

Knowledge in Action - Issue 19

Learning from external collaborations

It has never been more essential to collaborate with individuals or groups from outside the organisation, to share expertise, create learning networks and help solve shared problems.

These activities are continually conducted within every organisation, and there are ways to make them even more effective. Research from Henley's Knowledge Management Forum reveals the essential considerations for making the most of external collaborations.



Increasingly organisations are turning to external collaborations for learning opportunities that are simply not available internally. Everyone from government departments to isolated specialists within private organisations are trying to join up and collaborate across boundaries. These aren't formal, contractual arrangements, but looser, knowledge-based arrangements, designed to enable all the organisations involved to improve what they do.

“We collaborate with suppliers, customers and partners to improve our relationships, develop the business and deliver better quality to customers. We have some internal processes to support the sharing of learning from external collaborations, although some individuals are more proactive than others.”

Karen Fryatt, programme manager, QinetiQ



External collaboration has become part of how every organisation goes about its business. There is no doubt that each brings short term benefits to the individuals involved, but not every business is deriving as much value as it could from the process. It is therefore in the interests of the business to assess how to build better external collaboration.

The purpose

The first step is to consider why the organisation is doing this. Part of the impetus is that everyone is expected to be more innovative, and that requires the stimulus of new knowledge. In addition, new ways of looking at things can help challenge the status quo and help the organisation evolve. In the public sector in particular there is the added pressure that some challenging social issues are simply too big for one department or sector to handle alone.

The research found that there were a huge variety of benefits that could be derived from these collaborations. These ranged from the opportunity to think together about difficult challenges, to a way of

building trust for other work together, and the opportunity for isolated specialists to share ideas and practices. However, for each organisation to derive real value it needs to be clear about the benefits it is hoping for from the outset. Short-term value will be generated along the way, but a clear picture of the overall objective is the way to take the collaboration to the next level.

Connecting external and internal learning

Second is considering the context of what is going on within the organisation, and the process connecting up the external collaboration with internal learning. A major part of this lies with the individual involved, and ensuring the right individuals take part. They need to know what is important and be able to make sense of what it means for the organisation. They need the ability to transfer the learning where it is needed internally, and they must have the motivation to both learn and teach. Individuals need to realise they are in this for the organisation, rather than for their own good. They need to appreciate their role as a conduit for bringing learning back into the organisation.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

This report is based on research carried out by Henley's Knowledge Management Forum, led by Dr Christine van Winkelen in conjunction with Graham O'Connell from the National School of Government and Henley's Keith Heron. The study was based on seven case study collaborations from participants in the research, and involved organisations including HM Treasury, the Audit Commission, the Improvement and Development Agency and Unisys.

Knowledge-sharing behaviours needed by individuals

Knowledge sharing behaviour competency (KM Forum 2004)	Descriptors of individual styles provided by interviewees
Networking	Networker, puts people together, values connections.
Trust and empowerment	Open, authentic, honest, trusting.
Consideration and recognition	Willing to listen and understand others, diplomatic.
Managing and sharing information	Subject knowledgeable. Find links from conversations to value for the organisation and capture that value.
Gathering and developing knowledge	Curious to learn. Stimulated by intellectual input.
Communicating knowledge	Helpful, facilitative, enabling, self-confident.
Applying expertise	Energy, commitment, active. Credible and with influence back in the organisation.

Once those skilled, committed and open-minded individuals have been selected it is also vital that they are involved for as long as possible, to build social capital and trust within the collaboration. This means ensuring that senior managers are committed to it, so it has the organisational support required. Where senior leaders are involved in establishing collaboration and formally endorsing a programme, it effectively gives permission for the sustained commitment of resources and individuals to the learning process.

However, another serious consideration is the process by which this is done. It is common for this to be on a fairly informal basis, with personal networks at the heart of transfer, resulting in pockets of good practice. This is clearly not necessarily efficient. It is also hampered by newer flexible ways of working (including distributed teams) and the fact it leaves the majority of work to the participants. It is therefore important to improve internal collaboration mechanisms and join them up with learning from external collaborations. To capture and internalise knowledge gained this way the organisation needs to foster an alliance learning capability.

Managing the dynamics

The third step in the process is managing the dynamics of collaboration. A major part of this is setting up systems and processes to make it effective. The case studies revealed some useful examples, such as appointing a full- or part-time collaboration manager, using skilled and knowledgeable facilitators capable of selecting the best tools and techniques. Some also benefited from a skilled individual who could capture and distribute material generated from discussions and activities in the collaboration.

“I manage a website providing material to help local government deliver services. It is put together by the collaboration of partner organisations. It requires relationship management to keep people engaged, especially when new people are involved. I will work to bring them to the table in the right way. We also meet once a quarter to secure their buy-in.”

Natasha Gray, knowledge manager (improvement networks), Audit Commission



“We run communities of practice (CoP) for local government to connect around issues, work together and solve problems. Involvement was initially spontaneous on an individual level. Now CoP are more mainstream and understood by senior people, organisations are putting together a more holistic strategy for getting involved, using a business initiation document and business case.”

Lawrence Hall, knowledge manager, IDeA



Once the individuals were in place, collaborators also found it useful to have a regular rhythm of activities and events to build a sense of community and a loose agenda that allowed people to raise emergent issues. The technology was also important. Useful tools included websites, wikis and other collaborative online spaces, which were used by most of the collaborators to support their work together.

However, these systems and processes are not set in stone. As the relationships mature and collaborations evolve, the facilitators need to be able to adjust the mechanisms to support it. This is more successful where continuous feedback is built into the process.

Managing the individuals

In addition to processes, managing the dynamics also means working with the individuals. This starts with building relationships. Useful approaches here included incorporating social time within the programme to enable people to get together. Groups also benefited from ensuring sufficient commonality and shared understanding between participants, and continuity of those involved.

These individuals also need to be able to establish trust and manage risk. The case studies found success here lay in a neutral venue, skilled facilitation, working together on specific projects to encourage more active engagement, and bringing real issues to the table in order to demonstrate trust.

There is also the very real risk of power and politics derailing the process. This risk can be controlled by screening participants to ensure commercial and remit conflicts are avoided, and ensure they are of similar seniority. Efforts can also be made to reduce the visibility of differences in power between organisations and individuals. Of course the need for similarity between participants also needs to be balanced with the need for a mix and diversity of participants to generate a broad enough range of perspectives.

These issues require careful consideration, planning and management. They need the right processes and people involved in the collaboration and the right approaches for bringing the learning back into the organisation. They also need support from the very top of the organisation, a recognition that collaboration takes time and resources and commitment to build capability. But in return external collaboration can achieve things and deliver value that the organisation could not realise on its own.

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The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849.

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