The knowledge sharing approach of the United Nations Development Programme

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Knowledge networks or communities of practice (CoPs) were established in 1999 in some of priority thematic areas of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). They were originally set up to serve as a capacity-building mechanism for staff, as a bridge between headquarters and the field, to connect UNDP's country offices and to promote South-South exchange. Knowledge networks subsequently became institutionalised as part of the UNDP business plan and have formed the basis of UNDP's knowledge management strategy.

UNDP is organised according to five 'development practices', each corresponding to one of its five strategic goals outlined in the 2004-2007 Multi-Year Funding Framework (UNDP 2003). This document describes the strategic goals and service lines to be pursued by the organisation, and details the organisational strategies that will be followed. In addition, management is recognized as a functional practice, and we have additional knowledge communities supported by knowledge networks.

The five development practices bring people from different regions, across all bureaus and offices, into voluntary, flexible communities, based on common professional interests, so they can share and learn from each other's knowledge and experience, develop new ideas as communities and bond together to build a common identity. These communities have a horizontal make-up, which breaks down structural hierarchies and builds a greater sense of community within the organisation. Members are primarily UNDP staff, though some of our communities (e.g., the Human Development Report Network and the Millennium Development Goals Network) are open to external participants.

The networks work as internal, global exchange forums to inform practice members of the new and upcoming regional, national and global activities and resources available within each community. The networks also serve as a tool for sharing experiences and good practices, and for discussion of substantive issues related to each thematic area. Each network or community is linked primarily by an electronic network, or moderated mail list, but they are also supported by regular face-to-face meetings and other community-building activities which are outlined below. One of the unique features of UNDP's networks is the use of a standardised product provided across networks, called the 'consolidated reply'. When a question is posed or a discussion held via an electronic network, not only do people share their experience from around the world, but this is supplemented with information about what is already known and published on the topic at hand. Within an average of 10 working days, a consolidated reply is shared with network members that synthesises this expertise and experience.

UNDP has 20 knowledge networks, including six practice networks (five development practices and one functional practice – management); four knowledge networks open to other UN agencies and external partners; two cross-cutting networks and seven sub-practice networks. The experience of the Crisis Prevention and Recovery network has been described in more detail elsewhere (Swamy 2005).

Table 1: UNDP knowledge networks by type and membership

Network name	Type of network	Membership type	Number of members (as of 30 June 2005)
1. Crisis Prevention and Recovery	Development Practice	Internal UNDP staff	1,236
2. Democratic Governance	Development Practice	Internal UNDP staff	1,348
3. Energy and Environment	Development Practice	Internal UNDP staff	1,117
4. HIV/AIDs	Development Practice	Internal UNDP staff	806
5. Poverty Reduction	Development Practice	Internal UNDP staff	1,244
6. Management	Functional Practice	Internal UNDP staff	2,403
7. Gender	Cross-cutting (MYFF driver)	Internal UNDP staff	763
8. Evaluation Network	Cross-cutting	Internal UNDP staff	758
9. Millennium Development Goals	UN wide	Internal UNDP staff and External partners	2,340
10. Human Development Report	UN wide	Internal UNDP staff and External partners	1,013
11. Human Rights Policy	UN wide	Internal UNDP staff and External partners	601
12. UN Co-ordination GlobalNet	UN wide	Internal UNDP staff and External partners	289
13. Small Enterprise and Microfinance	Sub-practice (under Poverty)	Internal UNDP staff	680
14. Information and Communications Technology for Development	Sub-practice (under Democratic Governance and Poverty)	Internal UNDP staff	555
15. Decentralisation, Local Governance and Urban Development	Sub-practice (under Democratic Governance)	Internal UNDP staff	817
16. MPN-Human Resources	Sub-practice (Management Practice Network)	Internal UNDP staff	983
17. MPN-Finance	Sub-practice (Management Practice Network)	Internal UNDP staff	1,301
18. MPN-Procurement	Sub-practice (Management Practice Network)	Internal UNDP staff	1,076
19. MPN-Project	Sub-practice (Management Practice Network)	Internal UNDP staff	1,287
20. HDR-Stats	Sub-practice (under HDRO)	Internal UNDP staff and External partners	556

The total number of subscriptions to these networks is approximately 21,000 (as of 30 June 2005). The graph below represents the enormous growth in membership since the global networks were established in UNDP in 1999. A number of other regional and in-country networks are also supported by UNDP.

Graph 1: Membership of UNDP knowledge networks 1999-2005

Total subscriptions to the SURF & global knowledge networks*
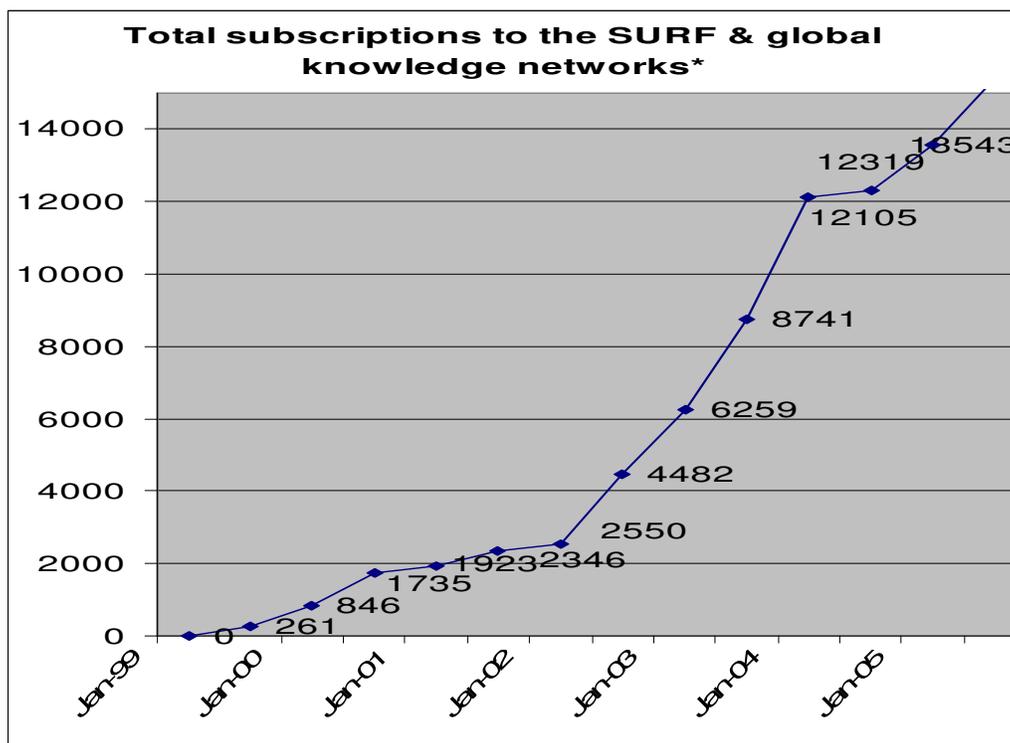
UNDP is supporting the expansion of its successful model UN-wide in order to enhance the knowledge management capacity of the UN system as a whole through an inter-agency model for knowledge sharing. Support is being provided to both the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in establishing their own knowledge networks according to the UNDP model. In addition, UNDP has taken one of its own sub-thematic networks, the Human Rights Policy Network (HuriTALK), and expanded it to function as the UN system's knowledge sharing and capacity building tool for human rights mainstreaming. These initiatives began only in 2004 and are still in their infancy.

Paula Souverijn-Eisenberg of DPKO's Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit had this to say about their experience in setting up a knowledge network:

> *We're setting up our own network, for which we're using every document you've ever produced. We're practically applying UNDP's approach in setting up our own network relying on your experiences and adapting them to our own organisation….In learning from UNDP's experience, DPKO has*

Henderson, K. 2005. The knowledge sharing approach of the United Nations Development Programme.
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changed its approach to establishing its own networks and communities.'
(UNDP 2004, p12)

In India a prototype model of in-country networks, based on the UNDP model, is being piloted through a UN country team project. The pilot began in January 2005.

Qualitatively, UNDP's networks are assessed through an annual Headquarters Products and Services Survey, which asks country offices to rate all products and services provided by headquarters' units. Ratings for the networks have improved every year since their inception, with the highest ratings ever received in the 2004 survey. Some 92% of staff members surveyed stated that participation in a practice or other network benefited their office, and 86% noted that participation benefited their own professional development. Each network was rated in terms of the quality of information and facilitation, with the ratings ranging from 70 to 93% favourable. This suggests a significant impact not only on organisational change but also on organisational learning.

Graph 2: Ratings of staff of networks (2004)
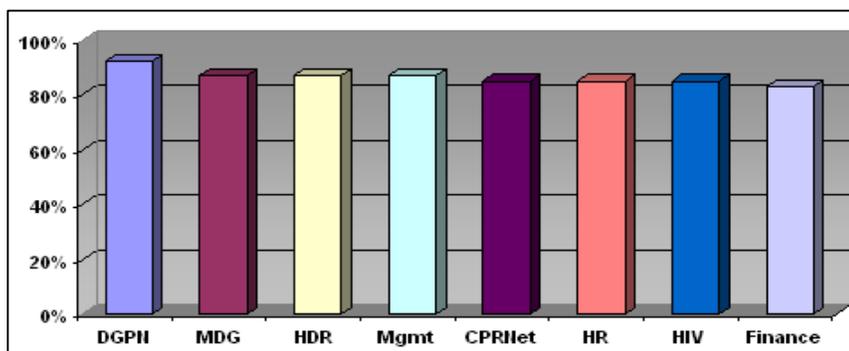
The impact of UNDP's networks

UNDP's networks have provided an entry point for the organisation's focus on knowledge management. UNDP's approach has centred on 'connection' (connecting people who have knowledge and want to share it), as opposed to 'collection' (compiling knowledge in online repositories). Many other organisations – the World Bank, for example – have developed their programmes in the reverse order. Whilst UNDP has been very successful in establishing its communities and connecting people to one another and to knowledge through communities, maintaining the focus on connection, while increasing our capacity for collection, remains the challenge for future development of our programme. There is also still room to grow in terms of mainstreaming knowledge management processes, such as participation in communities, into our business processes, such as the programming cycle.

CoPs or knowledge networks have, however, been a key element in the strategy to move UNDP from the role of programme manager to its current role as 'the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life' (UNDP

Annual Report 2002, p6). The networks have resulted in significant organisational change. They have also delivered on their promise, outlined above, to serve as a capacity-building mechanism for staff and as a bridge between headquarters and the field, and to connect UNDP's country offices and promote South-South exchange.

In terms of capacity building, the figures quoted above from the 2004 Headquarters Products and Services Survey, regarding professional development, highlight the significant impact of our CoPs on individual and organisational learning. A staff member of the UNDP Bratislava Regional Service Centre commented as follows: 'I gained a lot of knowledge from the network, and it helped improve my professional qualifications, but also the quality of work I have been doing.' (UNDP 2004, p31)

UNDP's CoPs have also improved connections between headquarters and the field, and between one country office and another, contributing to a leveling of the hierarchy within UNDP and enabling inputs from the bottom up into both policy and practice. Now any staff member can communicate across country offices, regional bureaus and headquarters units to obtain the best information for providing a country with a development service. As recently as 1998, staff were required to clear message content with senior managers before sending out e-mails. Today thousands of staff members communicate with one another daily across global, regional and country boundaries, units and hierarchical structures. This has also assisted in linking policy and practice, a challenge faced by all development organisations. Not only do we all face the challenge of linking community activities to policy, but we also must find ways to demonstrate where this link has occurred and the impact it has achieved.

The following mechanisms have been used in UNDP to ensure these linkages:

- Analysis of contributions and members/network activity
  This can be done to demonstrate the nature of the content being discussed, knowledge gaps, characteristics of the community and areas where policy guidance is needed or is already clear.
- Using the CoPs as consultation mechanisms
  For example, in UNDP all policy positions and 'practice notes' (a product that guides field office staff on how to implement programs in a particular thematic area) are discussed on our electronic networks.
- Bottom-up definition of policy issues
  For example, we have built into our policy development processes various means (such as e-discussions) of generating policy from the field. Commonly received queries on the e-networks can define the demand for a practice note or policy position and trigger the development of one.
- Agenda setting via practice meetings or e-networks
  As a community, we undertake periodic agenda setting for our activities and directions. This process can influence policy development.

How does this work in practice? In 2004 the Democratic Governance Practice Community held an e-discussion via its electronic network on whether or not UNDP should engage with political parties through our programmes. The e-discussion was prompted by an analysis of the content of network queries, which identified this as a recurring issue in country offices but one for which there was still no clear guidance.

It was the most active and lively e-discussion in the networks' history, with 79 contributions from 45 countries. Capitalising on the outcomes of the successful discussion, a mapping of UNDP's engagement with political parties has recently been completed. In addition, a short book, entitled *Opportunities in political party programming*, will be produced later this year to provide a coherent account of the challenges and opportunities identified through this discussion.

In relation to promoting South-South exchanges, the flexible and timely sharing of knowledge and information within communities, across hierarchical and unit boundaries, and from one country office to another, translates into a significant increase in South-South exchange. It provides a new opportunity for 140 or more country offices, staffed predominantly with national programme staff, to communicate directly with one another.

The UNDP's CoPs have facilitated a new way of working, in which we share knowledge amongst ourselves, across 'silos' and between country offices and headquarters on a daily basis. Our organisational culture now values and rewards the sharing of knowledge rather than rewarding those who 'own' knowledge. This is still rather informal, with rewards and recognition being based on visibility in the networks, acknowledgement of contributions and scholarships for active participants to attend training and workshops. However, work is under way to mainstream knowledge-sharing skills into UNDP's competency framework and to incorporate these formally into UNDP's performance management tool, the Results Competency Assessment. Some supervisors are already assessing staff contributions to knowledge sharing and networking through the results assessment, although this is not yet a formal requirement.

In October 2004, UNDP's CoPs were reviewed by an independent panel of knowledge management experts: Tom Davenport, Steve Denning, Geoff Parcell and Larry Prusak. In their review report the panel noted:

> *The group was particularly impressed with the energy and responsiveness of the networks. Indeed, we believe UNDP has something unique going on....Overall, the system is remarkable, and indicative of a culture that cares passionately about development issues and knowledge.* (Davenport 2004, p.1)

However, the most convincing statements of impact come from community members themselves:

> *It is comforting to know that my query is going out to over 1,000 eyes who could potentially respond. This gives me a greater sense of confidence in communicating with government counterparts as I can tell the government with more conviction what UNDP policy and experience on the given issue is.* (UNDP 2004, p. 14)

> *[The consolidated reply to a query] was 'brilliant' in terms of saving time as it could have taken 'months' to get the included information, useful contacts and documents.* (UNDP 2004, p. 14)

Following the 27 June general elections in Mongolia, where no party or coalition won a clear majority of seats in the new parliament, the Mongolia country office sent a query to the DGPNet. On the basis of the consolidated reply and their own research, the Mongolia country office presented a package of advisory materials to the key party leaders and members of the working groups of both parties involved in the negotiations. UNDP's resident representative to Mongolia, Pratibha Mehta, noted that 'the materials are being highly appreciated and the demand from both parties is growing. Most key people have read all the materials back to back and they often quote from some papers!' She also said, 'it was fantastic to receive detailed responses from colleagues within a matter of…days through these two networks' (UNDP 2004, p. 21).

CoPs in UNDP: successes and challenges

Key ingredients for healthy CoPs

UNDP's experience has demonstrated that a key ingredient for well-functioning CoPs is to have moderated or facilitated communities. Some argue that facilitation can inhibit community participation. However, in UNDP's experience, it has enhanced participation. The nature of the facilitation is important here. Our approach has been to use moderation, not as a form of censorship, but rather as a means to enhance participation by:

- Maintaining quality, which has maintained demand for membership;
- Balancing participation with quality of contributions;
- Getting to know community members, i.e., who they are, their level of interest and understanding of the issue, its relevance to their work and needs, their areas of expertise (this enables us to follow up with active solicitation and targeting of contributions from particular members to particular initiatives); and
- Sequencing and managing the flow of traffic on our electronic network and scheduling and co-ordinating community-building activities.

Other essential ingredients of well-functioning CoPs are less controversial but equally important and include the following:

- Trust, built on familiarity and shared experience, is crucial in developing an active and healthy community. CoPs and networks must be safe spaces for practitioners to share experiences and seek answers to questions in order to build their own knowledge and capacity.
- Building community identity beyond the electronic exchange of information is important. Face-to-face exchange is the most effective form of knowledge sharing and should be utilised strategically and built on via electronic and other forms of communication. These meetings and other forms of interaction should set the tone for the communities' interactions, emphasising respect and common ownership of the community.
- Bottom-up as well as horizontal and vertical lines of communication should be established. Top-down approaches quash participation. The community should be responsive to members' demands.

- Clearly defined objectives and a mandate for the community are essential, and they should be linked to specific outcomes and tasks that can be collaboratively developed. Objectives need to be flexible, however, in order to respond to dynamic circumstances and evolving needs.
- Quality of products should be emphasised over quantity.
- Leadership and sponsorship from senior management and bottom-up support are both critical.

Successful operating modalities
Some operating modalities are also 'key ingredients' and have been discussed above: for example, moderation/facilitation and a bottom-up versus top-down approach. Other important modalities include the following:

- A combination of tools and technologies should be used to facilitate community interaction. As mentioned above, face-to-face exchange is the most effective form of knowledge sharing and should be utilised strategically and built on via electronic and other forms of communication, including e-networks, telephone and Web-based collaborative tools. There should also be a mix of responsive and proactive mechanisms. For example, members may be led to participate in an e-discussion of an area, in our case, where the organisation wants to develop policy further, rather than respond to questions/queries from field-based colleagues.
- Recognise that operating as a CoP requires cultural change, a different way of working, and strategies to facilitate this should be built into the operating modalities of CoPs.
- Networks should be voluntary and flexible.
- Link the community to expertise outside as well as inside the community.
- Provide carefully tailored products and services to meet members' needs. In UNDP, for example, a number of specific products, common across our networks (such as the consolidated reply), have been developed and refined over the life of the CoPs, based on member needs.
- The community should provide a link to access codified knowledge.
- Sponsoring research on issues raised via community interactions and/or providing resources and funds for community-building activities has been successful at UNDP as a means of fostering community identity.
- Some form of recognition for community members' contributions should be institutionalised.
- Appropriate incentives are key for motivating members to participate.

Pitfalls
Many of these are the converse of elements already identified as strengths above:

- Top-down direction;
- Control by one entity of the organisation or section of the community;
- One-way communication;
- Lack of incentives;
- Too many interactions on process and a lack of substantive content;
- Lack of direction;
- Lack of proper boundaries;

- Presumption that the CoP can do everything and takes the place of organised project mapping or knowledge gathering;
- Reliance on one tool or mode of interaction, e.g., the e-network alone;
- A weak facilitator or no facilitator;
- Failing to recognise member contributions;
- Lack of follow-up – i.e., dismissal of a query if contributions are not forthcoming;
- Unfocused queries;
- Lack of leadership;
- Overwhelming traffic;
- Lack of a sense of belonging to the community (too big); and
- Launching initiatives and not following up.

Promoting participation

A key issue in relation to facilitating active involvement of community members is balancing quality and participation. Maintaining the quality of the content of the CoP is important to encourage membership and participation. However, if the bar is set too high, members can be intimidated about providing contributions. Maintaining balance is an ongoing and delicate task. UNDP has developed some products and mechanisms that enable us to recognise all contributions but to leverage and highlight to a greater degree those with more substantive value.

Many of the elements of a CoP that facilitate active participation have been discussed as 'key ingredients' or 'operating modalities', and conversely, those that can quash participation have been listed under 'pitfalls'. For example, see the comments above on trust, hierarchy, moderation/facilitation, combining face-to-face events with other tools, appropriate incentives and recognition of contributions, quality of content and lack of direction.

Other elements include:
- Making the benefits of membership and participation clear to community members. Internal advocacy strategies can be important for maintaining active participation. External advocacy strategies can also be of benefit to reinforce value from an external perspective.
- Showcasing good practices. If members understand that their good practices will be recognised by the community, this can motivate them to strive to develop good practices and share them.

The communities are vehicles by which we undertake peer review and identification of good practices, which can then feed into policy development.

In terms of challenges, other than those discussed above, which may be common to any organisation establishing CoPs, UNDP operates in a particular context and environment given its unique organisational mandate and structure. UNDP is a highly decentralised, multi-polar, multi-locational organisation, and it operates in an incredibly complex cross-cultural environment. This has given rise to a number of challenges particular to our environment, including language, cross-cultural communications, the need for a diverse infrastructure and additional challenges in building trust within communities.

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Although we have five official languages, our global networks and communities primarily operate in English. We have yet to secure the necessary resources to provide ongoing translations into the other official languages and provide ad hoc translations for queries or responses that come into the network in other languages, based on the language skills of our team. In relation to cross-cultural issues, we have overcome this to a certain extent, not only by bringing communities together on the basis of their common substantive interest, but also through emphasising a shared organisational culture and the need to respond to common, or similar, organisational imperatives and incentives, although there is much more to be done in this area.

These two elements also make it more challenging to build trust among community members. Within UNDP, we have tried to overcome this through emphasising the key role of the facilitator in building relationships with community members and linking them with one another, personalising our community news updates and providing ways to focus the spotlight on community members and initiatives. We also continuously monitor community members' feedback and try to track their fears and concerns regarding knowledge management, building this into the development of our communities and related products and services. In addition, we use a range of technologies, including face-to-face meetings where possible, telephone communications, video conferencing and e-mail.

Implications for future efforts to mainstream knowledge management

As noted above, UNDP's CoPs have been the entry point for the organisation's focus on knowledge management. However, the CoPs alone cannot accomplish the shift to an organisation with mainstreamed knowledge-based systems. They represent part of the whole, with networking as a mainstream activity and with successful 'connection' systems established but not yet sufficiently complemented by systematic 'collection'.

In response to this, in 2004, a formal knowledge management strategy, entitled *The knowledge management roadmap*, was developed. This strategy aimed to build on the successes of UNDP's CoPs by enhancing quality and participation through a number of initiatives, including mainstreaming knowledge management into human resources approaches, such as performance assessment and career tracks, and expanding UNDP's model within the UN system and to in-country networks. In addition, the Roadmap aimed to complement the connection strategy with improved content management systems supported by improved systems and tools. The Roadmap also sought to mainstream responsibility for knowledge management across the organisation (previously it had been led by the Bureau for Development Policy) and set corporate standards for future knowledge management initiatives.

The new strategy represented a shift away from a 'bottom-up', 'stealth' approach, through which the CoPs had successfully been developed, to a formal 'big bang' approach. With greater attention being given to this initiative across the organisation, a lively debate has ensued, and a number of issues have emerged, for which solutions have yet to be found. In order to move forward and build on UNDP's successful

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establishment of CoPs, we have to find a consensus within the organisation on the following issues:

- Should our knowledge management strategy continue to operate within the current paradigm or include the development of a new one?
- Should our strategy focus on knowledge management within the organisation or look outward?
- Should we encourage linear evolution in the development of knowledge management systems and tools or allow more organic evolution?
- Should we set standards for knowledge-management initiatives corporately from the top down or allow continued evolution form the bottom up?
- Should we rely on individuals or 'champions' to move the process forward or on work units?
- Should we set goals within our strategy or target specific work processes and tools?
- Should we focus on one knowledge management model or be eclectic?
- Should we focus on connection or collection, or both?
- Should we start at the centre or at the periphery?
- Should we manage the initiative or allow for innovative approaches to flourish where they develop?

Conclusions

CoPs can be an excellent entry point for knowledge management initiatives within development organisations. The bottom-up approach on which they are based is consistent with UNDP's development approach. In our experience, however, CoPs on their own can take the organisation only so far. Efficient systems for collecting information are required to complement knowledge sharing through connection and communities. In addition, whilst a bottom-up approach is essential for generating the organisational change necessary for development organisations to become knowledge enabled, at some point in the evolution of any knowledge management initiative, it will have to have the spotlight shone on it. Then, some of the thorny issues outlined above must be tackled in order for knowledge management to be mainstreamed into business processes. The timing of this debate can have a crucial effect on the outcome.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are personal views of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of UNDP.

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Abstract

This paper shares practical experience gained in establishing and implementing communities of practice (CoPs) – referred to as 'knowledge networks' within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – as entry points for our knowledge management initiatives. The paper outlines the history and evolution of CoPs in UNDP, placing them in the broader framework of knowledge management and practice architecture. The paper also describes how CoPs have generated cultural change within UNDP, taking the organisation from a situation in which staff could not send e-mails without clearance by senior management to one in which staff today are rewarded for sharing rather than owning knowledge. In addition, the paper identifies the ingredients of a healthy CoP, successful operating modalities, methods to promote participation and ways to link CoPs to policy outcomes. It also looks at what has not worked: pitfalls to be avoided in establishing and managing CoPs. Finally, the paper examines our experience with adding new procedures and tools to this initially successful approach, such as enhanced collection and codification, which have yielded mixed results.

About the author

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