

Putting knowledge into practice

Bonnie Cheuk – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 4 June 2003

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to meet up with so many of you here. I am new to the British Council and new to this country. To give you a brief background of myself, I moved from Arthur Anderson in San Francisco to London six months ago and joined the British Council on the 2nd December 2002 in charge of knowledge management. My past experience is in implementing knowledge management for Arthur Anderson as well as for external clients.

Today I am going to share with you some of the work that we have done in managing knowledge within the Council and some of our plans for moving forward and I will share the good news as well as the bad news.

Before we get into the question of how we share knowledge, I will introduce briefly what the British Council does. Our purpose is to win recognition abroad for the United Kingdom's values, ideas and achievements and to nurture lasting and mutually beneficial relationships with other countries. We are actually selling the UK's ideas to other countries. The British Council was founded in 1934 and is registered as a charitable organisation, with seven thousand five hundred employees world-wide, of which one thousand five hundred are based in the UK, mainly in London and Manchester.

How many of you are familiar with what the British Council does? Most of you - good, then I can go through this very briefly! We conduct examinations, we manage library and information centres, we provide vocational projects and exchange programmes and we have a development service team which works with our partners on development projects. We also organise arts events, science events and a range of other activities in one hundred and nine countries.

We started to ask ourselves, being such a large organisation, what was going on with knowledge sharing within the Council and I have some examples to share with you to explain why we think knowledge management is such a crucial issue for the Council and why our senior management team felt that we needed to get someone in place to make sure that it was going to happen.

Here are some examples. At 10am a director in San Paulo is planning an animation project and wants to find out which other offices have run similar initiatives and what has worked and what has failed. Meanwhile in Bangkok at the same time, 5pm, the communications manager wants to access some market research to find out what has been done, who he can consult and what the best practices are. At 9am in Brussels a business developer needs to compile a development proposal to be sent out to a tight deadline. He needs to include the CVs of experienced consultants who can be used on the project and he wants to find out what experience we have in the area in economic development. Two hours later, someone in London learns that a Member of Parliament is going to visit Morocco at the end of the week and needs a briefing, so she needs to find out more about the Member of Parliament and quickly to get hold of a country brief and more detailed information about the country.

These are real cases of things happening in the Council every day. Is it easy for us to get answers to all of these questions? That is my question to the senior management and also to the staff. If not, there is a problem.

Knowledge management is about connecting employees with the right information, or the right person, at the right time, so that they can learn faster, work better and ultimately achieve the Council's objectives.

The challenge is how do we make that happen? The senior management realised that this was an issue for the Council and wanted to do something about it. So beginning in December of last year, three divisions within the Council, (covering internet services, global databases, building and nurturing communities of practice, reports management, data standards, data protection and freedom of information) were grouped together under 'Knowledge Management'. These are really the building blocks for making information available and making sure that people use it and contribute to it, using the internet as the portal through which people can participate. Of course we will not forget our face-to-face tradition within the Council, but we believe these are all enablers to that.

When I first started, I needed to find out what was going on within the Council in terms of knowledge sharing, so over the first few months I conducted a knowledge audit, visiting a number of countries and talking to numerous colleagues in London and Manchester. I found out that we did have some good examples: we have over a

hundred networking communities which had already been set up, we have many collaborative tools which are already in place, some of which we have purchased and some of which we have built ourselves, including our intranet which has received double the number of hits, up from two million to five million in the past year. We have a number of knowledge databases, we have discussion forums, mailing lists, internet chat, web-logging and we are looking at new technologies every day to see what we can use to help people to collaborate and learn from one another.

But I also found that we had a number of bad examples. The intranet is there but if you look beyond the main page, many of the intranet sites have become outdated; many of the discussion forums lack participation; the experience-gains from face-to-face meetings like this one are not well captured - it is good for the people who have the chance to attend a meeting, but is it shared to a wider audience? This has not happened that often. Employees complain that they do not have time to share and that the organisational structure does not really support effective knowledge sharing. Some of the really critical information sharing - basic information which people need to do their work - is missing or incomplete. For example staff-contact information: I want to find out someone's contact details in Brazil and I notice that in the staff directory there are only five numbers under the telephone field, so there is something wrong with the data standard or issues. Other examples include things like a lack of data on past projects that we have managed. These are the kinds of issues which came out from the knowledge audit.

So we realised that we needed to improve in all of these areas and we are tasked to do that. In the past few months we have done a lot of consultation and brainstorming and come up with a 'grand plan' of how we want to move things forward. These are some of the highlights.

First, we believe that it is really important to improve the quality of content. We need to institutionalise a knowledge sharing network and we want people to be dedicated to helping to facilitate knowledge sharing, capture, organisation and dissemination of content. We need to raise awareness of knowledge management. Although some senior management think that it is really critical, there are a lot of middle-management and people doing work in the field who may not buy into it immediately because it is something that they are being asked to do on top of their daily work. So that area will take a lot of work. We will continue to build and nurture communities of practice. We want people to group together if they share similar interests and to support them if they want to collaborate on a global basis, not just within their office.

We will continue to improve the technologies to reduce barriers to sharing knowledge, for example if you ask people to share knowledge using the intranet, not everyone will have the html skills to contribute something to the intranet, so we are looking at content management systems and whether we can ask people to write things in Word and then save as a web page. There are a lot of technologies that we are considering and of course we also need to improve the retrieval of the content, so we are investing in a new search engine and looking at an electronic records management system which we hope to roll out early next year.

On top of that we need to make sure that we set corporate standards and have a corporate taxonomy so that we know where to go to get information and how to retrieve it from the system. We also need to measure the benefits and effectiveness of knowledge sharing, which we have not yet done effectively. We always say that it is important, but how do we convince people that this is something that is worth a certain amount of investment?

This is all part of our 'grand plan' and I call it that because it is impossible for us to do all of this, addressing all of the divisions and all of the communities, at the same time. We need to prioritise. We have started to identify a number of communities which say that they have an urgent need to collaborate, to share knowledge and to work closely with one another on a global basis.

One other example which I will share with you is what our development services team has done in the past three to four months. They are one of the groups who came to us and said that they needed to share their knowledge better. Although they were doing great work, they had not been sharing effectively on a global basis.

The development services team support our partners' objectives in a number of areas: economic development, education, governance, health, training management, etc. They started with the question of what was the knowledge that they wanted to share and to manage. They did a series of user studies to talk to people who need information to help them to do their work and they came up with a wish list which included quick access to consultants' CVs and a searchable database to look through these. Other examples of things they need include past project experience, case studies, information about what is in the pipeline and who the experts and the potential partners are for a particular project.

The intranet of the development services team shows some of the resources they have built to support people in development services work, including the consultants' database and information about how to produce proposals

and other documents for clients and customers and how to access other information and key documents which they have found useful or key to getting their work done. This is still being worked on and is not complete.

There is also a network of people interested in similar areas who are grouped together under various interests. The justice information network, for example, provides detailed summaries of projects, the methodologies used, what has been done, best practice and lessons learnt etc. They have also included a section showing what is in the pipeline so that people know what is coming up in this area, and client and partner information. This functions as a one-stop-shop for the information that people need in order to do their work and ultimately to achieve the Council's objectives.

So in summary, the work that has been done over the past few months includes: improving access to key content; assigning two knowledge managers to be in charge of capturing, organising and disseminating knowledge (including managing the intranet, conducting and facilitating face-to-face meetings, producing internal and e-newsletters to inform people in the network about these resources); raising awareness of knowledge management through including the knowledge sharing agenda in the business plan, so that people know that this is the high-level direction that the whole development service team want to go in; setting up quarterly face-to-face meeting to get feedback from staff; building and nurturing communities of practice (including identifying existing communities and how to revitalise their work); revamping the intranet site with more content, better navigation and design and planning the development of databases to manage contracts and the CVs of consultants. This is all the hard work which has been done to date.

The challenge ahead includes questions of how we ensure that the new content will come, setting up the site is one thing but keeping new content coming in and deciding how old content will be taken out, who will be in charge of keeping the site up-to-date and how people will find the time to share their knowledge, participate in discussions and encourage greater use of the intranet, involves getting people to be more aware of the resources available and to use them. Ultimately I think the most important question is how we prove the benefits of knowledge management.

I will give one short case study from our communities. The challenge is how to build some really successful communities and to show the benefit and then to multiply it to all the communities in a five year time range. That is a challenge!

We use a framework within the Council to identify key areas that we want to look at to make knowledge sharing happen within a community or within the Council as a whole. We understand that we need to get leadership support and incorporate knowledge management into the corporate and business strategy. We need to assign people to knowledge management, as the development services department has done, and to get that structure right for the British Council. We need to invest in technology because it can make it easier for people to contribute, retrieve information, and reduce the barriers to doing so by making it simpler and easier to access. This is an area that we really want to improve on. I have talked about how important effectiveness is and, at the core of it, we believe that it is vital to ask people what the information is that people need in order to do their work. We have started to look at each individual community and ask them to come up with a list of critical information which they need in order to get their work done and once this is decided you can come up with what we call the 'content management process', where you can start identifying where to get this information, who is in charge and how it is or should be organised and shared. This is the knowledge management framework which we will be using and which we have used to move knowledge management forward.

A lot of people say that it is nice if everyone wants to share knowledge but they do not see this happening in their organisations and the question is how to make it happen. The tips and tricks that we have come up with include inviting people to contribute to a monthly newsletter, encouraging people to give out mysterious gifts or some recognition to contributors, announcing top contributors in business meetings, just to showcase that this is something important to the Council and to excite people a bit more and also to make knowledge sharing part of the work process. The development services' methodology includes a proper debrief at the end of each project, and a system to store and feed documents into the intranet so other's can also learn from the project. These systems have to be in place or it will not happen. We are looking at management issues such as how to include knowledge sharing as a staff appraisal criteria. There are people within the Council who are already doing this kind of work, communications and information managers, who need to send out frequent reminders to build relationships with different people, we have not created new knowledge manager posts. Educating new staff and teaching them how to use all the knowledge management tools is very important but it has often been neglected in the past, so we are looking at including the knowledge sharing programme into the corporate induction programme. Also important is continuing to build good relationships with users and content experts so that they will contribute, and showing the benefits by sharing success stories and liaising with people in the different communities to understand the benefits of knowledge sharing to the business.