driver for using E-learning?</li> <li>• How the ROI is calculated?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benchmarking</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How E-learning is used in the organizations?</li> <li>• What tools and solutions are in place?</li> <li>• Where are they now in terms of maturity, knowledge and skills? Can we identify development needs?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of role E-learning plays as part of training practices?</li> <li>• Do the organizations have development plans in terms of E-learning?</li> <li>• Does the organizational culture affect the utilization of E-learning?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is E-learning managed in the organizations: via centralized management or individual business units?</li> <li>• How the E-learning environments are managed?</li> <li>• How do the organizations choose their service providers/partners?</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Understanding local user behaviour, themes and questions (Makkonen, 2012)

As a Finnish company, entering or expanding the business in any foreign market is always a challenge, if there is no physical presence in the country. Without physical presence it is more difficult to attract customers and the company easily stays “unknown”, unless investing heavily in their marketing activities. However, compared to other Finnish E-learning service providers regarding opportunities in the Irish market, the strength of Lexellence is that they have established a partner network that primarily focuses on the markets of Ireland and UK. This partner network, LD Pros Group, has been strongly involved in EU-funded projects in academic field; however, creation of strategy for business to business expansion has taken the back seat. The existing nature of involvement in LD Pros Group most likely contributes success in EU-funded operations, that primarily focus on R&D- and educational institutes’ as well as co-operation between these parties, but involvement and success in these projects does not necessarily boost Lexellence’s co-operation with companies operating in Ireland. Businesses have different focus and objectives for their E-learning practices compared to educational institutes and EU-funded ventures. Because of differences on the scope of these two fields, it is necessary to also have separately defined approach for each of them.

The lack of physical presence in the market could be simply solved by establishing an office with dedicated resources in Ireland. However, opening an office in Ireland, before having strong base of existing customers in the market, would be a financial risk for the target organization. Before moving business operations to Ireland it is strategically wiser to expand business networks in the country and to find potential customers in the market. One solution for this would be to join organized E-learning professionals’ networks in the market, and via this network to engage with local companies and third parties.

Joining existing networks in Ireland would have given Lexellence also an opportunity to benchmark their knowledge and solutions against the market. However, as a result of the exploratory research and qualitative interviews conducted in Dublin (Makkonen, 2012) it was found out that there did not exist any local networks in Ireland which would bring E-learning professionals from different industries together and provide

them with an opportunity to share their expertise. There could be found only networks that focus on E-learning development in educational institutes, and also clusters that focus on promoting E-learning service providers in the market. However, participating in academic network or E-learning service providers' cluster most likely would not bring additional value for Lexellence's market-related knowledge creation process neither wouldn't have made it easier to create relationships with the right end users.

For Lexellence's network expansion purposes in Ireland, the most important network was missing: A community of practice that would consist of E-learning professionals from different industries in Ireland and provide them with an opportunity to develop their E-learning related skills and knowledge by learning from each other. This information sharpened the scope of the study: If the network did not exist, could Lexellence establish one? As in all markets, there are several loose networks in Ireland which do not bring concrete value to the founder neither to the members, it was determined, that this network should have more strategic approach than being just a "nice to meet you" –type of network for people. Later during the study, it was identified that a community of practice would be the best basis for the network.

The final question created a scope for the study: *How to establish a community of practice for E-learning professionals in Ireland, so that it brings value both for the members but also for Lexellence and helps them to understand the market better?*

### **Structure of this study**

The process of the community of practice implementation is presented in this study by going through the different phases of the study including the action phases, literature review and applied theories; by explaining the design for the community framework and by creating a proposal for the future development work. The research questions and the objectives of the study will be defined as well as the relevant theories that have supported the entire process, will be discussed (chapter 2).



In Chapter 3 the conceptual framework and relevant themes will be discussed and defined as well as the chapter will briefly also describe the relevant themes that have been part of the literature review. The fourth chapter focuses on the definition of E-learning, which is the key domain for this development work. The study phases and methodologies have been explained in chapter 5, and is followed by a summary of the interview phase's key findings in chapter 6. The research findings have been analyzed in more detail in a separate report which has been shared with Lexellence. This report is confidential and provides the target organization with an understanding of E-learning related needs and key drivers among the organizations operating in Ireland. These E-learning development needs in the market are strongly relevant in terms of the focus of E-learning community of practice (E-learning professionals' network, later in this paper as EPN Community) in Ireland.

The meaning of knowledge sharing community as well as the scope of the development work is important to understand before creating the design for EPN community. These aspects have taken into discussion in chapter 7 (The scope of the development work), which is followed by the suggested preliminary design for the EPN Community (chapter 8) and the description of the actual implementation process (chapter 9). At the end some future development opportunities have been raised in chapter 10 and the actual development & implementation process has been reflected as a thesis process in chapter 11.

## **2 Background of the study**

This chapter provides an overview of the benefits gained from Community of Practice implementation and management work in Ireland both from the members and the founder organization (Lexellence) point of view. Before discussing the benefits, the definition of the research problems and study objectives are discussed in more detail. There are two research themes and they are in sequential order: The second question could be answered only when there were answers for the first one. At the end of this chapter, also relevant theories will be discussed and reflected against the study objectives. The sub-questions under the themes have been created based on the discussions with Lexellence and via identifying their needs and resources available for the development work.

### **2.1 Definition of research problem and study objectives**

The research problem could be narrowed into two themes and sub-questions:

1. Understanding the Market: E-learning utilization and the key drivers
  - How E-learning is utilized in the market and what key drivers can we identify?
  
2. Implementing and managing an E-learning professionals' network in Ireland
  - How to establish and manage a E-learning professionals' community of practice in Ireland which fulfils the following requirements:
    - Is organized and manageable
    - Creates value both for the members and Lexellence?
    - Possesses minimal financial risks for Lexellence
    - In the long run will cover the operational costs without external funding
    - Attracts E-learning professionals to join the community
    - Provides the network members with a neutral platform for knowledge sharing and networking

- Provides the target Lexellence with an “ownership” of the network
- Is scalable and has a great growth potential
- Is built based on framework that can be implemented in other countries in Europe

Both of the defined study problems relate to each other. The first part, understanding the market, relates strongly to the research phase which was conducted both via online survey as well as via onsite interviews. The research was aiming to provide Lexellence with an understanding of the user behaviour in the market from the decision makers’ point of view and to answer the following questions:

- How E-learning is used in different type of organizations?
- What tools and methods have been used?
- What kind of E-learning key drivers can be indentified?
- What level of knowledge and skills do these organizations have?
- Can we identify similar needs among these organizations?
- What kind of impact does organization’s culture have on E-learning utilization in Ireland?

The second study theme (*Implementing and managing an E-learning professionals’ network in Ireland*) with sub-questions relates to the target organization’s aim to strengthen their position in the market with minimum financial risks. The necessity of avoiding financial risks relates to the small size of the target organization and the current lack of possibility to hire resources for the full physical market entry, which would be both expensive as well as unprofitable for a long period of time, as during the time of the study the target organization did not have any corporate customers in the market. Entering the market by opening a branch in Ireland would require time and resources. Resources would be needed for example office management, HR and recruitment, financial operations, legal operations, marketing activities and customer engagement, consultation work as well as – first of all – finding customers.

Implementing the E-learning network in Ireland as a community of practice, later in this study also called as EPN Community, is a secure and controlled way for Lexellence to start their market expansion process in the market, if implemented according to the best practices. The community of practice deployment process will also help them to gain in-depth knowledge about the trends in the market, to understand the local buying behaviour, and to get to know the actual decision makers and E-learning developers in local firms. In order to gain a competitive position in the market, it is important to engage with local E-learning professionals, to create strong relationships with third parties and to build a positive image and brand for Lexellence in Ireland. The requirement of Lexellence being able to manage their business operations from Finland (until they are assured about the idea of establishing a branch also in Ireland) has defined the scope for my proposal and for the strategy created. The strategy is to enter the market via the community of practice.

As an outcome of this study, guidelines for a community of practice implementation have been created, especially from the community manager and coordinator point of view. This study contains descriptions of different stages of the EPN Community implementation process. The study conducted will also support the target organization with the possible community expansion process in the future by providing guidance for adapting the EPN Community's framework, activity cycles and coordination activities. Several initial actions of the implementation work have already been taken during the study period, however, the coordination and the management work of EPN Community requires continuous attention and activity from Lexellence.

## **2.2 Benefits gained from the community of practice**

A successful community of practice provides benefits for all parties – both for the actual members and the coordinator. As a founder of the community, Lexellence will hold the “ownership” of the community, which gives them an opportunity to drive the community towards preferred direction. At the beginning the community structure will consist of a small group of E-learning professionals from different industries. By the

time EPN Community has grown and reached a stable nature, it will naturally start to generate also sub-communities. This will be the time for Lexellence to introduce the framework also in other countries in Europe. In order to reach this stage, most important for the EPN Community implementation strategy that the framework will be scalable also in the future.

As Lexellence will be responsible also for the coordinator role in the community, they will gain an opportunity to get to know all the community members and to co-operate with them. All the people involved in EPN Community will benefit from their participation and the community will naturally also create new business opportunities. Even the target organization is an E-learning solution provider, as a community coordinator they need to keep neutral position in the community: continuous sales pitches in the community meetings could destroy the neutrality of the group and impact the members' participation in a negative way. In the interviews conducted in Dublin (Makkonen, 2012) it was mentioned by some of the participants that they are not interested in getting involved in professional networks where the founder of the network tries to primarily boost their own business.

The community offers also Lexellence with an opportunity to learn themselves, both about the market as a whole but also from the members. The community will handle large amount of information and knowledge related to E-learning, which will naturally guarantee learning opportunities for all parties. Managing and coordinating the EPN Community is also excellent way to both to gather and manage knowledge for Lexellence. And most importantly, in EPN Community new knowledge will be created continuously. According to Nonaka (1991) the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge. When markets shift, technologies proliferate, competitors multiply, and products become obsolete quickly, successful companies are those that consistently create new knowledge, disseminate it throughout the organization and quickly embody it in new technologies and solutions.

The coordinator role provides Lexellence with an opportunity to get their name recognizable in the market. At the same time, neutral position in EPN Community does not

lead them into any difficult position. Lexellence should be seen as a neutral but reliable E-learning professional and as a developer, as well as a researcher. It is important to act accordingly in the community; otherwise the trust can not be built. If the trust will be built, community members will naturally reach the coordinator for advice and propose co-operation. This cannot be forced. The community also opens new doors to networks in Ireland, which supports broader co-operation with the local firms. From Lexellence's point of view, benefits to be gained from the community will be impossible to forecast in numerical format, especially during the first operative year of EPN Community. However, in this investment the same rules apply as in customer relationship management: You cannot charge the customer for the relationship you have built together, but if the relationship is handled with the best care, he will most probably come to you also next time.

For members, a community of practice is primarily an opportunity to learn and develop and via this to gain value. The table below describes typical examples of learning network's practice applied into EPN Community scope:

<i>Problem solving</i>	"Can we work on this design and brainstorm some ideas; I'm stuck."
<i>Requests for information</i>	"Where can I find a person with knowledge in E-learning technological deployment options?"
<i>Seeking experience</i>	"Has anyone dealt with a challenge with tracking participation in this LMS?"
<i>Reusing assets</i>	"I have a proposal for a E-learning change management process. I can send it to you and you can easily tweak it for your new project."
<i>Coordination and synergy</i>	"Can we combine our general training for the new E-learning environment and to participate as one group to achieve bulk discounts?"
<i>Discussing developments</i>	"What do you think of the new E-learning design tool of x in y environment?"
<i>Documentation projects</i>	"Some of us have faced this problem several times now. Let us write it down, open the issues and share it with others."
<i>Visits</i>	"Can we come and see your training program? We need to establish one in our company."
<i>Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps</i>	"Who knows what, and what are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?"

Figure 2: Typical examples of learning network's practice modified from Wenger's theories (2006, 2-3)

The practice itself is not enough but the community of practice needs to create actual value for its members. The members need real concrete value and want to see benefits from the very beginning of their involvement in the community.

The members of EPN Community benefit from the community participation in many ways. The community provides the members with opportunity to:

- act in a large professional network
- gain new business relationships and business opportunities
- gain knowledge about new topics, products and solutions
- benchmark their skills and practices
- learn from each other
- save time in finding answers to relevant questions
- get support with complex projects or processes
- create best practices and standards
- save money and time as they learn more and find answers quickly
- get involved in external projects and researches

It is clear that the EPN Community will generate new business, not only for Lexellence but potentially also for the members of the community as well as for the co-operators involved. When the community reaches its full potential, it could transform to an independent organization which will be fully focusing on the community work, possibly even creating separate operational units on location or industry basis. The potential is huge.

### **3 Conceptual framework and relevant theories**

The literature review of this study consisted of four aspects: Learning-, change management-, communities of practice- and knowledge management theories. However, the conceptual framework in this study has been built based on learning, communities of practice and knowledge management, leaving the change management out of scope as it does not have direct impact on the CoPs development work but rather on CoPs members's internal processes. The literature review started with the learning and E-learning theories, and was later expanded with communities of practice and knowledge management theories once the final objectives of the study had been confirmed based on the research findings.

In this chapter I will discuss the reviewed literature and applied theories, describe the conceptual framework, apply knowledge management theories into the CoPs framework, discuss the benefits of external communities of practice as well as the importance of relationships in CoPs. These areas create the basis for the EPN Community framework.

#### **3.1 Literature review**

The initial theories for the EPN Community development work were investigated via articles and journals available in Internet. Even though I had studied learning theories (e.g., Ahonen & Virkkunen, 2007; Engerström, 1982; Sarala & Sarala, 1996, Senge, 1990) and change management approaches (Kotter 1996, 2002; Bridges, 2009), the actual theory reviews (e.g., Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Cox, 2005; Timbrell & al., 2005) followed by theories of knowledge management- (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007; Nonaka, 2007; Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka & Teece, 1998) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) were identified to be the most beneficial for the nature of this study. As community of practice- and knowledge management theories had to be brought into action via external knowledge sharing



practice, the theories or experiments seemed to be individually unable to fully support the process. Despite of the lack of external community focus, Wenger's (1998, 2002) theories seemed to be the most suitable and responsive to the objectives of this study, combined with some areas from Nonaka's knowledge management theories.

### **3.2 Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework consists of different key elements as follows: Knowledge management, communities of practice and learning.

Knowledge management and learning play important roles in the community of practice framework. Instead of traditional ways of applying and stocking up knowledge and data via internal processes, the focus in communities of practice is to create and share knowledge, also tacit knowledge. This includes social capital that members of organizations carry through their personal skills, competences, experience and knowhow. Organizations find it difficult to store, share or measure this type of knowledge.

Learning is important part of knowledge management. Learning takes place in different occasions, methods and practices like collaborative learning, social learning, informal learning and embedded learning. Embedded learning means learning as a result of activities and can be seen as part of social learning and collaboration. Social learning is one of the most efficient collaborative ways to gain and share knowledge: People learn every day through their social interactions and by working together. Social activity and collaboration is emphasized in agile organizations, which provide knowledge workers opportunities to bring their strengths and knowledge into practice and to participate activities where social or informal learning takes places.

All companies have not reached the agile state in their practices. Actually, majority of organizations have not managed to become truly agile in their learning and knowledge management practices, due to many internal and external reasons. As the results and outcomes of informal learning and collaborative learning are hard to measure, organizations tend to play safe and base their learning practices on traditional courses and

controlled learning paths. At the same time companies face pressure with cutting costs in all areas of business, including training practices. On top of this, they face difficulties in keeping up with the high speed of technological development. However, initial changes have already taken place during the past 10 years also in more traditional organizations: As a result of these rapid changes in technology, economy and in knowledge acquisition processes, E-learning has become a natural way to deliver trainings and to support learning.

E-learning development is not a simple process and the more the companies try to do it alone without external support, the slower is the development. Providing the staff members with an opportunity to access learning platforms from a computer is not enough: Smart phones, tablets and other mobile devices have become necessities of almost any daily communication, interaction and knowledge creation. This means that organizations need to emphasize also the mobile learning opportunities in a way that they can response to the behavioural changes that the technology has created. If companies fail to response to the changing world and to the changing behaviour accordingly, they might face huge gaps in their knowledge management- and creation processes.

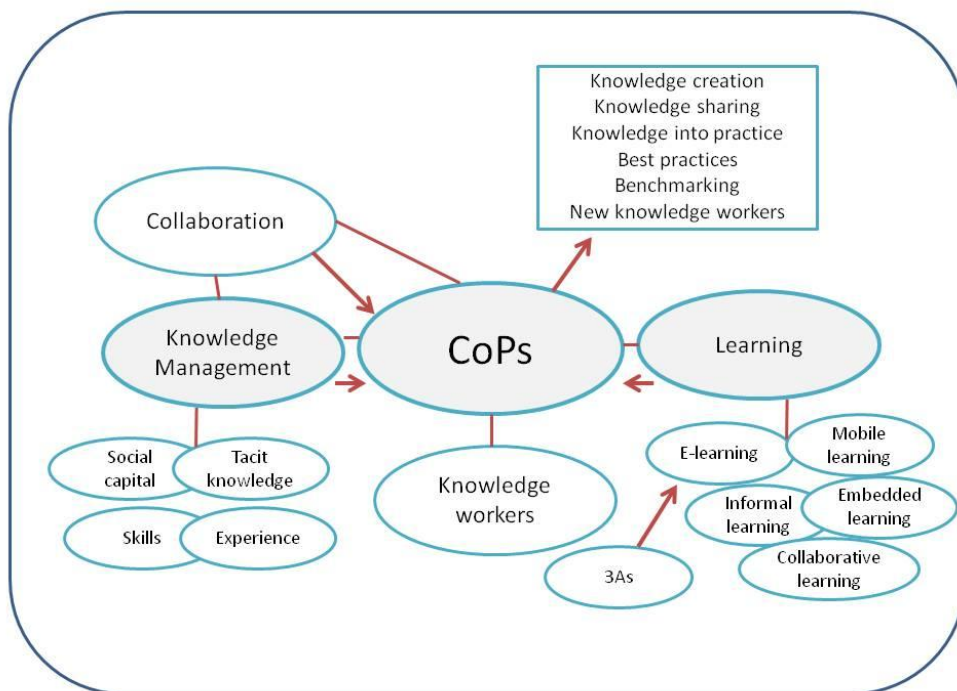


Figure 3: Development of EPN Community conceptual framework (Makkonen, 2013)

The community of practice -framework could response to the needs and changes discussed above by bringing all these aspects into action. CoPs brings knowledge workers together around the shared domain and provides them with an opportunity to share and create knowledge. The community members learn from each other both via organized and informal interactions as well as through their shared expertise. The community of practice helps the members to keep up with the advanced technology through knowledge sharing and learning processes. These areas are brought into practice by adapting and developing social, collaborative and informal learning. At the same time, new knowledge will be created and shared continuously both internally and externally.

The EPN Community's conceptual framework development has taken into account all the aspects and areas presented in figure 2 (Development of EPN Community conceptual framework). These areas will be discussed through the study in different contexts, as the study and the actual development work for the EPN Community implementation has included several phases from research to action. The study itself has guided Lexellence with their activities in the EPN Community implementation process and will help them to develop the community further.

### **3.3 Adapting theories of knowledge management into CoPs**

After going through several theories on knowledge management and communities of practice discussed at the beginning of this chapter, I decided to apply Wenger's (1998) as well as Wenger, McDermot & Snyder's (2002) theories for building the structure and framework for EPN Community. Wenger has probably the strongest roots in the communities of practice theories among the researchers in this field. Also other researchers seem to be building their theories based on his theory. At the same time, Ichijo's and Nonaka's (2007) theories of knowledge management have driven the study towards the Wenger's community of practice –framework, as these two knowledge areas (knowledge management and CoPs) are very strongly dependent on each other.

In the organizational knowledge-creating process individuals interact with each other to transcend their own boundaries. As a result the people involved change themselves, others, and also the organization and the environment. Knowledge is not born automatically. Knowledge is created through the synthesis of different views held by various people. It is a process. However, it does not mean that all the created knowledge would be automatically accepted or applied. In the knowledge creation process tentative and partial knowledge created through individuals' experiences is shared and justified by the members of the organizations and beyond, and then used and embodied by individuals to enrich their subjective tacit knowledge. (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007.)

Based on Wenger's theories (1998), communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". This does not mean that these people would necessary work together, like they do not do in EPN Community, but they meet because they find value in their actions. They may share information, knowledge, insights, advice and help each other with solving problems. They could simply share tacit knowledge, but in addition to this and as a result of all this interaction, they might also create tools, processes, standards, designs, best practices and manuals. In a community of practice, members also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting with other people in a way that generates value. From the knowledge management point of view, increasing complexity of knowledge requires greater specialization and collaboration and without communities focused on critical areas, it is difficult for organizations to keep up with rapid pace of change. (Wenger et al., 2002)

Cultivating communities of practice in strategic areas is a practical way to manage knowledge. Sadly, many companies do not even consider communities of practice as a suitable way to manage knowledge because they see it as an expensive solution. However, actually from organization perspective successful knowledge management lowers the transaction costs associated with creating, sharing and applying knowledge, and improves strategies to support these activities. Still, even slowly, organizations are be-

coming increasingly focused on making it easier for knowledge workers to apply what they know. But in order to really enable this, companies should also make it easier for these knowledge workers to network and build relationships. By increasing the company's focus on collaboration and shared practices the managers make it easier for knowledge workers to apply what they know. However, it is not clever to participate any business oriented community of practice just for the sake of broadening the knowledge. Shared context is important. Through the shared sense of context people can apply what they have learned and they can share the insights with the group. (Inchijo & Nonaka, 2007.)

Organizational cultures in Ireland are also impacting the success of EPN Community. Lexellence might face challenges with getting firms to approve their knowledge workers' involvement in the community of practice activities during the office hours. One could say: *"If community of practice participation really brings results, isn't it then easier and cheaper to create internal communities of practice for knowledge transfer purposes? We already have expert teams who run successful projects, why not to let them share their knowledge with each other? The knowledge is in the house already."* Great, if they really managed to do this successfully. I would ask: How many E-learning professionals and technological developers do you actually have available in your house? According to the research conducted in Dublin (Makkonen, 2012), these resources are very limited. Also according to the news in the media, many companies have been cutting down their personnel costs ever since the early recession (2008-2009) and the trend seems to be here to stay for a while.

### **3.4 Emphasis on external participation**

There are some limitations also in Wenger's theory. He focuses almost purely into internal communities inside a company or organization despite of the fact that companies could broaden their knowledge in most effective ways if they would interact with people outside of the organization and share knowledge with them. This would provide broader aspects also to the internal knowledge management, knowhow and business development processes. A community of practice is the most beneficial for its members as a knowledge sharing network if there are different kind of experts in-

volved with different type of competences, knowledge and experience. Good to note also that in organizations' internal communities internal expert teams' members are not necessarily interested in topics that do not have anything to do with their own projects and the community of practice can be easily seen as a personal waste of time or understood just as an "another project team". And as known, pure knowledge sharing is not enough; it is important that the community members are engaged to the group and excited about the topic (shared domain).

Even internal communities of practice might be able to bring large amount of knowledge into same space, still the knowledge can lack of scope and the shared vision might be problematic to define. It is much easier and more efficient to transfer knowledge among people who speak same technical language, share same interests and have similar work incentives – and still their competences and experience might vary a lot. In addition to this, all the firms do not even have resources for internal knowledge communities, as it requires several people's working time at regular basis.

Sadly, still firms often see external networking as a pure expense. The fact is that the firm's actual knowledge transaction costs can be already extremely high, but still they struggle to track on these costs and actually little attention has been paid to these costs. These transaction costs might include for example the time and effort of searching for experts or codified knowledge, qualifying and synthesizing knowledge, and adapting it for work (Inchijo & Nonaka, 2007). By lowering these specific knowledge transaction costs, organizations can increase knowledge workers' productivity. According to a research report by IDC an organization employing one thousand knowledge workers might easily waste over \$6 million per year. Why? Because users fail to find existing knowledge they need, waste time searching for nonexistent knowledge and re-create knowledge that is available but could not be located (Inchijo & Nonaka, 2007).

Many organizations also support the high level management's networking opportunities but are not interested in other knowledge workers' connections with the external world. According to Inchijo & Nonaka (2007) having external contacts is crucial on every organization's hierarchical level. It is beneficial for a company that external con-

stituents allow assumptions to be challenged and provide feedback to the team or department. The external perspective is not there to make things complicated but to assist teams' knowledge creation and transfer. In EPN Community the knowledge creation is facilitated through relationships with external environment. As people get to know each other, also the relationships get stronger. Knowledge workers hear what is important from the people they know and who are specialized in the same domain, and they can interpret the meaning of the information on the value that they attribute to the sources. For new execute decisions like new E-learning environment's implementation in their organization or complex design processes, teams require links to outside constituents that not only serve as input to the knowledge creation process but also serve as channels to help implementation. (Inchijo & Nonaka, 2007.)

It would be beneficial to have at least two participants from each member organization in EPN Community, so that they could apply the gained knowledge in collaborative ways also inside their teams and reflect on with each other. Via access to many external contacts team members tap into multiple sources of knowledge and information, and this can facilitate the creation of knowledge within a team by combining individual stocks of knowledge with outside information. Knowledge also gets out of date easily if discussion and networking with externals does not take place. As every business oriented organization understands, internal stock of knowledge needs to be updated regularly in order to avoid convergence of views or loss of crucial information (Inchijo & Nonaka, 2007).

### **3.5 Importance of relationships in CoPs**

As mentioned earlier, gathering new knowledge is important, but it is not enough. Relationships and networks are important for many aspects of business performance. As suggested by Inchijo & Nonaka (2007) and many other researchers (e.g., Lin, 1999; Wenger, 1999), for firms the best way to manage external knowledge is gained by leveraging relationships with stakeholders. Many companies do share knowledge with their stakeholders like suppliers and advisors, and create systems to manage this knowledge, for example CRMs. Isn't this enough? Well, instead of creating separate

knowledge management systems the managers should get involved also in networks of potential knowledge that involve also other parties than only suppliers, advisors and competitors. According to Lin (1999) such networks of relationships, which can be leveraged to access knowledge and get things done, are the source of firm's social capital.

In a successful community of practice the members get things done. They share strong personal relationships through their interest and engagement to the community, which also encourages them to take responsibility in the community and to develop existing practices. Naturally they also start to create and share tacit knowledge, which is usually more difficult to share than explicit knowledge like manual or set of instructions. The most efficient way of sharing tacit knowledge is through a dialogue that comes from personal relationship, as people are more likely to contact one another in personal relationships when they face uncertain situations. (Nohria & Eccles, 1992.)

In an external community of practice like EPN Community, members also face competitors. This might create challenges for community coordinators and community leaders in terms of attracting members from competing companies as still many knowledge workers even on management level ignore these possible relationships and the opportunity for knowledge sharing because of not willing to take the risk that would lead to deeper trust. According to Inohji & Nonaka (2007), shared interest relationships are not used to their potential, despite of the fact that these relationships could provide excellent scanning and screening mechanisms for firms if these relationships would be developed explicitly for this purpose. When sharing ideas and concerns about the shared focus, people in a community of practice bring in points of view and information that others may not have considered or heard about. Through communities of practice, knowledge workers have an opportunity to build relationships that can create tacit knowledge and provide access to non-public explicit knowledge among competitors. In this kind of practice involved parties actually acknowledge that they can build value together.



## 4 E-learning defined

Before discussing the challenges in E-learning in the chapter of research findings, the definition for E-learning will be provided.

In the research conducted in Dublin (Makkonen, 2012) the participants defined E-learning in many different ways, however, similarities could be found between the descriptions as follows:

- Self-paced
- Accessibility
- Purely virtual
- Computer-based
- Online
- Electronic
- Collaborative
- Interactive
- Formalized

More than decade ago, Marc Rosenberg (2001) related E-learning to the internet as *“the use of internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance. It is based upon three fundamental criteria:*

- o networked
- o delivered to the end-user via a computer using standard internet technology
- o focuses on the broadest view of learning”.

The definition is old and as we can see, the E-learning is not anymore necessarily computer based but could be also purely mobile based. During the time the definition was written, smart phones and tablets like iPad did not exist. International Journal of Economics (Pillai’s College of Arts Commerce and Science, 2013) provides more fresh description as they define E-learning as an acquisition of knowledge and skill using electronic technologies such as computer and Internet-based courseware and local and wide area of networks. Knowledge management has been mentioned to be seen as a

form of E-learning according to some definitions. However, how do we know what is the definition for E-learning after ten years or will this term possible disappear?

There can be seen fundamentally two approaches to E-learning: Synchronous training and Asynchronous training. Synchronous training involves interaction of participants with an instructor via the Web in real time. Asynchronous training allows the participant to complete the web based training at his own pace, without live interaction with the instructor. (Pillai's College of Arts Commerce and Science, 2013). Both methods have been widely used in companies by using multiple learning environments including virtual classroom where participants interact with each other, embedded learning which is accessible on your own pace without instructor, as well as discussion groups which encourage for collaboration.

There are number of advantages in E-learning. First of all, E-learning can be accessed from different locations without need to travel to training. This saves huge amounts of money. Secondly, E-learning is often self-paced which gives the learner to focus on the areas that he wants or needs to learn most. The content can be repeated as many times as needed. Thirdly the message in E-learning is consistent, especially in embedded learning which means that the learning material is available in electronic format and accessible anytime. The disadvantages in individual embedded learning is that you can not necessarily receive answers to your questions unless the organization has dedicated a person for this purpose. According to the findings of the interviews, it seems like there are not enough resources available for this of support. Second disadvantage for E-learning is that as a result of online technology the face-to-face communication is decreasing, which might have impact on other skills. Thirdly, if E-learning is not built with high quality, the result can be very bad – and expensive at the end. However, despite of this, the E-learning seems to be taking more and more place in training practices - especially mobile learning. EPN Community will offer a great opportunity for developing totally new kind of E-learning solutions and processes, which would dim these experienced disadvantages.

E-learning is not going to disappear as a context, even it may disappear as a phrase. At the end, life-long learning is becoming a norm for knowledge workers and they do not have time to participate too many class room trainings. In this changing world, E-learning has become a standard practice in training due to the pressure with fast knowledge adaption, cost savings as well as a natural result of global technological development. For business operations it is getting extremely important to enable 3A's in all their operations that include technology. The 3A's mean: Accessing from anywhere, anytime and from any device. Cost efficiency also means that employees should be able to use their time in the most efficient ways, which means that they should have an opportunity to learn and improve their knowledge whenever they have allocated time for this. However, this is not happening. The reason why 3A's is not happening in the field of training is that companies face challenges with their E-learning practices and technological solutions. Reaching the development objectives is not necessary cheap or easy, especially if there are not required competences feasible or available to manage the organization's E-learning development. At the same time when businesses aim for cost reductions in their training & development practices, they also reduce the amount of personnel – which limits the skills and knowledge available for the actual development work.

E-learning is developing fast. Currently the key driver for E-learning is strongly related to mobile learning development. However, many companies fail to introduce mobile learning in their organizations including the following reasons (Netex, 2013; adapted by Makkonen, 2013):

1. Incompatible systems and platforms

A wide range of incompatible platforms especially in mobile phones presents a substantial technological limitation to the development of learning content.

2. Device management issues

Smartphones and other mobile devices are not yet widely provided in organizations but rather encouraged to bring your own device. This makes it impossible to manage the devices centrally or to provide technical support. It is also a secu-

urity risk if employees use their own mobile devices to access confidential data, as in case of loss of the device the wipe off or device location request is not possible.

### 3. Rapid changes discourage investment

The device market moves fast which means that devices get obsolete very quickly. If large companies would invest in providing mobile devices for all their employees, the device investment would raise critically as they should keep updating the devices as well.

### 4. Security challenges

Many devices have not yet offered the level of centrally managed enterprise control over their devices and the security that IT would find acceptable. The more confidential information handled in a company (e.g. banks, hospitals, and insurance companies) the more they require from the security.

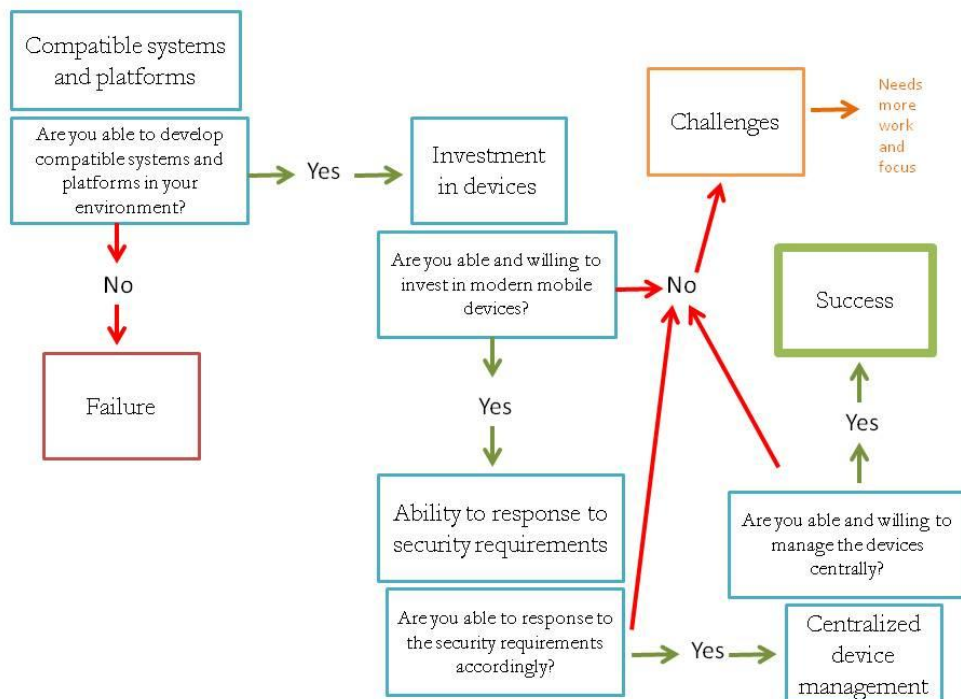


Figure 4: Success estimation in mobile learning introduction plan (Makkonen, 2013)

In figure 4 (Estimating success in introducing mobile learning) I have visualized the reasons that might lead to failure, challenges or success for any organization introducing mobile learning in their environment. The reasons have been adapted from Netex research (2013) and their importance has been drawn based on my personal experience and knowledge from IT environments and change management processes in organizations. Even an organization would fail in certain parts (answering “no” to the presented questions), the organization would still have an opportunity go forward with the mobile learning and to develop the mobile learning environment further by increasing their focus on the key questions/areas. However, if an organization is not able to develop compatible systems and platforms (the starting point/first question), the development work does not go further. Ability to develop compatible systems and platforms, is a requirement for mobile learning.

Despite of the challenges and possible development failures in organizations, the mobile learning will grow. According to Forrester research (2012) it is estimated that by 2016, smartphones and tablets will put power in the pockets of a billion global consumers. Mobile is not simply another device for IT to support the website but rather it is seen that mobile is the manifestation of a much broader shift to new systems of engagement in organizations and also externally. In 2010 Forrester research already forecasted technology developments that along with the trend of an on-the-go workforce will continue to grow. We have already seen that technology has impact on our everyday life and more and more employees work from different offices, from home as well as during commuting time. According to the research this will also have huge impact on E-learning: The trend toward shorter learning modules, assessments, and quick access to support information driven by the workers requires ubiquitous and transparent mobile access for learning using a smartphone or other mobile devices, like tablets. (Forrester, 2010.)

As of the knowledge today, technology development is not going to slow down. This means that the companies need to start invest on their E-learning and mobile learning development sooner or later. There are many challenges to face and as most of the companies share similar challenges, this might require that companies start to co-

operate more closely in order to take the next steps faster. Communities of practice could bring a solution for managing this change.

## 5 Study phases and methodologies

The study started with general exploratory research in Internet in order to get understanding of the following: *How does the market look like? What kind of E-learning networks can we find? Can it be seen that economical situation would be impacting training field in Ireland? What E-learning topics people are discussing in online discussion forums? What does E-learning really mean and what do I need to understand in order to discuss with training professionals?*

By reading through several materials, discussions and news, I got a better understanding about E-learning and the current situation in Ireland. It was found out, that there is a huge pressure to cut the training costs in companies operating in Ireland but at the same time companies want to develop their training practices in order to be able answering the needs of the market when the economy stabilizes. This is a dilemma, but from the personnel development point of view it looks like that many companies are confident that E-learning will save them. The exploratory research was followed with online survey and onsite interviews.

### **Study phases:**

1. Online exploratory research
2. Online survey
3. Onsite interviews
4. Analysis
5. Proposal for development work (CoPs preliminary plan)
6. E-learning Seminar & Workshop
7. Final proposal

As co-operation and networks are important part of the business, the Internet search also focused on finding out if there could be identified any co-operation in terms of E-learning development between companies operating in Ireland. Instead finding B2B co-operative networks, there seemed to be several development projects in Ireland that focused on schools and educational institutes' E-learning development. There could

not be found any E-learning development networks operating in Ireland that would focus on neutral knowledge sharing and collaboration between different type of companies and business organizations. This finding impacted the scope and structure of the onsite interviews (phase 3): In addition to explore how E-learning was utilized and developed in different type of organizations, the study was also aiming to find out how companies co-operate with each other and if there could be identified a need for an organized community of practice that would focus on E-learning.

In order to gain further knowledge about the E-learning usage in the market before conducting the actual onsite interviews, it was decided to add a second phase for the study: The second phase of the study was aiming to collect information about E-learning utilization in different kind of environments and it was collected via online survey. The survey (Appendix 1) was sent to people in different kind of roles in various organizations operating in Ireland, including companies, non-profit organizations and educational institutions. Qualitative data was collected by asking participants to provide definitions for their competences, experience, ideas and development insights in terms of E-learning. The response rate was quite low: only 20 answers were collected via qualitative online survey form, even more than 150 individuals and several associations were contacted with personal messages. However, for qualitative objectives the amount of data was not as important as the content of the data. The data was enough to guide the third phase of the study: the semi structured interviews.

For the third phase of the study, which was conducted via semi structured onsite interviews (Appendix 2) in participant organizations' premises in Dublin (Ireland), participants were invited to the interview based on their role and experience in terms of E-learning and/or personnel development. Altogether 9 experts were interviewed for the second phase of the study in December 2012. Each of the interviews took approximately one hour of time. The questions have been presented in appendix 2 (Interview questions).

The interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed. Once transcribes had been completed for all the interviews, patterns and keywords were looked for initially on



question basis. After this, as the interview was semi-structured and lots of topic-related side-conversation took place, all the questions and answers were also cross-checked with each other. The complete data was analyzed both for similarities and differences between the responses and summaries could be drawn between different questions related to the same topic. The interviews and open discussion with the participants contributed remarkable information that could not have been feasible without face to face meetings, for example information in terms of organizational culture's impact on E-learning development as well as E-learning's change impact for different type of organizations.

The participants for the both research phases were invited by email and LinkedIn messaging tool. All these contacts were looked for manually, one by one, which took huge amount of time. There could not be found any service in Ireland from where you could buy these contacts details. Finding the contact details was just the first step. The next objective was to get the message through. In order to attract people and organizations to take part into the research and to avoid the image of spam message or commercial sales message, I personalized the messages, sent them out one by one and also created a research website (appendix 4) with information about the research and its objectives. The website link was attached to the email-based invitations and also to the invitations sent via LinkedIn. The purpose of the research site was to provide the participants with information about the research in terms of the objectives, schedule, benefits they would gain from taking part as well as information about the researcher and the co-operators involved. As the objective was also to track how many people accessed the website and to avoid irrelevant statistics, the website was shared only with the people who were invited to take part in the research. During the time of the online survey activity and onsite interviews, the site got altogether 60 visits, from which 40 visits were unique visits.

Nowadays people in all organizations receive huge amount of advertisements, other commercial information and pure spam messages, which makes it difficult to reach people via email. Many messages get deleted without reading them or they are directed to spam immediately by receiver organization's email system. For this reason it was

important to differentiate from the huge amount of other survey senders and market researchers by creating a research website with reliable information about the research and the person behind it. The emails were also sent from my personal email address and from my personal LinkedIn profile because personal contact seems to work better than general marketing messages. The website supported the transparency of the research. Naturally, the recipients who never received the invitation message due to spam filter, or left the message unread due to huge amount of other email messages, also missed the information about the research and the research website.

For any research, it is important that the participants are explained why the research is conducted and where it is aiming at. The following research objectives were defined on the E-learning research website:

1. To gain information how E-learning is used and developed in organizations that operate in Ireland -> to understand the key drivers in E-learning
2. To share knowledge, information and knowhow about the solutions and methods used in E-learning
3. To encourage organizations to develop their E-learning practices and to learn from each other

*“By taking part into this study you will gain knowledge and experience that you can adapt into your organization's operations as well as for your personal use immediately.”*

People considering taking part in any research also analyze “How do I benefit from taking part?” First of all, getting people to read email from unknown sender (other than business opportunity) is a challenge. Secondly, as the time is limited and as people receive huge amount of surveys and feedback queries into their inbox, it is even bigger challenge to get people to answer any surveys or invest their time on onsite interviews. Many companies, especially those doing market research for their business development purposes, attract research participants with the help of draws and valuable prizes (like mobile phones). However, for the research purposes it was important to keep any commercialization out of the picture and to find other ways to convince people to take

part. It was also important that participants taking part were actually interested in the topic, as the survey and interviews were aiming to collect qualitative data and descriptive definitions, not to have people just clicking through the survey or quickly answering yes/no questions just for sake of a chance to win something. Instead of having large amount of random uninterested survey fillers or interview participants, the research - especially for the onsite interview phase – was aiming to attract research participants that would bring value to the research. The listed benefits that participants would gain from their participation were also statements which would not attract people without any interest for the topic (E-learning). Benefits that the participants would gain from their participation were defined on the research website (appendix 4) as follows:

*As an end result of this study, you will:*

1. Receive E-learning study summary report.
2. Learn from other participant organizations: How E-learning is used and adapted in Dublin based organizations?
3. Learn more about E-learning. We will provide you with learning opportunities.
4. Gather awareness of your organization's current situation and development possibilities in the field of personnel/service development via E-learning.
5. Have an opportunity for free E-learning consultation.

Many interview participants told in the interviews that they appreciated the opportunities and benefits that they gained from the research participation as well as many of them found it extremely exciting and interesting to participate the interview and discussing hot topics around E-learning.

How were promises about benefits kept then? At the end of the research the data was coded, analyzed and transcribed into two different types of reports which were then shared with the research participants. The website included also information about E-learning and E-learning examples in order to make sure that all the participants share common understanding about the topic. The promised learning opportunities were

also followed by arranging an E-learning Seminar & Workshop (appendix 3) in Dublin five months after the onsite interviews. In the future they will gain more learning opportunities via EPN Community. Participating the research also helped the participants to reflect on their current E-learning development areas as well as encouraged them to think about the future development needs from their own organization's perspective.

## 6 Research findings

The nine (9) participants for the onsite interviews were invited to take part based on their roles and experience in terms of training processes, E-learning and/or personnel development.

The participants were from the following industries (based on their organization's industry):

- Aviation (1)
- Commercial (1)
- Enterprise development, property management & training (1)
- Financial services (3)
- Internet services/online advertisement (1)
- IT hardware, technology, software and services (1)
- Pharma and healthcare (1)

Each participant was representing their specific organization within a company. Company size, including all locations worldwide, varied between 50 employees to more than 300 000 employees. Among the participants, four of the nine companies had 3000-15000 employees and four of them more than 60 000 employees.

The participating organizations were all operating in Ireland and answered all the research questions from their own organization's point of view (instead of answering behalf of their companies). The interview could not cover company-wide interviews as there are remarkable differences between different internal organizations and the most of the participants would not have enough knowledge about all their company's organizations' practices to response on behalf of them.

There could be seen huge change facing the companies in terms of learning and development. Based on the findings from the interviews, the border between informal learning and formal learning seems to be breaking down; companies and organizations are

increasingly looking for ways to bring informal learning and collaborative training as part of their training practices. Many of the companies also have a clear vision about their E-learning development objectives, but they are not really sure how to get there, especially in terms of mobile learning. As in most of the companies there are not broad internal training groups or resources available, they try to find support from online forums and discussion groups: The knowledge workers are engaged to several networks online especially in social media. The most followed networks, interest groups and discussion forums are based in LinkedIn where people can follow and join discussions globally without location- or knowledge related requirements. However, despite of online networking, there can be identified certain issues with knowledge management. The challenge is not the lack of knowledge but rather the overload of knowledge in Internet and lack of time to adjust all this knowledge, not to mention the difficulty of applying the knowledge into practice. The information and knowledge gained by individuals should be also evaluated before applied into practice. When networking purely online, it is difficult to validate and evaluate the information.

Why companies then want to move to E-learning so fast even if they are not quite sure how to get there? In addition to the pressure derived from global technological change, one of the main drivers for transformation of the learning seems to be cost efficiency. The larger the company, the more aware they seem to be about the cost of the training and the more they are willing to develop their E-learning. This is also supported by the theory of Weller (2000): “the economies of E-learning are highly dependent on the number of learners involved. The greater the number of learners, the greater the probability that economies of scale will make E-learning an attractive proposition from a cost perspective.” Even though the amount of tacit knowledge is growing thanks to Internet, the knowledge management costs as well as transactional costs may also get huge when people are individually gathering knowledge from online from unknown people and personally trying to evaluate the validity of this data. It also takes lots of time to look for information and to learn about new technologies. How do you know that you have gained all the necessary information if the information is not received from the people you trust? And how do you know that you have paid attention into correct areas? At the end, “you do not know, what you do not know.”

Why knowledge workers and E-learning professional do not then network also elsewhere than purely online? They were familiar with training and seminars, but to my surprise, any organized E-learning related knowledge sharing network across the companies could not be found from Ireland neither the interview participants would know if any this kind of network existed in Ireland. When the non-existence of these networks was raised into discussion, all the interview participants stated that they would be interested in taking part in E-learning professionals' knowledge sharing network if one would exist. One of the participants even mentioned that there is actually "urgent need" for this kind of network in Ireland. The professionals interviewed seemed to be especially interested to hear how other companies use E-learning, what kind of success stories there are and what kind of difficulties other companies have faced during the process, to share knowledge about different kind of environments and development processes. According to the participants, there is also demand for best practices, white papers, case studies and tool/solution comparisons. Several participant organizations were also interested in benchmarking their E-learning competences and solutions within their own field or industry.

The following examples given by the interviewees (Makkonen, 2012) describe the benefits and activities that the participants would like to gain from the E-learning professionals' network in Ireland:

*"To hear how they use (E-)learning, the best practices sharing."*

*"There are not really any E-learning networks in Ireland. I would be really keen to be in e-learning network with multinationals to discuss challenges, to discuss common standards with vendors, there are probably many companies that have documentary of same sort – to share that practice to network to be aware of common challenges and to come together to overcome these challenges (across the board related to e-learning)."*

*“I would see there is a really big need for local white papers on best practices. Very formalized article on success and I would like to see discussion...Experience on success factors and what to avoid. Maybe together we could collaborate and find those best practices.”*

*“I think it is good to know the processes and cultural norms. It would be good to see the global scene.”*

*“You could share experience with similar organizations, you can tell what you are planning and ask help or to tell what you have done.”*

*“I would be interested to be part of this network and share our knowledge there as well. I would like to hear experiences how people in the field do things differently, to hear question and answers “what would you not do again” for example.”*

As the key finding from the interviews was strongly related to knowledge management and to a need for a knowledge sharing network, the scope of the study was defined to fulfill both the E-learning professionals’ needs as well as Lexellence’s needs: to establish and implement a community of practice for E-learning professionals, which would bring benefits both to the members and Lexellence.

Further information and knowledge gained from the interviews will be used for the community of practice development purposes: to fulfill the development needs of the E-learning professionals in terms of E-learning development by providing networking and learning opportunities, through interest and shared practice. The detailed analysis of the interviews can be found from the appendix of this report (Appendix 1).

## **6.1 Validity and reliability of the research**

After gaining some basic information about the target market (Ireland) and the utilization of E-learning in different type of organizations (online survey), the semi-structured interviews took place. Altogether 9 experts were interviewed for the second phase of the study in Dublin in December 2012. Each of the interviews took approxi-



mately one hour of time. The questions have been presented in appendix 2 (Interview questions).

The interviews' purpose was to gather in-depth information about E-learning usage and utilization in that particular organization that the interviewee represented. At the end data was combined from all the interviews and analyzed in order to get an overall understanding of the E-learning development needs in different type of organizations. Similarities and differences in E-learning utilization were compared in order to understand the key drivers for E-learning and E-learning development.

The interview was semi-structured with initial questions and probes, but also included side conversations and allowed the conversations to run freely without strict structure. The primary skill that I used as an interviewee was to involve the respondent in a conversation (rather than interview) that covered both general topics as well as associated probes.

The objective and importance of the interview (why it is done) was explained to the interviewees as well as the confidentiality of the data as discussed. It was agreed that the participant names or the names of their organizations will not be published in the reports or any other public documents. All the members accepted that the interviews were recorded and felt comfortable about this.

The interviews were started by asking the interviewees to tell his/her story in relation to the research topic and to define their understanding of E-learning as a concept. The relaxed interview situation allowed the respondents to describe their views in their own words with flexible and open approach.

The recorded interviews were carefully transcribed. Once transcribes had been completed for all the interviews, patterns and keywords were looked for initially on question basis. After this, as the interview was semi-structured and lots of topic-related side-conversation took place, all the questions and answers were also cross-checked with each other. The complete data was analyzed both for similarities and differences

between the responses and summaries could be drawn between different questions related to the same topic. The research findings responded strongly to the findings from the survey which was conducted during the earlier phase.

In the qualitative research it is extremely important to minimize the errors and biases in a study. There is no way to draw generalizations the way you can do in quantitative research. In order to avoid errors and biases, as an interviewee I was extremely careful for not evaluating the answers given in that exact moment and made sure that I was not imposing my own perspective on the respondent. It was important to understand the descriptions as separate cases on organization basis before any similarities or difficulties could be inspected between different organizations. In the final report (confidential) I used lots of straight quotas from the interviewees in order to visualize that the summaries responded with examples and summaries presented. The report was also shared with all the interview participants in order to highlight transparency of the process and to create trust between the interviewer and the interviewees.

## **7 The scope of the development work**

Based on the findings of the E-learning research in Ireland (Makkonen, 2013), there can be identified a need for a community of practice which would give an opportunity companies and organizations operating in Ireland to share their knowledge, expertise and experience in terms of E-learning. The network's member organizations themselves would not be E-learning service providers or vendors, but rather businesses and institutions with representatives involved in their internal training and/or personnel development, especially in terms of E-learning. The network should provide participating organizations opportunities to learn from each other, to ask other participants' support and to share experiences. The knowledge sharing relates to E-learning, for example in terms of developing processes, choosing technology, ranking tools, aligning strategies etc. According to the research findings the organizations are specifically interested to hear how other organizations use E-learning, how they implement E-learning in their organizations, to share success stories and also how to avoid mistakes, have insight views into the latest technology, share general experience about E-learning and to produce best practices and white papers. The EPN Community will be strongly focusing on these values and it has been taken into account also in the actual development work.

### **7.1 The meaning of knowledge sharing community**

Lave and Wenger (1991) implemented the term community of practice. The term was coined to describe an activity system that includes individuals who are united in action and in the meaning that action has for them and larger collective. As many business managers tend to look the business development on cost basis which is connected on profitable development projects that often focus on co-operation and knowledge sharing among internal development groups, there is a risk of a mix-up in terms of meanings of a project group and a community of practice. It is important to understand the

difference between project teams and communities of practice: Communities of practice are informal entities that are glued together by the connections the members have with each other and by their specific shared problems or areas of interests. Generation of knowledge in communities of practice occurs when people participate in problem solving and share the knowledge necessary to solve the problems. Already in 1990s researchers have observed that creating and supporting communities of practice is a strong alternative to building teams especially in the context of new product development and other knowledge work. (Ardichvili et al., 2003.)

Even understanding the importance of networking and community-based knowledge sharing has strong roots since 1990s, Allee (2000) argued still ten years later after 1990s that the most common intellectual capital frameworks still operate within a traditional view of the company and the company's external relationship category had been limited to those who have direct financial transactions within a company. She saw that the role that enterprises play in the larger economic, social and environmental systems seem to be widely overlooked when discussing intangibles and intellectual capital (IC). The change can happen only when companies begin to redefine value at enterprise level and wealth at the macro-economic level, as well as evolve the frameworks to an expanded view of potential value domains. In this context networks and communities of practice play a critical role.

Technology has fastened the pace of work during the past two decades and especially after the launch of "Internet era". As organizations are facing the overload of information, in every organization you can find teams and specialists who struggle with prioritizing the information and adapting it into his or her work. A lot of learning happens in business units and teams, however due to lack of knowledge management processes and documentation – or even because of "over-documenting" everything, the knowledge, especially the tacit knowledge, is easily lost. As discussed earlier, ever increasing complexity and amount of knowledge requires much greater specialization and collaboration than 10 years ago. More attention needs to be paid to knowledge management processes and to learning. Sadly, as business units focus on immediate oppor-

tunities in the market in order to achieve their business goals, the learning usually comes only as a second or third priority.

As companies try to find ways to be more efficient, as a result more and more project teams get established, especially in large companies. As project teams are always temporary (that is why they are called project teams) their knowledge is largely lost soon after the “ramping down” period. The operational teams are not the help here neither, as the traditional operational teams’ knowledge usually remains local because these teams are focused on their own tasks and objectives. During the past decade, many companies and organizations have started to discover that communities of practice are the ideal social structure for “stewarding” knowledge both internally and externally. Instead of feeding the teams with information and constantly outdated training material, many managers have started to provide them with an opportunity work in knowledge sharing communities, where the responsibility to generate and share the knowledge is assigned to the members themselves. Still, there are many managers who overlook this opportunity. (Wenger et al., 2002.)

The problem is not the lack of information or lack of knowledge, but rather the way the information and knowledge is handled. Whatever decisions organizations make, it is clear that managing knowledge has become the actual and crucial key to success. Organizations have stored huge amount of knowledge and information in their computer databases, but these databases get easily unused and out of date as they grow continuously – it gets impossible to handle all the data. The databases piled with information might give safe feeling and a feeling of control, but the worst thing is that this stored knowledge is not actually shared, neither brought into practice. In most cases this knowledge is not even close to the value that tacit knowledge provides them with. Sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal processes. These processes’ success is often dependent on organization’s culture and the encouragement for interaction provided by management. The knowledge can not be updated by anyone in the organization, but only by people who understand the issues and appreciate the evolution of their field. (Wenger et al., 2002.)

As all the companies are result-oriented and driven by figures, the problem is that companies still tend to overlook the importance of tacit knowledge, as tacit knowledge is not easy to measure in numerics. The value of knowledge is not necessarily measurable by figures and this is why companies need to look at the community of practice related values from different perspective. If companies and other organizations decide to boost and support knowledge sharing via communities, they will generate both short- and long term value. Members of the communities of practice will get help with immediate problems and issues by bringing the topics into discussion and getting insights from members outside of their own team. At the same time, problem solving processes get faster, which saves both time and money. Companies may also notice, that via acting in communities of practice, the members gain knowledge that will result with better solutions and decisions in the organization.

## **7.2 Designing the CoP for E-learning Professionals (EPN)**

As well as any firm, also the networks like communities of practice (CoP) need a concrete vision with concept, goal or action standard to connect the vision with the knowledge-creating practice. According to Ichijo & Nonaka (2007) this concept/goal/action standard is the driving objective as it drives the knowledge-creating process. This is important from the energy point of view: Many intentional communities fall apart soon after their initial launch because they don't have enough energy to sustain themselves. Communities, need to invite the interaction that makes them alive, they do not operate in same "automatic" structured ways as teams. However, it is important to avoid too detailed plan. Community design is more like life-long learning than organizational design (Wenger et al., 2002, 53).

When creating a living and active community with members sharing the same objectives, it is important during the very early development stages to define the community's domain and focus. Wenger et al. (2002, 45-46) have listed for example the

following questions that should be asked and answered in very early stages of the community development:

- What is the interest that we want to develop?
- What roles people in the community are going to play and how do we interact?
- What knowledge do we share, develop and document – and how?

These questions have been answered in the preliminary design via the three key areas: Domain, Community and Practice. However, the biggest question and also a challenge for EPN Community is: How do we design aliveness? Aliveness is not automatic but requires activities, especially from the coordinator side. Aliveness can not be forced. Many intentional communities fall apart soon after their initial launch because they do not have enough energy to sustain themselves, which sometimes also might be linked to the lack of the time or skills of the coordinator. In order to avoid this and to bring out the community's unique character and energy, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002, 51-64) has derived the following 7 principles that communities should follow:

1. *Design for evolution* – As an alive community EPN needs to reflect on and redesign documents of themselves throughout the existence, as the community itself is changing during the stages of natural lifecycle.
2. *Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives* – EPN Community design brings information from outside the community into a dialogue about what the community could achieve. Involvement of the members is important.
3. *Invite different levels of participation* – Different kind of people want to have different kind of roles. It is important to find the “core group” for EPN Community. The core group includes people who are actively participating discussions and support the community coordinator. In the E-learning professionals' network there can be already identified people who have engaged to the core group.

4. *Develop both public and private community spaces* – The community coordinator needs to work the private space between meetings and helping the community members to link with helpful resources as well as with each other. It is also advised that the EPN Community coordinator keeps meeting the members also individually.
5. *Focus on value* – A key element of designing value is to encourage EPN Community members to be explicit about the value of the community throughout its lifetime. By raising awareness of the value it is easier to keep the members engaged to EPN.
6. *Combine familiarity and excitement* – A community needs routine activities in order to provide stability for relationship-building connections. Exciting events are a good way to provide a sense of common adventure. These activities will be discussed in detail in chapter 8.2.
7. *Create a rhythm for a community* – As well as routine, also balanced rhythm will help community to have a feeling of movement and aliveness. The suggested activity rhythm and rotation for E-learning professionals' network is discussed in chapter 8.3.

The seven principles described above are extremely important in different development stages that the community will naturally follow. These stages will be discussed in the following chapter.

### **7.3 Five natural stages of a community**

Wenger et al. (2002) have observed five different stages of community development that most of the communities naturally follow. During these five stages the community also evolves, which means that the activities during these stages also need to change.



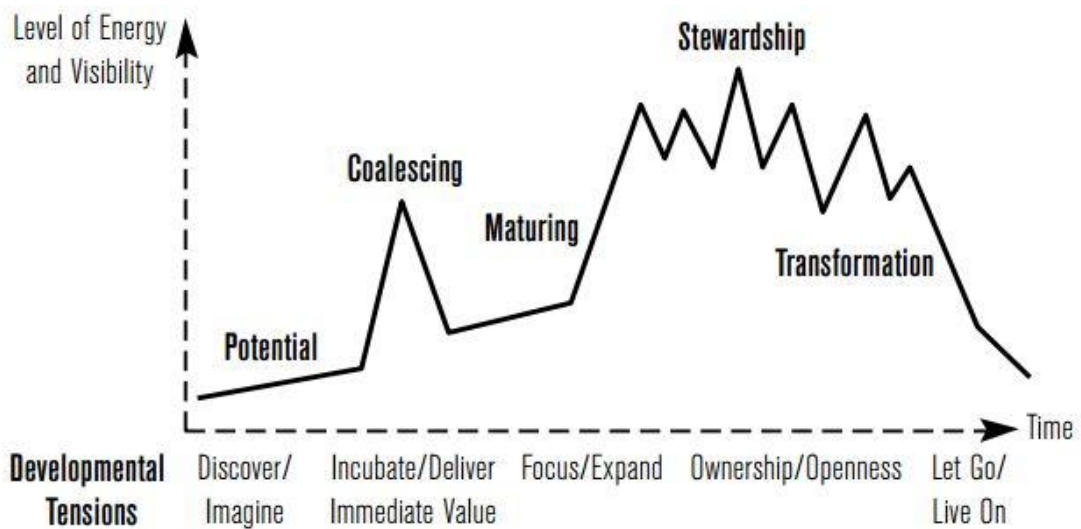


Figure 5: Five stages of community (Wenger et al. 2002, 69)

Below discussions and activity plan is created for the four of the five stages based on theoretical observations (Wenger et al. 2002). The fifth stage (transformation) is usually faced in internal communities inside organizations, especially if the scope could not have been evolved during the four stages. As EPN community aims for continuity, the fifth stage will not be introduced in this paper.

### Stage 1: Potential

The potential stage could be called also as the first level of preparation stage. In terms of the continuity of the EPN Community, this is an extremely critical stage and needs attention and activities from the “owner” of the community. Community development has began with an extant social network by attracting with E-learning topic (shared interest) the group of professionals to get involved. In this stage the network has already started to see themselves as a community of practice and these people are likely to for the core group of the EPN community. These people pull the community together, as could be seen after the community kickoff event (E-learning Seminar & Workshop, Appendix 3): The idea of the community was introduced to this network and the participants started to see their own issues and interests as a communal fodder.

The E-learning Seminar & Workshop as a kickoff event was aiming to find common ground among members for them to feel connected and to see the value of sharing

insights and stories. The face-to-face discussions helped the events participants to discover that they face similar problems, share the passion for E-learning and topics around it and that the members in the community have valuable insights that they can really learn from each other.

In order to develop from this stage, it is important to remember that the EPN community is driven by the values the members get from it. The following steps need to be highlighted again when moving on with this stage:

1. Domain: Defining the scope of the domain (shared interest)
2. Community: to find more people who already network on the topic as well as to help them to discover the value of the networking and knowledge sharing
3. Practice: to identify the common knowledge needs of the group. The overall goal of this planning stage is to promote community development around these three key elements.

(Wenger et al., 2002.)

The collected feedback and suggestions during the EPN community E-learning Seminar & Workshop (Appendix 3) has supported with sharpening the future scope of the community as well as with identifying the needs of the participants. At this point the definition of the scope is defined in a way that engages members and potential members - the aim is not to determine the final scope because the community will naturally evolve and the scope needs to be able to evolve accordingly.

In order to attract more members, Lexellence needs to build a case for action, which describes the potential value of the EPN community also for their organizations, as some managers are unwilling to actively support their staff's participation in communities. This is also a business culture issue, which needs to be taken into account. The

case of action defines the scope of the community as well as describes the value gained via participation.

## **Stage 2: Coalescing**

As there is an understanding of a vision where the EPN community can go and it has been officially launched as a preparation stage for the community of practice, it has at this point moved to the coalescing stage with certain activities. This could be also called as incubation period or the second level of preparation stage. The initial activities have included the kickoff event (Appendix 3, E-learning Seminar & Workshop with discussion of the community scope) and knowledge sharing, like the workshop itself and the established online discussion forum in LinkedIn; the networking has already begun.

There have been also planned activities in the near future as a second level of the preparation stage, like informal community meeting over dinner as well as the next E-learning workshop which will strongly focus on mobile learning. Mobile learning was raised as one of the most problematic development issue for E-learning among the kickoff event participants. The annual activity plan has been also designed, however in a way that it leaves space for scaling. These activities allow members to build relationships, trust and awareness of their common interests and needs.

The main focus of the coalescing stages is to generate energy in the community and to highlight the following:

1. Domain: to establish the value of sharing knowledge
2. Community: to develop relationships and trust to discuss E-learning related practice problems openly
3. Practice: to specify what knowledge should be shared in EPN and why

For coalescing stage it is natural to face some challenges, especially when we look at this as a preparation stage and as an initial framework for the future development. According to Wenger et al. (2002), communities often start with spike and interest, especially if the community has a highly visible launch event as the EPN community had. As other commitments pull people away from participating and the energy for the community can fall off as they forget the real value of the community. In this stage the coordinator role is extremely important in order to keep the energy level high. Keeping the energy level high requires the following coordination activities: facilitating meetings, establishing and updating the website, sharing documents and most importantly: talking with members personally about their needs and connecting them with each other. Also for EPN Community, the second workshop will be crucial for the community's future and it needs lots of focus from the coordinator in order to assign the right agenda as well as attract new potential members to the event. After the second workshop it will be important to follow up with regular events. Scheduled regular events will help the EPN community to strengthen the relationships as well creates a rhythm for the community.

During the coalescing period it is also crucial to build the core group and to create a strong relationship between the coordinator and the core group. It would be also ideal to have the members actively helping each other out with their specific problems, which means that the relationships between the members need to be also strengthened. Linking people who have problems with others who might have solutions is crucial from this point of view.

### **Stage 3: Maturing**

Once EPN community has demonstrated its value and the words spreads both via the existing members as well as via marketing activities, the community might grow rapidly. At his stage the community also will have a stronger sense of itself which sharpens the scope and the activities. It is important to understand that when the community grows rapidly, it also may shift its tone: New members may have different needs and they do not have yet established the relationship with other members, so they do not necessarily have similar trust to the group as the core group has. It is necessary to men-

tor the new members both by the coordinator and the members of the EPN community. Communities often re-organize themselves during this stage, which means that this is active stage especially for the coordinator. The domain itself becomes the primary driver of the activities. At this point it is also a great opportunity to divide the EPN into smaller sub-communities, so that people can stay connected to the whole community while maintaining a stronger engagement to smaller sub-groups. The preliminary plan for these groups has been divided, but they need to be adjusted accordingly based on the needs and scope of the EPN community during the maturing stage.

During the maturing stage there might be also assigned more than one coordinator for EPN Community. Coordinators' responsibility is to keep well connected with the core group in order to make sure that their needs are still met, even new sub-communities would have been established. At the same time it is important to find new core members.

If the body of the information is getting impossible to handle, the coordinators should share the responsibility of the material management. This task area includes scanning for relevant articles, books, cases and other resources as well as organizing and sharing this material with the community. The coordinators also support the EPN community members to find out the most relevant and helpful resources.

#### **Stage 4: Stewardship**

For the coordinators and the core group it is a key to identify opportunities to take on new challenges, expand the community's focus as well as to incorporate new perspectives. Introducing new topics and speakers help to raise the energy in low periods. Maintaining freshness and liveliness takes more energy and attention at this stage.

For the coordinators and the core group it is a key to identify opportunities to find and take on new challenges, expand the community's focus as well as to incorporate new perspectives. Introducing new topics and speakers help to raise the energy in low periods. Also, introducing new members to the community creates active atmosphere. As well as during the maturing stage, also during the stewardship stage it is important to

guarantee the mentoring for the new members. There could be even established “mentorship” program to make sure that this task is completed accordingly.

As a summary of the different stages above, it can be said that all the stages will develop naturally. They can not be forced neither skipped, neither ignored from the activity point of view. However, if the key activities required on any certain stage would be ignored, the community would most probably start to die naturally. Especially, if the coordinator role would be taken out or ignored. The community coordinator is the key driver for the community development and this is why the role should be also taken seriously from the very early stages of the community aliveness.

## 8 Preliminary design for EPN Community

The preliminary design for EPN community includes a description of the community's scope, hot topics, structure, roles and knowledge-sharing processes. The ownership of this design belongs to Lexellence. However, even Lexellence is the original owner of the EPN Community, at the end the community will operate under the name of the LD Pros Group as an individual venture. This is due to legal and operational reasons: LD Pros Group has been registered in Ireland and as at this point Lexellence is operating purely from Finland. From this sense, it would complicate both legal and financial practice if Lexellence would officially and legally manage the EPN Community.

The preliminary design introduced here is detailed enough to initiate community activity, but not too detailed so that it leaves little room for improvisation and new ideas. The community will modify itself along multiple dimensions as it develops. The community leaders; which in EPN community consists of the core group, should be invited to help develop the design at the very early stages of the E-learning professionals' network's lifecycle (Wenger et al., 2002, 79).

As discussed earlier, the community of practice cannot be designed as organizational structure: community design is more like life-long learning than organizational design. The three key elements (domain, community and practice) can be promoted by defining the community's focus, identifying and building relationships between members, and identifying topics and projects that would be exciting for community members (Wenger et al. 2002, 73).



Figure 6: The structure of a community of practice (Global Gateways, 2013)

The overall goal in the planning stage is to promote community development around each of the three key elements as:

1. **Domain Scope:** E-learning in business environment
  - E-learning fundamentals and deployment process as a whole
  - E-learning development (plan, design, technology and delivery)
  - Mobile learning and gaming
  - Managing change, cultural challenges

The EPN Community consists of members that are professionals in the field or training and E-learning. The specific focus of the group is E-learning: How to implement and develop E-learning, to learn more about E-learning delivery and design, to gather knowledge about technological solutions and specific topics like mobile learning, gaming and E-learning platforms.

2. **Community Scope:** Finding more community members and recognizing the core group
  - As a target engaging 15-20 members by the end of 2013
  - Expanding the existing core group



Finding community members is challenging due to E-learning professionals' limited opportunities to participate external networking events during the working hours. This is why it is necessary to reach also the company managers and learning managers and to convince them about the value of the EPN community participation. Sending emails is not enough; also face-to-face meetings and phone calls are needed, as well as activity in social media and in other training networks.

In the later stages when the members are truly engaged to the EPN community, the membership fee will be introduced in order to expand the learning opportunities and in order to improve the quality and value to be gained via the membership. When coordination resources can be expanded, also the community starts to generate more value.

3. **Practice Scope:** Identifying needs of the new members via face to face connection and surveys conducted during the events
  - The current community needs focus on sharing knowledge and experience about E-learning practices. The participants are especially interested in hearing how other organizations have implemented their E-learning practices as a whole; sharing success stories and mistakes, sharing tips and hints.
  - From specific topic point of view, all the members are specifically interested to learn more about mobile learning and mobile learning implementation. This could be identified as a current E-learning "hot topic".

The objective of the EPN practice is to create value to the members so that they learn more about the topic as well as save time and money in terms of information search and knowledge gathering, but also they should receive concrete tools and documents like manuals, best practice guides, R&D support, benchmarking reports and opportunities to pilot new tools and solutions. The value is reflecting on the value of the work

they complete in their business organizations. In other words both the members as individuals need to gain value but also the organizations that they are representing.

## **8.1 EPN Community practice: Activity plan**

In order to create energy through different stages of EPN Community development stages, the community should have a roadmap for rotation of events and activities. Even though EPN is a knowledge sharing community and therefore the members should establish the discussion (issues where they need help, generating ideas) and activity by themselves, still the community needs leadership and strong encouragement for this. The responsibility of the leadership and encouragement belongs to the coordinator.

The EPN Community practice will include the following designed activities:

- Knowledge sharing workshops
- E-learning seminars
- Training sessions
- Online meetings (QA Sessions)
- Informal face-to-face meetings

### **8.1.1 Knowledge sharing workshops**

Knowledge sharing workshops will focus on certain topics based on the interests of the participants. These workshops' delivery method is mainly based on knowledge sharing activities that will be facilitated by the coordinator. One of the most efficient knowledge sharing strategy that encourages for interaction is the Open Space method, which runs on two fundamentals: passion and responsibility. The method is founded by Harrison Owen (1993) and its purpose is to create inspired meetings and events. The common result of using Open Space method according to Owen is "a powerful,

effective, connecting and strengthening of what's already happening in the organization: planning and action, learning and doing, passion and responsibility, -- and a simple powerful way to get people and organizations moving. -- Open Space works best when the work to be done is complex, the people and ideas involved are diverse, the passion for resolution (and potential for conflict) are high, and the time to get it done was yesterday.”

The following structure is a simplified version of the Open Space method:

1. The participants raise the most important issues for them. This can be done by writing the issues on the paper. After writing, the participants will stick the papers on the wall.
2. The workshop participants choose personally the most interesting topics (1-3 topics depending on the size of the group) and mark those topic papers with their own initials (=voting). Depending on the amount of participants, the 3-6 most voted topics will be highlighted by the community coordinator. Each of the voted topics will have its own “meeting” and space in the same room or venue. The initial issue raisers are chosen to be the “chairmen” of these meetings.
3. The other participants walk into the “topic corners”, they can choose their topic corner based on their needs and interests. The chairman introduces the topic and the meeting participants start to bring their ideas, experience and knowledge into the game by providing examples and suggestions. This creates lots of discussion and brainstorming among the participants. The chairman takes notes of good suggestions and writes them down on the flip chart or into shared online documents. The meeting participants can jump from meeting to meeting whenever they want, only the chairmen must stay in their initial meetings and keep managing them.

4. Once the time is used, the participants get back to the same shared space. The chairmen wrap up their meetings with the conclusions and action plans. The notes will be shared with the EPN community coordinator.
5. In a time as short as one or two days, all of the most important ideas, discussion, data, recommendations, conclusions, questions for further study, and plans for immediate action will be documented in one comprehensive report by the community coordinator.
6. After an event, all of these results can be made available to an entire organization or community within days of the event, so the conversation can invite every stakeholder into implementation - right now.

Many business companies have used this method successfully. According to Owen, results gained via Open Space method can be planned and implemented faster than any other kind of so-called "large-group intervention." It is said to be literally possible to accomplish in days and weeks what some traditional approaches take months or years to do. However, this is just an example of many efficient methods that can be used in the workshops. Most important is to remember, that the EPN workshops focus on interaction and active knowledge sharing. The workshop's aim in EPN community is to inspire people and provide them with concrete value as well as to engage them with each other.

The workshops might also contain presentations held by the community members or other E-learning specialists, however these presentations need to focus on the EPN. The presentations should cover less than half of the time of the workshop. Instead of delivering presentations, the workshop should focus on the actual knowledge work (like knowledge sharing by using Open Space method) in order to keep the event interactive and to differentiate from generic seminar events.

### **8.1.2 E-learning Seminars**

Seminars differ from the workshops in terms of its nature and objectives. In the EPN seminars the members will be gathered together to gain knowledge and information about the HOT topics. These topics will be presented by professionals from different areas and industries, however, all the topics are tightly related to the share interest/domain of the community: E-learning.

During the first year of operation when the community is still on coalescing stage, it is suggested to have one informal meeting, one online training/workshop and one onsite workshop. During the following years when the EPN Community will be growing, it is wise to arrange two workshops and two seminars annually, from which one of the seminars will invite also third parties and external professionals to participate. For the community, this “Annual Grand Seminar” is a great opportunity to attract new members and to arrange an E-learning exhibition. Exhibitors may consist of retailers, manufacturers, solution providers, training professionals and other specialists from the field of training. The exhibition/trade show covers some costs of the community. The coordinator is responsible for organizing the Grand Seminar and it is important to create a detailed plan and budget for the event.

### **8.1.3 Training sessions**

The EPN Community will also arrange training sessions based on the members’ needs. The trainings will be mostly delivered as webinars via online tools like Webex, Connect Pro and Live Meeting, which makes it possible to attend the training also from your own workplace. In the later stages of the community development it might be also needed to create an own E-learning environment for the EPN Community or at least broadcast these trainings. For any training sessions it is important to complete a training needs analysis in order to make sure that the training needs are met. Depending on the state of the community, sometimes it is also necessary to arrange onsite face-to-

face trainings, especially during the stages when the energy seems to be getting lower among the community members.

The trainers should be found from the community itself in order to avoid sales pitches and to keep the environment neutral. However, sometimes external trainers are necessary, for example in cases when the required knowledge is not available or does not exist in the community. These topics might relate to very specific needs on technology or on some new solutions or topics, like augmented reality or mobile learning.

#### **8.1.4 Online meetings**

The EPN Community coordinator is responsible for arranging and facilitating the online meetings. One of the big challenges is to keep the discussion active as well as to share the opportunity to “raise to voice” to all the participants equally. For online meetings it is wise to reach the members beforehand and collect the topics of interest into the agenda. This helps the coordinator also to plan and keep the time as well as to share the time equally. Especially at the early stages of the community engagement, it might be challenging to find volunteers to speak up during these meetings. In this case the coordinator could personally reach certain members of the group and invite them to discuss about their current challenges in the coming meeting. The other option is to send a QA (Question & Answer) form for the participants and invite external professionals to answer some of these questions. Usually also new questions arise during the QA session.

When facilitating an online meeting, the coordinator should be active for example in terms of asking the participants several follow up questions as well as referring to earlier examples given by the members, or discussions that have taken place during the workshops. If the workshops lack of participants, this is also a good way to raise interest and attract people to participate the workshops. For any virtual meeting from the coordinator point of view, it is necessary to get well prepared. The coordinator needs

to create and sustain energy, keep the group focused and to make sure that every meeting creates value for the participants.

Online meetings as well as any other EPN events require registration so that the coordinator can plan the schedule, agenda and activities accordingly as well as to send the possible queries and surveys to the participants before the actual event.

### **8.1.5 Informal meetings**

From the community engagement and relationship point of view it is also important to organize informal meetings where the members can get to know each other personally. These meetings could be for example dinners a couple of times a year, of meeting over a coffee with opportunity to get to know each other and to discuss the current hot topics. Even these meetings should be kept informal, the coordinator's attendance is important. The coordinator ensures that the conversation is active and people get to know each other. Informal meetings are also great way to introduce new member as well as to announce the latest success stories in the community.

One way to increase the connection of the community members is to rotate meeting location and bring them to visit member's work sites.

## **8.2 Activity rotation**

The EPN activity plan includes activities listed above (8.1.1-8.1.4.) that take place on rotating basis. This gives the people a feeling familiarity and also the change to plan their calendars well ahead. This should increase the participation rate. However, informal events should not be planned too much ahead in order to leave space for "improvisation" and for "something new".

**The following activity rotation is suggested for the EPN community:**

<b>Annually</b>	Annual Grand Seminar (inc. trade show and presentations) E-learning Seminar
<b>Twice a year</b>	Face to Face Workshops
<b>Quarterly</b>	Webinar/Introducing newest technology, tools and solutions Online Meetings: Video/Voice meetings with the community Training Sessions
<b>Weekly</b>	Updates on discussion forum and websites

In some point the EPN Community might expand into several countries in Europe. Even it is advised to arrange the events on local basis, the Annual Grand Meeting could invite all the EPN Communities from all the countries together, giving them an opportunity to get to know each other and to expand their networks, share experiences as well as celebrate together the successful year of the community work. It is also important that all the community events allow people also time to network informally.

In addition to the events and meetings listed above, the community might work on co-operative development projects, create best practices and documentation together as well as participate in R&D projects that could be arranged in co-operation with universities and other external partners. When the community grows, it might naturally lead to birth of sub-communities and requires the change for the activity plan.

### **8.3 EPN Community coordination**

Lexellence is going to offer a resource for the coordinator role. A good community coordinator is knowledgeable and passionate about the topic (E-learning) as well about the community creation. Coordinator is crucial to a community success and his/her primary role is to link people. It is important to choose a person for a coordinator role who can fulfill the following requirements:



### 1. Dedication and time

- According to Wenger the most common failure in communities is the underestimation of the time needed for the coordination activities.

The coordinator should be both excited about the community work as well as to have allocated time for the coordination. It is suggested that one person will be hired for the EPN Community to take full responsibility of the coordination activities.

### 2. Networking skills

- A community coordinator needs excellent networking skills and ability to network with all the members of the community. The community coordinator needs to actively contact the members, create good relationships with them and to visit their offices to discuss about the community issues. From the networking skills point of view it is also crucial that the coordinator is actively looking for new members and introduces the members with each other, encourages them for co-operation and offers co-operation opportunities. Every phone call made, email exchanged or problem-solving conversation strengthens the community – the coordinator can actively drive the community into this direction. The community coordinator needs to work on private spaces between the meetings, linking the members with helpful resources both from outside of the community. He/she also recognizes the development needs of the individuals in the community.

### 3. Technical knowledge & skills

- The EPN Community coordinator needs to have an understanding of E-learning and the technical issues related to the topic and to the community; otherwise it is difficult to take initiative to move the community forward. However, even certain level of skills are required, being a leading expert in the topic is not required neither really want-

ed, as for the coordinator the priority is to link the people – not to give answers or lead the conversation with his or her own knowledge.

It is important for the EPN Community coordinator to take a neutral position in the community; even he/she is representing a solution provider (Lexellence). The discussion with the members should not aim for business expansion but for the value of the community. The coordinator needs to be also able to recognize the changes in the community energy and to act accordingly, to facilitate conversation and to bring new topics and ideas into discussion. (Wenger et al. 2002.)

The EPN Community coordinator role could include the following responsibilities and tasks:

- Engaging members and linking them with each other.
- Recognizing and building the core group
- Finding new members
- Organizing community meetings and events
- Organizing small group projects and meetings
- Organizing site visits and informal meetings
- Finding presenters, speakers and professionals that are gurus in E-learning
- 
- Facilitating the events and making notes
- Creating document library & updating it
- Recognizing the needs of the individuals and organizing activities/links accordingly
- Linking individuals with helpful resources from inside and outside of the community
- Managing online discussion groups and private spaces for information and documentation sharing
- Updating the website and social media
- Other marketing activities

As the community grows, also the tasks of the coordinator will take more time. And the more the community grows, the more important it is to take care of the documentation as well. For this purposes it is suggested that also private online space is created in addition to the discussion forums and public website. This space creates value in terms of the membership, as only the members can access the shared documents and proposals as well as comment on them. Collaboration should be supported also via technology.

Despite of the several tasks and responsibilities that the coordinator carries in the community, it is important to not to load him/her too much with the responsibility. Even all the tasks would be taken care of; more important is to provide the right content in the right context rather than scheduled list of networking events. The key element of designing value is to encourage the community members to be explicit about the value of the community throughout its lifetime and to adapt accordingly. (Wenger et al., 2002.)

## **9 Implementation of EPN Community**

The initial preparation activities have taken place already in 2013. After the qualitative E-learning research conducted in December 2012 in Dublin, the preliminary network/community proposal was introduced for Lexellence and it was decided to create the network for E-learning professionals in Ireland. The people were connected both via LinkedIn and email messages. The group of E-learning professionals was invited to attend the E-learning Seminar and Workshop in Dublin where the idea of the network/community was introduced. Based on the feedback collected in the event, the initial core group could be established. However, as the community is still on incubation level, more actions are needed to be taken in order to guarantee the engagement of this group as well as to expand the existing group.

The incubation period is a critical time for building the core group. During this time the EPN Community coordinator needs to engage the existing core members and to recruit new ones so the community has enough members to grow and thrive. But during the coalescing stage, building membership is actually less important than developing the core group. It is through the collaboration of the core group that the community discovers its value. Making connections between core group members is the most important networking the EPN coordinator can do at this stage. When the core group is cohesive, the community can face the growth pressures which are typical of the next stage. (Wenger et al. 2002, 88-89)

### **9.1 The E-learning Seminar & Workshop in Dublin**

The E-learning Seminar & Workshop (Appendix 3) as a community kickoff event of the EPN Community took place in May, 2013. E-learning professionals from different industries were invited to take part to the event, which carried a name of E-learning Seminar & Workshop (Appendix 3). The agenda for the day consisted of presentations and discussions in the morning and of the afternoon workshop, where the participants

introduced their current E-learning challenges and worked together to find solutions for these issues. The presentations were held by E-learning professionals and included also one of the research participants, who could be identified as one of the leaders in terms of E-learning knowledge and experience in Ireland. The nature of the event was very interactive and collaborative, which was also the purpose to provide the participants of the feeling how the actual community would work: Together, openly and by learning from each other.

The event had altogether 20 registered participants, from which 16 were present. At the end of the event the participants provided feedback and suggestions for the future community activity. The feedback was excellent and provided some guidance in terms of the value creation.

## **9.2 Attracting members**

As noticed during the earlier stages, it is very difficult to reach unknown people via email because the amount of received email is huge nowadays, almost in any role or position. Also, many E-learning professionals who could not make it to the E-learning Seminar & Workshop discussed with me in LinkedIn about the community/network and raised their interest towards networking and the future events. Some of them were not able to attend because their organization does not allow them to attend external networking activities during the office hours, and some of them most probably could not attend because they were assigned to deliver trainings in their own premises. Convincing organizations to let their knowledge workers to work also outside of the office might be one of the biggest challenges for the community in Ireland. The balance is difficult to find as many of those who are in manager position most likely would not attend any networking events outside of office hours.

As communities typically depend on middle and senior managers for funding and encouragement to participate, it is important to offer them well-researched, convincing proposals to build a case for action (Wenger et al. 2002, 77). For the EPN Community

coordinator this is also a challenge, as these managers are difficult to reach directly, especially in Ireland. This is why it is suggested that the community coordinator visits the members' and potential members' offices and invites the managers for a meeting, where the coordinator can present a case for action. This case describes the potential value of the EPN Community to the organization and the rationale for supporting it. The same case of action also can be used to market the value of participation to members. It should highlight the benefits gained via the EPN Community participation, such as the time people lose looking for information or reinventing tools and approaches that already exist in other organizations or groups, the speed with which competitors share technology, or opportunities missed by failing to share technology. (Wenger et al. 2002.)

### **9.3 Managing the community aliveness**

As discussed in a couple of different context already, communities naturally go through cycles of high and low energy, which requires them to regularly to fresh up their ideas, members and practices, including activities. To spur the interest during the low periods, the EPN Community could introduce new topics like new technology and practices, invite inspirational speakers to the meetings or to arrange joint meetings with other communities – in later stages even to bring professionals from other countries' networks to join online meetings and to deliver their expertise in these meetings. Sometimes the topics generate interest among people beyond the community as well and the community might attract new members without additional recruitment activities. Also changing the rhythm of the community activities might sometimes help with rejuvenating the community. (Wenger et al., 2002, 104-106.)

### **9.4 The communicative strategy**

The communicative strategy has been built based on my personal experience with difficulties to reach and attract professionals to join networks outside of their organiza-

tions. Nowadays email is the most common way to reach people for marketing purposes, but it is getting also very difficult because of the amount of junk mail received daily. In Ireland, it is also extremely difficult to find personal contact details from any company's website. For this purpose, LinkedIn is the best way to find professional contacts in Ireland and it is advised to be used also in the future. In addition to LinkedIn, even though the community will not limit them into any certain platforms, the some certain free social media channels are recommended to be used at the beginning of the communicative operations. The time planned to be invested on the communicative strategy during the incubation period (2013) is less than during the later stages (2014-2015), as the core activity during the incubation period is to engage the existing core group. Once the community achieves more stable position, the effort on communicative strategy and marketing activities will be increased.

### **Social Media**

The EPN Community should establish routines for social media activities and to create interaction in these social networks. Instead of being present in all social media channels, it is more efficient to invest time and resources on certain channels, especially during the incubation period. This helps also the coordinator with the time planning and allocation.

One of the best tools currently to create interaction is LinkedIn, where you can create both closed and public discussion groups. This site provides good opportunity for polls and QA section and at the same time it works as a marketing tool for the community. The more actively coordinated at the early stages of the community practice, the less work is needed during the later stages of the community development: Members get engaged and create the conversations themselves based on their interests and issues. The initial LinkedIn group for EPN Community has been created in June, 2013, however in order to create aliveness in the group it requires activity from Lexellence, as discussed above.

Google+ reaches Google users around the world. During the past two years Google+ has reached 500 million registered users around the world, including many E-learning

networks. In Google+ the EPN Community should also create their own page, where the community coordinator can easily share links to interesting documents and to promote the community events. The purpose of the EPN Google+ page is not to work as a website or internal communication channel for the community, but rather as a promotional marketing tool and as a tool for sharing public information about the EPN Community.

In Ireland Twitter is more popular than in Finland and many E-learning professionals also encourage their colleagues to use Twitter. For this purpose Twitter account and activity is recommended.

### **Incubation Period/preparation stage**

Time allocation for social media activity (weekly/monthly):

Monthly total: 10 hours

### **Mature stage**

Time allocation for social media activity (weekly/monthly):

Monthly total: 20 hours

### **Incubation Period/preparation stage**

Time allocation for website updates:

Monthly total: 8hrs

### **Mature stage**

Time allocation for website updates:

Monthly total: 20hrs

### **Face to Face meetings and network creation activities**

Arranging face to face meetings with organizations E-learning and training managers is a necessary part of the coordinator role. However, this does not need to happen on



weekly basis but could be allocated as an activity, which makes it easier to plan the resources and time needed. Arranging the meetings with the managers requires email communication, phone calls and connections through the existing network. Around six new meetings (potential members) per quarter is suggested. This could be divided also into two meetings per month, depending on the location of the coordinator. In addition to this, finding new contacts and updating contact list requires continuous work for 1hr estimated per each week.

### **Incubation Period/preparation stage**

Time allocation for face to face meetings (calculated on monthly basis):

Arranging meetings – 6 hrs

Attending meetings – 8hrs

Finding new contacts – 4hrs

Monthly total: 18 hours

### **Mature stage**

Time allocation for face to face meetings (calculated on monthly basis):

Arranging meetings – 12 hrs

Attending meetings – 16hrs

Finding new contacts – 8hrs

Monthly total: 36 hours

### **Events**

Arranging events that are open for E-learning professionals also outside of the community is a great way to promote the EPN Community. All of the workshops and seminars should allow 5-10 potential new members to participate. The “free of charge” participation could be limited to one workshop or seminar. This event should also convince the new members to engage to the group.

<b>Annually</b>	Annual Grand Seminar (inc. trade show and presentations) E-learning Seminar
<b>Twice a year</b>	Face to Face Workshops
<b>Quarterly</b>	Webinar/Introducing newest technology, tools and solutions Online Meetings: Video/Voice meetings with the community Training Sessions
<b>Weekly</b>	Updates on discussion forum and websites

### **Incubation Period/preparation stage**

Time allocated for event arrangements:

2013: 100h (3 events)

### **Mature stage**

Time allocated for event arrangements:

Yearly: 500h

Monthly: 42h

The mature stage's time allocation is based on existing contact list, which will be updated twice a year. Time for this task is allocated separately. Below is the preliminary structure of the activity rotation on yearly basis followed by the estimated time required for the event arrangement and delivery. Informal meetings are optional and will be arranged based on the energy level in the community.

January	Informal meeting (16h)
February	E-learning Seminar (40h)
March	Online meeting 1 (24h)
April	WS1 (60h)
May	Onsite training (60h)
June	Informal meeting (16h)
July	SUMMER BREAK
August	Online meeting 2 (24h)
September	WS2 (60h)
October	Informal meeting (16h)

November	Online training (40h)
December	Annual Grand Seminar (140h)

The communicative strategy includes also other communicative activities like emailing EPN Community members, linking them with each other as well as some administrative activities, which could be estimated to be around 45 hours per month during the preparation period/incubation period (2013) and more than double time during the mature stages when the amount of members rises. The total estimation of the minimum working hours for the coordination resource is around 80 hours during the preparation stage and full time if followed the above communicative strategy.

## 9.5 Return on Investment

For the most companies the ultimate test for measuring the value of new knowledge is economic and commonly based on increased efficiency, lower costs and improved ROI. But in the knowledge-creating company like Lexellence also other more qualitative factors are equally important (Nonaka, 2007). In terms of establishing and managing the community of practice activity in Ireland, the company can easily engage with high number of companies, potential customers and co-operators in a short period of time. At the same time Lexellence gain knowledge asset as they stay on the top of information what is going on in the market, how the competitors behave as well as how the market trends develop.

The costs of the EPN Community practice will consist of the following:

1. Coordination (part time resource 80 hours month)
2. Web Hosting/ICT environment
3. Events
4. Travelling (visiting sites, engaging new members)
5. Advertising
6. Administrative cost

Part of the operational costs will be covered with the following income:

1. Membership fees
2. Sponsorship
3. Training income
4. Annual Grand Seminar participation
5. Trade shows/exhibitors in Annual Grand Seminar
6. Additional fee-based services for members
  - Consultation
  - Research management
  - Benchmarking
  - Piloting new technology

### **Membership fees and sponsorship**

The membership fees in different kind of networks are often lined up based on the size of the company, small companies having lower membership fee than larger ones. The initial plan about the fees will be discussed with the potential members during the early stages of the development in autumn 2013. When introducing the membership fee, it is important that the activity plan has been introduced for the network members and that they agree the membership fee is relative to the value to be gained via the membership – as well as what is covered with this membership fee. In addition to the members, the EPN Community should look for sponsors for each year. These sponsors could be found from inside the community (large companies) or via co-operation plan with Universities and public developers in Ireland and Finland.

### **Training income and Annual Grand Seminar**

The training income is based on the face to face training held once a year. The training content will be built based on the EPN members' needs during each year. The additional event fees should be generally low, so that members feel that their membership fee is worth to pay. External participants will be also invited both to the annual face to face training and Annual Grand Seminar, however they pay higher fee than EPN

Community members in order to highlights the benefits received via the membership. The other option is to have higher membership fees and free event participation for the members.

### **Trade shows**

The Annual Grand Seminar will open the doors also for external exhibitors/service providers. The fee will include 15mins presentation/speech time and the exhibition area/space in the venue. The exhibition will give the local service providers an opportunity to share their expertise as well as the network members with an opportunity to learn about the technology and services available. During the second activity year of the EPN Community, the Annual Grand Seminar should double the amount of participants and aim for at least 70 participants each year.

The additional services that are not counted in this budget will be provided based on additional fees. These additional services also have impact on the input needed from the coordinator, so it is important to have fixed prices for the services to be provided in order to be able to estimate the total cost/income. The budget has been introduced and estimated in a separate confidential plan for Lexellence.

### **External funding**

Via external funding, the community would get a chance to grow faster as more coordination resources can be allocated for the community from the very beginning. During the incubation stage Lexellence will be responsible for the most of the costs and this will be their initial investment for the community development and market entry strategy. However, in order to enable maximized value generation for the community, expanded co-operation with third parties as well as opportunity to invest in development work, it is suggested that Lexellence will look for additional opportunities for funding. These opportunities could be one or more of the following:

- Tekes development funding and opportunity for technological development, expanded networking as well as business growth
- Shared practice with educational institutes or research institutes with shared resources in order to maximize development potential for both

- Local funding operatives (Ireland) via international market entry investment opportunities

## 9.6 Overcoming community obstacles

More and more companies and public institutions turn to the implementation of CoPs, both for capitalizing knowledge and for improving the experience and knowledge of their employees (Nonaka, 2007). However, still it can be seen that many organizations in Ireland are limiting their knowledge workers' participation in external communities during the official working hours and based on my personal experience from the time when I lived in Ireland, the weekends are generally preferred to be kept "work-free". The first challenge for the EPN Community will be related to participation opportunities from the members' side. Naturally, if there will be no participation in the events, the community will not bring will value to the members and it will collapse. The most efficient way to overcome the participation challenge is to meet the organizations' decision makers face to face and convince them about the value of the community participation.

Even the community grows, there will be challenges on the way. Communities often begin with a spike of interest and energy, particularly if the community has a highly visible launch event like the EPN Community had. However, after the first event, the reality of community work like networking, sharing ideas, maintaining the Web site typically sets in, and people's energy for the community can fall off sharply (Wenger, 2002). For this reason it is important to have a skilled coordinator in place that takes care of the administrative work and arranges the events as well as helps the members to co-operate smoothly. Still, other commitments might pull members away from participating in some point sooner or later, and the sooner if people don't always find great immediate value gained via the community practice. According to Wenger et al. (2002) the members might interpret this loss of interest as a lack of real value and become impatient with the community. In order to avoid this, it is extremely important to help the members to realize the value; to build cases of action, to make memos and

build documentation about the success stories inside the community and celebrate the success, to communicate about any positive development to the community – in other words to highlight the vision and guide the group towards success.

During the incubation period communities are particularly fragile and this is why it is important to identify the possible challenges at the very beginning and to have suitable strategies to avoid the loss of energy in the EPN Community. Building trust, exploring the domain and discovering the kind of ideas, methods, and mutual support take time and also energy, especially from the coordinator. Also the community members need to develop the habit of consulting each other for help and the coordinator can help them to do that by linking them with each other and by supporting open communication with professional facilitating methods. As the members develop the habit of consulting each other, they typically deepen their relationships and discover their common needs, collective ways of thinking, approaching a problem and developing a solution. However, most people, and most of their managers, have a personal limit on the time they are willing to contribute before realizing value, which brings pressure on the coordinator side. (Wenger et al. 2002, 84.) The more energy and time brought for the community at the beginning of its activity, the easier it will be to maintain the energy also in the future.

## 10 Future opportunities

Once the EPN Community has been piloted for two years period of time, there might be seen several changes that have taken place during the activity time. The scope of the community might have sharpened or changed, the core group might have totally different members and the community probably has learnt what works and what doesn't. The coordinator himself might have changed. Also the coordinator might have changed his/her methods to support the value creation process as well as the way to organize events. Does the online training work? Are people happy to participate online meetings or do they prefer to meet face to face? Is there time to create best practices and are these implemented? The context and content of the events might be totally different compared to what it was at the beginning.

The learning point here is that the community will be changing and finding its own way to develop. There might be faced several cultural related needs and requirements that would not work in other country than Ireland. Also the co-operators preferred for the community might have cultural impact, in Ireland the practice might be strongly business related whereas for example in Finland co-operation with universities would be probably highly appreciated by the members. Despite of the cultural differences, after couple of years of time there can be identified also areas that will work also in other cultures, for example by understanding what has brought success for this community and what kind of best practices can be applied if similar communities of practice will be established in other countries.

In this chapter I will suggest some future opportunities for the EPN community of practice.



## 10.1 Co-operation with universities and research institutions

Even the analysis of the onsite interviews in Dublin (Makkonen, 2013) suggest that companies are primarily interested to co-operate on practical basis and are not specifically keen to network with academy, it was also mentioned in the interview that in order to build a long term strategy for E-learning development, related research and future employee development, the universities and research institutes should be invited co-operate more closely with companies. This co-operation and development relates strongly to technology development but also to learning related research and development.

Co-operation with universities and research institutes would bring new opportunities also for national and global E-learning development especially if the global companies will be involved. This would emphasize R&D in E-learning industry and might even have global impact on the way the companies apply their knowledge in learning development: it could make the businesses realize that the value of E-learning practices and development should not be measured purely on cost basis but with a larger scale.

Co-operation with universities would also bring new aspects for the community members who most commonly have roots in the fast paced business environments. The community members' companies might even want to co-operate with the universities on practical level by providing senior students with internships and research projects as well as with topics for final thesis based on the company development needs.

Educational institutes also operate as training providers and training institutes, which would be beneficial both for the training providers and the community members. The co-operation between the companies and training institutes could even produce new standardized training and E-learning programs.

## 10.2 Multiplying communities across Europe

Once the community has had a couple of years activity in Ireland, most probably many changes in the community have taken place. Once Lexellence has learnt to identify best practices for community “management” and facilitation and has found its way to comply full funding for the community work, via different activities, it will be good time to implement the framework in other countries in Europe and to establish similar development and knowledge sharing communities in these countries. The best practices can be applied from the very beginning of the implementation process in other countries, thanks to the experience in Ireland, so the expansion of the communities will be both faster and more cost efficient.

Once there will be EPN communities in more than one country with same practical principles and same domain as in Ireland, the communities will gain an opportunity to also work across the nations. At the beginning the co-operation across nations would most probably be easiest to establish via sub-communities in order to expand the knowledge scope on specific topics of small groups, as well as it could be also expanded on co-operational level for example between different universities - especially in the area of R&D.

Below image describes the engagement proposal between EPN communities in different countries on different community levels:

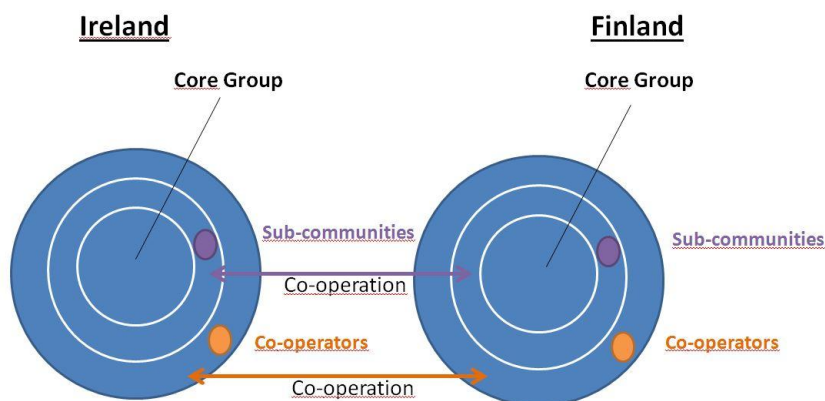


Figure 7: Structure and interaction of different communities (Makkonen, 2013)

The co-operation across nations can take place in many formats including shared projects, R&D projects between co-operators and/or co-operators and companies, eTwinning, participation in each others' online meetings occasionally, giving presentations and introducing own community's development work and success stories in each others' larger events. If the community framework will expand very strongly, also annual European-wide seminars and workshops should be arranged.

## 11 Conclusions and reflections

The study has been completed during 1-year period of time. It provides insight, principles and guidelines for establishing and implementing a community of practice as well as discusses these insights especially from the management point of view.

The study started with an idea of conducting market study in Ireland for the target organization operating in Finland. Via exploratory study and suggestions made by the author of this thesis, the scope was defined further to support their business and network expansion opportunities in Ireland and at the same time to support the company's role as a developer and as a researcher. As it was found out that no required networks existed in Ireland, it was suggested one to be created in Ireland and the target organization to take the management responsibility. After the research phase, Lexcelence got determined about establishing the network in Ireland. The study has helped them to start the preparation work for this network's implementation process in Ireland, by taking the initial steps and activities and by creating guidelines based on the research findings, theories and interaction with the potential members.

The following activities have taken place during the study:

1. Research
  - Exploratory research
  - Online survey
  - Onsite interviews in Dublin
  - Promotion work for the research purposes (website, emails, social media)
2. Creation of contact list
  - Finding contacts from company websites and LinkedIn
  - Contacting people one by one and interacting with these people
3. Research analysis and recommendations
  - Analysis work
  - Confirming the need for organized E-learning network in Ireland

4. Coordination with the potential members
  - Creating reports and analysis also for the research participants
  - Sharing information about the further development plans
5. Proposal for Community of Practice implementation
  - Proposal for the target organization about implementing community of practice type of network in Ireland
  - Informing TEKES about the project
6. Kickoff event: E-learning Seminar & Workshop
  - Organizing E-learning Seminar & Workshop in Dublin
    - o Finding contacts
    - o Finding presenters and creating agenda
    - o Sending invitations and reminders
    - o Preparing material and presentations for the event
    - o Promoting event in LinkedIn
    - o Facilitating event and the workshop in Dublin
    - o Collecting feedback
7. “After-sales” and coordination
  - Sharing feedback and information about the future development with the event participants
  - Creating document library for the participants
  - Creating LinkedIn group to develop online collaboration in autumn 2013
8. Final proposal with further recommendations
  - Updating the CoPs proposal and preliminary design after the E-learning Seminar & Workshop
  - Further theories reflected on the proposal

The author of this study was the main designer and developer of the EPN Community during the study period and took full responsibility of all the tasks related to network creation listed above. At this point there exists a strong activity base for the EPN Community. There have been also found 10-15 potential members, including those who participated the kickoff event in Dublin and confirmed their engagement to the network. Some of the members could already be recognized as “key members” for the

network, also called as a core group. These people are extremely important for EPN Community and should be taken special care.

Even the base already exists and the challenging work of finding contacts has been done for the first phase, still there are many activities to be taken to make sure that the community starts to create value for its members at the very early stages, already during the incubation period. This requires a coordinator to be hired, as the actual study period has ended and the author as a resource is not available anymore.

The author has invested around 750 hours of working time for this study and EPN Community implementation work, including the early research phases and the final report. Looking for contacts and interacting with them took most of the time in this process, both when looking for participants for the research and when inviting people to the E-learning Seminar & Workshop as well as following up with further updates. The seminar required marketing activities in social media, as well as sending personal reminders to the invitees. However, the time invested on these contacts is totally worth it, as it was necessary in order to make progress with the process – and now Lexellence has an up to date contact list to be used also in the future.

The network could be created in many ways, but as there can be found huge amount of more or less loose professional networks around the world that fall apart easily, people are also getting fed up with networking. For this reason also, it is extremely important to manage the network creation process with continuous value in mind, both from the members' and the Lexellence's point of view. The best way to create value in networking format is to create a community of practice where people gain actual concrete value, even they handle lots of tacit knowledge in the community. Many networks also fail in the coordination task and tend to focus mainly on event management, even though building relationships is more important than creating events, especially at the early stages of operation. For this reason the coordinator role has been emphasized in this study.

If EPN Community will grow in Ireland during the next two years as estimated, there will be huge growth and expansion potential for the EPN Community also in other countries in Europe. The EPN Community is still suggested to be kept local and interacting with other communities via co-operation, however, without blocking access from potential external participants. As suggested, expanded co-operation with the universities, research institutes and other third parties should be also considered at the stage when the community has reached stable position in Ireland – even earlier if possible.

When I started the thesis process, I already had experience and knowledge about training, E-learning and learning development in general. Collaborative competences and readiness for networking helped me to interact with people in Ireland. It also helped me to conduct onsite interviews when I had knowledge about the topics we were discussing about. However, I also learnt a lot during the thesis process. I learnt about the technology around E-learning, knowledge management processes, communities of practice theories as well as about the challenges in marketing activities. Still I had more to learn which I did by reading articles, theories and discussion about E-learning, get introductions about learning management systems, evaluation processes, benchmarking opportunities and about different type of training design models. I participated online trainings and continuously interacted with E-learning professionals. I got to know the companies before I conducted the interviews with them, tried to find cases from the same field as well as to find event participants from the same industry fields. Overall, the study has been great learning period for me: I got to use skills and knowledge that I already had and at the same time to leverage new knowledge and apply it into my work.

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## **List of appendices**

1. Survey Questions
2. Interview Questions (onsite)
3. E-learning Seminar & Workshop agenda
4. Research website sample view

## Survey Questions

**Survey: E-learning Usage in Ireland**

**Welcome to take part to the Study of E-learning Usage and Development in Ireland!**

The study is aiming to define the current status and key drivers of E-learning in Ireland. At the same time the aim is to support participating organizations to develop their E-learning practices. We are looking for both private and public organizations to take part. We are especially interested in companies and educational institutes to share your thoughts about E-learning. Read more from [here](#).

Filling the survey takes about 15 minutes.

**Thank you for your time, your participation is highly appreciated!**

**Sincerely yours,  
Leena Makkonen  
Change Management & Training Consultant**

All the participants' and participant organizations' names will be kept confidential. You can also complete this survey anonymously.

**Knowledge level and personal skills in the area of E-learning****1. How would you describe your level of knowledge in terms of E-learning? \***

Please indicate the level of your knowledge.

	1 = No knowledge at all	2= Basic level of knowledge	3 = Some knowledge	4 = Strong level of knowledge	5 = Expert level of knowledge
Level of knowledge in E-learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**2. Which of the following E-learning environments you are familiar with? \***

- Learning management systems
- Virtual classrooms
- Simulation environments
- Shared sites/work spaces
- Video conferencing environments
- Mobile environments
- Gaming environments
- Social Media
- Collaboration tools
- Other
- I have no experience of E-learning environments

**3. Additional information for question 3:**

Please provide more details about your experience in E-learning environments.

**4. Which of the following E-learning methods**

- you are familiar with via your own experience?
- have been used in your current organization?

\*

Please choose methods for both your personal experience (= that you have used/experienced) and those that your organization has used. If neither you nor your organization has experience for any of the listed options, choose option "0" for that particular method.

	0 = No experience at all	1 = I have personal experience	2 = Have been used in my current organization
<b>Case studies</b> (Case studies meaning here working online on the set up cases for learning purposes)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Discussion groups</b> (Discussion groups meaning here both moderated and open discussion forums/groups set up by the organization)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Online live training</b> (Online training delivered via video conference solutions)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Role plays</b> (Role play meaning here participants practising the communication via delivered roles, e.g. customer advisor and customer)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Simulations - Interactive simulations</b> (Interactive simulations meaning here e.g. simulating customer service communication situation and learning with help of interactive online tools)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Simulations - Technical simulations</b> (Technical simulations meaning here simulating the real environment with technical solutions e.g. pilot simulation)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Self-study courses</b> (Self-study course meaning here studying any online learning material provided by the organization)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**5. How strongly you are involved in E-learning development in your organization? \***

- Highly involved
- Somewhat involved
- Not involved at all

**6. Please describe your involvement in E-learning training/deliverables/services in your organization:**



## E-learning background information on organizational level

### 7. What is the primary E-learning environment currently used in your organization?

Please describe the current E-learning environment. If possible, please name the platform.

### 8. Which features and functionalities are most relevant for your E-learning environment?

Please describe below.

### 9. Which E-learning solutions are currently used in your organization? \*

- Audio recordings
- Blogs
- Chat
- Chat rooms during virtual training/webinar
- Collaboration tools
- Discussion forums/groups
- Games
- Online exams/tests
- Online training course
- Shared documents for reading
- Simulation tools
- Social media
- Surveys
- Video conferences
- Video presentations
- Video recordings
- Other

**10. How is E-learning currently managed within your organization in terms of roles and responsibilities? \***

- Via centralized management within the company
- Via individual business units
- Via both centralized management and individual business units
- I do not know

**11. Is your organization's current E-learning environment continuously developed based on your organization's needs? \***

- Yes and we keep developing it continuously
- Yes, but we have stopped developing the environment
- No, the E-learning environment is not originally tailored based on our organization's needs but we are planning to develop it
- No, the E-learning environment is not tailored based on our organization's needs and we are not planning to develop it
- I do not know

**12. What are the main purposes/objectives for providing E-learning in your organization?**

Please describe below.

**13. Which other ways do you use E-learning environment and E-learning tools in your organization?**

Do you use E-learning for other purposes than developing your personnel e.g. providing services to your customers or cooperators? Please describe below.

## E-learning as part of Training & Development strategy

**14.** Do you have personnel development strategy in place in your organization? \*

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

**15.** How E-learning is taken into account in the personnel development in your organization? \*

Please answer based on the current situation.

- E-learning is strongly taken into account in our personnel development
- E-learning is somewhat taken into account in our personnel development
- E-learning is not taken into account in our personnel development

**16.** Based on your estimation, what level of impact does E-learning currently have on your personnel's development results? \*

- Strong impact
- Neutral impact
- No impact at all

**17.** Based on your estimation, how would you describe your personnel's level of satisfaction regarding the quality and impact of E-learning provided by your organization? \*

- Personnel are very satisfied
- Personnel are somewhat satisfied
- Personnel are dissatisfied

**18.** What kind of current and future needs can you recognize in your organization in terms of E-learning?

Please describe below:

## Participation in the Study

### 19. Are you interested in continuing to the second phase of this study? \*

We offer you a possibility to participate also the second phase of this study. The second phase of the study will include an on-site interview in your organization's premises in December 2012. All interview participants will be provided with the research summary report and opportunity for follow up with the research and participation in the future projects. You can find more information about the 2nd phase of this study from the research web site (URL provided in the invitation letter) or contact Leena via email leena.mcmahone@gmail.com

- Yes, I am interested  
 I am not sure - please provide me with further information about the study  
 No, I am not interested

### 20. Contact details:

You can leave your contact details empty if you would like to participate anonymously. Please provide your job title.

Name:

Email:

Mobile:

Company/Organization:

Department:

Job title:

### 21. Your organization: What is the approximate total number of employees in all locations? \*

Please choose or estimate the total number of employees including your organization's all locations.

- 1-20  
 21-50  
 51-100  
 101-300  
 301-500  
 More than 500  
 I do not know

### 22. What is the principal sector of your organization's operations? \*

E.g. Financial services, Gaming, Health & Safety, Insurance, Media etc.

Interview Questions (onsite)

1. Defining E-learning: What does E-learning mean to you / How would you describe it?
  - How do you define E-learning?
2. E-learning process: Please Describe your organization's E-learning planning and deployment process
  - When planning E-learning, what is your focus area / what is important in this process?
3. Evaluation: How is the training (especially E-learning) success evaluated in your organization?
4. Benchmarking/knowledge sharing: Do you know how other organizations in the same industry use E-learning in their training practices?
  - How would you compare (or estimate) your organization's E-learning competences and practices to other organizations competences and practices
  - Would you be interested to share knowledge with them?
5. E-learning competences: How do you keep your E-learning knowledge and skills up to date in your organization?
  - How do you develop your personal learning and development/training management skills?
  - Does your organization belong into any learning and development network in Ireland?
6. E-learning support availability in Ireland: Do you use/get help local networks, partners and co-operators in your E-learning development processes?
  - Do you find it easy to gather knowledge and information about E-learning solutions?
    - a.) online
    - b.) from the local service providers

7. Benefits: What kind of benefits do you personally see in E-learning as a training method or as a part of the organization's personnel development process?
  - What kind of E-learning methods you find most efficient and/or beneficial?
8. Future development: What kind of key drivers do you see in E-learning future development a.) in general b.) from your organization point of view
9. Networking: Do you see your organization would benefit from E-learning network (for knowledge sharing) in Ireland?
  - Do you see that you would benefit from local network (network of organizations and E-learning professionals) created to support E-learning knowledge and skills?
    - a) If yes, who should be members of this network?
    - b) What kind of support should this network provide so that you would see organizations benefiting most from this?
10. Organizational development: What do you see being the most crucial development area or learning point for your organization in terms of E-learning planning and delivery?

## E-learning Seminar &amp; Workshop agenda



## E-learning Seminar & Workshop Program

Location: The Camden Court Hotel, Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2

Time: May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at 9.30 am – 5 pm

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09.30-10.00	Coffee & Tea / Networking
10.00-10.30	Dr. Alan Bruce, Vice President of EDEN (European Distance and E-learning Network) <i>Welcome to the E-learning Seminar &amp; Workshop</i>
10.30-11.00	Keith Quinn, Learning Technologies Manager, SSSC <i>Untethered Learning – Using Mobile Devices to Support Workplace Learning</i>
11.00-11.30	Neil Cody, Global Commercial Sales Training & Development, Dell (Ireland) <i>E-learning Implementation and Development in Fast Paced Sales Environment, experiences from Dell</i>
11.30-12.00	Discussion: QA/Hot Topics
12.00-1.00	Break – Lunch*) will be served in the Camden Court Hotel.
1.00-1.30	Teemu Patala, Director – Training & Development Services, Context Learning Finland <i>Developing Inter-Personal Skills in Customer Service by Interactive Multimedia</i>
1.30-2.00	Discussion and Brainstorming <i>E-learning professionals' Network in Ireland, Future Potential</i>
2.00-2.15	Break
2.15-5.00	E-learning Knowledge Sharing Workshop <i>Working together for success / Learn from your colleagues</i>

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Fee: The participation is free of charge (excluding lunch).




## Research website sample view

# E-learning Study - Ireland

- Home
- About the Study
- Why take part?
- E-learning Library
- Contact Details

## Home



**Share your experience and learn from others by participating the E-learning Study in Ireland**

The study is aiming to define the current status and key drivers of E-learning in Ireland. At the same time the aim is to support participating organizations to develop their E-learning practices. Read more from [here](#).

**Who is behind this study?**

The study will be completed by [Leena Makkonen](#), Change Management &

[Go to Survey ->](#)

# E-learning Study - Ireland

- Home
- About the Study
- Why take part?
- E-learning Library
- Contact Details

## About the Study


### How will we use the information collected from you?

First of all, no participant names/organization names will be published. We are collecting information from different organizations in order to find out how E-learning is used in organizations that operate in Ireland - or is it used at all.

At the end of the study we will put all the collected information together and report the conclusions and the summary of the findings to you. Everything will be done anonymously.

**The study has 3 key objectives:**

1. To gain information how E-learning is used and developed in organizations that operate in Ireland -> to understand the key drivers in E-learning
2. To share knowledge, information and knowhow about the solutions and methods used in E-learning
3. To encourage organizations to develop their E-learning practices and to learn from each other



*The information collected will be used for E-learning development purposes in future projects and E-learning researches.*

Read more about the study author and background information from [here](#).



# E-learning Study - Ireland

- Home
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## Why take part?

You will be part of the important study.

By taking part into this study you will gain knowledge and experience that you can adapt into your organization's operations as well as for your personal use immediately.

All you need to do is to fill the [survey](#), which takes around 15 minutes.

### As an end result of this study, you will:

1. Receive E-learning study summary report.
2. Learn from other participant organizations: How E-learning is used and adapted in Dublin based organizations?
3. Learn more about E-learning. We will provide you with learning opportunities.
4. Gather awareness of your organization's current situation and development possibilities in the field of personnel/service development via E-learning.
5. Have an opportunity for free E-learning consultation.

