

How to Build a Community of Practice

A strategy guide based on Open Recognition is for Everybody (ORE)

Last updated: March 2024



Overview

This guide is for those interested in creating a Community of Practice (CoP) using a social learning platform such as Participate. It has been created by [We Are Open Co-operative](#) (WAO) based on our experience building and facilitating a community known as [Open Recognition is for Everybody](#) (ORE).

Our aim with this guide is to help you understand what a Community of Practice is, some things to consider when establishing one, and share insights based on lessons we've learned along the way.

You may be interested in this if the following themes and roles resonate:

- **Learning Design and Pedagogy**
 - Instructional Designers: integrating CoP strategies to enhance collaborative and experiential learning designs.
 - Curriculum Developers: embedding social learning and peer engagement in curricular structures.
 - Educational Consultants: advising on incorporating community-based learning practices to improve learning outcomes.
- **Digital and E-Learning Technologies**
 - Educational Technologists: exploring digital tools and platforms that facilitate community-based learning.
 - E-Learning Coordinators: understanding how CoPs enhance digital education in online learning environments.
 - Digital Learning Specialist: implementing digital strategies for learning, including the use of CoPs for informal learning.
- **Community Engagement and Management**
 - Community Managers: strategies for engagement and culture-building within CoPs.
 - Social Learning Facilitators: looking to enhance learning through social interactions and community engagement within CoPs.
 - Learning and Development Managers: integrating community-driven learning strategies into organisational development.

- **Organisational Development and Knowledge Sharing**

- Knowledge Managers: leveraging CoPs for effective knowledge sharing and management within organisations.
- Organisational Development Specialists: using CoPs to help with organisational effectiveness and collaborative problem-solving.
- HR Development Officers: enhancing skillsets and supporting career development using CoPs.

- **Professional and Talent Development**

- Corporate Trainers: exploring CoPs as a means to enrich training programmes with peer-to-peer learning.
- Professional Development Leads: considering CoPs for networking and development, as a method for continuous professional growth.
- Talent Development Specialist: nurturing and retaining talent, viewing CoPs as platforms for leadership development and innovation.

Introduction

“Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”

(Etienne Wenger)

As we build communities, we seek to create safe, interesting spaces for people to learn and be social. The [Participate platform](#) is a go-to place for social learning with recognition, and it's where we've been building a Community of Practice (CoP) called **Open Recognition is for Everybody (ORE)**. This guide looks at this community and how it is supported on Participate.



There are all kinds of people represented in this community: from those whose day job involves some form of digital credentialing, to those who are entirely new to the concept; from those who work for huge, multi-national organisations, to those who work for themselves; and from those who spend the majority of their day working with others in-person, to those who mainly work by themselves.

Every CoP exists within a particular context which we may refer to as a **Landscape of Practice**. Individuals and groups engage with communities of which they are part in many different overlapping and diverse ways. For example, some communities may

be more formal and institutionalised, whereas others may be more informal, fluid, and emergent.

Things to consider from a Landscapes of Practice perspective when reading this guide:

- **Multiplicity:** individuals often participate in multiple CoPs, each contributing to their identity and learning trajectory in different ways.
- **Boundaries:** there is no one 'correct' way to manage boundaries between communities; individuals navigate these boundaries in their own way, facilitating knowledge exchange and learning across different practices.
- **Identity:** identity is formed (and transformed) through participation in various communities, and so social learning has an important role to play in identity development.
- **Engagement:** individuals may be more or less engaged at different times and in different communities, from full participation to more peripheral forms of engagement.
- **Negotiability:** the meaning and value of what is learned in communities are both subject to negotiation, both within individual communities and across the landscape as a whole.

It's important not to forget that learning is not confined to engagement within a single community, but occurs across a diverse and interconnected ecosystem. When considering the 'growth' of your CoP, it's useful to remember that there is a quality and diversity of knowledge being shared from other places.



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What is Open Recognition is for Everybody?

Open Recognition is for Everybody (ORE) is a CoP of people interested in the intersection of digital credentials, such as Open Badges, and CoPs.

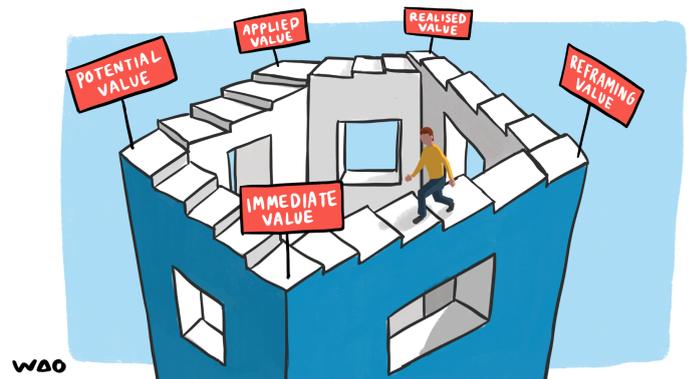
We are a community with people who have invented and pioneered badge systems, technologies, standards and social learning. People in this community are front line educators, programme designers and learner advocates. We are the people who are motivated and influential in getting organisations to start thinking about upskilling in a non-traditional way. It's a place in which we acknowledge contribution badges can recognise participation, creation, and reflection, as well as act as credentials.



This guide uses the Open Recognition is for Everybody (ORE) community as a case study to provide practical examples for the various models and tactics you can use to build a CoP on the Participate platform.

Community history

Community building is an organic process that changes as the community grows. When we're getting started, we always start with the vision.



The vision for ORE

We wish to disrupt and transform institutional thinking around how recognition is "supposed" to work. The ORE community can offer guidance, tools and approaches to encourage change, and we can show the business case of how it is practical, empowering and profitable to use Open Recognition.



Open Recognition is the awareness and appreciation of talents, skills and aspirations in ways that go beyond

credentialing. This includes recognising the rights of individuals, communities, and territories to apply their own labels and definitions. Their frameworks may be emergent and/or implicit. ([What is Open Recognition anyway?](#))

Using Open Recognition in the ORE community is an effort to try to make everyone feel welcome. We help people understand that there is no one 'correct' way of doing recognition, and we aim to be a 'big tent' for all kinds of initiatives. For example, members of the ORE community are active in other spaces ranging from the [Open Skills Network](#) to the [Verifiable Credentials for Education Task Force](#). By bringing together work from different areas and geographical regions, we can help one another learn what's possible.

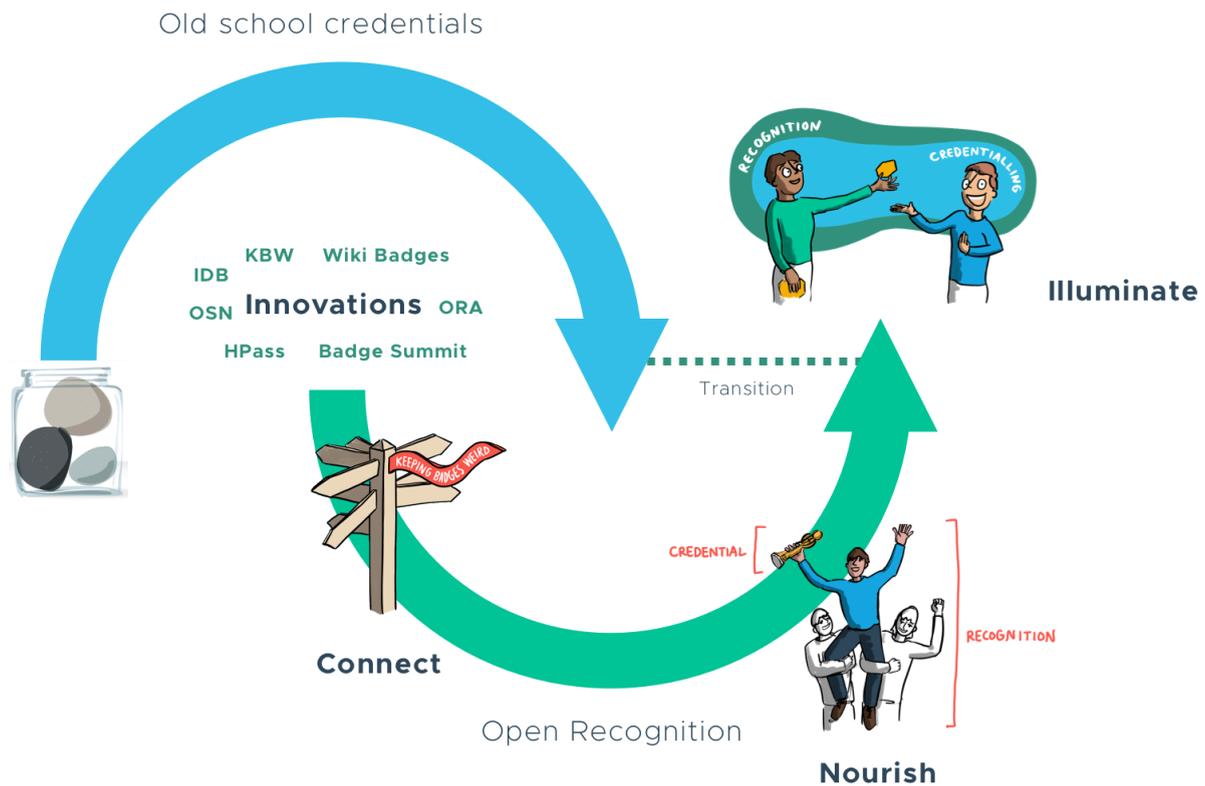
In [advocating for learner-centric badge systems](#), our vision involves:

- **Coalition Building**: empowering people who want to use Open Recognition
- **Community Building**: reaching people who are uneasy about the top-down credentials that permeate our society
- **Building Capacity for Advocacy**: helping the community promote and champion Open Recognition
- **Community Organising**: celebrating people, giving them tools and showing them they're not alone
- **Communications and Messaging**: providing an understandable story and reusable assets for and with the community

Strategy

Our big idea when starting the ORE community was to give people both the theory and practice of CoPs and badges. It's all very well learning about 'value cycles' but there's nothing like *experiencing* them, along with earning Open Badges. At the same time, we wanted to create intersections and pathways to other communities and establish a place for a meta conversation about CoPs and Badges.

Having been active in the Open Badges landscape for over a decade, as we began to build the community we realised that we were doing this work to help an alternative system of recognition evolve as the old system of credentialing begins to sunset.

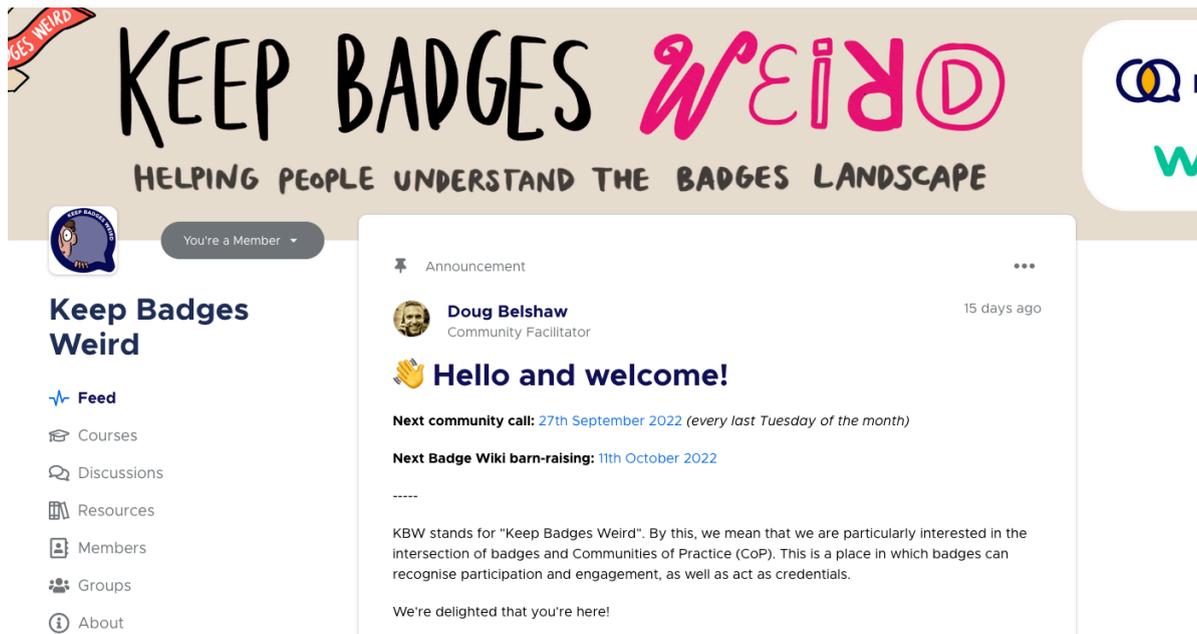


[The Two Loops Model for Open Recognition advocacy](#)

As a result, our work became as much about advocacy for a different way of using Open Badges within a CoP as it did providing a space for people to come together to learn about these two ideas as they currently stand.

Keep Badges Weird

The ORE Community initially organised itself under the name “[Keep Badges Weird](#)”. The brand was somewhat accidental – it started as a code name for a project that was ill-defined. Participate and We Are Open Co-op knew we wanted to work together, but we weren’t sure what exactly to *do*. Eventually, we realised that together we could convene a community of people working to disrupt what “recognition” looks like in their organisations and institutions.



As we began to engage with these folks, Keep Badges Weird stuck as the name of the community. The initial community identified with the ethos of name and used it as a rallying point for integrating Open Recognition into all kinds of recognition programmes. We started using the acronym KBW quite soon afterwards.

The 'weird' approach resonated with those who wanted something fresh and different to digital credentials used to capture things which have traditionally been captured. We leaned into this both with the imagery we created and a playful approach to encouraging new people to join the community



Example of some bad poetry we used on Twitter to promote the new community

Building a healthy community

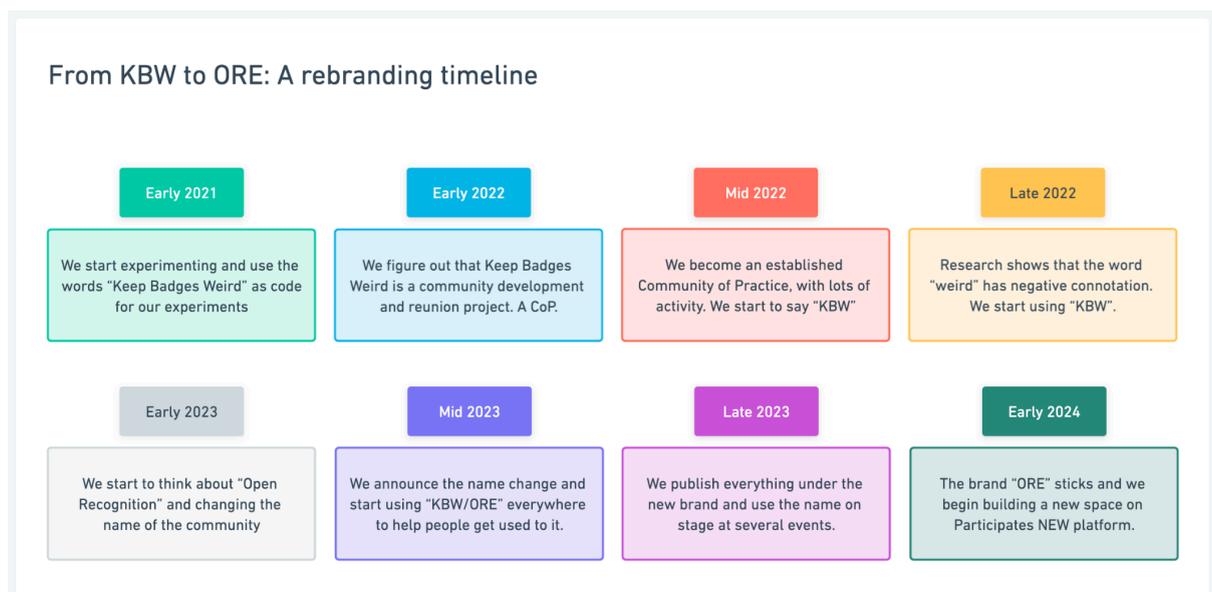
As the Keep Badges Weird Community grew, the number of people working inside of systems that needed a bit of transformation grew as well. As more people joined the community, we learned that community support took a number of different forms. We paid special attention to social actions and what people had to say about how they were feeling in the community of practice.

Diversity and inclusion are intentional practices that help communities change and grow towards the better. This is because as the number of different voices grows, the number of ways to describe and approach the world or problem space increases.

In the tactics section, we've included frameworks and notes on how to build a healthy community. For now, let us say that a healthy community is planned, moderated and taken care of.

Rebranding a community

In 2022, we [collected data across the KBW community](#) and found that the naming was something to think about. We had been using the term "open recognition" across the community for a while, and began thinking about renaming Keep Badges Weird (KBW) to Open Recognition is for Everybody (ORE). The new name is inspired by the book "Feminism is for Everybody" by bell hooks, an accessible guide to the basics of feminism aimed at every audience. We asked the community to weigh in, and then slowly started to rebrand.



[A timeline of how we slowly moved from 'Keep Badges Weird' to 'Open Recognition is for Everybody'](#)

Tactics

Community building should be emergent. We build together *with* the community, not just *for* it. It's important to get people involved from the beginning. One way we engaged early adopters was to help them define what the ORE community stands for: [what are its values?](#)

From there, we did some strategic planning, provided an on-ramp in terms of [a memorable URL](#), and encouraged people to introduce themselves in fun ways. These approaches are all detailed in [this blog post](#).

Breaking things down, here's how we did it...

Gathering Allies

As soon as you've decided to build a Community of Practice, you'll want to get other people involved. One of the first steps is to gather people together. A good way to do this is to lean on your existing networks, but also consider running a session at an online event to 'launch' the community. This meant lots of people joined together and you can gain some traction.

Here are some other tips:

- **[Start a community call](#)** - gathering people together and asking them what they want is the best way to build a CoP that serves the needs of the individuals in it. A community call is an online meeting aimed at improving connections between community members and enhancing their co-operation.
- **Personal outreach** - we message every new member of the community, which now stands at hundreds of people. If they introduce themselves without being prompted, we respond to their introductory post and issue them a badge. If they haven't yet introduced themselves, we direct message them to say hello and encourage them to do so.
- **Collaborative agenda building** - in meetings or discussion threads, we try to make sure people know that we are hoping for their input. We ask people in the community what is important to them. Giving people a chance to have their voice heard, both literally and figuratively, is a vital part of them feeling like part of the community.

Code of Conduct

Every community needs to know what is acceptable and what is not. This can vary widely depending on the type of group, but there are enough core tenets that templates for developing Codes of Conduct have emerged over the last few years.

For the ORE community, we used the [Participate Code of Conduct](#), and in the past have used templates such as the [Contributor Covenant](#). The process by which you get to the Code of Conduct is important, as is reviewing it on a regular basis.

Community Canvas

We regularly use the [Community Canvas](#) to help us bring focus to the particular community we're trying to build. In the *Maturity Model* for community building (next section) we talk about different stages a community goes through while maturing. For the stage between *Ignition* and *Liftoff* we decided to work with the *Community Canvas* to align our goals and define how the community can be supportive, positive and sustainable while maturing further.

Keep Badges Weird community

WAO COOPERATIVE community-canvas.org

1 Purpose Why does the community exist? KBW is a Community of Practice (CoP) for badge champions who want to counteract the top-down focus of institutions or corporations and ensure that the learner remains the beneficiary of badges. 	2 Identity Who is this for and what is our selection process? Participate staff CoP Curious folks who are interested in badges Badge Champions 	5 Experience What happens in our community on a recurring basis that helps us achieve our goals? Also consider onboarding: how does the experience in the community start? Onboarding: individuals introduce themselves using prompts (and earn the KBW badge) Weekly prompts: we actively post ideas and facilitate the CoP to help people engage Monthly community calls: Build solidarity Random: We try to find ways the community can work together through one-off events, research papers, projects and funding opportunities.
3 Values Which three principles are important to us? Trust – We are using and building a shared language, but trying to ensure that diverse voices can be heard. Integrity – We believe in honest discussion and admirable dissent. Advocacy – We build advocacy skills. Badging is about the learner, not the issuer. 	4 Success Definition In the next twelve month what are three metrics that will define success for us? 1) Deputize at least 3 CoP Coaches and issue a ton of badges 2) End of 2022 the community is self-sustaining, with at least bi-weekly posts 3) The KBW CoP is a showcase example of the Participate platform. 	8 Governance How do we make decisions? Who gets to decide what? We use openness to help build consensus and encourage the decision making. Moderation, context : We use distributed leadership and encourage people to make their own decisions. The community needs to help decide some of this Help for next step meeting or community call? Can we self-organize?
6 Roles What different roles can members play in our community? Learners, OGs, Moderators, Harmony Keepers, Hoffmeisters, Firestarters 	7 Rules What guidelines and boundaries help us achieve our purpose and represent our values? Code of Conduct: https://app.participate.com/conduct Manifesto: TBD Default to working openly! Signpost to other places: TBD 	9 Communication What are the simplest channels for us to communicate? Participate platform (discussion threads) Community calls Moderator (backstage)

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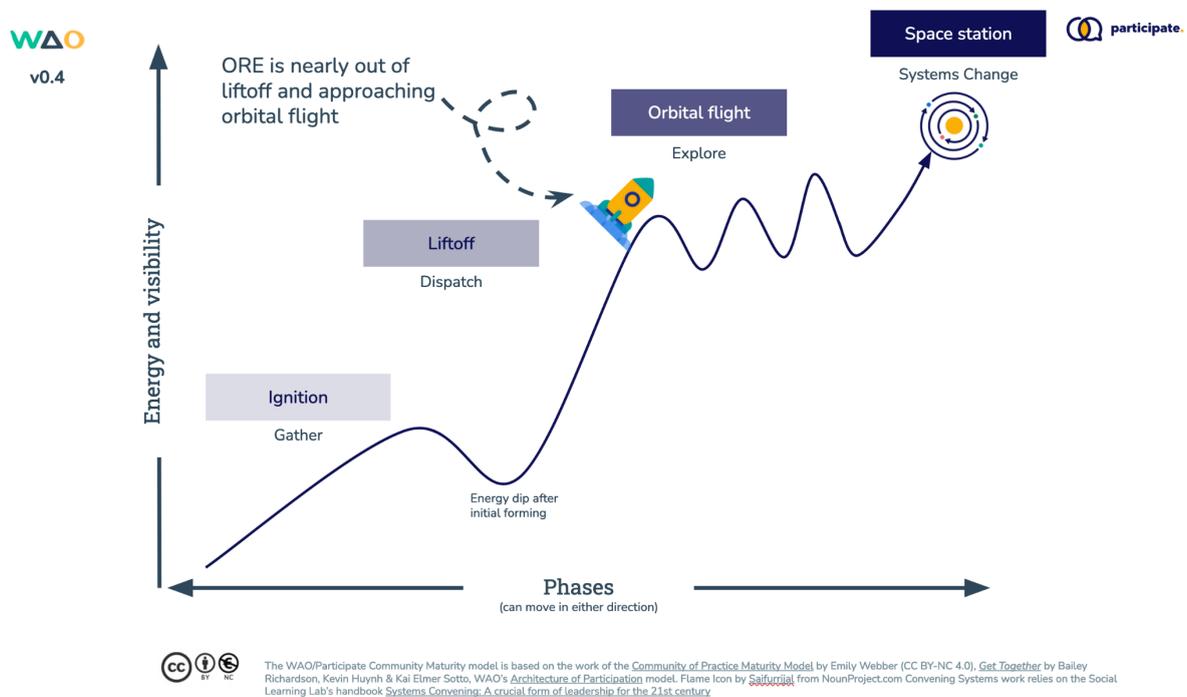
The initial Community Canvas we completed for the KBW community

We have made [a template](#) which you can use with your community.

Maturity Model

Sometimes it's difficult to know what kind of interactions to expect within a community. For example, we can expect a level of cohesion and 'togetherness' that can take months, if not years, to establish. That's why we find Emily Webber's [Community of Practice Maturity Model](#) a helpful approach to figure out where a community is in its development.

For the ORE community, we remixed this model and [focused on the types of interactions](#) that were less common in the community. Doing this helped us determine activities and resources to help the community develop further. As we explained in the post [Towards a maturity model for online, networked communities](#), communities can grow both numerically and in maturity, and so continuing to feed them is important – even after it looks like they're beginning to sustain themselves.



Our maturity model for online, networked communities based on the work of Emily Webber (and others)

During the course of community building we discovered Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner's work on [convening systems](#) which we combined with the Maturity Model. This gives us an even better picture of the community development and what work has to be done for it to thrive.

We use badges to recognise people and [encourage pro-social behaviours](#). The examples below show how this can be done in a fun, highly visual way. In addition, we chose to make some of these 'stealth' badges which means that they were not widely advertised to community members. Instead, moderators issued them based on members' organic interactions with one another. Instead of being just another thing to aim for or to chalk off, these badges *mean* something; they are rare and special.

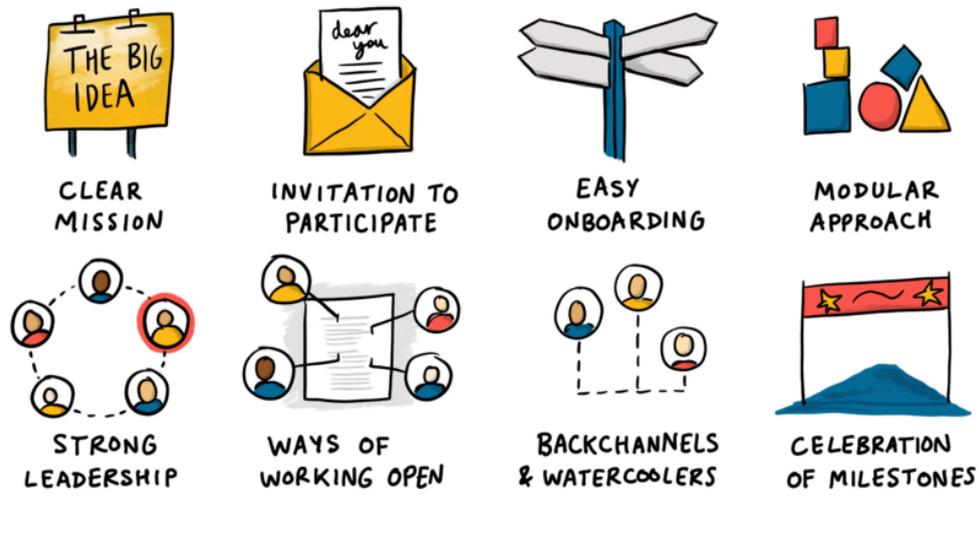


Examples of pro-social 'stealth' badges

Tech + Platforms

To build communities, we use our [Architecture of Participation](#) technique to help us ensure that we've covered all our bases. This is a model we've honed over the years, to ensure that we've made it as straightforward as possible for people to get involved with communities we set up and help flourish.

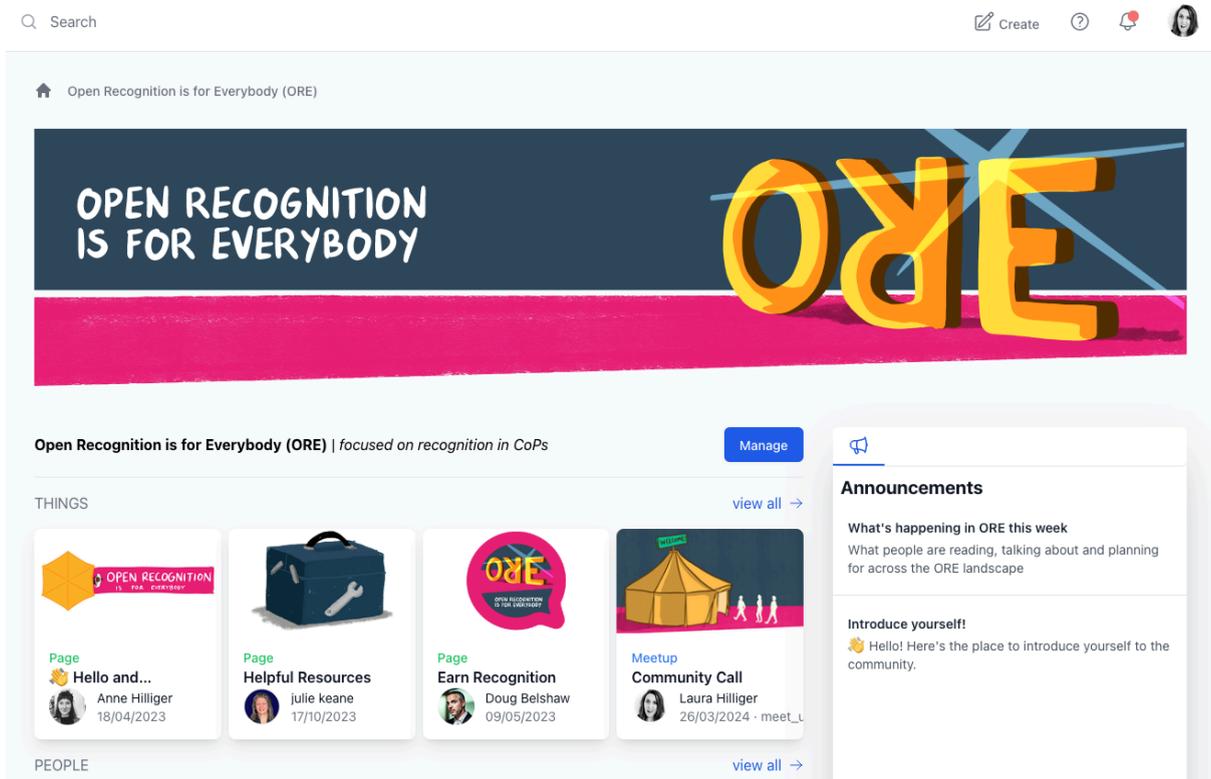
an architecture of participation



[WAO's Architecture of Participation approach](#)

When it comes to technology, we've found that many community platforms are too sparse for the types of advanced interaction we're looking for. We are building social learning communities with embedded recognition, so we need a platform that can support some pretty complex interaction. That platform is, for us, 'the internet', and it's how we weave together different tools that allow us to keep growing our communities.

A place to call home



A screenshot of ORE's main interaction space on [the Participate platform](#)

Community members and potential community members need a relatively easy to remember link that they can call home. Often called the 'canonical link', this is the address community builders send to people. For the Open Recognition is for Everybody community, we chose [badges.community](#) – this gives an overview of the community and links out to community projects and our main interaction space on [the Participate platform](#).



Welcome to **badges.community**, a place for people interested in [Open Badges](#) to come together in a Community of Practice. We are a landscape of practice centred around the idea that Open Recognition is for Everybody!

Get Involved



Open Recognition is for Everybody

This is our online space to collaborate and recognise participation, creation, and reflection, as well as act as credentials. We are guided by this definition of [Open Recognition](#). We have [community calls](#), maintain [Badge Wiki](#) and steward working groups.

[Join the community](#)

A screenshot of badges.community

Regular moderation and events

[Consistency is key within a community](#). To keep a community engaged, there has to be something happening within it on a regular cadence. In the Open Recognition is for Everybody community, moderators set aside time every week to post announcements, answer discussions, share links, issue badges and encourage people who are interacting in the ORE space. This ensures that ORE members, unless they have opted-out, receive at least one email per week about what is going on in the community.

The ORE community also meets for a monthly community call. These have a focus on whatever community members wish to discuss, including dedicated work on a

specific project such as [Badge Wiki](#). We use a platform called [Lu.ma](#) that allows people to save calendar events, schedule reminders, and see when the next call is coming up. We plan to migrate this to Participate once the events functionality has been completely built-out.

Being open about it

Figuring out what a sprawling internet community is making and doing means paying attention to more than just the platform that is being used as the 'home' space. ORE members use, and have used, various hashtags (e.g. #KeepBadgesWeird, #ORE, #OpenBadges, #VerifiableCredentials, and #OpenRecognition) to share things happening in the community. They also write blog posts and reflections that are posted on various social media.

We've found responding to these is important, which can be time-consuming. However, engaging outside of the platform then allows us either to encourage people to post inside the ORE community themselves, or for us to do it for them. It all adds to the feeling that there is a 'buzz' and things going on.

Final thoughts

Community-building is a time-consuming process that involves many things which are obvious, and many things which are not. Initial plans, and even the focus of the community, can change slightly as more people join it and start interacting. The important thing is to know what values the community stands for, as well as a goal (i.e. where it's headed).

With the ORE community, we've been delighted with the success we've had over the past couple of years, and have big plans for its future. It's clear to us that a platform that fuses Communities of Practice and Open Badges is a 'killer app' for community development centred around Open Recognition.

