Special Interest Group - a decade of knowledge sharing

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Abstract

This paper outlines key strategies for establishing and maintaining a Special Interest Group (SIG) that promotes professional development and knowledge sharing. It highlights the importance of a clear mission, the recruitment of passionate members, and the need for management support to enhance learning and networking. A robust communication framework and simplified administration are recommended to keep members engaged and focused on the goals of the SIG. Regular meetings, updates, and newsletters are essential for consistent member engagement. Methods for maintaining direction and fostering a collaborative environment include developing a strategic roadmap and encouraging active participation. The guide also stresses the importance of measuring the group's impact through feedback and adapting accordingly. Furthermore, encouraging collaboration and aiming to advance the field are seen as critical to the SIG's success. By following these tips, one can create a dynamic, collaborative, and impactful SIG.

Keywords: Community Building, Enterprise Architecture, Good Practise, Communities of Practice, Professional Development

1 Introduction

Running a special interest group (SIG) can be a challenging yet rewarding experience. At the same time, we learn as and in a social structure as we build and maintain that structure. This community of practice has been described by Wegner (2012) as a social learning system in which identity,

alignment, commitment, engagement and other social factors shape the collective learning process. Reaburn & McDonald (2017) reported their experiences from Australian Universities in establishing and maintaining Communities of Practice among the academic staff. They categorise the benefits in conjunction with a brief literature review.

This is a paper about establishing, running and developing best practice for a community through special interest group activity, spiced with learnings from a decade of activism and leading SIG's on institutional, national, and European level.

2 Motivation

We want to encourage people to build up SIG's around topics and share experiences and knowledge. Although the group setup can vary from conceptual level insight to deep technical discussions and principles, it always has a purpose of expanding the knowledge of the community.

We (the authors), as leaders, members and experts, have spent over a decade helping to shape not only the technological framework of educational institutions, but also fostering an environment of collaboration and shared knowledge. The role of a Special Interest Group extends beyond the traditional boundaries of IT, as it actively engages in understanding and addressing the complex needs of academic and administrative functions through strategic planning and implementation of innovative solutions.

The passion for knowledge sharing is a key to being an actor of a Special Interest Group, both nationally and internationally. In this role, you will be instrumental in bringing together experts from diverse backgrounds, facilitating discussions, and sharing insights that can make a significant contribution to the advancement of your field. Such a group in this position reflects the commitment to not only staying abreast of the latest trends and developments but also to leading the charge in setting new standards and best practices. Ultimately, the group enables all members to apply knowledge by reusing methods, processes, and data.

We have observed a persistent challenge in the sector: colleagues struggling to initiate and structure effective collaboration. Recognizing this, we have taken it upon ourselves to educate and guide colleagues in building robust collaborative networks. By sharing best practice and leveraging our extensive experience, we aim to empower others to overcome these barriers, leading to a more connected and efficient education landscape.

At the heart of our work as stakeholders in a SIG, is a deep-rooted belief in the transformative power of education and the pivotal role that technology plays in it. We are driven by a desire to see the academic community and the people enabling education and research disciplines to thrive through improved communication, streamlined processes, and a shared vision of excellence. Our journey in higher education is not just about implementing systems. It's about building a legacy of applicable knowledge, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

3 What is a SIG?

A special interest group (SIG) is a community setup consisting of e.g. organisation, institution, associations or similar members, with a shared interest in advancing a particular area of knowledge, learning where members work together to influence or to produce solutions within their particular area. Actions of a SIG are often to communicate, meet, and organise workshops.

3.1   What is a function of SIG?

The function of an SIG is to provide a platform for members to share their expertise, knowledge and best practices, and to collaborate in the field of enterprise architecture. By sharing knowledge and experience, members can learn from each other, and stay up-to-date with the latest trends and developments in the field.

3.2   Why SIG - sharing learnings and knowledge?

Often, experts in a specialised field have no counterpart in their own institution's team. The sheer complexity of the landscape is impossible to master in one's lifetime without reaching out to colleagues and other fields of experts for insight. Sharing information with experts from other institutions in a special interest group (SIG) is the essence as it allows members to learn from each other and keep abreast of the latest trends and developments in e.g. enterprise architecture. By sharing knowledge and experience, members can gain new insights and perspectives that they may not have considered before. This interdisciplinary collaboration" or "multidisciplinary collaboration." approach combines expertise and perspectives from different disciplines to address complex issues, generate new ideas, or solve problems that are beyond the scope of a single field. Interdisciplinary collaborations are valued for their ability to foster innovation, increase understanding, and create comprehensive solutions by integrating knowledge from different fields. It is also important to learn and share about developments at both national, European or even global level.

4   When should you establish and support a SIG

You should establish and support a special interest group (SIG) if you have a shared interest in advancing a particular area of knowledge, learning, or technology. SIGs provide a platform for members to share their expertise, insights and best practice, and to collaborate on projects that advance the field. SIGs are particularly beneficial when you lack colleagues within your own institution who share your specialised field of interest. SIGs allow you to expand your network and gain access to a wider range of expertise and knowledge. This can help you overcome challenges and solve problems that you may not have been able to solve on your own.

Establishing a SIG can be beneficial when you want to:

- Connect with like-minded professionals: SIGs provide a platform for members to connect with other professionals who share similar interests and goals.

- Stay up-to-date with the latest trends and developments: By sharing knowledge and experience, members can learn from each other and keep abreast of the latest trends and developments in their field.

- Collaborate on projects: SIGs provide a platform for members to collaborate on projects that advance the field of enterprise architecture.

- Expand your network: By collaborating with other members of the SIG, you can expand your network and gain access to a wider range of expertise and knowledge.

- Advance the field of e.g. enterprise architecture: By sharing knowledge and collaborating on projects, SIGs can help advance the field of enterprise architecture by sharing e.g. meta models, visualisations, training in modelling, key research or surveys.

5 Learnings and best practices for running a SIG

Some lessons and best practices for running a successful and pragmatic SIG:

Defining Purpose and Goals - At the heart of forming a Special Interest Group is the critical step of defining its purpose and goals. This fundamental action not only helps to attract the right members but also ensures that there is alignment around the group's goals. It simplifies the process for senior management to understand and support the cause, thereby facilitating easier buy-in for the allocation of necessary resources.

Establishing Clear Communication - Communication is a cornerstone of the success of any SIG. It is essential to establish a clear communication plan that includes regular updates, meeting agendas, and the distribution of newsletters. Using shared platforms such as Google Drive or Teams to structure, store and share documents and presentations will ensure that information remains accessible and organised. As Dei & van der Walt (2020) point out, knowledge management is often a weak point in the community of practice in higher education.

Creating a Roadmap - Developing a roadmap that clearly outlines the SIG's objectives and goals is critical. This strategic document keeps the group focused and guides all members to work cohesively towards common goals. It acts as a navigational tool, steering the group's efforts in a unified direction.

Use of a Calendar - The organisation of regular monthly meetings is essential, and the use of calendar invites plays an important role in this process. Sending out invitations ensures that all members are aware of upcoming meetings and can prepare accordingly. For face-to-face meetings, it is essential that all necessary information is shared through these calendar invitations to ensure seamless communication and preparation.

Encouraging Participation - Fostering a culture of openness and respect is key to encouraging the participation of all members. Starting meetings with a low-threshold hearing not only allows participants to get to know each other, but also lowers the barrier to questions and comments. This approach sets a positive tone for potential future collaboration and ensures that everyone feels comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions.

Measuring Success - Conducting satisfaction surveys is an effective way to measure the success of the SIG. Analysing this data allows for continuous improvement, ensuring that the group remains focused on its objectives and meets the expectations of its members.

Keeping it Simple - Simplicity is crucial in maintaining the focus on the SIG's objectives. Overcomplicating the group's structure and processes can distract from its goals. Adopting a streamlined approach, such as using a single presentation for agendas with a permanent link, can reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and keep the group's efforts focused on its primary objectives.

Promote Progress - Ensure that the results of group discussions are made visible beyond the SIG. Publishing papers and presenting at regular conferences of members' peer groups keeps the community alive and attracts new members. These members provide additional input and increase group dynamics.

In addition to these best practices, it is important to stress the importance of regular monthly meetings and newsletters summarising the talk. Monthly meetings provide an opportunity for members to connect, share ideas, and collaborate on their needs. Newsletters can be used to share updates, highlight achievements, and promote upcoming events. This is the easiest way to lead SIG based on a Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) methodology (see Figure 1), of which can be found several variations in different sources, e.g. LeMahieu, P.G., Nordstrum, L.E. and Greco, P. (2017).
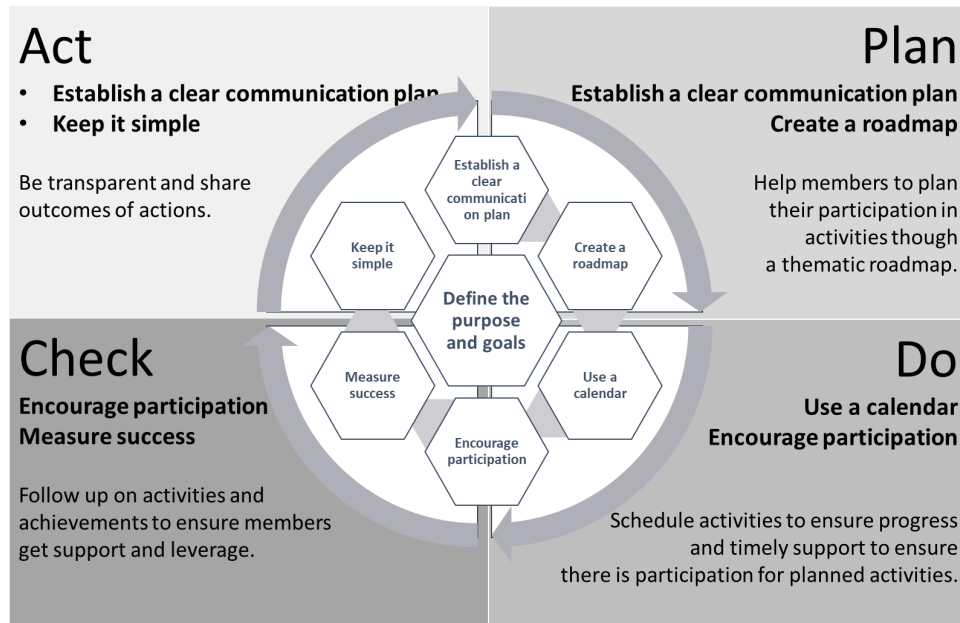
Figure 1: Leading of SIG based on PDCA methodology

6 Roles and purpose of different SIG types and their operational model

Special Interest Groups (SIGs) are collaborative entities formed around a common interest or topic, ranging in size from institutional to global. These groups play a vital role in promoting learning, developing best practice, and encouraging operational excellence in their respective domains.

Institutional SIGs focus on internal institutional development and aim to improve working practices and knowledge sharing within an individual institution. They leverage local resources and expertise to improve internal processes.

Community or Regional SIGs bring together members from specific geographical areas to address local or regional issues. These groups aim to create shared values and practices that are relevant to their particular community or region and to facilitate learning and benchmarking in that context.

Partnership, consortium, or alliance-driven SIGs are formed when different institutions join forces to tackle specific thematic projects. These groups leverage the diverse strengths of their members to pursue ambitious goals, fostering innovation and collaborative solutions.

National SIGs operate at a country level, aligning efforts and issues within national borders. They focus on establishing national benchmarks, sharing best practice and delivering projects of national significance.

International SIGs are the broadest in scope, with a global reach and a focus on international standards and interoperability. These groups bring together a diverse range of members from different countries, aiming to address global challenges and establish global best practices and models.

Each type of SIG serves a unique purpose and offers different levels of collaboration and thematic focus, yet all are united in their pursuit of shared learning, benchmarking, and the development of

common models or practices within their respective domains. However, it is important to note that different types of communities have distinct motivations and may use various models of sponsorship. These models can influence, require, support, facilitate, or limit the way a community operates.

Type of SIG	Goals	Outcomes	Types
Institutional SIG	Development of the org. methods	Learning and sharing. Operative excellence.	Local institution and resources
Community / Regional SIG	Learning from each other Creating some common value	Learning and benchmark. Common practice.	Partnership, Consortium or Alliance driven themes / projects
National SIG	Organise around national efforts and/or thematic compliance across institutions	Learning, benchmark and common models. National projects.	National institutions sharing cross sector topics
International SIG	Broader viewpoint and global reach / interoperability	Learning, benchmark, common models and best practices.	European reach Global reach

Table 1: Roles and purposes of SIG

7 Examples of communities in practice

Distinguishing between Professionally Funded Groups, Standardization Bodies, Learning Hubs, and Special Interest Groups in the area of enterprise architecture.

1. OpenGroup / TOGAF (The Open Group Architecture Framework):
   - Nature: The Open Group is a global consortium that enables the achievement of business goals through technology standards. It is best known for TOGAF, an enterprise architecture methodology and framework used to improve business efficiency.
   - Focus: Its primary focus is the development of open, vendor-neutral technology standards and certifications.
   - Activities: Includes the creation and the management of technology standards, certifications, and research, with a broad focus across multiple technology areas.
2. Standardisation Body (e.g., ISO - International Organization for Standardization):
   - Nature: ISO is an independent, non-governmental, international institution. It develops and publishes international standards, e.g. the ISO/IEC/IEEE 42010:2022, Systems and software engineering — Architecture description, and ISO 15704:2019 Enterprise modelling and architecture.
   - Focus: It covers a wide range of industries and technologies, not just limited to IT or enterprise architecture. It's about setting universal standards to ensure quality, safety, efficiency, and interoperability.

- Activities: Development of international standards through consensus among expert members from different national standards bodies.
3. Learning Hub:
   - Nature: A learning hub is generally an educational platform or institution focused on providing learning resources and training. Examples include edX, coursera, linkedin, SAP and others.
   - Focus: It's dedicated to education and skills development, offering courses, training programs, certifications, and sometimes research opportunities.
   - Activities: Providing educational content, training sessions, workshops, and possibly certifications in various fields. Skills development and knowledge dissemination are the primary objectives.
4. Special Interest Groups (SIGs):
   - Nature: SIGs are typically part of larger institutions and focus on a specific area of interest within that institution. Several examples of enterprise architecture are known at international level, such as CAUDIT, Educause and EUNIS, and at national level in Finland, Sweden and Germany.
   - Focus: Concentrates on a particular aspect of technology, industry, or academic interest. They are set up to promote cooperation and exchange of information between members who share a common interest.
   - Activities: Can include research, discussion, publication of findings, advocacy, and organising meetings or conferences specific to their area of interest.

Key differences in a nutshell:
- Scope and Focus: OpenGroup, ISO and CAUDIT establish and maintain standards and frameworks, while learning hubs offer education and skills development, and the other SIGs (EUNIS and nationals) enable collaborative interest-based exploration.
- Target Audience: The target audience for standardisation bodies and OpenGroup is usually professionals and institutions in various industries, whereas learning hubs cater to learners and students, and SIGs at enthusiasts and professionals with specific interests.

8 Risks and pitfalls

There are several risks and pitfalls to be aware of when running a special interest group (SIG). A lack of member participation can lead to a lack of progress and momentum within the group. It is important to encourage participation and create a culture of openness and respect. Ignoring members' feedback can hinder the group's development and limit innovation. Another risk is that over-complicating the structure and processes of the SIG can lead to unnecessary bureaucracy and a lack of focus on the group's objectives. A lack of resources, especially leaders' time can hinder the group's progress. This can happen when the value of the SIG's work is not seen in terms of the needs of the institution.

Overall, running a SIG is neither a sprint nor a marathon; it's about fostering a continuous exchange of knowledge. It's a space where seasoned experts warmly welcome new ideas and openly share their insights with those who are less experienced. Importantly, it's also about embracing young or new colleagues embarking on their careers in the field, offering them encouragement and support to grow, rather than focusing solely on education. Failure to embrace this aspect will lead to a gradual decline in member engagement.

However, it is also important to offer new perspectives and development opportunities to those who have been involved for longer, in order to maintain their interest in SIG activities. To ensure the continuity of SIG activities, it is useful to identify the needs of groups at different levels of maturity and to adapt the objectives of the SIG so that there are areas of interest for each group. Inflexibility to new ideas or ways of working can hinder the development and relevance of the SIG.

9 Take away - 10 tips to run a SIG

So if we can do it, so can you! By implementing these steps, you can effectively establish and maintain a SIG that not only serves as a platform for professional development and knowledge sharing. This approach will ensure that the SIG remains a dynamic, collaborative, and valuable resource for its members:

1. Identify the Purpose and Goals:
    Clearly define the SIG's mission with a focus on advancing knowledge, learning, or technology within the SIG. Ensure that these goals resonate with potential members and address current gaps or needs in the field. (Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002))

2. Recruit Passionate Members:
    Reach out to professionals who share your enthusiasm for the SIG topic. Emphasise the value of learning from each other, keeping abreast of European developments, and collaborating in a niche field. (Cross, R., Borgatti, S. P., & Parker, A. (2002))
    Give managers a reason to support their professionals to join the group by emphasising on learning, professional development and networking.

3. Establish a Communication Framework:
    Set up a robust communication plan, including regular updates and meeting agendas. Use open tools and repositories for document sharing and management.

4. Simplify Administration:
    Keep the structure simple. Use streamlined processes such as a single presentation for agendas, to keep the focus on the SIG's objectives.

5. Communicate Regularly
    Invite to regular meetings that you schedule as monthly meetings and circulate calendar invites.
    Send out newsletters to share updates, successes, and promote events to ensure ongoing engagement.

6. Develop a Roadmap:
    Create a roadmap to outline the SIG's long-term goals and short-term objectives. This will help maintain focus and guide the group's activities.

7. Encourage Active Participation:
    Promote a culture of openness and respect. Organise low-threshold activities at the start of meetings to encourage interaction and lay the groundwork for future collaboration.

8. Measure and Adapt:
    Collect regular feedback through satisfaction surveys. Use this feedback to continually refine and improve the SIG's operations and activities.

9. Promote Collaboration:
    Stress the importance of collaboration, especially in fields where in-house expertise is limited. Highlight how the SIG can connect members to a wider network of knowledge and experience.

10. Advance the Field:
    Through shared knowledge and collaborative projects, aim to make a significant impact on the field of the SIG's theme. Showcase how the SIG contributes to advancements and innovations in the sector. (Davenport T. H. & Prusak L. (1998))
    Making the results of group discussions available beyond the SIG, through publication and presentation at members' peer group conferences, maintains community engagement and attracts new members, thereby enriching input and improving group dynamics

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