Review

Ben Ramalingam (2005) Implementing knowledge strategies: Lessons from international development agencies. *ODI Working Paper* No. 244, Overseas Development Institute: London
http://www.km4dev.org/index.php/articles/downloads/366

Steve Song

In 'Implementing knowledge strategies: lessons from international development agencies', Ben Ramalingam sets himself the tasks of contextualising knowledge initiatives in development agencies to date, profiling 13 agencies' knowledge initiatives, building a synthesis of the profiles, and producing recommendations based on his analysis. Ben is clearly not afraid of a challenge.

Ben starts by establishing a framework for understanding knowledge strategies. He uses the traditional metaphor of knowledge as a unit of production and divides knowledge activities into the categories of knowledge creation, storage, sharing and use. He sets those activities against three different types of knowledge: tacit, explicit and implicit. His model is a variation on a common framework, and whilst knowledge frameworks are often a subject of heated debate, Ben's model does a reasonable job and sets a context for the rest of the paper.

In developing the background for knowledge-for-development activities, Ben summarises several notable papers on the theme. The papers share a common sense of the complexity of development and the need for knowledge strategies to look further than the internal function of the organisation – an approach that appears to be a legacy of the application of corporate-sector knowledge management approaches. Among the most interesting of the papers he draws on are those dealing with organisational learning (OL) from the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), UK. He paraphrases Robert Chambers in one paper, describing the ultimate goal of OL as being to re-think basic organisational principles and values of the development project itself. This is consistent with the tone and approach of most of the other papers referenced. It is also consistent with the approach advocated by knowledge management (KM) consultants such as Steve Denning, who has in the past emphasized the broad and encompassing nature of KM by describing it as 'a different way of doing the organisation's business'. Accepting this broader challenge, Ben throws down the gauntlet to development agencies to embrace a more powerful, fundamentally different approach to development.

Having led us to this precipice, Ben then begins his analysis of the 13 organisational profiles. On the basis of his synthesis, he then develops eight key areas of analysis, which are expressed through the following questions:

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1. How is knowledge and learning understood and applied?
2. How does knowledge interface with the existing structures of the organisations?
3. How do knowledge activities link to existing core functions within the organisation?
4. How do knowledge and learning link with the existing support functions of the organisations?
5. How do connective physical and electronic infrastructures support knowledge and learning strategies?
6. What role do vision, leadership and management play in implementing knowledge strategies?
7. How are the costs and benefits of learning or not learning measured?
8. How does the knowledge programme address the external aspects of knowledge and learning work?

Ben then maps these questions onto a framework adapted from the ODI's RAPID framework (http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Lessons/Tools/RAPID_Framework.html), originally designed for understanding research-policy linkages. The adapted framework is intended to be used as a construct for carrying out a comparative analysis of knowledge and learning initiatives in development organisations. While the eight key areas mentioned above make good sense and emerge from the interviews with organisations, the adaptation of these ideas to the RAPID framework feels forced, as it is not clear what additional value is added by the framework to the eight areas of inquiry.

Ben's synthesis of his findings based on the application of those 8 questions to the 13 development organisations can be summarised as follows:

- Knowledge initiatives are still largely information-system oriented, focused on 'knowledge products', as opposed to knowledge and learning processes.
- Whilst some knowledge-oriented practices, such as communities of practice (CoPs), are catching on in organisations, none of the organisations' profiles could boast that knowledge-oriented practices have been integrated in any widespread or systematic way.
- Knowledge initiatives within development organisations have a tendency to be marginalised or even isolated within organisations and are sometimes viewed as being in conflict with core processes and culture.
- Information infrastructure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for knowledge sharing. Many development organisations are drawn down the path of information infrastructure as a knowledge solution and fail to address the richer but less visible aspects of knowledge that are embedded in process and human interaction and are more difficult to measure.
- High-level buy-in and leadership were identified as necessary conditions for effective knowledge initiatives but were also found to be rare.
- Nobody really knows how to measure the costs of not having an effective knowledge strategy. Narrative is seen as a powerful tool but is criticised by some as being too often used to highlight one-off successes as opposed to actual trends.
- Looking outwards, most organisations have tended to focus on sharing their knowledge with Southern partners. Little attention has been paid to facilitating

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the flow of knowledge of Southern partners into development agencies. Similarly, inter-agency knowledge flows have not been identified as a priority.

Having conducted his analysis, Ben then sets out recommendations for each of the eight key areas. One assumes they are aimed at development organisations in general, though this is not explicitly stated. This is the only really disappointing section of the paper. Whilst the recommendations are all perfectly sensible, they are at too high a level to be of great use to the reader. I am reminded of an old Steve Martin stand-up comedy routine in which he offers to instruct the audience in how to get a million dollars and never pay taxes. 'First, get a million dollars.…'

The recommendations may not be as difficult as getting a million dollars, but they are not that far off. For example, in the section on organisational contexts, the recommendation is made to:

> *ensure that leaders and senior management are on board, briefed and trained in all aspects of knowledge and learning work, especially rationales and the tools available.*

Having spent some time trying to do just that in my own organisation and having worked with a number of organisations to help them do that, I can attest to how difficult and complex and ongoing this issue is. Often, it is not clear how to start. It is evident that Ben has absorbed a huge amount from these organisations but is struggling to convey it in his paper. This is a classic example of the challenge of representing complex knowledge as information.

Ben's eight areas of inquiry make a good start towards a framework; however, they would benefit from both further refinement and validation. Something like a Delphic Survey of experts from the field of knowledge for development as well as organisational learning and perhaps learning-based evaluation may be a good next step towards achieving this.

In order to implement any such framework, richer data is required from the organisations. Many of the organisational profiles read a bit like a communications pamphlet. One approach might be to collectively develop a behaviour-based evaluation methodology for knowledge initiatives, which could serve the dual purpose of helping organisations reflect on and learn from their own knowledge initiatives but also provide a richer, more easily comparable data resource with which to carry out further research. Approaches such as outcome mapping, developed at Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), or other learning-oriented evaluation methodologies could easily be adapted to this purpose.

Ben's paper is a good first step toward a more structured discussion of knowledge initiatives in development agencies. Hopefully, it will spur others on to carry the process forward.

About the author

Steve Song studied cognitive science and artificial intelligence at the University of Toronto in Canada, and worked for many years in the computer industry. However, he prefers to refer to himself as a 'reformed' technologist. Steve Song is now the Managing Director of Connectivity Africa, an initiative hosted by IDRC that is part of Canada's response to the G8 Africa Action Plan. Connectivity Africa's mission is to accelerate innovation, adoption, and development in information and communication technologies in Africa. Steve was formerly a Senior Programme Officer with the Bellanet International Secretariat where his work focused on knowledge management and its implications for international development. He has led a number of knowledge management strategic planning missions and has organized workshops throughout Africa and Asia. In the open source arena, he has championed the use of free software for collaborative work in developing countries. He has worked in the area of ICTs for development since 1991. He was involved in the early development of the Internet in the non-profit community in South Africa.
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