International Institute for Sustainable Development
Institut international du développement durable

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Success Factors in Knowledge Management

An IISD Knowledge Communications Practice Note

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2005

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Published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development

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These notes were originally prepared as background for a study on knowledge mobilization for the World Conservation Union. For more information on the full study, go to http://www.iisd.org/publications/pub.aspx?pno=778

Success Factors in Strengthening Knowledge Management Practices

There is ongoing debate in the field of knowledge management about whether it is possible to set standards or benchmarks for knowledge management practices, and what those standards might be.[1] Nevertheless, there are a number of knowledge management practices that appear consistently across a variety of organizations, regardless of structure and mandate.

1. A stated rationale for knowledge initiatives

The rationale for adopting the language and practice of knowledge management varies from institution to institution, not surprisingly. In some cases, it is precipitated by crisis (financial crisis or a leadership change). In others, it is an attempt to gain competitive advantage. For example, The Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) noted that it was working in an increasingly competitive funding environment, and it needed to strengthen its ability to identify its expertise and bring its knowledge into play more rapidly than potential competitors. In one case, the organization recognized that knowledge retention was becoming an issue: that retirement of long-time staff, and other staff turnover was leading to loss of methodologies that could be applied to new projects. In some cases, agencies began to ask fundamental questions about their role in the world, in response to growing criticism about aid effectiveness.

Where motivations have been clear from the start for introducing KM (as was the case with REC and the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]), there has been some solid success with implementation. Where there has been a lack of shared understanding for the rationale for KM, implementation has been less than successful.

2. KM efforts connected to both mission and operations

KM should be dictated by the strategic plan of an organization—answering, for all staff, the "knowledge for what" question. KM practices must be tied directly to operations. Reviews of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the World Bank noted this very significant disconnect between knowledge-sharing initiatives and the actual day-to-day operations of the organizations. Of the development assistance agencies, UNDP was perhaps the most successful at reorienting itself into the business of providing advice for more effective development on the ground. Their Sub-regional Resource Facility (SURF) services then became the logical mechanism to broker people, institutions and information. The Global Practice Areas mechanism at UNDP ensures that the advice and expertise of UNDP staff is the best that it can be. In general, they have been more successful at implementing "knowledge-based" operations.

[1]Skyrme, David. KM Standards: do we need them? In Entovation International News, September 2002. http://www.skyrme.com/updates/u66_f2.htm

3. Setting the objectives at the right level

Unlike the research institutes and membership organizations, the development assistance agencies paid significantly more attention to starting with strategies for mobilizing knowledge. While beginning with strategic planning seems consistent with standard organizational management practices, experience seems to indicate that there can be real blockages to moving from strategy to implementation. This may reflect a common pitfall in attempting to structure knowledge-sharing. Often a great deal of effort is invested in developing strategies, platforms, policies, protocols and so forth for an entire organization, only to have the whole system fail. **The fundamental mistake is one of scale:**[2] knowledge-sharing works best when it is closest to the level of implementation and impact. One has to build the capacity to gather and communicate knowledge at the project/activity/field level before one can begin to aggregate up to corporate systems and general knowledge marketing strategies. The Chief Knowledge Officer of InfoDev noted that "knowledge flows are situation specific, and while infrastructure, systems and protocols are important, they must be designed and supported with specific purposes in mind." And the Executive Director of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) confirmed that "knowledge flows better in time bound activities: the shorter, more focused the project the better the knowledge flows."

The research and membership organizations took notably different approaches to KM from the development assistance agencies. REC, APC and The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) were looking for operational efficiencies; the champions were the mid-level managers and even the staff, who were demanding better access to project and planning information. Their starting point tended to be the capturing of explicit knowledge in systematic ways for use internally. These organizations are all project-oriented/project-driven: consequently, they have little time for extensive discussions and strategies for KM. They set up the systems they need, as they need them. Their primary "knowledge focus" is on how to have influence (getting their knowledge used by others) rather than how to support knowledge-sharing internally. Their orientation is towards external knowledge communications.

4. Understanding the basic components of KM

Much of current KM practice can be reduced to the following elements: good use of e-mail functions and good design of Web sites, combined with people learning how to plan and maintain interaction with each other and with external audiences. A success factor in good KM practice is the existence of strategies and tools to facilitate the following:

a. Internal KM: how an organization manages internal communications among its different parts in order to strengthen its knowledge base; how it is managing the archiving and sharing of knowledge products developed by its staff and partners.

   In some organizations, the focus has been on the formation of structured communities of practice or thematic knowledge networks, supported by internal listservs and Web sites for exchanging information on their area of interest. In the research community, less attention has been paid to introducing such

[2] See also Nadim F. Matta; Ronald N. Ashkenas. Why Good Projects Fail Anyway. Harvard Business Review September 1, 2003.

"communities," because informal channels for discussion already exist. Membership organizations (APC and TakingITGlobal [TIG]) strongly emphasized creating the space for dialogue among their members, but capturing that dialogue electronically so that it could be mined for ideas later. What is important is not the specific modality for internal communications, but rather a combination of:

- the recognition that internal communications **across the whole organization** are necessary;
- the existence of tools actively deployed to support communications and the storage and retrieval of knowledge products; and
- the regular examination of the sufficiency of these efforts and experimentation with new ways to improve communications.

b. External KM: how an organization flows its knowledge into the hands of the people it most wants to use it; how it strengthens its knowledge through its interaction with external experts and decision-makers; how it knows whether its insights made a difference. Again, what is important here is not the specific modality for external KM, but whether there is:

- consideration of different modalities for collaboration and communication required, and selection of those that may be most appropriate for the task at hand;
- management of the relationship-building and communications processes, with articulated objectives and anticipated outcomes within designated periods of time; and
- regular monitoring and adjusting of these efforts.

5. Working with combinations of strategies

Not only was an overarching KM strategy not always effective within the organizations and literature reviewed, it was also rarely comprehensive in addressing the related issues of building relationships for influence, bringing in expertise outside of the organizations and strengthening communications for broader knowledge dissemination. A more realistic practice may be the deployment of three or four strategies that are related, but are not dependent on the others for their success:

- Internal communications strategies: Strengthening the tools for internal communications.
- Influencing strategies: how to identify and maintain the relationships the organization needs to have with experts (to reinforce the quality of the organization's knowledge) and with those in positions to make change (bridging research and action).
- Communications strategies: how to flow the knowledge of the organization out to broader audiences, to build awareness of issues and receptivity to changes necessary in order to address issues.
- Administrative strategies for supporting the infrastructure for KM: Information technology, human resources (staff time available, tasks and training) and so forth.

6. Defined roles and responsibilities

No matter what strategies are deployed, at what level of activity, there are a number of important roles and responsibilities that an organization needs to define.

- KM needs a champion at the senior management level of an organization and that championship needs to be sustained for the long term.
- Equally important, KM also needs champions at the mid-management levels. These are the individuals who will connect knowledge needs and flows with the operations of the organization.
- The role of the external expert and the stakeholder, and how their knowledge will interface with that of the organization, should also be defined.
- Just as different strategies may need to be developed, so too different roles need to be recognized within those strategies. "Tipping point management" is the process involved in recognizing and fostering specific individuals who play important roles in starting "idea epidemics" within and beyond an organization. Mavens are the research experts; connectors are those with connections to decision-makers; salespeople are those with the ability to craft and communicate messages.[3] Too often, organizations that see themselves as "knowledge-based," and foster their research experts, overlook the equally important roles for connectors and salespeople.
- Specific roles and responsibilities for young professionals should also be articulated, as they often serve as both the connectors across an organization, and the beneficiaries of strengthened knowledge flows.

7. Progress based on experimentation

Piloting is a common practice in KM, and it is consistent with the trend towards experimentation rather than full-scale analysis, strategy development and roll out across an organization. Both CIDA and UNDP started with pilots of their knowledge-sharing initiatives: CIDA piloted an entire program of internal networks with staffing and budgets. UNDP, on the other hand, built on existing experiments with one or two SURFs operating out of country offices. Bellanet's work with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research knowledge management initiative is based on a similar principle: they are starting with two pilots, and developing them intensively over 18 months.

It is important to create room for experimentation, particularly with new technologies—blogs and online communities, with Wiki (open editing) technologies, even using Google-style algorithms to rank community members according to their level of participation and connectedness to other members of a community.[4] Rapid piloting, and then scaling up, can be as effective as planning large scale from the beginning.

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[3] Excerpt from Creech and Willard; adapted from Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Boston: Little Brown & Company, 2000.

[4] For example, TIG is piloting a method to organize their community members on the principle that who you know and who knows you are as important as what you know: And the more people who know you, the higher your ranking in the virtual community.

8. Planning for sustainability of knowledge mobilization processes

Information networks and knowledge-sharing portals have had checkered careers as mechanisms for supporting knowledge flows: there are probably as many failures of these as successes. Inevitability they come up against the challenges of long-term sustainability: how to keep the information current; how to upgrade systems when necessary; the need for user testing for continuous improvement of quality and functionality. Often these systems are set up with the best of intentions, but lack long-term strategies for maintenance and development and, in particular, lack the willingness or resources to restructure and upgrade portals as new understanding of user interactions and new technologies become available. An emerging good KM practice is undertaking long-term planning for sustainability of knowledge-mobilization processes.

IISD's Knowledge Communications program works at the intersection of communications, networks and sustainable development knowledge. Research and communications go hand in hand; IISD can make a difference in the world by sharing what we know—and what others know—about sustainability.