

The World Bank

Building and Sustaining Communities of Practice

Editor's note: The following partner profile was adapted from the 2000 knowledge management study, Successfully Implementing Knowledge Management.

The World Bank (the Bank) offers loans, advice, and an array of customized resources to more than 100 developing countries and countries in transition. The Bank helps poorer countries as they become involved in the world economy. The Bank is the world's largest provider of development assistance, committing about \$20 billion in new loans each year. The Bank also plays a vital role in coordinating with other organizations—private, government, multilateral, and non-government—to ensure that resources effectively support a country's development agenda.

The World Bank's mission is to fight poverty with passion and professionalism. The Bank's main focus is to help the poorest people and the poorest countries. It emphasizes the need for investing in people, particularly through basic health and education. The Bank also emphasizes protecting the environment, supporting and encouraging private-sector development, strengthening the ability of governments to deliver quality services efficiently and transparently, and promoting reforms to create a stable macroeconomic environment conducive to investment and long-term planning.

Fighting poverty requires a global strategy to share knowledge systematically, energetically, and quickly. A fairly closed organization a few years ago, the Bank has become a global development partner by sharing global and local knowledge with client countries, public and private partners, and civil society.

ROLE OF KM IN THE ORGANIZATION

The World Bank's knowledge management strategy stresses connecting those who need to know with those who do know; it collects what is learned and shares that information internally with other staff members and externally with clients, stakeholders, and partners around the world. The knowledge management strategy is not merely an operational game plan of making parts of the existing business run more efficiently, but a strategic shift aimed at helping the World Bank become a different kind of organization—more agile, open, and able to reduce poverty.

The key drivers for knowledge management include:

- **Speed**—responding faster to client needs;
- **Quality**—delivering to clients the experience of many countries adapted to local conditions;
- **Innovation**—bringing new services and finding and testing new ideas; and

- **Wider access to knowledge**—building the capacity of countries to tap into global resources online, and developing the skills of clients to adapt the best global practices in knowledge sharing and management.

ROLE OF COPS IN A KM STRATEGY

In the process of implementing the strategy, the Bank learned that neither connecting nor collecting could be effectively achieved unless communities of practice were in place. Hence the formation and nurturing of such communities (known in the Bank as thematic groups) has become a central preoccupation of the knowledge management program.

The World Bank's knowledge management approach has steadily evolved away from the idea of knowledge management as a product and towards the idea of knowledge management as an activity generating solutions. Knowledge management includes forming memberships in thematic groups that connect people together to solve problems, connecting people through a directory of expertise, providing statistics online through live databases, providing help desks that respond to queries from staff members inside the organization, developing knowledge repositories that are being made available externally on the Web, and having dialogues via the external Web site.

A central core of knowledge draws on the experience of the Bank and the people in the field. This central core of knowledge is called the knowledge bank. The knowledge of players from the United Nations, regional banks, private sector, and civil society, as well as that of the clients and the Bank, had to be brought in to the knowledge bank. The Bank could only do so much by bringing together the knowledge of all the players. The Bank is now exploring the concept of using the knowledge base as an ongoing, growing system as a way to get protocols established so that many in the lending and development community accept a common framework. This would allow anyone speaking any number of languages interested in development to come into the Bank to get information and find out who is interested, who has resources and money, and who to ask if the answers can't be found in the existing knowledge bank.

The Bank is now exploring a further evolution of the thematic groups, aimed at spawning new communities of practice among their clients (i.e., fractal communities). The thematic groups are seen as the most valued KM product or service at the Bank.

Planning

Prior to the president's announcement in 1996 that a commitment to knowledge management would be made, pilot projects were launched as a result of the personal interest of the particular managers who were involved in knowledge management. The initial plans for implementation developed by the task force in November 1996 called for a phased introduction of knowledge management, but in practice there was such widespread interest in starting that implementation blossomed across the board without any formal setting of priorities or introduction of phasing. Within a year of the president's announcement, virtually all sectors had some knowledge management activities under way.

Creating

The World Bank realized following the president's announcement that in order to create the knowledge base, knowledge communities would be needed. The crosscutting sector networks led cross-country knowledge sharing on a global basis, and they led the development of knowledge sharing efforts. These networks organized the practitioners in their respective areas into meaningful groupings related to areas of knowledge and discussed how one could go about knowledge sharing. These groupings of practitioners became the thematic groups. Some of the activities the thematic groups are accountable for include building the knowledge base, the quality of the knowledge, and reaching out to new members.

The most successful sectors are those in which the staff members have been able to choose which issues are of most interest to them as practitioners and form into communities of practitioners around these issues. Therefore, unless the members of the community are already passionate about the subject under discussion at the outset, it is unlikely that the community will have enough energy to get going and survive. Once the group is launched, its specific activities need to respond to the varying and changing needs of its members. It is difficult to generalize such needs, which depend on the composition of the group, the operational priorities at the time, and the opportunities that afford themselves to the group.

Membership

The participation of external partners in the thematic groups has evolved spontaneously and easily. One example of external partners participating in a thematic group is from the highways thematic group. If a participant in the highways thematic group needs to know more about traffic safety and identifies that the U.K. Traffic Safety Institute has a great deal of assembled know-how in the area, then it would be natural to invite the Institute to join the thematic group. As knowledge collections become available on the Internet, it is natural for Web site visitors who are practitioners to identify their interest in becoming an active participant in the Bank's sets of partners.

Roles

The leaders of the thematic groups are clearly key actors in the KM support structure, but their job titles do not reflect this. The leaders of the thematic groups are generally not appointed or selected. Rather, they typically emerge as leaders and win support from colleagues and the relevant sector board. There are also cases of such leaders being appointed, but this practice is generally perceived as less effective.

Relatively few employees are entirely dedicated to knowledge management. Along with selected individuals to help develop the knowledge management initiative, a central knowledge group comprising the program director and four staff members spends 100 percent of their time on knowledge management. This group functions as a team, responding to opportunities and problems as they emerge; it is responsible for spearheading the overall institutional effort. There is also a technology group that spends about 50 percent of its time on technology issues related to knowledge management. Group members also have responsibilities for information management and supervising the internal and external Web sites.

Another group called the central group was pulled together to help people get started. The most important skills for the members of this group were an ability to communicate, inspire, catalyze, and facilitate large-scale collaborative actions across organizational boundaries when mandates were not clear and overall institutional policies were still being formulated. As the initiative has matured, the challenge has become one of encouraging greater coherence and coordination among units with common protocols and approaches and tighter linkages with other operational priorities.

Technology

Although thematic groups are generally established via face-to-face contact, information technology connects thematic group members from many countries in out-of-the-way places—resulting in global communications network, connecting World Bank headquarters with the 60 field offices. In the connection process, e-mail has been the dominant tool (Lotus Notes), although video-conferencing is becoming an increasingly important channel. In the collection phase, the Web is the principal tool for sharing knowledge, both internally and externally. Extranets in the form of the activity rooms—a combination of Lotus Notes and the Web—are also growing very rapidly.

The thematic groups are responsible for validating knowledge materials and disseminating them on the Web. Quality assessments of Web collections are being undertaken on a pilot basis. In a June 1999 staff survey, 72 percent of participants said that they could find knowledge and information to do their jobs; however, online improvements were needed.

Because a considerable amount of fragmentation was identified at the time of the External Evaluation Panel in April 1999, a major effort is now under way to implement a consistent Web policy. At that time, only 37 percent of participants in focus groups agreed that the Bank's knowledge online resources were easily accessible, compared to 70 percent of participants seeing the thematic groups as adding value. The most important cause of this problem is the fragmentation of substantial knowledge resources on the intranet that hampers those resources being easily found by an interested user. Resources are variously located in the intranet knowledge management, online, in network Web sites, in some regional Web sites, and in thematic group workspaces. Although on the surface this fragmentation presented itself as a technology issue, it is not a question of technology; in essence, it reflects a fragmentation of organizational effort to meet the perceived needs of individual units and groups to appear distinctive and different at the expense of the institutional need to present knowledge resources in a consistent and well-organized fashion to all users. Business need should drive the formulation of the policy, not the technology. The policy should be determined by practitioners.

Although the World Bank believes that IT is the easy part, developing user-friendly knowledge management tools has proven more difficult than expected and generated more friction than any other part of knowledge management.

There were no specific training programs offered at the Bank except for general training courses on the Web and Lotus Notes and the incorporation of knowledge management into the orientation courses for new staff members. Differing user needs, frequent changes in the knowledge management technology, and continuing work to improve its user friendliness have tended to mitigate against large-scale, across-

the- board training. However, the staff members involved in cataloging knowledge materials in many units have formed into a user community that meets regularly.

Sustaining

In order to integrate and balance corporate strategy with local initiatives, the World Bank has taken a number of institutional actions to create an overall climate conducive to knowledge management, while allowing a large measure of local autonomy in implementing knowledge management in particular business areas. To create a supportive climate, the Bank has formulated and disseminated an institutional knowledge management strategy, made a knowledge management budget available, and reflected knowledge management in the personnel system.

Face-to-face contact seemed to be an essential aspect of sustaining the thematic groups. Seventy percent of the Bank's staff is in Washington, D.C., and for these individuals, face-to-face contact is easier to arrange than for those staff members in the field or for the external partners who are scattered around the world. At headquarters, brown-bag lunches are a ubiquitous feature of the life of a thematic group.

There are some 20 sectors, such as rural development, health, education, urban development, and so on, and each sector has a board composed of representatives from the various business units who are responsible for directing policy and programs in that sector. Each sector has between three and twelve thematic groups that are communities of practitioners in particular aspects of the sector. Each sector holds an annual "Sector Week" in which staff members from the entire world, including the 60 field offices and external partners, get together to share views in person. Sector weeks are principal tools for incorporating these groups. There has also been a small amount of formal training of staff in the field offices to show them what knowledge management is about and to encourage their participation.

Successful thematic groups have tended to be communities of practitioners combining knowledge providers and knowledge users in a single seamless community of practitioners. In this sense, end-user involvement in these communities was built in from the outside. Some groups tend to get into a supply-driven mode. Knowledge management staff members who set out to build knowledge bases in the hope that users would come have been less successful. The World Bank has not been able to incorporate the needs of inactive managers and staff members who do not express any needs or demand or the needs of external users. Outreach efforts to the former and surveys of the latter will be increasingly important aspects of knowledge management.

The World Bank is continually attempting to improve its knowledge management initiative through frequent interactions with other practitioners, in conferences, with benchmarking, by exchanging site visits, and by inviting outsiders.

The external evaluation panel of April 1999 was quite positive in its assessment of knowledge management effectiveness, and it identified a number of actions that could further improve the initiative. Action is under way on a number of these recommendations, particularly strategy, Web revamping, metrics, and links of knowledge management to quality. The KM community of the Bank

tends to focus on the task that remains to be accomplished rather than the progress it has already made.

Measuring

The Bank uses a variety of methods for feedback from end users including focus groups that are a frequent vehicle for collecting end-user feedback, surveys both on paper and online, groupware used in conducting focus groups, comments solicited, collected and responded to through feedback channels as part of the Web development, and institution wide feedback gathered as part of a staff survey.

Feedback in focus groups has usually been solicited with a particular purpose in mind, and the inputs have been used in decision making. For example, the results of focus groups in the education sector were specifically used to decide on the composition of the thematic groups, results of the focus groups conducted for External Evaluation Panel were used to design the recommendations, and feedback on the Web was used to design online improvements.

More generic feedback mechanisms, such as the staff survey, have a process for taking action. But the feedback on knowledge was among the more positive results of the survey, so it did not figure in the action planning.

The Bank believes the effectiveness of its improvement efforts is best judged by others. In the absence of reliable measures, it is hard to be precise. Inside the organization, employees are very conscious of what remains to be done. In particular, the culture shift is well under way, but it still has some way to go.

THEMATIC GROUP EXAMPLES

Education Early Child Development

The purpose of knowledge sharing is to improve the quality of activities in support of early child development. The group continually monitors the questions that are asked by the users and continually seeks to develop, generate, and collect information. Currently, \$1.5 billion is invested in early child development projects that range from preschool reform programs to informal home-based services. All of this information is available on the group's/World Bank's Web site, because 85 percent of its users come from outside the Bank. The group is continually widening and deepening the information on the Web site with the help of partners such as InterAmerica Development Bank, The Consultative Group for Early Childhood Care and Development, and The Children's House.

Urban Services Thematic Group

The Urban Services Thematic Group (USTG) focuses on improving the living conditions in slums around the world. The group is working to capture the experiences of the past. The USTG relies on many instruments such as tacit downloads because they have become an important part of its thematic group work. Tacit downloads are interviews with people who have valuable experience transcribing that information, presenting through its Lotus Notes system, and organizing the information by categories.

The database not only captures the experience of the Bank's staff but also their counterparts in the countries that have worked on these projects. The group also is working on study tours and consultations in countries with policy makers that develop dialogue with the Bank and other agencies about how to improve. This is developing rapidly because the group has been challenged by President Wolfensohn to take on a new initiative called Cities Without Slums. This means that the group will have to double or quadruple its efforts as an institution and alter how it works with partners. At this time, the group is building up its tools and techniques for doing knowledge management in a better and bigger way. This includes drawing in staff and clients to learning processes simultaneously.

Indigenous Knowledge

The basic goal of Indigenous Knowledge is to learn from clients how to better adapt global knowledge to the local setting to bring value to the services the group provides its clients. The impetus for formation originated from civil society groups concerned that the knowledge bank was going to turn into a one-way street of knowledge exchange from the developed north to the developing south. And when the group asked the clients how well the staff was adapting knowledge to the local conditions, the group received only a 30 percent approval rating. The group has tried to raise awareness both inside and outside the Bank by using 12 organizations outside the bank as partners, by establishing a database on the local practices and by integrating the practices into its projects. One issue that it must address is culture. It needs to change the culture by enabling staff members to listen to clients and learn from them.

BENEFITS REALIZED

The thematic groups are, in a sense, self-organizing entities; and hence, in theory at least, they automatically customize themselves to meet the members' needs. In practice, some thematic groups are more supply-driven than the Bank would like, and efforts are underway to make them more demand-driven.

Even though the broad direction of the knowledge management strategy announced by President Wolfensohn in 1996 has not changed much, many of the aspects of implementation now look quite different. In 1996 thematic groups were not a major focus. Now they are at the center of the initiative. In 1996 the attention was on getting knowledge sharing started. Now the focus is on tightening the links between knowledge sharing and the specific business priorities of specific sectors and units. The Bank expects that the knowledge management program will continue to evolve as the organization learns from experience.

Knowledge is visibly permeating the organization, not so much as "knowledge management," but as a different way of thinking about the organization and its mission, including the mission statement, the upcoming strategic forum, the increasing realization of the importance of knowledge to the accomplishment of the mission, the increasing interest of the business units in mapping and managing their knowledge, and the interest of World Bank clients in managing their own knowledge.

ABOUT APQC

For over 30 years, APQC has been on the leading edge of improving performance and fostering innovation around the world. APQC works with organizations across all industries to find practical, cost-effective solutions to drive productivity and quality improvement. We are a member-based nonprofit currently serving more than 500 organizations in all sectors of business, education, and government.

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