by Michele Egan
The World Bank

Creating a knowledge bank

How to make the most of your people and what they know

Being a "knowledge-based" organization is about people – their behaviors and relationships to one another. HR has an important role to play in building a knowledge-enabled culture. Here, Michele Egan describes initiatives implemented by the World Bank's HR function to ensure employees are getting the most from the organization and each other.

THE HR DEPARTMENT isn't usually perceived as having a key role – or having any role at all in knowledge management or knowledge sharing. This might be due to the fact that many early knowledge initiatives were led by IT departments. But that's forgetting an important principle: the effective flow of knowledge is only sustainable through people. Information systems don't share knowledge and formal structures can constrain the free exchange of knowledge. Ultimately, it's the culture of an organization that determines the behavior of its employees and whether they share what they know. It's also the culture that attracts and retains the types of people that can make or break an organization.

Because HR looks after people – their skills, behavior and potential – then it is only natural that the function should be involved in effective creation and sharing of knowledge within the enterprise. However, an organization does not become knowledge-based overnight. In fact, the transformation is very much a change management exercise.

This article describes how an organization might integrate HR, information systems, knowledge management and internal communication efforts to attract, retain and develop employees to meet its goals. Examples will come from the experiences of the World Bank (hereafter referred to as the Bank) as we develop programs to leverage the synergies between these functions to deliver on the Bank's mission: to enable sustainable development through the transfer and sharing of knowledge, ensuring that our clients are able to help themselves.

The initiatives described below, supported in whole or in part by the HR function, have helped us in our transition to becoming a "Knowledge Bank" – an organization that understands the value of knowledge and leverages it for internal and external stakeholders.

Hire for skills – but don't forget behaviors

The influence HR can have in building a knowledge organization starts at the beginning – as new staff are brought into the organization. The Bank already had a long-established tradition of recruiting top experts worldwide across a broad range of disciplines. However, the "expert mindset" (a.k.a. "I know it all") was sometimes detrimental to a new culture of sharing knowledge, working as a team member (rather than a team leader) and building capacity (rather than providing solutions).

One lever for change has been to seek out candidates who, in addition to their expertise, also display the appropriate behavioral traits which sustain a knowledge Bank. And such an initiative begins with the way in which we recruit. For instance, the Bank's external Web site tries to communicate the types of behaviors the Bank is looking for and contextualizes those behaviors through the scope and impact of its programs. We don't try to "sell" the Bank; rather, we try to inform applicants. People are able to "self-select" as they read through that information and to compare their career goals with these criteria in mind.

Throughout the candidate selection process, the Bank uses behaviorally-based interviews – probing specifically for evidence of teamwork orientation, a knowledge sharing mindset, and the ability and willingness to work effectively with clients. Questions asked during such interviews require the candidate to reflect on past experience and articulate how that experience unfolded and how challenges were addressed. These "people-related" traits carry at least as much weight as do the candidates' technical skills.

Integrating new hires effectively

At the Bank, all new staff spend their first four days at an orientation session. Besides the "administrivia" of induction, the orientation sessions put a heavy emphasis on exposing the culture of the World Bank Group – its overall mission, its business, and its services – as well as setting some work expectations, such as:

- what it's like being a staff member of an international agency;
- how to use the specialist networks which cut through the organizational structure to bring together experts around one specialism, such as population, health, and nutrition;
- understanding the ethics of the organization.

These orientation sessions help build another form of network: cohorts that share common experiences by virtue of their time of entry into the Bank Group. Beyond this induction phase, to help new staff navigate the organization, we recommend that hiring departments assign a "buddy" to the new recruit. Because most employees work in the field at a country site, it can be invaluable to have someone close at hand to answer the inevitable questions and translate the Bank's idiosyncratic language.

Looking beyond just the current employee

We realize our new recruits often uproot their families after joining the Bank – and we need to ensure that these families are supported as well. The World Bank Volunteer Services (WBVS) has developed its own network among spouses, families and partners of staff and provides services to both staff and their families. WBVS volunteers share experiences from assignments abroad to facilitate relocation; they conduct their own orientation for family members; and they avail the many skills they hold among themselves to families – from language and computer services to book and discussion clubs.

Retirees are a great source of institutional memory, varied experience and skills for the Bank. Many continue their association with our organization's work through consulting (or even pro-bono) work on projects and through mentoring or coaching assignments. They, too, have formed a worldwide network into which the Bank can tap – a new online database now allows retirees to register their skills and experience, and provides managers with capability to "shop on-line" for institutional knowledge and expertise.

One such retiree, a former country director, helps coordinate and facilitate a peer network of currently employed country directors. This informal, grass-roots initiative brings together country directors who are at the front line of development to share experiences and learn from each other, in spite of the fact that they are each located in a different country. This network ensures transfer of knowledge across geographical and organizational boundaries.

Measure what counts

It's human nature to work to what's being measured. Three of the four main behavioral competencies on our performance management system are enablers for sustaining a knowledge-based organization:

- client orientation;
- teamwork;
- learning and knowledge sharing.

These criteria apply to all our staff, no matter what position one holds. Similar measurements are carried over to the managerial cadre through a 360 degree evaluation seeking assessments from colleagues, subordinates, managers and clients.

It's also part of human nature to respond positively to recognition. The Bank makes a deliberate effort towards highlighting and raising the profile of those whose behaviors we should emulate. Our World Bank's internal Presidential Awards for Excellence, which are team-based, draw nominations from across the organization for those teams who exemplify results on the ground, client responsiveness, partnership, and teamwork. Since the inception of the program in 1996, 15 teams representing the achievements of close to 600 Bank staff have received the award. This is only one of many awards programs which are celebrated publicly and open to all staff.

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THE WORLD BANK

The World Bank Group works with government agencies, non-governmental organizations and private sector companies to formulate assistance strategies that support a broad range of programs aimed at reducing poverty and improving living standards. In the fiscal year 2002, the institution provided more than US$19.5 billion in loans to client countries.

t Learn while doing and do while learning

Learning in the Bank, as elsewhere, has evolved over the past few years to a focus on experiential and team-based learning. Our modes of delivery have moved away from a majority of classroom learning to combinations of e-learning, action learning, and knowledge sharing, driven by demand and aligned with business needs. Knowledge sharing and learning are no longer "separate activities" that employees must add to a long list of tasks at the end of the day: they are fully integrated in the way we do things.

One such example is our Multi-Sectoral Team Learning (MTL) approach. These multi-disciplinary teams bring together staff from many different specializations around the resolution of a single issue in a particular area. The process in the past had been somewhat inefficient, as different specialists would work in a sequential manner – each following the other to do "their" part of the project. With MTL, a group of specialists work as a team to work on a project in a holistic and integrated approach.

MTLs are supported by a learning coach who helps the teams on processes (what it's like to work as a team member; group dynamics) and substance (how to manage the learning and knowledge contents emerging from the team's activities). We currently have over 60 MTLs in operation across the Bank, fostering knowledge creation and transfer across a wide range of ages, cultures and experiences. Results: teams are better integrated around sectors and demonstrate improved communications; their approach has improved the overall achievements of project goals.

GETTING COMMUNICATION RIGHT

Many efforts are being undertaken throughout the Bank to disseminate and share knowledge – some are fairly structured; others are very informal. Here are some examples.

Ask us! Advisory Services serve as the interface for learning and knowledge sharing. One of their main functions is to provide a "one-stop shop" to respond to information needs on various development topics. They ensure that responses are given, usually within 24-48 hours, to internal and external queries. One of the strengths of advisory services is their ability to pull together responses from many information sources and gather experience from a wide range of experts. Although advisory services may use different means to answer queries, often they respond by sharing relevant references, materials, reports, Web site links, and connections to experts. Information collected is used to answer specific queries and then developed into knowledge products. This knowledge base is used to respond to future queries.

Brown bag lunches are a common practice throughout the Bank. All sorts of different groups sponsor these informal get togethers over lunch to discuss issues, present ideas, products and services or conduct training sessions. On any given day of the week, our elevator lobbies are "decorated" with announcements to these events which are open to all interested staff. They represent a great opportunity for expanding your learning horizon into new territories.

Newsletters, mostly in electronic form, have sprung up across the institution and provide coverage of unit or topic specific issues. Staff can freely subscribe to these internal newsletters and many are encouraged to provide their own submissions. Our internal communications group has recently begun keeping an inventory of these newsletters and providing advice on how to get more "bang for the buck" out of the medium.

"The Guide on the Side"

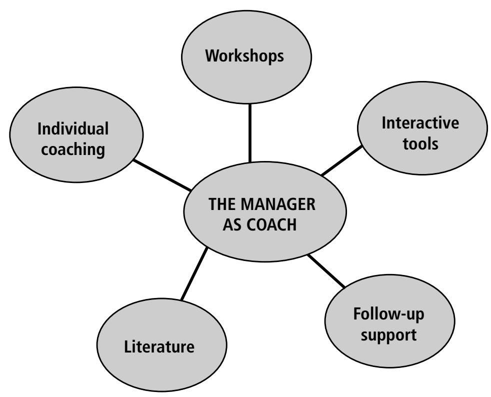
Mentoring and coaching directly support transfers of knowledge and help inculcate and reinforce desirable behaviors. Mentoring programs operate under the principle of "master and apprentice." The mentor (usually a seasoned professional) introduces the mentee (a more junior staff member) to his/her network, providing access to and transfer of knowledge and experience in low pressure, informal settings.

Interestingly, mentors often comment that the learning cuts both ways – they gain considerable insight from their mentees who can provide new perspectives and challenge established ways of thinking. We've implemented many distinct mentoring programs focusing either on intact organizational groups (e.g. our regional departments) or on cross-organizational groups that focus on particular constituents that don't have an existing strong network (e.g. women from developing countries or sub-Saharan Africans). We currently have about 2,500 pairs of staff involved in one or the other of our programs.

Coaching programs are provided in direct support of managers to help them deal with day-to-day issues of management but also to cultivate and develop skills so that, in turn, they may become better coaches to their own staff. (See Figure 1, below, for the manager training offerings.) These processes result in transfers of those cultural and behavioral norms we'd like to encourage from generation to generation of managers in the Bank. The behaviors this program aims to cultivate:

- *interpersonal and communication skills* (listening, observing, reflective questioning, gaining agreement, establishing rapport, giving and receiving feedback);
- *ownership* (helping staff learn and develop their own

Figure 1. Manager training toolkit



solutions, building partnerships, dealing with work program conflicts).

Every first-time manager is assigned a “free” individual coach in his/her first year. Individual coaches are available to all other managers on a shared-cost basis. And workshops, interactive online tools, and various other forms of support are available to everyone. Over 100 managers are currently using our coaching programs.

From know-what to know-why

People naturally emulate their leaders and look to them for guidance. In a change effort it becomes paramount for an organization’s leader to “walk the talk” and display the behaviors we seek to reinforce. Thus, we’ve paid particular attention to the development of our management curriculum.

The curriculum targets the unique needs of our 500 managers by incorporating knowledge of our processes and emphasizing interpersonal and behavioral skills. It focuses specifically on the “5 M’s”:

- managing self;
- managing others;
- managing work;
- managing the organization and its relationships;
- managing change.

The curriculum is designed collaboratively with participants and “pilots” across the Bank and delivered through workshops with a high level of peer interaction and experiential learning. Theoretical principles are operationalized by providing workshops that address such issues as ethics and moral challenges, dealing with conflict, being an “authentic” manager, attaining business goals through people management, and the like. A separate leadership program, mandatory for all first-time managers, helps them deal with a transition which presents unique opportunities and challenges and provides critical information, skills practice and support needed to master these new responsibilities.

Communicating with a purpose

How we talk – and listen – to people is central to an effective knowledge organization. Internal communication serves to reinforce and “translate” corporate messages, share accomplishments, provide feedback loops, reinforce a sense of community, and connect people to people.

Eighteen months ago, the Bank created an internal communications group, housed within the HR function, to activate knowledge sharing across the institution and to energize staff engagement around common issues, some pretty rough external criticism, and waning staff morale. There was no doubt that something needed to be done.

We used many different channels to catalyze sharing and engagement across the Bank: our intranet’s homepage is now devoted to news (both corporate and individual); every two weeks, staff receive an e-mail digest of the news with links to the full articles; we interview individuals on business and personal topics and stream the videos online; we organize community meetings which bring staff together; we conduct quick surveys on specific topics or for targeted groups to check the “pulse” of the organization; we’ve instituted discussion databases into which staff can share their thoughts on both operational and personal issues; we organize video conferences with our offices abroad; and we work with managers across the Bank to enhance their communications skills, in particular for face-to-face communications.

The results? In a recent independent survey, 75 percent of staff say internal communication has improved in the past year – including the substance and frequency of managers’ face-to-face communications and the level of information employees have on critical corporate subjects.

KEY POINTS

- **Because HR has an important role to play in the development of an organization’s culture, then it can also be influential in ensuring that knowledge sharing is made possible and recognized.**
- **HR and IT interventions need to be integrated in order and driven by the need to optimize people’s time, attention and decision-making capability.**
- **Crucial to the success of any IT system is its credibility. Currently, the World Bank’s HR intranet is second in credibility only to face-to-face meetings with managers.**
- **Successful communication comes through having the right mix of channels that meet the organization and user’s needs.**

Technology: enriching human interaction

There’s no doubt – technology is everywhere. But it’s useless unless it meets people’s expectations and needs. Three basic principles should be the norm nowadays:

1. mass-customization which allows information to be broken down into small, re-usable and repackageable pieces;
2. personalized access, according to the role you play in the organization, to provide you with what you need according to who you are; and,
3. simple self-publishing tools so that technology itself does not stand in the way of those who have the knowledge and need to deliver it to those who need it.

Good technology should also enable good decision making. A few years ago, the HR function at the Bank embarked on a journey towards empowerment through self-service. Today, just about every personal transaction is conducted online, from reporting life events to changing benefits and applying for jobs. By taking

HR out of the way for most of those transactions, we allow for more informed inquiry on the more complex ones and for a more strategic role for HR personnel.

Even some of our business transactions have been automated. For selected job families, we offer our managers the ability to hire directly from a pool of external candidates, according to the needs of the position and the skills of the candidates, without intervention from HR except to issue the final contract.

Our use of technology rests on optimizing people's time and attention: our transactional systems are always complemented by enough information to help people navigate the issues and have the knowledge they need to successfully conclude their transactions. Conversely, our knowledge system allows users to access the relevant transactions with one click of the mouse. (See Figure 2, below, for a screenshot of the HR intranet, YourNet).

Crucial to the success of these systems is their credibility factor. According to a recent independent survey, the HR intranet is second in credibility only to face-to-face meetings with managers. We attribute this high level of trust to the fact that HR content management is entirely decentralized and owned by our various specialists: those who know the subject best are those who publish and maintain the information up-to-date. Remember the three principles listed above? Self-publishing is the norm in the Bank's HR function and requires absolutely no technical skills: every one of our 300 HR staff is in fact a webmaster!

Success is about providing the right mix

People learn and absorb information in different ways. And so HR uses channels in a variety of ways to adapt to end-user preferences. We "push" information through e-mail. We can target selected groups of staff for information specific to their needs and inform them individually of essential issues.

We "pull" through our intranet. In addition to being a repository for information, we publish news and feature articles on the front page of our intranet which pull staff into areas they may not have thought of exploring. We "get together" in face-to-face meetings – anything from all staff town halls to focus groups. No better way yet to share information, listen and answer to questions, and gauge reactions.

We "meet" through videoconferences. With a third of our staff located in over 80 countries around the world, it is important to retain face-to-face contact. On a periodic basis and as the need arises, we organize videoconferences with one or several of our offices abroad to "check in" or to share important information. Working across time zones is not for the faint of heart and invariably involves some bleary eyed staff either in Washington or in our country offices!

We "view and listen" to streamed videos. Same time, same place does not work for everyone – some prefer to get their information when it's convenient to them. So we videotape meetings, 10 minute pieces on topical subjects, as well as important announcements and avail them online to watch or listen to whenever it is convenient to staff.

We "interact" virtually through feedback lines and discussion spaces. Every piece of information which is posted on our intranet includes a feedback line directly back to the owner of that information. This keeps the communications lines open between those who need to know and those who do know. As for discussion spaces, although this does not yet appear to be the preferred medium of Bank staff, we've had moderate success in soliciting contributions for topics ranging from inputs and comments on a new HR agenda to sharing thoughts on the anniversary day of September 11.

Ultimately, there is no "cookie cutter" approach

Nor is there a single approach or a quick fix. The examples above are all illustrations of means to an end: taken individually, they make a marginal difference; taken together, they can be levers for powerful change within an organization. Ultimately, a knowledge-based organization is about people, organizational processes, culture and behaviors and, especially, it is about recognizing the inherent complexities involved. And the HR function sits at the nexus of the factors that can make or break the knowledge practice in the organization.

Figure 2. The World Bank's HR intranet

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