



Date : 05/08/2008 (2nd Version)

Information outreach and knowledge sharing in the United Nations: new approaches

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United Nations

New York, NY

USA

Meeting:

138 Knowledge Management

Simultaneous Interpretation:

English, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL

10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

Introduction

Many knowledge management initiatives are viewed primarily as improving the use of information technology to streamline processes. As information professionals know well, this is only one part of the picture. Many organizations in the private and government sectors are deploying new methods, systems and management techniques to encourage knowledge sharing and are seeing some concrete benefits including faster project implementation, more insightful decision-making based on comprehensive understanding of issues and increased efficiency. No one disputes that information and knowledge are the lifeblood of the United Nations, (UN) however, the organization has been slow to address the issue of how to leverage this invaluable resource effectively. A report of the Internal Oversight Services on knowledge management¹ noted that there was no common understanding of knowledge management or knowledge sharing in the UN. Typically, knowledge management was associated with disseminating information and overlooked the critical role cross-organizational collaboration and peer interaction plays in effective knowledge sharing.

¹ UN. Economic and Social Council. Committee for Programme and Coordination. Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the thematic evaluation of knowledge management networks in the pursuit of the goals of the Millennium Declaration. E/AC.51/2006/X, 2006.

Over the last year, however, the concepts around knowledge management have been given more attention, due to the emphasis on UN reform and organizational change. There is now recognition that content management and organizational learning are necessarily part of the package. In addition, other entities in the UN System, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), have undertaken significant initiatives on knowledge sharing, and these have served as models for new activities and projects in this area.

This paper will highlight some of the plans for new approaches and describe some of the activities and services that have already been developed. It will also describe the plans for a new knowledge management program that is being set up within a newly formed Office of Information and Communications Technology, that is intended to encourage an effective collaborative environment in which United Nations personnel and stakeholders can capture, share and manage information and knowledge more effectively.

Assisting the UN to manage its own information and knowledge

Recognizing that recycling and reusing information and knowledge leads to collective intelligence and greater efficiency for the organization and its clients, information professionals in the UN are taking on new roles as coaches and consultants to help the organization manage its own information and knowledge, develop new products, as well as to access relevant external information. Providing the technology tools and applications is only a first step and training can help, but most staff find it difficult to schedule time to take courses, even for short periods of time.

Support to staff needs to be tailored to individual needs. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library and Knowledge Sharing Centre is beginning to have a presence across the organization; both in the form of "live" knowledge coaches and teams that help people find and organize information in their offices and at their workstations, and in the network of behind-the-scenes library workers who prepare targeted information resources to support the work of the United Nations. Through a Personal Knowledge Management initiative, Library professionals are being transformed into networking facilitators, essential team members in the United Nations community of knowledge workers. Eventually libraries without walls will make UN information professionals more visible. During 2009, the Library and the entire premises of the UN will be renovated, involving a major relocation effort for a period of at least four years. This move will provide an opportunity for more innovation, experimentation and ironically a chance to be more visible to certain core departments. Service points, consulting services and collections will need to be set-up in various locations. By 2009, the Library will effectively be without walls.

With the installation of an enterprise content management system (ECM), the processes and work flow relating to the creation, storage and dissemination of information will be improved. In addition, the ECM will help minimize the time spent searching for information and knowledge, improve access to knowledge and information inside and outside the organization and facilitate the development of knowledge repositories.

Internal communications at the core of knowledge sharing

One of the most visible knowledge sharing tools in the UN is the organization's intranet, "iSeek," which was redesigned in August 2005. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library and Knowledge Sharing Centre, was requested to take responsibility for the management of the UN's intranet by the Deputy Secretary-General. A dedicated unit, the Internal Communications Unit (ICU) was established and tasked with the development of an internal communications strategy in an effort to identify new means of communicating more effectively, and encouraging a dialogue from the top – down, bottom – up and across the organization. As a result, the Library developed a more prominent, pragmatic role in management reform, helping to strengthen the UN through better information and knowledge sharing.

iSeek has been used extensively to communicate messages to foster a sense of community and encourage dialogue at all levels. The objective of the UN intranet's re-conceptualization was to increase transparency between management and staff, facilitate communication and strengthen communities across duty stations. In addition, iSeek's mandate was to create one intranet for one UN worldwide, with consistent layout, and standard technology, providing relevant and consistent messages to reach potentially some 37,000 staff around the world, plus approximately 100,000 peacekeepers. Senior management began to realize the importance of involving staff in the change process, if it was to be successful. There was also recognition of the role internal communications played in creating perceptions about the UN in the media. The UN's intranet has been used effectively to support a new internal communication strategy and the creation of a network of focal points at headquarters and in offices worldwide to support and sustain these activities.

Poor communication was seen as a source of negative feelings amongst staff, particularly at a time when the organization was undergoing major changes and an onslaught of attention from the media. To address this problem, iSeek, took on new importance as management began to craft messages specifically aimed at staff concerning management reform and a range of other issues intended to share knowledge and increase transparency. This technological tool has already had an effect on the culture of the organization towards a more collaborative environment. In recognition of the role iSeek has played to encourage better knowledge sharing, the team that was involved in the redesign and revamping of

the system, received a “UN 21 Award” from the Secretary-General, in July this year.

iSeek has become a primary internal communication tool that brought together disparate parts of the organization. Its objective was to inform staff about the UN’s common objectives and where they fit into the overall picture. This involved:

- Enabling users to find for themselves what they need to know.
- Facilitating staff understanding and focus on UN strategies and priorities;
- Helping UN Information centers around the world to better serve their role as points of access to UN information and materials and to operate more effectively as the “eyes and ears” of the organization by making it easy for them to communicate news and events back to the rest of the UN;
- Increasing awareness and understanding of UN policies internally;
- Providing authoritative, timely, online access to information and documents to all staff worldwide;
- Supporting change management through better dialogue from the top – down, bottom- up and horizontally;
- Streamlining processes such as reporting to enable faster decision-making;
- Assisting work-sharing among teams in different time zones around the world;
- Aiding peacekeeping and humanitarian operational staff in their communication and information needs;
- Promoting greater operational efficiency throughout the organization by connecting staff that need to collaborate and share knowledge and information.

iSeek is now established as the corporate intranet for the UN worldwide, providing relevant and consistent messages to staff almost everywhere in the system. Eventually, the installation of portal technology and social networking applications will facilitate even more active participation and involvement of staff.

Knowledge management program

By taking advantage of both mature and leading-edge knowledge management technologies in the market, such as social networking applications (e.g. weblogs, wikis and other Web 2 tools) and visualization products, the knowledge management program, part of the information and communications strategy for the UN, will facilitate organizational innovation and change, building on the knowledge sharing activities that have thus far served as catalysts for change. The program will support the further use of search tools to help locate relevant information quickly and easily and facilitate the analysis and synthesis of information and knowledge. Encouraging and facilitating collaboration will help

change the organizational culture which is largely bureaucratic and heavy on process.²

One of the key developments will be the transformation of the UN's web site, (<http://www.un.org>) as a gateway for finding information on the substantive and support activities of the United Nations, effectively transforming the site into a knowledge-sharing platform that will serve stakeholders throughout the world. Other priority projects that will be part of this program will include Secretariat-wide information management policies and standards, implementation of web-content management and document management systems, and collaborative networks.

The aim is to provide a “one-stop-shop” on the United Nations, facilitating access to relevant, easy-to-use information of specific issues – especially on the three main core areas: peace and security, development and human rights.

The objectives of the program include:

- Retaining institutional knowledge
- Facilitating and enhancing knowledge-sharing and collaboration
- Improving the organization, accessibility and usability of information
- Improving websites and web-content management
- Reinforcing analytical and decision support capabilities
- Rethinking information management policies and processes.

Learning to manage with knowledge

In July this year, senior officials and staff members from the fields of information technology, human resources and information management from around the UN System participated in a forum held in New York, called “Learning to Manage with Knowledge.”

The main objectives of this event were to share practical lessons from within the UN system on existing knowledge management initiatives; to understand how knowledge management can help the UN and its specialized agencies to meet their mandates; and to identify concrete steps to implement successful knowledge management initiatives with the UN.

The forum provided an opportunity to have a better understanding about which knowledge management approaches would and would not work within specific environments and, based on actual experiences, identify effective methods to

² Described in: UN. General Assembly. Investing in information and communications technology: information and communications strategy for the United Nations Secretariat. Report of the Secretary-General, A/62/793, 9 April 2008.

share knowledge and to move specific initiatives forward. The forum was opened by the UN Deputy Secretary-General, and the Chief Information Technology Officer, highlighting the importance that knowledge management is now being given by the leadership in the UN.

During the event, participants worked in small groups to define priority areas for development to support knowledge management initiatives United Nations. Attendees shared stories about the success and failures of knowledge management projects in their respective organizations and brainstormed about projects that could be considered “quick wins” – those that that could be developed within existing policies and resources.

Through group work sessions, the following suggestions were made:

Relating to knowledge collaboration:

- ✚ Identify existing communities of practice and establish new ones
- ✚ Launch the use of wikis

Relating to knowledge creation:

- ✚ Establish knowledge maps – directories of what people know and what they do
- ✚ Set up a directory of “alumni” – former UN officials who might serve as mentors or in other activities
- ✚ Create a directory of KM specialists
- ✚ Launch a guide to “making sense” tools and encourage informal gatherings of staff around themes or activities
- ✚ Use stories to promote messages and share knowledge

Relating to knowledge application:

- ✚ Measure and evaluate knowledge transfer initiatives
- ✚ Identify technically feasible approaches with program value
- ✚ Encourage more mentor relationships
- ✚ Expand the global contact directory to provide a skills inventory
- ✚ Provide support for the use of social networking applications such as Facebook
- ✚ Create searchable yellow pages
- ✚ Determine more effective ways of storing knowledge

These suggestions will be followed up as part of the newly established knowledge management program that was discussed earlier in this paper.

Institutional memory

With the departure of large numbers of personnel in the next few years, the United Nations is beginning to focus on how to capture the institutional knowledge that otherwise walks out the door every time an experienced employee retires or leaves the organization. Approximately 1,900 UN staff Secretariat will reach the mandatory retirement age within the next four years. This represents 15.8 per cent of the current workforce. Many of the retirements are at senior levels in the organization. Some plans are being explored to create an interactive directory of expertise of “alumni” who might be willing to serve as mentors or contribute their knowledge in other ways. Although specific methods to mitigate the repercussions of these departures have not yet been put into place, this trend along with the urgent need to improve access to knowledge and information inside and outside the organization now has many champions at senior levels.

Conclusion

To be effective, knowledge management in the UN will have to have visible benefits for the work life of all staff. The new knowledge management program will have to focus on concrete, tangible outputs, particularly those that relate to improvements in processes many of which are currently cumbersome and slow. Effective communication, enhanced collaboration for the sharing of expertise and ideas will be at the core of this work.