

Chapter 4.16

Using Social Networking Analysis to Facilitate Knowledge Sharing in the British Council

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the establishment of the Knowledge Management (KM) strategy, the British Council defined knowledge as objects. Knowledge sharing was about sharing documents and information on the intranet or via global databases. Since December 2002, Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology has been applied to manage knowledge. Knowledge is seen not as a product that can be transferred from one colleague to another but as a communication practice. This means that shared knowledge has to be interpreted and made sense of by its recipients through genuine dialogue. During this phase of KM implementation, the focus shifted to linking up colleagues and providing space for dialogue through building global communities of practice and virtual teams. This article presents an example of how we have used the theory of Social Networking Analysis as a diagnostic tool to promote knowledge sharing among our newly

formed 30-people global leadership team. The three steps we have taken to carry out the exercise and its limitations also are discussed.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of the British Council is to build mutually beneficial relationships among people in the UK and other countries and to increase appreciation of the UK's creative ideas and achievements. Much focus has been on sharing knowledge and experience with customers. In order to take the organization to another level, the British Council promotes knowledge sharing among its 7,000 employees, who are located in 109 countries. The ultimate aim is to empower staff to get the knowledge they need to serve their customers to the highest standard possible.

The Knowledge Management (KM) program was launched officially in December 2002 with the

appointment of the new Director of Knowledge Management. Following a comprehensive six-month knowledge audit exercise, the global KM strategy was approved by the Senior Management Team in December 2003. The KM vision was to enable the British Council to develop and deliver world-class products and services to its customers by effectively sharing and utilizing collective knowledge. This will be achieved by finding the best ways to connect its employees with each other and by providing them with easy access to relevant documents and resources.

Over the last two years, we have launched a number of projects to increase awareness of KM and to get the buy-in of senior management for the program in order to invest in the tools and approaches needed to improve global knowledge sharing. Specific KM projects that are beginning to be embedded into the organization include:

1. Knowledge audit conducted using Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin, 1992; Cheuk & Dervin, 1999)
2. Development of Knowledge Management strategies for business units
3. Building communities of practices using seven-phase methodology (Cheuk, 2004a, 2004b)
4. Enhancement of the intranet, collaboration tools, and global databases
5. Applying Social Networking Analysis to support collaborative working (Anklam, 2003; Cross & Parker, 2004)
6. Applying narrative techniques to conduct project debriefs

In 2005, KM was recognized widely as an enabler to deliver the British Council's overall business strategy. More than 100 knowledge champions worldwide have attended training on KM, and more than 70 global communities of practice have been developed¹.

BUSINESS CONTEXT

During 2004-2005, the overseas operations of the British Council were significantly restructured. Thirteen regions have been introduced to replace the existing 109 country operations that each were managed as individual entities. Each new region is made up of a number of existing country operations.

Thirteen regional directors were appointed. They have to work closely with the 17 senior management team members based in the UK in order to set strategic direction for the organization. This 30-person team is referred to as Global Leadership Team (GLT).

The restructuring provides an excellent opportunity to promote knowledge sharing beyond country operations as well as to promote knowledge sharing between overseas operations and the UK headquarters. However, it also presents a challenge. Any organizational restructure leads to the creation of new teams, which can be to the detriment of any existing knowledge-sharing culture. This presents a challenge to the KM team.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE?

A review of the KM literature largely defines knowledge using Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) definition of tacit knowledge (i.e., knowledge in a person's head, which has a personal quality and is hard to formalize and communicate) and explicit knowledge (i.e., knowledge that is transmittable in formal, systematic language). Sutton (2001) defines the latter as codified knowledge (i.e., knowledge that can be written down) and uses it interchangeably with information. Taken this view, KM systems were created to capture the knowledge of experts. The capture approach continued with an emphasis on capturing knowledge in databases, manuals, books, and reports,

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