

Finding Your Community and Connecting with It

Adam Hockman

As professions grow,
their influence widens
as their members
connect and shape
lasting relationships,
charting the future
direction of the work
they do.

Organists can find themselves working in every corner of the world—from the back-roads of rural Virginia to a Paris arrondissement. Depending on where you live and work, there might be hundreds of miles between you and another organist with whom you can connect. Virtual conferences or online discussion boards can make networking easier, but the positive benefits of a *community of practice* (CoP) that you regularly interact with cannot be understated.

What is a community of practice?

Researchers and learning consultants Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner have studied communities of practice across multiple industries. They coined the term themselves and define it as “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.” No matter the discipline—teaching, electrical engineering, banking—the authors found that it’s important to connect with colleagues for mutual support.

When you connect with people from your industry, you encounter new ideas, access more resources for solving problems, and have opportunities to reenergize your love for the profession and your own work. Without a community of practice, it’s easy to lose sight of what you’re doing and whether anyone cares. It’s often through relationships with other people that you come to find common purpose in difficult times.

What does a community of practice look like?

For organists, a CoP can take multiple forms. It could be a subgroup of an AGO chapter that gets together once a month to discuss program ideas or talk through the challenges of fundraising for a new instrument. Members find validation and support with one another. Or, if distance or scheduling prevents in-person meetups, it could be a virtual happy hour where attendees listen to masterpiece performances or discuss current innovations in organbuilding.

While format and frequency of connecting with your community can vary, the Wenger-Trayners have outlined some common activities of the CoPs they’ve studied. It’s these shared activities that define how you can build and connect with your community of practice.

Solving problems. *I’m not sure what to do next—I’ve hit a wall.* We all have professional challenges that require getting advice. Turning to people outside of your profession can yield a fresh perspective for identifying a solution or next step, but sometimes you need the knowledge and skills of someone from within your discipline. Be it a musical problem (like a tricky fingering pattern) or a leadership challenge, getting help from other organists, and engaging in this sort of collaborative problem-solving, can do the trick.

Reusing assets. The Wenger-Trayners give the example of allowing a colleague to reuse a template you have already developed for a proposal, so that your colleague can send it to a client. For an organist, it might be sharing a diction tip sheet you prepared for choristers, or a colleague sending you their vetted practice-plan template. Sharing resources within your community adds to the give-and-take of a professional relationship. It’s not always appropriate, as in cases where there’s protected intellectual property or private internal documents, but if you can help someone overcome

hurdles faster, saving them the time of having to reinvent the wheel, it benefits you, them, and the profession.

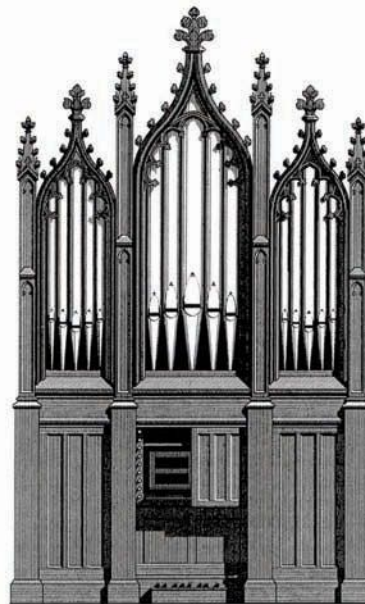
Building an argument. Talking with your CoP about an issue may give you the right words to say or actions to take to bring about the changes you seek to make. Maybe you need to convince your organization to pay for expensive repairs to the console or change the programming for a concert. If you're experiencing it, someone in your community of practice has probably experienced it too. Seek out their advice by asking how they have built an argument for a similar case.

Build Your Community

Practitioners and researchers who study communities of practice outline even more benefits of building and sustaining a community. You can start your own, and it will grow and advance over time as you foster relationships with colleagues and regularly connect on meaningful issues. If you've been missing professional camaraderie with other organists, it might be time to start building a CoP.

Start small—one email to a new colleague with an offer to talk by phone or meet for coffee. You never know what's on the other side of that step forward. Remember, this is about collegial community-building. As professions grow, their influence widens as their members connect and shape lasting relationships, charting the future direction of the work they do. Help yourself, help others, and help the discipline you've committed your life to.

Adam Hockman is a practice and performance consultant on the faculty of the Heifetz International Music Institute. He applies his training in behavioral and learning science to music practice, performance, and teaching, and writes about these subjects for different music sites and magazines. Learn more at AdamHockman.com.



James Polzois drawing of the historic organ built by
Henry Erben, 1845
The French Protestant (Huguenot) Church
Charleston, South Carolina

L'Organo 2023

Organ Recital Series
for the
Piccolo Spoleto Festival
Charleston, South Carolina

Founded 1979

Accepting applications
to perform on the series of
weekday morning recitals

May 29–June 2 & June 5–9

For application, please visit
www.piccolospoleto.com/lorgano

Or contact
City of Charleston
Office of Cultural Affairs
culturalaffairs@charleston-sc.gov

Application deadline: November 1, 2022
Application fee: \$20.00



AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS
BROOKLYN CHAPTER

Is hosting the annual

George Mathison Memorial Scholarship Competition

Saturday, March 18, 2023

St. Philip's Episcopal Church
334 MacDonough St, Brooklyn, NY

Accepting applications in two categories:

- High school students in private study
- Undergraduate/Graduate students enrolled in Organ programs

Applications due February 18

For more information visit www.brooklynago.org
or contact dean@brooklynago.org