

# Building

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# Bridges

*How Communities of Practice can drive local innovation and collaborative governance*



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### ABOUT EASYGOV

EasyGov Solutions is an independent consulting firm with a prime focus on the public sector, bringing over 15 years of experience in digital transformation and organizational innovation for the public administration. Founded in 2008 within the Politecnico di Milano business accelerator, the company maintains strong ties with academic and research institutions, combining methodological rigour with hands-on delivery. Its service portfolio spans strategic advisory, program and project management, process reengineering, technology design and change management, covering the full lifecycle of public sector transformation programmes. A steadily growing company with nationwide coverage and increasing engagement in EU-level initiatives, EasyGov operates as a strategic, competence-driven, and impartial partner committed to turning complex institutional change into lasting impact.

Since 2026, EasyGov is part of **Nethos Group**, a European network of independent firms (including 3PIItalia, Panteia, PredictBy and RevNext), each specialised in a different stage of public-sector transformation, from research and policy design to public-private partnerships, digital government and innovation. Nethos Group operates as an open network, combining applied research and strategic consulting to generate shared value for public administrations and private investors across Europe.

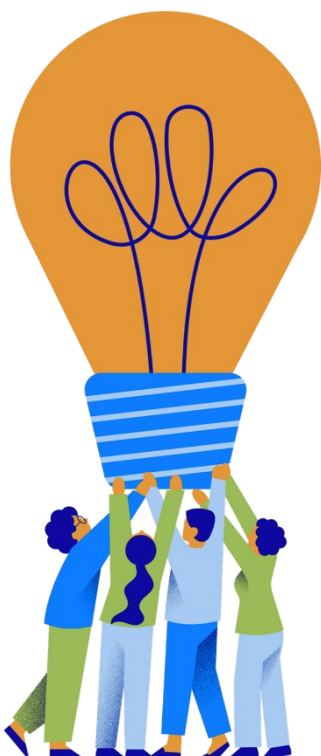
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communities of practice are one of those ideas that feel instantly familiar: people who do similar work, learning from each other by working together. The concept is simple. Turning it into a lasting, institutionally embedded mechanism for collaborative governance is not. Yet this is precisely what a growing number of European public administrations are attempting to do, as they face a persistent challenge: strategies are designed at the top, but implementation depends on thousands of local actors with vastly different capacities, resources and priorities. Bridging this gap requires structured spaces where practitioners can share what actually works on the ground.

This paper traces the intellectual foundations of communities of practice, maps their adoption across the European public sector (from the Digital Decade Policy Programme and the Interoperable Europe Act to the JRC Communities of Practice Playbook) and examines one of the most mature implementations to date: the Thematic Communities (COMTem) of the Emilia-Romagna Region, operating since 2008 and currently bringing together ten thematic communities with 882 individual members from 132 bodies including municipalities, inter-municipal unions and regional agencies.

Drawing on this analysis, the paper proposes the CoP Architecture Framework, a design tool that organises the conditions for building institutional communities of practice into six interdependent components distributed across three architectural layers: a foundation layer that gives the community its identity, an operating system layer that makes it work and a sustainability layer that makes it last. The Framework can be used both to design new communities and to diagnose why existing ones are struggling. Complementing it, the paper distils three practical lessons from field experience, producing tangible outputs, designing participation rather than merely inviting it and connecting practitioners across institutional boundaries. It closes by arguing that communities of practice must evolve from experiment to infrastructure: treated not as time-limited initiatives to be evaluated, but as a permanent layer of collaborative governance, becoming genuine feedback loops for adaptive policy-making.

Building Bridges is the first publication in EasyGov's Discussion Paper series, through which EasyGov contributes its field experience and analytical perspective to the public debate on digital transformation, public sector innovation and collaborative governance in Europe. Upcoming editions will address further themes drawn from EasyGov's work with European public administrations and institutions.



# 01. Introduction

**Communities of practice are everywhere:** they exist in schools, workplaces, hobby groups. They are such familiar experiences that, paradoxically, their very familiarity has long made them invisible. Yet once the concept is named and brought into focus, it becomes a powerful lens through which it is possible to understand how people actually learn, collaborate and create knowledge.

A growing number of organisations across sectors (from technology firms to public administrations, from healthcare systems to international development agencies) are now looking at **communities of practice as a strategic lever for improving performance, fostering innovation and breaking down organisational silos**. There's nothing particularly new about the phenomenon itself: people have been learning from each other on the job long before anyone bothered to put a label on it. What's new is the urgency we now feel to name it, study it and design it intentionally.

The reflections and tools developed in this paper are addressed to **practitioners, policy designers and institutional actors** who work on collaborative governance and digital transformation in public administration and are intended to be useful to anyone engaged in the design or management of communities of practice across sectors. The focus of the analysis, however, rests on European public administrations and on local and regional governments in particular, which is the institutional terrain on which EasyGov's field experience has been built.

The EU's digital transformation agenda sets ambitious targets and sophisticated governance mechanisms, yet implementation ultimately depends on thousands of municipalities, provinces and local agencies, each operating with different capacities, resources and political priorities. The gap between how policies are formulated and how they are carried out on the ground is well documented, and it is the kind of issue that formal structures, on their own, tend to struggle with. Hierarchies allocate responsibilities and define reporting lines, but are not designed to move operational knowledge sideways, across institutional boundaries, between practitioners facing similar challenges in different contexts. Communities of practice can fill this space only if they move beyond informal exchanges and become structured, output-driven and institutionally sustained. How this is happening in practice, what is working and where the model still falls short, is the subject of this paper.

Building on this analysis, the paper proposes the **CoP Architecture Framework**, a design tool that organises the conditions for institutional communities of practice into six interdependent components across three architectural layers, **foundation, operating system and sustainability**. The Framework is then put to work: first through three operational lessons for the early life of a community, then through the two design components



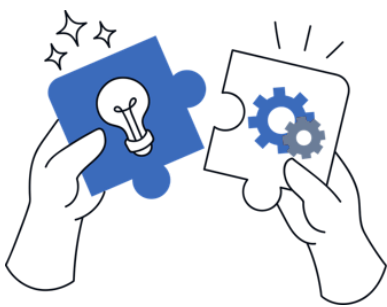
(institutional embedding and value articulation) that determine whether a community that works is also one that lasts.

The perspective developed in this paper is not a theoretical one. Since 2024, EasyGov has supported the operational management of the COMTem system, one of the most mature implementations of institutional communities of practice in Europe. The framework and the lessons presented here emerge from the **direct observation** of ten thematic communities over a two-year period, a living laboratory in which design choices are tested against the day-to-day reality of regional and local public administration. What follows is not a set of hypotheses, but the **recurring patterns we have seen**.

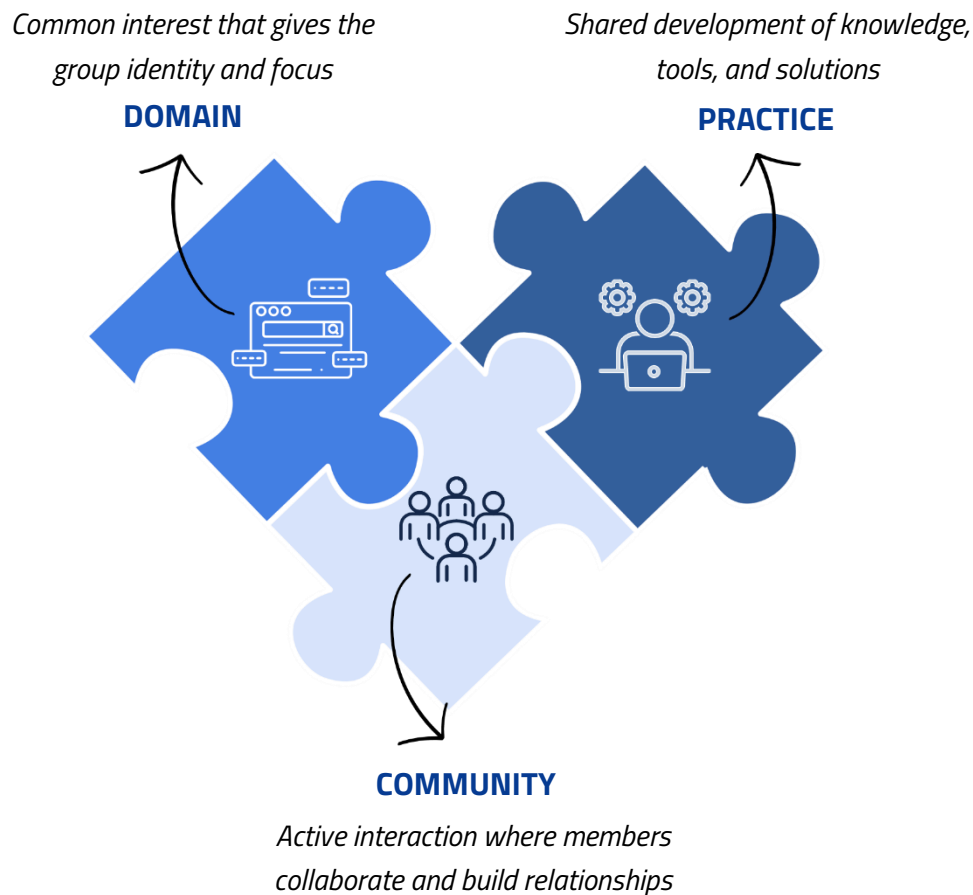
## 02. Designing communities that work

### The anatomy of a community of practice

The concept of a community of practice was first articulated by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991<sup>1</sup> and further developed in Wenger's 1998 monograph<sup>2</sup>, which remains the foundational reference. A community of practice, in Wenger's formulation, is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Three structural elements define it: a **domain** (the shared area of interest that gives the group its identity), a **community** (the relationships and interactions through which members learn together) and a **practice** (the shared repertoire of knowledge, tools and methods that the group develops over time). Remove any one of these elements and what you have may be interesting, but it is not a community of practice.



Wenger later formalised this into the concept of a **social learning system**: an environment in which communities of practice act as the basic units through which competence is collectively defined, maintained and renewed. Within this kind of system, knowledge emerges and is sustained through social participation, rather than being acquired by individuals in isolation. This perspective is particularly relevant today, when the complexity and speed of change in the public sector demand knowledge that no single individual or organisation can possess alone.



*Figure 1. The three structural elements of a community of practice*

## From principles to methodology

Recognising the strategic value of CoPs for institutional learning, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) has published the [Communities of Practice Playbook](#), a **practical, evidence-based guide designed to help individuals and organisations create, develop, run and sustain CoPs**. The Playbook was developed through extensive research and coaching with community managers across the Commission and is built around a methodology called the **Communities of Practice Success Wheel**.

The Playbook is explicitly action-oriented. It helps users create community roadmaps, design and facilitate engagement activities, apply co-creative methods, measure performance and build community resilience. It can be used individually to assess a community's current state, collaboratively with core teams to co-develop plans, or continuously as a reference when facing new challenges. The inclusion of interactive visual boards and practical questions makes it suitable for workshops, planning sessions and strategy discussions, bridging the gap between CoP theory and daily operational practice. For the public sector specifically, the Playbook addresses a persistent organisational challenge: overcoming siloed working and enabling integrated outcomes through knowledge gathering, sharing and application across institutional boundaries. It provides a replicable framework that can be adapted to CoPs of any size, whether internal to a single administration or spanning multiple organisations and countries.



Figure 2. The Communities of Practice Success Wheel, developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre

## 03. CoPs in the European public sector

### The institutional landscape

In 2020, the von der Leyen Commission launched the [Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030](#), providing the institutional architecture for Europe's digital transformation: **a strategic framework built around four pillars** (skills, infrastructure, transformation of business and of public services) with binding targets, national roadmaps, annual reporting through common KPIs and a peer review mechanism that allows Member States to assess each other's strategies.

Architecture alone, however, does not produce learning. Strategies are designed at the top, but **implementation depends on thousands of municipalities, provinces and local agencies**, each operating with different capacities, resources and political priorities. For the programme's cooperative governance to translate into real capability-building, practitioners need spaces where they can exchange operational knowledge, test approaches and learn from each other's failures and successes, something that sits outside what hierarchies are built for, focused as they are on allocating responsibilities and defining

reporting lines rather than circulating knowledge horizontally, across institutional boundaries, between practitioners facing similar challenges in different contexts. Communities of practice tend to operate in precisely this kind of space and initiatives like the [Interoperable Europe Community](#), a structured hub for collaboration on digital public services, and [Living-in.EU](#), a bottom-up network connecting smart cities practitioners across all 27 Member States, show that the model is already taking shape within the EU ecosystem. The challenge ahead is to **strengthen the link between the Digital Decade's top-down governance framework and these collaborative spaces**, so that policy targets are informed by the practical intelligence of those working to deliver them.

### The Smart Communities Network

*European Commission – Living-in.EU initiative*



The [Smart Communities Network](#), endorsed by the European Commission under the Living-in.EU initiative, is a 'network of networks' designed to involve all EU local communities in the green and digital transformation. Its mission is to enhance awareness, improve strategies and boost the effectiveness of urban management through digitalization. The Network engages communities across all 27 Member States through associations and public organisations, delivering hybrid information sessions on European digital topics and tailored online training sessions for local communities. The Network's activities concluded in August 2025. Its legacy is being carried forward by the LDT CitiVERSE EDIC, a European Digital Infrastructure Consortium that brings together Member States and local authorities to work on long-term, cross-border digital projects for smart and sustainable communities.

## From European frameworks to local practice

The underlying logic is consistent across all these initiatives: **digital transformation in the public sector is unlikely to succeed on the strength of mandates alone, and tends to require structured collaboration alongside the concrete circulation of what has already been tested on the ground.** A municipality digitising a permit process or a health authority building a cross-border patient record now has access, in principle, to a shared repository of proven approaches rather than starting from scratch.

The distance between European frameworks and local implementation, however, remains considerable. Translating high-level interoperability principles into operational practice requires intermediary structures, mechanisms that connect the strategic ambition of EU programmes with the daily reality of local public administrations. The case examined in the next chapter represents one of the most mature attempts to build such a mechanism at the regional level.

## 04. A local best practice: Thematic CoPs in Italy

### The COMTem system of Emilia-Romagna



The gap between digital policy and local implementation is one of the most widely acknowledged challenges in European public administration. Strategies are defined at the national or supranational level; execution depends on thousands of municipalities, provinces and local agencies, each with different capacities, resources and priorities. The Emilia-Romagna Region has developed what is arguably one of the

most structured responses to this problem: the [Thematic Communities System](#) (*Comunità Tematiche*, or COMTem), a system that turns collaborative governance into a permanent operating mechanism for digital transformation.

What makes this initiative distinctive is not the idea of bringing practitioners together, but the degree to which the model is **institutionally embedded, operationally rigorous and output-driven**. It is an **operational instrument** of the Regional Digital Agenda (ADER), formally embedded in the institutional governance of Emilia-Romagna's digital strategy. COMTem are the spaces where the Emilia-Romagna Region co-designs and tests the actions of its digital strategy that affect local public bodies; where knowledge is multiplied and disseminated; where new responses to territorial needs are developed through new services and organisational solutions; and where the administrative capacity of local institutions is strengthened through the exchange of experiences. These functions can be distilled into five pillars: sharing, experimentation, implementation, dissemination and capacity building. The model originated in 2008 but experienced a major redesign in 2017 with the introduction of a more participatory approach characterised by grassroots coordination roles, territorial co-coordinators and the joint development of annual activity plans.

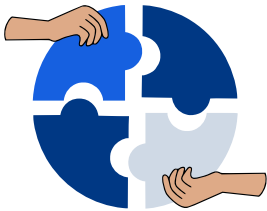


**EasyGov Solutions** has supported the operational management of the COMTem system since 2024, engaged by Lepida to deliver facilitation, qualitative analysis, editorial production and capacity building. Key activities include:

- facilitation of annual kick-off workshops and the yearly plenary session;
- design and analysis of the participant perception survey;
- editorial production of all deliverables and the annual Activity Plan;
- management of the initiative's presence on LinkedIn;
- direct contribution to selected Working Groups, including research on digital twins in European cities and a policy workshop on data governance.

The current model, launched in 2024 after a co-design process involving all members through focus groups and workshops, further strengthens the system by introducing institutional referents from the Region and Lepida (the regional in-house ICT company), a co-designed digital collaboration platform and a formal recognition framework for individual members.

## How the system works



The COMTem system currently comprises **ten thematic communities**, organised around **four strategic areas** of the Regional Digital Agenda: digital strategy, data for distributed intelligence, digital skills and public services, technology and infrastructure. Their scope is deliberately wide, reflecting the multidimensional nature of digital transformation in local government.

Some communities are **politically oriented**: the Digital Administrators community, for instance, brings together elected officials with a digital mandate (including mayors and councillors) to build shared awareness and strategic alignment at the political level. The Digital Gender Gap community focuses specifically on reducing digital divides affecting women, from mapping territorial disparities to designing targeted literacy initiatives.

Others are **technically specialised**. The Data community works on data governance practices across local authorities, while the Documents community addresses the entire lifecycle of digital records, from document management plans to archival preservation. The Cybersecurity and Cloud community develops shared standards for business continuity and disaster recovery, and the Internet of Things community supports the deployment and security assessment of IoT solutions on regional territory.

A third cluster is **service-oriented**: the Citizens and the Businesses communities design proactive, user-centred digital services delivered by municipalities and provinces and tackle interoperability challenges, whereas the Digital Facilitation community explores initiatives to strengthen digital literacy across the region. Finally, the Digital Integrations community takes a cross-cutting role, working on programming tools and coordination mechanisms for the overall digital transition.

Each community is coordinated by a team of **three co-coordinators** selected from among its members, supported by designated referents from the Emilia-Romagna Region and Lepida. This governance ensures that the communities' work remains aligned with regional strategy while staying grounded in the real needs of local administrations. Moreover, **participation is formal and structured**: members are officially nominated by their organisations and commit to an **Active Participation Pact** that requires regular attendance, active contribution to deliverables and an intermediary role between the community and their home institution.

*Periodic perception surveys conducted among COMTem members indicate a broad appreciation of the quality and relevance of the outputs produced by the communities, with a substantial share of respondents also finding them responsive to the concrete needs of their organisations*

**The annual cycle follows a clear and replicable pattern.** It begins with kick-off meetings where each community identifies priorities and needs from the ground up. These inputs are formalised into an annual Activity Plan, which can include a number of outputs that are directly applicable by local administrations. Deliverables include guidelines, training programmes, technical specifications, best practice repositories, needs assessments and policy recommendations. All deliverables are publicly available on the [website](#) under a Creative Commons licence.

The operational work is carried out by dedicated Working Groups, which can be either vertical (within a single community) or cross-cutting (involving members from multiple communities). The cycle closes with a plenary session presenting the year's results. The model's effectiveness is supported by consistently positive member feedback across multiple perception surveys conducted at system level.

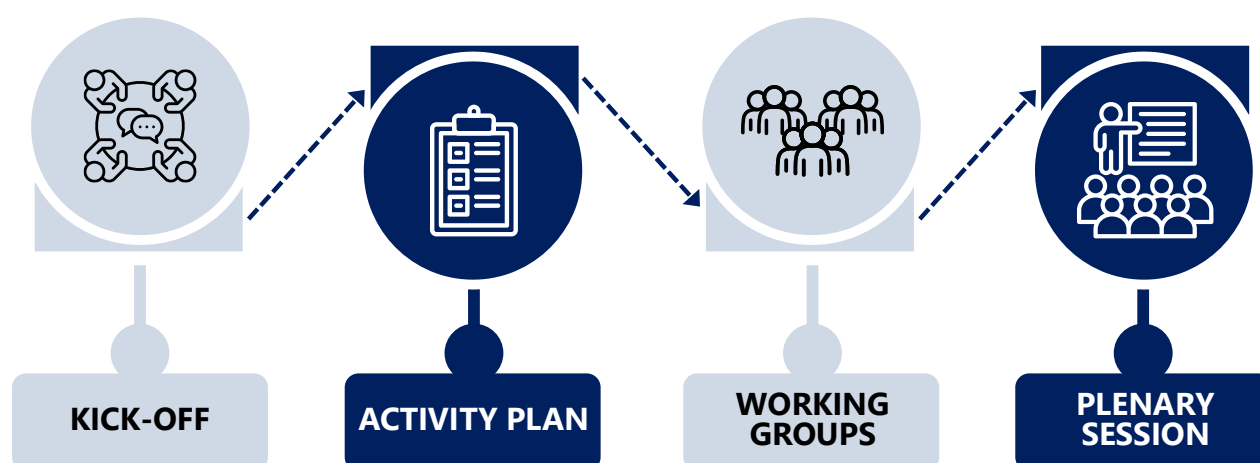


Figure 4. The annual operating cycle of the COMTem system

As of April 2026, the COMTem system brings together 882 practitioners from 132 local organisations, making it one of the largest structured CoP networks in European regional governance. Members include representatives from municipalities, inter-municipal unions, provinces, health authorities and other regional agencies.

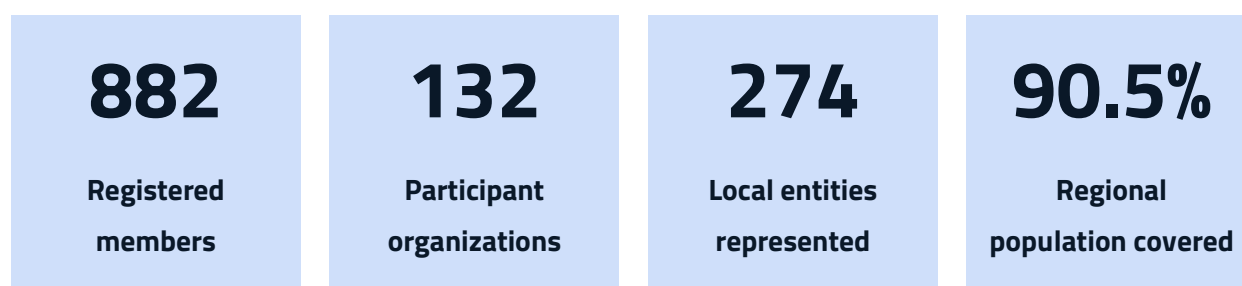


Figure 3. The COMTem system at a glance

A model of this maturity naturally raises a question: can it be replicated beyond its original institutional context? The COMTem system was built within a specific institutional ecosystem, which is the governance framework of an Italian region with a long tradition of administrative innovation. Whether its core mechanisms (co-coordination, structured participation, output-driven annual cycles) can be adapted to different institutional contexts, with different capacities and governance traditions, is a question that is already moving beyond the theoretical, as it is currently being tested on the ground through PADRION, a cross-border project that brings the COMTem approach into the Adriatic-Ionian region.

## **PADRION**

*Exporting collaborative governance to the Adriatic-Ionian region*



[PADRION](#) (*Public Administrations facing Digital transformation as a community in the ADRION area*) is an Interreg IPA Adriatic project that transfers the COMTem approach to a transnational context. With a budget of €1.2 million and a partnership of 9 organisations from 7 countries, Albania, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, the project runs from September 2024 to August 2027.

PADRION introduces three operational instruments inspired by the Emilia-Romagna experience: Local Digital Agendas (LDAs) tailored to each territory's priorities, Thematic Communities of Practice (TCoPs) for cross-border knowledge sharing on specific challenges and pilot deployments of digital solutions in real-world local government settings. The project also formalises long-term cooperation through a Memorandum of Understanding among partners and a Joint Action Plan designed to support the scaling and replication of tested solutions beyond the project's duration.

## The design choices behind the system

Not everything about COMTem is directly transferable: the role of Lepida as an in-house ICT company, the specific relationship between the Region and municipalities in the Italian institutional architecture, the cooperative and collaborative approach of Emilia-Romagna all shape the way the system operates. But beneath the local specifics, a set of design choices emerge that are **independent of context** and constitute the architectural core of any institutional community of practice that aspires to last.

| Design choice                  | How COMTem implements it                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | What is transferable                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Domain design</b>           | 10 thematic communities mapped to 4 strategic areas of the Digital Agenda. Scope ranges from politically oriented ( <i>Digital Administrators</i> ) to technically specialised ( <i>Cybersecurity</i> ) to service-oriented ( <i>Citizens</i> ) | Organise communities around a strategic framework, not around organisational charts. Each community needs a domain specific enough for identity, broad enough for critical mass                        |
| <b>Governance architecture</b> | 3 co-coordinators per community + institutional referents from Emilia-Romagna Region and Lepida to ensure strategic alignment from above                                                                                                        | Dual governance that connects bottom-up coordination with top-down strategic alignment                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Participation design</b>    | Formal nomination by organisations. Active Participation Pact. Members serve as intermediaries between the community and their home institution                                                                                                 | Make participation a formal institutional commitment, not an individual choice. Define expectations upfront. Assign members a bridging role between the community and their organisation               |
| <b>Production cycle</b>        | Annual cycle: kick-off, Activity Plan, Working Groups, Plenary. Deliverables published under Creative Commons. Outputs include guidelines, technical specs, training programmes, policy recommendations                                         | Build a recurring production cycle with defined outputs. Priorities must emerge from members (bottom-up), not be imposed. Outputs must be publicly available and directly usable                       |
| <b>Institutional embedding</b> | Formally embedded in the Regional Digital Agenda. Operationally managed by Lepida (regional in-house ICT company). Sustained since 2008 through multiple political cycles                                                                       | Anchor the community to a permanent institutional structure and a dedicated operational body. Avoid dependency on project-based funding. Ensure the system can survive changes of political leadership |
| <b>Value articulation</b>      | Periodic perception surveys. Concrete outputs adopted by local administrations (e.g. integrated document management guidelines, digital PA welcome kit). Public dissemination on LinkedIn and website                                           | Develop systematic ways to make the community's value visible. Start with member perception, move toward tracking actual adoption and reuse of outputs                                                 |

**Table 1.** An analytical reading of the COMTem system

## SPAC: a community built around shared digital products



SPAC (*Software Partecipato Aperto Condiviso – Open Shared Participatory Software*) offers a different model of how communities of practice can take shape in the public sector. Where COMTem is anchored to a regional digital strategy, SPAC is built around **specific software products originally developed by the Veneto Region** (e.i. a payment platform for public services, a framework for institutional websites and citizen-facing portals). Public administrations can adopt these solutions free of charge instead of procuring or building their own, and membership extends well beyond Veneto: SPAC brings together regions and other public bodies from across Italy, united by a common stake in the same digital products and services.

Yet SPAC is, first and foremost, **a community for sharing knowledge**. The software is what brings members together; what keeps them engaged is the operational intelligence they exchange. The community's own founding documents describe knowledge-sharing as the first level of reuse, one that precedes and enables the sharing of code. This makes the engagement dynamic distinctively grounded: the shared practice is inseparable from the shared artefact, and the knowledge that circulates is immediately actionable because every member depends on the same systems.

SPAC is structured into six product-based communities, each centred on a specific technology area: digital payments, citizen-facing digital services, identity federation, data platforms, open innovation, AI adoption in public administration. Its governance mirrors the formality seen in COMTem: steering committees, technical working groups, dedicated community managers and a structured animation system designed to sustain participation over time, including a formal programme for engaging ICT companies as qualified partners of the ecosystem.

What makes the SPAC trajectory particularly relevant to the argument of this paper is its ongoing evolution. Originally focused on the lifecycle of shared software products, the community is now extending its scope to include the lifecycle of the services those products deliver to end users: moving from coordinated development to coordinated service delivery under a unified governance model. This is a domain that expands as the community matures: **a concrete instance of a community of practice becoming infrastructure**.

EasyGov designed SPAC's governance, organisational and management model, and is engaged across all dimensions of its implementation, from institutional architecture to community animation and facilitation. Read against the CoP Architecture Framework, the SPAC case illustrates a specific point about domain design: a community's identity can be anchored just as effectively to a shared software product as to a strategic policy area, provided that the operational dependencies between members are real and recurring. **Different anchors, same architecture**.

## 05. The CoP Architecture Framework

The analysis developed so far (from Wenger's original formulation to the JRC Playbook, from the Digital Decade governance architecture to the COMTem system in Emilia-Romagna) converges on **a consistent set of conditions** under which institutional communities of practice function and endure. This chapter organises those conditions into **a single design tool**: the CoP Architecture Framework.

The Framework draws on EasyGov's accumulated experience in designing and supporting communities of practice in the public sector, across initiatives that include SPAC, the OCPA programme and, most recently and intensively, two years of operational involvement with the COMTem system in Emilia-Romagna. The components described below emerged as recurring conditions across these experiences, becoming visible in some cases through the dynamics that allowed communities to function effectively and in others through the difficulties that begin when those conditions were missing. The Framework represents an attempt to isolate those conditions and arrange them into a structure that can be read and used.

Read in this way, the Framework can be seen as a companion to the JRC Communities of Practice Playbook. The Success Wheel offers a methodology that accompanies the running of a community across its lifecycle, with particular attention to facilitation, engagement and resilience. The Framework looks instead at the structural design choices that shape whether a community has the conditions on which that operational work can build. The two instruments tend to be most useful when read together, the Framework helping to orient the initial design and to revisit it when something is not working, the Playbook supporting the day-to-day practice through which a community takes shape and matures.

The Framework identifies **six interdependent components** distributed across **three architectural layers**. Its logic is cumulative: each layer presupposes the one beneath it and no layer can compensate for the absence of another. But the dependencies are not only vertical: the six components sustain and constrain one another across layers, which is why the Framework should be read as an architecture rather than a checklist. Its diagnostic value comes from examining the balance between components, not from summing individual scores. The Framework can be used in two complementary ways: to **design a new community** from the ground up, sequencing the choices that will shape it, or to **diagnose why an existing community is struggling**, identifying which layer is under-designed and where the imbalance lies.

### Layer 1 - Foundation: what gives the community its identity

The foundation layer contains a single component: **domain design**. A community of practice is defined, before anything else, by the shared concern around which it is built. Without a clear domain there is no identity, no criterion for membership, no principle for prioritising activities. Domain design is the choice of what the community is about: how wide or narrow its scope will be and how that scope connects to the strategic priorities of the organisations the community serves.

## Layer 2 - Operating system: what makes the community work

Three components populate this layer and together they form the daily machinery of the community.

**Governance architecture** defines how decisions are made, who facilitates and how coordination happens.

**Participation design** defines the rules of engagement: how members join, what is expected of them, how different levels of contribution are accommodated. **Production cycle** defines how collective work is planned, executed and published, turning conversations into reusable outputs. When any one of these three components breaks down, the community stops functioning, even when its foundation is solid.

## Layer 3 - Sustainability: what makes the community last

Two components populate this layer. **Institutional embedding** is the structural defence: it anchors the community to permanent institutional arrangements (recurrent budgets, formal mandates, dedicated operational bodies) protecting it from funding cliffs and political cycles. **Value articulation** is the continuous defence: it is the systematic capacity to make the community's value visible to those who decide whether to keep supporting it, protecting it from the slow erosion of sponsorship over time. A community may well operate with a sustainability layer that is still taking shape, yet its capacity to endure tends to rest on that very layer reaching a certain maturity.

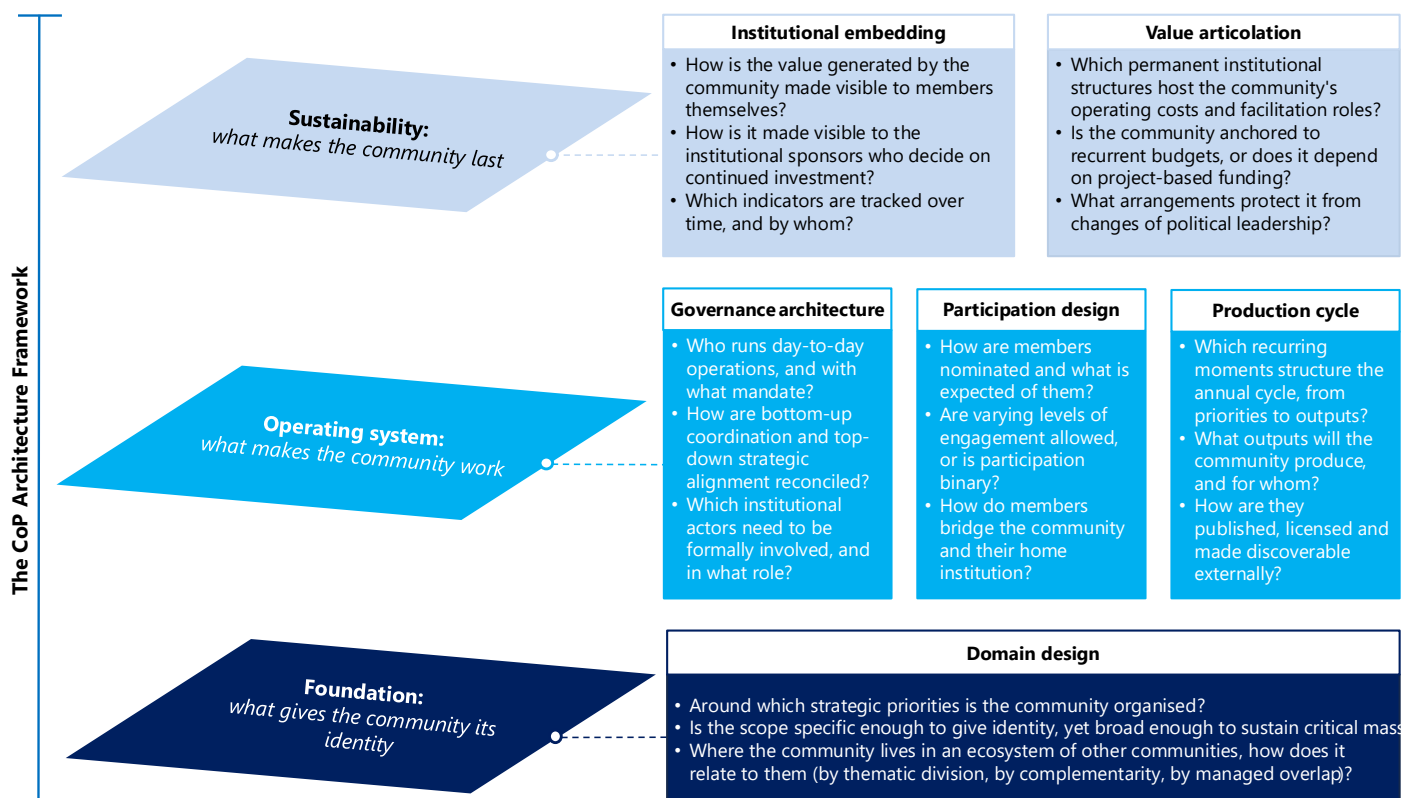


Figure 5. The CoP Architecture Framework

**Figure 5** represents a visual synthesis of the CoP Architecture Framework, illustrating how the six key components are distributed across the three foundational layers of a community of practice. This framework highlights the interconnections between these components, emphasising the architectural structure that supports the formation, functioning and sustainability of a community of practice. Each component is accompanied by **a set of guiding questions** designed to prompt structured reflection on its role and interdependencies within the overall architecture. Whether the reader is building a community of practice from scratch or seeking to diagnose and strengthen an existing one, these questions provide a consistent analytical lens. They ensure that no critical dimension is overlooked, making the framework a practical tool as much as a conceptual one.

## 06. Building communities that last

The CoP Architecture Framework identifies six components that together define a community of practice that both works and lasts. Not all components, however, are equally actionable for practitioners setting up or running a community in the short term. This chapter extracts from the Framework the **three lessons** that our field experience (in particular through the COMTem system) has shown to be the most decisive in the early operational life of a community: produce tangible outputs, design participation deliberately and connect practitioners across institutional boundaries. Together, the three lessons map onto the three operating-system components of the Framework (production cycle, participation design, governance architecture) and into the cross-boundary dimension that gives a community of practice its distinctive value.

### Lesson 1: produce or perish

The most existential threat to a community of practice is not conflict or lack of resources: it is **irrelevance**. A community that produces only conversations, however stimulating, will struggle to justify its existence when budgets are reviewed. Over time, members begin to question the return on their investment of time, managers lose patience with an initiative that cannot demonstrate impact and institutional sponsors redirect funding elsewhere. The community does not collapse in a dramatic failure; it simply fades, one missed meeting at a time.

#### Failure mode to watch for

Meetings happen, mailing lists are active, but at the end of the year there is no artefact that members can hand to a colleague and say: "use this, it will save you weeks of work." When asked what the community has produced, participants describe discussions rather than deliverables. This is the early warning sign that the community has slipped from production into mere socialization.





### What to do: output orientation

Every community needs a **recurring production cycle** with defined, measurable and publicly available outputs. This means establishing an annual planning process that translates member priorities into a concrete set of deliverables: guidelines, technical specifications, training programmes, needs assessments, best practice repositories or policy recommendations. The outputs need to be directly usable by the organisations that members represent, rather than remaining at the level of theoretical exercises. And they must be visible: published, shared and openly licensed so that their value extends beyond the community itself.

The COMTem system illustrates this principle: its entire operating model is built around output production, with an annual cycle that moves from bottom-up priority setting to a defined Activity Plan, through dedicated Working Groups, to a plenary session presenting results. In two years alone, these communities have produced guidelines for integrated document management plans, a welcome kit to the digital PA ecosystem, shared standards for business continuity and disaster recovery, and more.



#### BlueHats

DINUM - France

[BlueHats](#) is a community of practice launched in 2018 by France's *Direction Interministérielle du Numérique* (DINUM), born from the realization that many civil servants had significant open-source expertise but worked in silos, unaware of each other's efforts. Developers in one ministry were building solutions that developers in another ministry had already built. Knowledge existed in abundance; what was missing was a channel for it to circulate.

The community brings together over 2,000 voluntary participants from ministries, agencies, schools and research bodies, united by a shared professional interest in using and developing free and open-source software in public administration. Its most emblematic output is the SILL (*Socle Interministériel de Logiciels Libres*), a collectively curated catalogue of recommended open-source software for the entire French public sector. The SILL is not a top-down directive: it is built and maintained by over 180 expert civil servants from more than 40 public organisations, each acting as a voluntary referent for one or more software solutions. The catalogue currently references over 350 software products and is continuously updated through dedicated inter-ministerial working groups.

The SILL is precisely the kind of artefact no single organisation could produce alone. Its value comes from the diversity of contexts in which the listed software has been tested, and the act of contributing to it is itself the mechanism through which relationships across ministries are built. In 2023, BlueHats was awarded the OSOR Community Award by the European Commission's Open Source Observatory.

## Lesson 2: design participation, don't just invite it

One of the most common patterns of failure in communities of practice is the slow drift into passivity: a mailing list that nobody reads, a platform where the last post is six months old, a meeting series that gradually loses attendance. This is **participation fatigue** and it strikes hardest when engagement is left to individual goodwill rather than being structurally designed. Practitioners are already stretched by their day-to-day responsibilities; unless the community makes participation easy, meaningful and adapted to different levels of availability, members will quietly disengage.

### Failure mode to watch for

Attendance at recurring meetings declines steadily, the same five or six voices speak every time and informal feedback reveals that members feel the community is "interesting but not for them." Participation has become an individual heroic act rather than a designed experience, and as soon as one heroic contributor moves on, the activity around them collapses.



### What to do: structured commitment and co-ownership

Participation is something to be actively designed rather than left to spontaneous goodwill, which means defining multiple levels of engagement so that members can contribute according to their capacity: some will attend every meeting and co-author deliverables, others will follow asynchronously and contribute when a specific topic matches their expertise. Roles and expectations should be explicit from the start, ideally co-defined with the members themselves. Governance rules, decision-making procedures and accountability mechanisms should not be imposed top-down but negotiated collectively, giving members genuine ownership of the community's direction. **The design must balance structure** (clear expectations, defined roles, visible accountability) **with flexibility** (members contribute according to their strengths and circumstances, not according to a rigid template). COMTem achieves this through formal nomination, the Active Participation Pact and the intermediary role assigned to each member.

## **Decidim.Barcelona** Barcelona City Council



[Decidim.Barcelona](#) is an open-source participatory democracy platform launched in 2016 by Barcelona City Council, now used by over 450 organisations in more than 30 countries, including the European Commission and several national governments. What makes it a genuine community of practice is Metadecidim, the democratic community that governs the entire project.

Metadecidim has tackled participation design head-on in two ways. First, when the community needed a governance structure, it did not adopt one from outside: it used its own platform to co-draft the statutes of the Decidim Association through an open participatory process, debated both online and offline, and adopted them via collective vote. The same approach was used to define an Internal Regulation clarifying decision-making procedures and roles. Members are not invited to follow rules, they are invited to write them.

Second, the community is explicitly designed for different levels of engagement: regular community meetings for active contributors, thematic working groups for deeper technical collaboration, the annual DecidimFest for the wider ecosystem and a broadcast channel for those who want to stay informed with minimal time commitment. This multi-layered design accommodates a deliberately heterogeneous membership of developers, public officials, researchers, activists and citizens.

### **Lesson 3: build across, not within**

Formal organisational structures are, by design, vertical: they allocate responsibilities, define reporting lines and create accountability within silos. This is what they are built to do, and they do it well, though their design is geared toward vertical flows rather than the lateral circulation of operational knowledge across institutional boundaries, between practitioners facing similar challenges in different contexts. A municipality struggling with data governance, a province implementing a new digital service and a health authority building a cybersecurity framework may all be working on closely related problems without ever knowing it. **The knowledge they need exists somewhere in the system; it simply has no channel through which to flow.**

#### **Failure mode to watch for**



The community looks healthy from the inside (active members, regular meetings, useful exchanges) but its membership is concentrated in a single type of organization, or a single tier of government, or a single geography. Conversations stay comfortable because everyone shares the same constraints and assumptions. The community has become a club, not a bridge.



### **What to do: cross-boundary artefacts**

A community of practice works by deliberately **connecting practitioners who tackle the same problems in different organisations**, and this cross-boundary quality is, in many ways, its defining rationale. The most effective way to operationalise it is to build shared artefacts: a collaboratively curated catalogue, a common standard, a jointly developed software tool – something that any organisation could produce on its own, but that gains real value when built together and shared by all. These artefacts serve a dual purpose: they are valuable in themselves, as they save organisations the cost of reinventing what has already been tested and they are the mechanism through which cross-institutional relationships are built and sustained. Communities of practice do not replace hierarchies; they create the connective tissue that hierarchies, by their nature, cannot provide.

Within COMTem, the cross-cutting Working Groups, which bring together members from different thematic communities to work on shared challenges, perform exactly this function at the regional level. The PADRION project is now testing whether the same logic can extend across national borders, transferring the COMTem model to seven Adriatic-Ionian countries through Local Digital Agendas, Thematic Communities of Practice and pilot deployments.



## OCPA: when the foundation is missing

Not every attempt to build collaborative networks among public administrations has started from a clear definition of what practitioners are meant to share and why. **The OCPA (OpenCommunityPA2020) programme**, funded under Italy's National Operational Programme on Governance and Institutional Capacity 2014-2020 (one of the operational programmes through which Italy channels EU Cohesion Policy funds into public sector reform) with a total budget of approximately €14 million, offers a useful point of contrast.

Launched within the 2014–2020 programming period, the programme supported **30 inter-institutional projects**, in which administrations that had developed effective practices ("transferring bodies") shared them with administrations seeking to adopt them ("receiving bodies"). EasyGov coordinated nine of these projects; across all 30 initiatives, nearly 50 transferring bodies and over 150 receiving ones were collectively involved, in areas ranging from digital process management to administrative simplification and inter-system interoperability.

The programme's design logic was built around one-off good-practice transfers rather than the construction of enduring communities of practice. Networks typically dissolved at the end of the project cycle, with **no permanent infrastructure to sustain what had been initiated**. The shared domain, in Wenger's sense, never fully crystallised: each project defined its own thematic scope, broad enough to encompass a wide range of administrative challenges but too project-specific to generate a stable identity that could outlive the funding cycle.

Read against the CoP Architecture Framework, OCPA illustrates how the absence of two components (a clearly defined domain and the institutional embedding that protects it from funding cycles) limits what even well-resourced collaborative initiatives can leave behind. The lesson is not that good-practice transfer programmes are ineffective in themselves, indeed, in a great many cases the transfer of organisational models and solutions between bodies brought genuine value to the adopting administrations. Nevertheless, they operate on a **different logic from communities of practice** and should not be expected to deliver the same long-term outcomes.

## 07. From experiment to infrastructure

This paper began with a simple observation: communities of practice are one of the oldest and most familiar ways in which people learn together. Yet, turning them into reliable instruments of collaborative governance is one of the hardest design challenges facing European public administrations today. The gap between **policy formulation and local execution** is unlikely to close through mandates alone, the experience accumulated across recent years suggests that progress depends on the **availability of structured spaces** in which practitioners can share what actually works on the ground, produce reusable knowledge and feed operational intelligence back into policy-making.

The analysis developed across these chapters points in a consistent direction. The **CoP Architecture Framework** organises six design components (domain design, governance architecture, participation design, production cycle, institutional embedding and value articulation) into three interdependent layers, offering both a blueprint for building new communities and a diagnostic tool for refining existing ones. The three lessons drawn from field experience translate the Framework into operational priorities for the early life of a community: produce tangible outputs, design participation deliberately and connect practitioners across institutional boundaries. The COMTem case offers a sense of what these principles can produce when they are sustained over time, across multiple political cycles and within the day-to-day reality of regional and local administration.

Several of the elements needed for this shift are already available, from the theoretical foundations established by Wenger and developed since, to the operational methodology offered by the JRC Playbook, the example of mature regional implementations such as COMTem and a gradually expanding institutional recognition of collaborative governance as a meaningful component of public sector reform.

A recurring pattern, however, is that communities of practice continue to be funded as time-limited projects, evaluated as pilots and presented as experiments, which leaves their potential as a stable instrument of governance only partially realised. The reading suggested by the evidence assembled here is that communities of practice are more likely to deliver on their potential when they are designed and supported as infrastructure, with the deliberateness, institutional commitment and long-term perspective normally reserved for other forms of public infrastructure.

Two areas in particular seem to deserve further work. The first is the **development of more robust value articulation strategies**, methodologies that move beyond perception surveys to track adoption rates, solution reuse across organisations and concrete policy influence. The second is the **replication of mature models** such as COMTem in different institutional contexts, a question on which the cross-border level is starting to provide initial indications and that will likely benefit from further experimentation at national and European scale.

The underlying point is one of perspective. Roads, energy grids and digital identity systems were once experimental endeavours and they gradually came to be treated as infrastructure as public institutions recognised that the problems they addressed were of a lasting nature and warranted responses of a comparable durability. A similar trajectory may be followed by the institutional arrangements that allow public servants to learn from one another. Communities of practice appear most likely to deliver on their promise to the extent that European public administrations come to treat them as a stable layer of how the public sector learns, adapts and governs, with an institutional commitment comparable to that reserved for other forms of infrastructure on which public life depends.

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- OIDP – Decidim.Barcelona: <https://oidp.net/en/practice.php?id=1407>
- PADRION – IPA-ADRION: <https://padrion.interreg-ipa-adrion.eu/>
- Thematic Communities System (*Comunità Tematiche*, or *COMTem*): [Le Comunità Tematiche della Regione Emilia-Romagna – Agenda Digitale](#)

## Glossary

|                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ADER</b>                   | Agenda Digitale dell'Emilia-Romagna (Regional Digital Agenda of Emilia-Romagna). The strategic framework guiding the digital transformation of the Emilia-Romagna Region                                                                              |
| <b>CoP</b>                    | Community of Practice. A group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 1998)                                                                               |
| <b>COMTem</b>                 | Comunità Tematiche (Thematic Communities of Practice). The structured CoP system operated by the Emilia-Romagna Region since 2008, currently comprising ten thematic communities                                                                      |
| <b>EU</b>                     | European Union                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>GovTech</b>                | Government Technology. The use of technology solutions by or for public administrations to improve public services, policy-making and administrative processes                                                                                        |
| <b>ICT</b>                    | Information and Communication Technology                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Interoperability</b>       | The ability of different systems, organisations and services to work together and exchange data and information effectively                                                                                                                           |
| <b>IoT</b>                    | Internet of Things. A network of physical devices embedded with sensors, software and connectivity that enables them to collect and exchange data                                                                                                     |
| <b>JRC</b>                    | Joint Research Centre. The European Commission's in-house science and knowledge service                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>KPI</b>                    | Key Performance Indicator. A measurable value used to evaluate progress toward a defined objective                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>OCPA</b>                   | OpenCommunityPA2020. A programme funded under Italy's National Operational Programme on Governance and Institutional Capacity 2014–2020, designed to support good-practice transfer among public administrations through inter-institutional projects |
| <b>Social Learning System</b> | A concept developed by Wenger (2000) describing an environment in which communities of practice act as the basic units through which competence is collectively defined, maintained and renewed through social participation                          |

# Get in Touch



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*This first issue is dedicated to Giovanna Parmigiani, a long-standing advocate of communities of practice whose years of commitment made a lasting mark on the COMTem system and, as Head of the Community Systems Area at Lepida, one of its most steadfast driving forces.*



**Digital services for public administration.**

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