

KM4Dev Community Notes

In this section of the Journal, KM4Dev members revisit and reflect on past mailing list discussions. In this Issue, Lucie Lamoureux, Programme Associate at Bellanet International, looks back on discussion threads that focused on knowledge sharing capacity development. This specific Community Notes was also developed as an entry in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Renewal Project¹¹.

Developing capacity for the use of knowledge sharing approaches and techniques

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Introduction

More and more development organisations are formulating knowledge management (KM) strategies and an integral part of most KM strategies includes the building of their employees' knowledge sharing (KS) skills. KS skills can be developed through more formal training, or through informal means, such as through exchanges with other members of the organisation, or networks. Knowledge sharing implies a change in people's behaviours and organisations need to take into account that their staff may not necessarily have the competencies to do so, just as organizations may not have the supportive environment for KS. They also need to look at reinforcing or supporting the skills that are already there, and at reducing impediments for knowledge sharing such as the organisational culture or time constraints.

This Community Notes examines both the formal and informal ways of developing capacity for the use of various knowledge sharing techniques, based on the experiences of KM4Dev members and their organisations. There is, of course, no magic solution that applies to all, but some of the approaches described below have been very effective in specific organisational cases. Both formal and informal KS capacity development approaches are highlighted by examples from some of these international development practical applications.

Formal knowledge sharing capacity development

Various methods are used for formal capacity development. Some of the options include hiring trainers or facilitators to provide in-house capacity development, sending staff out to training courses or workshops, and providing access to e-learning courses or self-directed learning modules. All of these options are worthwhile, although a mix and match approach can be considered, depending on available time and budget.

A few organisations have provided basic introductory sessions to staff on KM by bringing in well-known KM experts, such as Larry Prusak and Tom Davenport. Others have focused more on KS skills development workshops in using specific techniques, such as facilitation (face-to-face and online), peer assists, after-action reviews and storytelling.

The latter are most effective when it is clear to staff that developing these practical skills will support and benefit their daily work, and that improved knowledge or experience sharing will be valuable to both individual and organisation. The Consultative Groups on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) are two examples of organisations that developed in-house workshops - with the assistance of external resource people - in order to develop their staff's capacity in facilitation techniques and using peer assists and after action reviews. A KM4Dev learning event held at the World Bank in 2004 also sought to develop specific skills in KS competencies.

Self-directed knowledge sharing skills development can also compliment other formal methods. Several knowledge sharing toolkits have been elaborated by development organizations, the latest by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)¹². The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and its partners created a fully integrated learning module on building *Electronic Communities and Networks*.¹³ This module looks at the approaches, methods and tools, which help build groups and communities, enhance communication and stimulate active participation.

Informal knowledge sharing capacity development

Another aspect of capacity development is through 'learning by doing', or in various informal means. In any organisational setting, it is important to recognise the ways that knowledge is shared already, for example through meetings, seminars, or even informal chats at the coffee machine or water cooler.

Informal capacity development involves supporting KS skills but without using a didactic or classic instructional approach. For example, knowledge fairs or knowledge weeks reinforce knowledge sharing, giving the space for staff to talk about their work and activities, and to share their experiences and challenges with one another (and in some cases, with external people). The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have all experimented with some type of knowledge fair. At the grassroots level, some Latin American groups have done the same.⁴

KS capacity can also be developed in meetings or workshops by providing participants with practical experience in using KS techniques (for example, by conducting real-life peer assists and telling stories in a workshop setting). Learning by doing is a very effective way to gain a better understanding of what KS is all about. Afterwards, people can take what they have learned in workshops and apply it in their own work contexts. Four CGIAR centres have used different techniques within their annual general meetings, with the explicit goal of building their staff's KS capacities by 'doing'.⁴

Similarly, staff capacity can be built through participation in communities of practice or thematic networks. By sharing their experiences in these informal settings, participants learn from each other and can develop common solutions.

Mentoring and/or coaching is another way to develop knowledge sharing skills and encouraging learning. Mentoring brings together more experienced individuals with younger or less experienced staff. Sida (the Swedish development agency) uses mentoring effectively in mixed age field mission teams.

Time is required for all of these approaches, so an organizational context, which recognizes and provides time for these activities is essential to success. Adding 'something else' on top of existing workloads rarely bears fruit.

KM4Dev discussions on capacity development

There have been three separate KM4Dev mailing list discussions on this specific topic (in August 2002, September 2004 and February 2006). Interestingly enough for the members of the FAQ Renewal Project, there was an attempt to re-launch a dialogue on capacity development in June 2006 but only one person responded to the query. This led the FAQ Renewal Project team to wonder if members had a sixth sense about what is a pressing need for their input, rather than a more contrived one.

The February 2006 discussion was on KM online courses that are specifically related to international development. The resources suggested in the thread can be found in the 'Links & Web Based Articles' section of the FAQ entry⁵. The conclusion is that such a course does not currently exist. One participant suggested that the KM4Dev community should think of developing an online action-learning course on KM. This idea has sparked interest in a few members and Simone Staiger of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) led a discussion on the topic at the July 2006 KM4Dev workshop in Brighton. A wiki space was created for the group's purposes⁶. One member was concerned that we should be wary of 'reinventing the wheel', since there is a lot of material already out there. He also suggested to develop a 'blended learning course', i.e. both online and face-to-face, instead of only the former. A section was created on the KM4Dev website where people can post their useful PowerPoint training slides⁷. Another contributor noted that in order to have a quality product, you need both content process experts and format experts (including educational experts).

This led to a discussion around other learning-oriented consolidated efforts, such as the FAQ, the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, and the new Knowledge Expeditions project⁸. The latter seeks to move away from tool-centered learning and more into self-organizing 'learning alliances'. A member strongly supports such initiatives and would like to see:

The proposed KM-course - in a view to building KM competencies - would best valorise these parts of the Journal that present consolidated insights, summaries, compilations, syntheses. This would keep these contributions alive!

He also suggested that 'Learning in KM' could as well be conceived in an analogy to a 'collegial coaching', driven by the needs of someone. For example, instead of collecting

(and compiling) asynchronous contributions, we could hold a teleconference or a chat and members of the community could subscribe and attend.

But one person felt that ‘KM training does pose some potential problems, or at least confusions’ because we are discussing both training development practitioners, as well as the training of ourselves, ‘the KM specialist’. He advanced that:

The key to mainstreaming KM practices and approaches will be to integrate KM into the work, process and mindset of development professionals. This in fact may NOT lead to many specific KM courses - except for folk like the members of this list.

He thought that KM tools and practices (such as Communities of Practice, After Action Reviews and peer to peer exchanges) should be gently integrated into the way work gets done, without calling attention to the ‘KM lingo’. He also argued that providing training may be necessary but is hardly sufficient and that other actions (for example, policy, regulatory and human resources) are often needed to provide an ‘enabling environment’ to make these approaches acceptable to the larger community.

In 2004, a member of the community enquired about KM training or certification programs and one academic institution had been suggested, but the member found the \$8000 price tag a bit high. Another participant argued that in order to make KM capacity building sustainable - especially in developing countries - there should be subsidies available and that organizations should be the ones footing the bills, not individuals, as is often the case.

Back in 2002, a KM4Dev member asked for ideas in developing an internal workshop, which aimed at building KM and communications skills of participants through the sharing of their own knowledge, skills and experience. Suggestions included using KS techniques such as storytelling/narrative (‘which is how most important communication actually happens in organisations and elsewhere’) and peer assists within the workshop structure helps participants to understand the value of KM while doing it.

Capacity development examples in application

Here are specific examples of KM4Dev members’ practical applications of KS capacity development in their organisations and networks.

CIDA’s KM Secretariat developed a learning package on collaboration and knowledge sharing for all CIDA staff. Part of this package was a toolkit⁹ containing their ten favourite techniques for better knowledge sharing, workshops on using peer assist and after action review (co-organised with Nancy Dixon and Bellanet) and a storytelling workshop with Steve Denning.

CGIAR’s KS project developed an approach that involved incorporating KS principles and techniques into important CG centre events. The idea is that by creating opportunities for centre management and staff to experiment with these KS techniques, the project can demonstrate their value as means of facilitating organisational change and research collaboration. The project worked through four pilot initiatives, carried out at CIAT, the

Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT) and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI). The project also carried out complementary activities, including a training course in facilitation skills (in collaboration with CGIAR's Institutional Learning and Change Initiative) and the development of an online KS toolkit.¹⁰

SDC organized a 'Dare to Share Fair' on its premises in Berne on 30-31 March 2004. Around 200 SDC staff and partners from more than 30 countries came together to share the ways they learn from experience. The SDC building was transformed into a colourful market place. Market stalls, workshops and short presentations provided ideal opportunities for lively discussions and getting to know each other. The event's theme was 'managing knowledge and skills for development' and underlined the fact that learning from experience is a must and should be a daily routine.¹¹

One member, Sebastiao Ferreira, trained facilitators for 'social learning experiences', to help groups and organisations make their knowledge explicit. In 2004, as part of a Knowledge Fair for Latin American groups, he organized brief training sessions with development professionals, sent them off 'to practice', and then offered them support in tackling their practical problems. The Seminar part of the Fair looked at the challenges of supporting social learning initiatives: methodological and cognitive, networking, advocacy, funding, etc. As Sebastiao noted:

Over the course of 3 days, 46 people were trained and they are now identifying group learning experiences. I'll deliver a second workshop to them, more focused on expressing knowledge and in searching for partners in constructing learning networks.

A second Knowledge Fair is being organized for a group in El Salvador in October 2006.

The Centre for Reflective Community Practice of MIT in Boston also trained facilitators in using a reflective methodology to help groups in Latin America to retrieve their knowledge¹². They are currently evaluating their experience and will have elements of a model by the end of 2006.

There exist many more examples of capacity development in using KS approaches and techniques in development. Hopefully, Community Notes readers can use these and other examples as inspiration to propose formal or informal capacity development tailored to their own environments.

The following members of the KM4Dev community are key contacts on developing KS capacity: Stephanie Colton, Steve Denning, Urs Karl Egger, Sebastiao Ferreira, Manuel Flury, Allison Hewlitt, Erik Johnson, Lucie Lamoureux, Geoff Parcell, Tony Prior, John D. Smith, Simone Staiger, Marc Steinlin and Nancy White.

About the author



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Endnotes

- ¹ With a grant from Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), a team of four community members undertook a project aimed at updating and reviving the FAQ section of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community website. See FAQtory: http://www.km4dev.org/wiki/index.php/FAQ_Index
- ² See http://www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Publications/Tools_KM.html
- ³ See http://www.imarkgroup.org/moduledescrC_en.asp
- ⁴ See Examples in Application, p. 4-5
- ⁵ See http://www.km4dev.org/wiki/index.php/Developing_capacity_for_the_use_of_knowledge_sharing_approaches_and_techniques%3F#Further_Information
- ⁶ See http://www.km4dev.org/wiki/index.php/KM_in_Development_Course
- ⁷ See <http://www.km4dev.org/index.php/articles/c206>
- ⁸ See http://www.km4dev.org/wiki/index.php/Knowledge_Expeditions
- ⁹ See <http://www.km4dev.org/index.php?module=uploads&func=download&fileId=10>
- ¹⁰ See <http://www.ks-cgiar.org/toolbox>
- ¹¹ See <http://www.daretoshare.ch>
- ¹² See article in KM4D Journal, Vol.1, No.3, <http://www.km4dev.org/journal/index.php/km4dj/article/viewFile/44/115>