Five characteristics of effective information intermediary organisations and how to ensure you have them

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IDS Knowledge Services

About IDS Knowledge Services and the Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI)

IDS Knowledge Services facilitate the exchange of development knowledge between continents, sectors and disciplines through a wide range of media, co-creating online information services and print publications with Southern partners.

This publication was written under the auspices of the Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI), a time-bound initiative within Phase One of the Mobilising Knowledge for Development programme (MK4D) at the Institute of Development Studies, UK. MK4D is a DFID-funded project, managed and delivered by IDS Knowledge Services, and its Phase One ran from 2005-09 with a remit to promote evidence-based learning about knowledge, information and communication in international development.

SLI was guided by the belief that development and social change are greatly enhanced by the availability, accessibility and use of research and information, and:

- aimed to stimulate learning and develop capacity among information and knowledge intermediaries who share this belief

- facilitated learning and innovation by sharing critical thinking and examples of best practice
- drew on four areas of expertise: Capacity Development, Research, Marketing and Monitoring and Evaluation.

In Phase Two of MK4D, the **Impact and Learning Team** is taking forward the values, work and learning from SLI, exploring in greater depth the role and impact of capacity development, context analysis, and monitoring and evaluation on knowledge, information and communication in international development, both in IDS and further afield.

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Background and framing for this paper

This paper is aimed at intermediary organisations, in particular organisations or teams within organisations undertaking intermediary work that seeks to improve the access to and use of information in development processes. Knowledge and information based development interventions are an important part of broader endeavours to alleviate poverty, realise equality and social justice. Contrary to popular understandings that see information intermediary work simply as building platforms to store information and channels to disseminate it, this role is far from simple, easy and unproblematic. Knowledge and information intermediary work is a complex and evolving process of experimentation. Its effectiveness in contributing to social justice outcomes is bound up in the ways in which people know, learn and act, people who are themselves part of complex systems of change. Seeing this bigger picture in which intermediaries are operating can be daunting, however failing to acknowledge it at all can inhibit success.

In addition, the nature of the work poses challenges to the individuals and organisations that seek to undertake it. The new generation of information intermediary work, conducted in an age of ever changing technologies and expectations, is a relatively new kind of endeavour: one in which anticipated outcomes are difficult to predict and to measure, and the activities required to reach them are evolving, opportunistic and experimental. It may pose challenges to existing ways of working within organisations and be misunderstood by key stakeholders such as senior management and donors.

This paper aims to identify some characteristics of successful information intermediaries that can help individuals, teams and organisations who seek to deliver information services to address and overcome some of the specific challenges inherent to their work.

Origins

This paper is based on a number of observations about information intermediary work:

- Firstly that information and knowledge based development interventions are often seen as simple, unproblematic, technical programmes, often created as an add-on to other projects. They are generally not subject to the amount of thought, planning and scrutiny given to other development interventions.

- Understandings of information and knowledge interventions which focus on the communications technologies used to deliver them, tend to promote a limited understanding of the range of factors involved in delivering an effective service. Attention is focussed on specific tools, tasks, and skills rather than considering the wider systems within which the service and the team that deliver it are located.

- There are an increasing number of information and knowledge services, most of which are created in isolation from each other, some of which are succeeding while others are struggling. There is little learning or reflection about what enables success or causes failure

- There is not an established body of knowledge in this area on which people can draw, meaning many people coming into intermediary roles have little guidance on which to base their actions, while misunderstandings about the nature and demands of the role are prevalent among their stakeholders

The five characteristics defined in this paper were identified by applying principles about capacity specifically to the particular nature of information and knowledge intermediary organisations and the contexts in which they work outlined above. This paper aims to combine theory and experience to generate insights and ideas that can be applied in practice. Understanding of information and knowledge intermediary work is based on the author's nine years experience within the IDS Knowledge Services and her knowledge of how other organisations have approached intermediary work gained from partnership and capacity development work and convening the I-K-Mediary Network[1].

Limitations

This paper does not seek to prescribe what a good information programme should look like, instead it seeks to provide advice and suggestions about the contexts in which a good programme can be designed, implemented and sustained. It provides suggestions about approaches which may not be applicable to all but will hopefully stimulate discussion about what is appropriate in different contexts.

For some people, the ideas and suggestions in this paper will be obvious. For others, they will pose challenges to the way they understand and undertake knowledge and information intermediary work. It is hoped that the ideas will be of use to everyone involved in designing, implementing, overseeing or funding knowledge and information based development interventions and will go some way to encouraging greater debate about the nature of this work and what is needed to undertake it effectively.

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[1] The I-K-Mediary Network is an emerging global network of organisations that play a knowledge and information intermediary role in development. More detail can be found at this address: http://www.ikmediarynetwork.org/

Applying theory of capacity to the practical domain of information and knowledge intermediary work

In thinking about the characteristics of effective intermediary organisations, this paper draws on recent thinking on capacity development, particularly that undertaken by Heather Baser and Peter Morgan at ECDPM[2] and by the Capacity Collective at IDS. The key finding of the ECPDM work is that capacity, which can be understood as "the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully", is made up of a range of different elements which the ECDPM framework describes as capabilities. These five capabilities are illustrated in the diagram below.

All organisations, including information intermediary organisations, need to have and to be consistently maintaining and developing these capabilities. The five characteristics in this paper were inspired by these five capabilities. The author has attempted to draw out how these capabilities apply particularly to information intermediaries and suggest practical ways in which intermediary organisations can be aware of and maintain these capabilities. This attempt to move between theory and practice and present the analysis in an engaging way means that this paper refers to characteristics rather than sticking to a tight definition of capabilities.

Elements of capacity (Baser and Morgan, p26)

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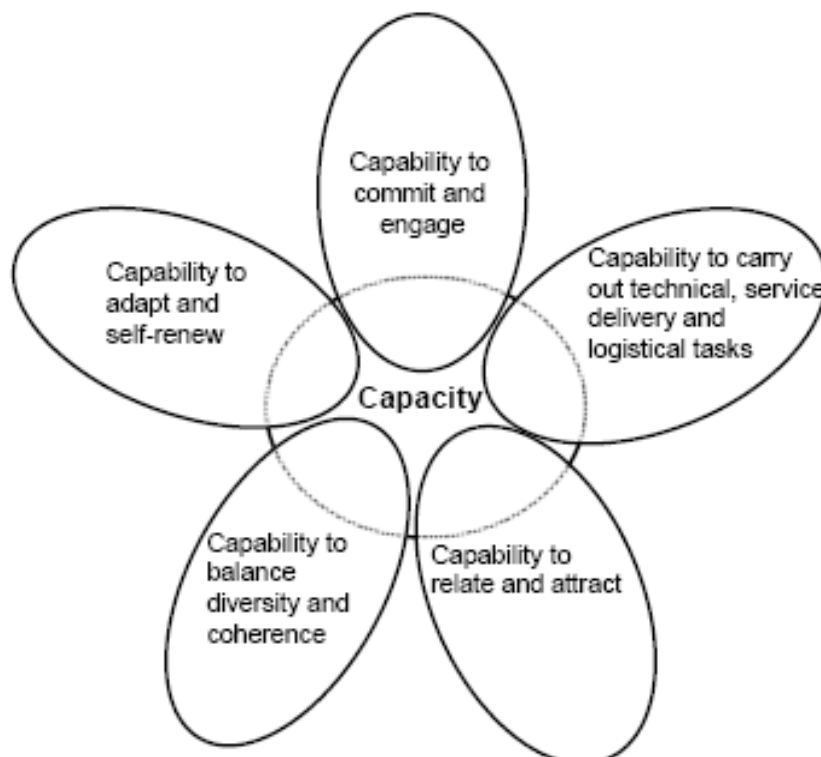
[2] Baser and Morgan (2008) "Capacity, Change and Performance: study report" European Centre for Development Policy Management

1) A clear understanding of the purpose of your work: what problems you are trying to address, what are you trying to change and for whom; with a service that matches

Many information based services are characterised by a clearly defined solution (such as a portal) to an ill-defined problem (such as not enough knowledge sharing). This is perhaps not surprising given problems around access to and use of information and knowledge sharing are multi-dimensional and the impacts of interventions are difficult to identify and attribute. However, having a clear and articulated understanding of your purpose is the basis for designing a service which is an appropriate response to problems, and will enable effective implementation and ongoing innovation.

Identify what problem your service is addressing and base all decisions around that
Before launching into creation of the service it is worth putting effort into thinking about it strategically, in terms of the problems you are trying to address and being very clear about what you are trying to change and for whom. While the economies of scale provided by the internet invite generalizations about who *can* use your service (everyone interested in country x or topic y), we have found you need to be much more specific about the kinds of people and the kinds of use that you are aiming for.

Building some idea or theory of how your work contributes to the changes you are looking for is a useful exercise in strategic thinking. While the approach implied in creating a *logframe* is intended to encourage this, it doesn't have enough stages or make sufficiently explicit the linkages between inputs and outcomes (p.8 Downie 2008). Once you have built this theory, a research phase can investigate how grounded your ideas are. The scale of the strategy and research phase should be in line with the level of investment in the set up and creation of the service (e.g. in creation of technical, human and organisational infrastructure) and the amount already known by your organisation or the commissioning organisation (e.g. the donors) about the nature of the issue. For smaller, short term or low budget initiatives this could be a quick process but worth doing for all projects to ensure resources are used effectively.

Ideas about outcomes and audiences should inform the design of your project. This will involve decisions about appropriate communications tools and products (such relative emphasis on print or online communication channels, aggregation or synthesis), design of any web platforms, editorial policies and approaches, the kinds of activities you undertake and how you position yourself in relation to others. While your service may be useful for many different stakeholders, you need to design it with specific types of users in mind. Ideally strategies should be developed

in consultation with intended beneficiaries[3] and should evolve according to changing circumstances and feedback. Having an idea of the kinds of outcomes you expect to see will help you to recognize and monitor impact. It is essential if you are likely to be evaluated. Finally, a clear understanding of your purpose will also help you fundraise for your work.

Keep the bigger picture in mind to enable day to day autonomy and strategic innovation
Ongoing implementation of your service, for example taking day to day editorial decisions, and identifying new ideas, will be enhanced if based on a clear and regularly debated understanding of what you are trying to do, why and for whom. This will require you to regularly refer back to the purpose of your work. It is important that this vision is shared by everyone involved to enable team members to act autonomously within appropriate boundaries (see Characteristic 3). While it can be difficult to keep an eye on the bigger picture when you are involved in day to day delivery of a service, failure to do so can lead to problems and stagnation. An overly delivery orientated culture focused on specific products and outputs can lead to perpetuation of misconceptions and a failure to refine and adapt services. Keeping strategic outcomes in mind can help all staff to innovate and respond to new opportunities. Ideas for this are shared in below.

Experimentation and risk taking are valuable if you recognise that that is what you are doing
It is important to acknowledge that many efforts in this area are experiments which seek to harness communications technologies and approaches in creative ways, without a clear idea of what will happen as a result. This experimental approach is important source of innovation and many broadly successful initiatives have evolved in this way. However, this becomes a problem when: large amounts of resources are invested in projects that are not appropriate solutions to the problems they are intended to solve;   when projects make over inflated claims about what they can achieve in order to get funding or credibility, or; when unproven approaches are replicated on the assumption they work. Pilot projects or experiments should be seen as such and efforts should be made to identify impacts, intended and unintended, before services become institutionalized.   If something is clearly an experiment, effort should be placed on identifying what you are experimenting in and how you will assess and adapt to the outcomes of that experiment.   Institutionalising processes of learning, reflection and iteration and adopting practices associated with being a "Learning Organisation" are particularly important in this context (see Characteristics 3) and 5)) for further ideas on this[4].

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[4] An extremely useful resource exploring issues about learning, evaluation and building this into organisational practice is Chapter Five of "Research Matters Knowledge Translation Toolkit" which explores the relatively new concept of Evaluative Thinking, which provide useful introduction to and further references for the many ideas this embodies.

Areas to think about in the design of your service:

- **What are the problems you are trying to address, what are intended outcomes of your service, the kinds of changes you wish to make for whom?** Visioning exercises, ideally with key stakeholders including users can help. Other tools that can help think this through are *outcome mapping* and *theory of change* methodologies. *Problem tree analysis* can help drill down to specific problems.

- **What are the specific knowledge or information needs of your intended audiences?** This is often called a needs analysis. We have found it better to ask people how they use information in their work and how they access it, what information they have problems accessing, rather than asking them what their expectations are of a particular service such as a portal. Be wary of generating 'wish-lists' of features which may not meet needs and which you may struggle to deliver

- **What are the contexts in which your service will be used?** What other similar services already exist and what are key changes that might be forthcoming in that area? What will be the niche or key contribution of your service to that context?

- **Where is there relevant experience and good practice that you can draw on to design your service?** This might be in related information, communication, or technology fields. Modern information interventions increasingly combine insights and approaches from a range of fields and disciplines.

Practices for upholding this on an ongoing basis:

- An effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) strategy, ideally including clear progress indicators, reviews from users and experts, regular engagement with target audiences including visits to their workplaces and feedback loops to ensure that learning from M&E is acted on.

- Time for implementing team to reflect on and engage with learning generated from M&E and talking to target audiences,

- Culture of debate and discussion between staff members about the purpose and nature of the service, not just activities, progress and targets. Regular reference to the purpose of the service including any theory of change, for example in team meetings or when making decisions about new ideas or activities.

- Effective induction and training strategies and investment in implementation staff , ongoing culture of reflection and learning through use of tools such as after action review (IDRC, 2008)

2) An implementation model that enables you to deliver your service/programme

Work with what you have and what you can mobilise
Once you have determined the nature of the problem, you need to design a solution that you think will address it. This will be based on the needs of your intended users but it also needs to be a model that you are able to implement and sustain. It may require focusing your efforts on tackling only parts of the problem you have identified, at least in the first instance. An effective implementation model will be based on the particular strengths and resources of your organisation and the resources you are able to mobilise and dedicate to the project – financial, organisational, human and technical.

Typically information and knowledge projects over-invest in technical infrastructure and under-invest in the human resources required to deliver a project. As a general principle, if you get handed a budget for an information portal, halve the technical budget and double the staff budget, if at all possible[5]. The amount of human resources required will increase according to the amount of value-added that your service provides. For example, services that involve digitisation, translation or adaptation of material, organising and providing narrative through collections of material or converting material from one communications channel to another will require far more resources than services based largely on automated aggregation. Don't create anything, least of all an expensive web infrastructure, until you have thought through how it will be used to deliver services, updated and maintained now and in the future.

Base your service on realistic assumptions about how people will interact with it
Often implementation models are based on assumptions about how users will contribute to, interact or use a service product or platform which may not be grounded in reality. In the past, many portal style projects were built on the assumption that users will voluntarily submit content to the service, in practice this was rarely the case. The success of Wikipedia has led to a new generation of projects based on similar assumptions, which similarly have not been realised. While web 2.0 tools do hold real potential for effective delivery of information services, the myth that "if you build it, they will come" remains as unfounded as ever.

Work at developing a sustainable financial model but be realistic and maximise what you have
Information programmes are difficult to finance; like libraries they need funding as an ongoing public good investment and so are vulnerable to donor fatigue and changing donor agendas.

Experience suggests that some element of core funding is most effective to cover ongoing implementation and to ensure continuity of platform, staffing and service delivery. However, this is relatively rare. In addition, relying too heavily on one donor can be a risky strategy. The benefits brought by core funding need to be balanced against the vulnerability which over reliance

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[5] Thanks to my former colleague Carl Jackson for this insight which is based on his experience of a range of information projects.

on particular funding streams can bring. You will need to think creatively about different funding sources and agendas and how they change over time. For example, services focusing on a particular theme may struggle if that theme moves out of favour, just as many services funded by ICT4D budgets were hit as donor interest in this area subsided or changed.

Short-term and project funding is likely to be the norm and so the question becomes how you can use it effectively. Project funding around specific products or activities can be used to supplement more dedicated funding if you are lucky enough to have it, but should not distract from the core business. If you have short term funding, be wary of investing in heavy infrastructures. Alternative approaches would be to focus on building on, or collaborating with existing activities, platforms or infrastructures (including those that otherwise may be faltering) or concentrating on something with quicker impact. This may in turn generate interest and link to funding for scaling up or out.

It is very difficult to generate revenue from users of the service, subscription fees are rare in this sector and are likely to limit reach and impact. Sponsorship and advertising (e.g. banner adverts on websites or in publications) are unlikely to raise much revenue. There is some evidence that providers can create revenue generating services for a small paying clientele which can be used to subsidise freely available services, although this too is rare.

Areas to think about in the design of your service:

- **Who are the potential donors for this work now and in future?** You may have a geographic or sectoral focus or think about your work in terms of objectives such as national policies around the knowledge economy, or freedom of information, or trends in development assistance such as concerns around aid effectiveness or civil society strengthening.

- **What assets and resources of your organisation can be mobilised for this project?** Work with what you have and work out what extra is needed, recognising that it may be difficult to mobilise senior staff and their networks to your cause. Organisational capacity assessments may help you identify what assets you have to mobilise to deliver this work although there are few (if any) tailored for knowledge work. Effective use of discussion tools such as a *SWOT analysis* can help too.

- **What are the production processes behind products and services and what kind of resources do they require?** Think through all of the steps behind delivering products and be sure that they are sustainable to deliver before investing a lot of resources in creating them.

- **Who could you work with to maximise your impact?** Identify if there other organisations, particularly other intermediary organisations with which you could collaborate to enable you to focus your efforts, for example through content sharing agreements.

Ideas for upholding this on an ongoing basis:

- Investigate revenue generating opportunities but recognise that fundraising for your work will be an ongoing challenge

- Keep up to date with developments in communications approaches and technologies, particularly those that could add efficiency or add value to how you deliver your service

- Challenge assumptions that technology alone can deliver[6]: celebrate and communicate the work undertaken by your staff, feature them on your website or on publications and make sure they are high profile within your organisation and with other stakeholders.

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[6] This strategy was generated by participants in the I-K-Mediary Workshop 2009 at which a draft of this paper was presented (p 18 Kunarathnam and Fisher, 2010).

3) A favourable institutional environment and enabled individuals

Organisational and senior support for your work

It is important to have an institutional setting where knowledge work is valued and not looked down upon. This is because information intermediary work is different to other kinds of work that organisations may be involved in and could pose challenges to organisations that host information services. As mentioned earlier, outcomes are not as clear and the activities it involves are evolving, opportunistic and experimental. Delivery may require ways of working that may be at odds with organisations created for other more concretely defined projects. It requires skills and competencies that may be unfamiliar to staff within the organisation, including senior management. Providing information services may involve communicating perspectives that contradict those of your organisation which may be difficult for some organisations and people within them.

Ideally senior management within your organisation will be supportive of your work and will see it is a core part of the organisational strategy. Alternatively, they could be oblivious to it which gives you space to operate but not the support you might hope for. Given that many projects are innovative, they may initially exist in a fairly unsupported space until the concept is proven. If it gains the support of senior management, it may later be able to move into a more legitimate space where it can get support.

Positive engagement would be where senior management is engaged and actively involved in strategy and development of the project and can be called on to promote, advocate for or defend the project in high profile contexts. Senior support would also ensure coherence between intermediary work and other organisational objectives, for example by identifying opportunities for collaboration between streams of work and ensuring that they didn't compromise each other. One way in which different organisational strategies have a negative impact on each other is if staff on the project are regularly called on to deliver on other organisational objectives or even redeployed within the organisation.

Where the project is located within the structure of the organisation is also important. Ideally intermediary work that has target audiences outside the organisation should not be located in a service or facilities department because this can be low status and can give misleading signals about who are the beneficiaries for the project. Status of intermediary or knowledge work can be enhanced if it successful in generating positive resources for the organisation such as income, profile or reputation and partnerships. Although status of intermediary work can go up as well as down, it is particularly vulnerable at times of change such as changes in senior management or creation of new strategies.

Subsidiarity and the space to work

A favourable environment is one where good people can be recruited, motivated and given freedom to make decisions and experiment. Senior management will ideally support the creation

of this environment but will not be involved in day to day implementation of the project. Subsidiarity, the principle where decisions are made at the lowest possible level, is important for knowledge work which requires flexibility about what activities are undertaken in pursuit of objectives and lots of small decisions, for example, on editorial choices. This may require giving responsibility for decision-making to relatively junior members of staff which may be problematic for some organisations (Barnard, 2006), particularly those where there are clear distinctions between technical or professional staff and support or administration staff.

As well as scope to make decisions and innovate, staff need time to dedicate to the information service on an ongoing basis. Additional responsibilities that regularly require dropping everything to work intensively on projects with short deadlines or taking long trips away from the office are difficult to reconcile with the ongoing nature of delivering an information service.

An effective competency-based team given autonomy and development opportunities
The most effective information intermediary teams seem to be those with individuals who can multi-task and turn their hands to many different kinds of work. Relevant backgrounds in journalism, information science or communications can be advantage but not essential. You may not need to recruit technical specialists if you can draw on specialist skills in other ways. The implementation team will need certain skills, for example around technology, or writing, but apart from the most specialised, most skills can be learned on the job.

More important than skills seems to be enthusiasm and interest in the subject matter and the objectives of the service as well as a particular set of *competencies*. Important individual competencies for information intermediaries include creative, lateral and strategic thinking that enable innovation and problem solving, networking and people skills, interest in communication and different communications approaches including an inquisitive approach to new communications technologies and a willingness to learn and experiment.

Staff motivation, knowledge and skills need to be developed. As well as formal training programmes, support for networking with others involved both in knowledge work and in the subject, sector or discipline in which they work are motivational and important learning opportunities. Another important way to develop motivation and experience is to enable staff to spend time with target audiences.

Areas to think about in the design of your service:

- **Who within the organisation needs to be supportive of this project and how?** How can you get clearance at a management level to devolve responsibility to an appropriate point (this might be a long term strategy).

- **What range of skills and competencies are needed and how will they be utilised?** Looking at job descriptions from similar projects can help the thinking process. You may

then need to be creative about recruitment within your organisation's guidelines – if you can, consider changing recruitment rules norms and conventions for this kind of work.

- **How can you invest in your staff?** Can you create a learning culture that enables learning from each other and others and learning-by-doing? Try to factor a budget for staff development in project proposals, not one tied to formal training programmes!

Practices to uphold this on an ongoing basis:

- Regular communication with strategic management to ensure their support and the right level of engagement, particularly in times of change

- Organisational development strategies, with an emphasis on creation of appropriate and attractive working environment for staff including effective management

- Ongoing professional development strategies for staff which could include time and budget to pursue self-directed learning, participate in networks and professional associations and attend events

4) Reputation and relationships that enable you to act effectively

The ability to create and maintain reputation and relationships is an essential characteristic of any organisation that relies on the goodwill and co-operation of others. For information and knowledge intermediaries there are two key sets of relationship that matter: firstly with the people who use and contribute to your service and on whom you rely on to ensure its success; secondly, with the people who ensure that you are able to continue delivering, notably the donors and others within your organisation. Understanding the relationships that are important to you and investing in their creation, maintenance and development is an important success factor.

Building reputation with users, contributors and collaborators
The effectiveness of any information service will rely in part on having a positive reputation amongst your intended users and contributors. Acting as an intermediary between different groups requires that you have credibility with those actors to ensure that they will co-operate with you and trust the information you broker. Your credibility can be inferred from your organisation's reputation, however you will need to build credibility and positive reputation as an intermediary through the quality of your work and the way you interact with others. Being clear and transparent about your values and standards is one way of building your reputation. If your service is primarily web-based you may not have a direct personal relationship with all of your users and they may not be familiar with your organisation, so your credibility will be determined in other ways[7].

You will also need to have relationships with the producers or holders of the knowledge/information you hope to share. This can be difficult in highly politicised or competitive environments, some knowledge producers can be distrustful of people attempting to broker or mediate it on their behalf. You will need to work hard to convince knowledge producers of the value that your work can bring to them and be sensitive to their concerns, for example around intellectual property or inaccurate representation of their ideas.

Another set of relationships that can be important are with peers or people undertaking similar work to you. Hopefully, you should have no direct competitors but you may have what we call "comparators"; either individuals or organisations. Work done through the I-K-Mediary Network suggests very few services are direct competitors to each other and there is a lot of potential for collaboration between information services that builds on the relative strengths of each. Collaboration and interaction with peers is also an important means of generating innovation

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[7] Stanford university have undertaken a lot of work about how credibility is established in virtual environments
http://credibility.stanford.edu/guidelines/index.html

Creating and maintaining the relationships that enable you to operate

Another set of relationships are those that could potentially affect your ability to operate. At its most extreme is the relationship, whether individual, organisational or sectoral, with those that can control you by force or law. It is beyond the author's experience to reflect on operating in a controlled or threatening political environment although this is explored in "Rebel voices and radio actors: in pursuit of dialogue and debate in northern Uganda" (Ibrahim, 2009).

Other key stakeholders who can prevent you from operating are donors, who can restrict funding, and seniors within your organisation. These relationships are discussed in other sections of this paper. In both instances, strong relationships based on regular debate around shared objectives as well as careful manoeuvring seems to be important. It is important to remember that relationships can deteriorate as well as improve, so strong relationships should not be taken for granted!

Areas to think about in the design of your service:

- **Who are people who can enable or prevent your work?** Thinking in detail about the complex web of relationships in which you operate is important. Collectively mapping relationships is an important process. Using a tool like a *SWOT analysis* with a specific focus on relationships might help to think about this.

- **What strategies, particularly communication strategies, do you need to make sure that relationships are maintained and developed?** What strategies can you adopt to develop positive and enabling relationships? How can you maximise the value of positive relationships? Who do you need to communicate with, what do they need to know, and what kinds of language should you use to build your relationships? For example, within a research organisation, you may need to be able to describe you work in theoretical terms to gain credibility.

- **What are the values and principles that underpin your intermediary work and how do you communicate and demonstrate them?** As an intermediary, your brand is the sum of what people believe about you, what they have inferred from the look of your website, the association they make with the organisation you are based in, and built up from how you behave in your relationships with them. To project a particular brand or reputation, it can help to articulate what you want your brand to be; the brand values e.g. authoritative, trustworthy, helpful, and use these to guide your communications, your design, the way you behave, your name, logo, etc

Practices to uphold this on an ongoing basis:

- Ongoing attention to and investment in relationship building, including allocating time to this in planning processes and recognising progress in this area in performance management processes (formal or informal).

- Regular discussion, for example in team meetings, of values and principles and reflection on how they are being upheld.

5) The ability to evolve, innovate and spot opportunities both in terms of the purpose of your programme, its design and delivery

The ability to innovate and respond to opportunities is important for the delivery of knowledge and information intermediary services on both a day to day and a strategic basis.

On a day to day level, delivering an information service is an ongoing process of spotting opportunities and responding creatively. Whether it is identifying an emerging issue or seizing an opportunity to promote your service, people working on information service need to be flexible and imaginative in how they achieve their objectives. Many information services are themselves experiments, so particularly for new services there are no right or wrong ways of doing things. This can be a challenge for organisations who are more used to working in very established areas of work where tasks and activities are known in advance and are not subject to change (although these areas of work are becoming increasingly rare).

On a strategic level, innovation is required on a number of levels to respond to a range of factors. Development and political issues change rapidly so you will need to respond to stay relevant. Information services these days often rely on information communications technologies (ICTs) of some description and the rapid development in ICTs and the many people who are moving into this area, means the environment for your service is almost certainly changing rapidly. This will have an impact on what you do and how. Finally, donor agendas change rapidly so you may need to innovate in order to keep bringing in resources (i.e. funding) to operate.

The ability to innovate and change on both a strategic and day to day level are strengthened by a clear understanding of the purpose of the service which can enable a creative approach to thinking about how objectives can be realised. This can help screen good ideas from distractions. A culture of reflection, debate and openness to feedback can also help to identify when innovation is required as well as generate new ideas for action

Areas to think about at design or strategy levels:

- **How can you build innovation into your work?** An innovation system might include evidence collection, idea generation and ranking, idea testing, and means for experiments to become mainstream. Alternatively it could be much more emergent and embedded in the way that people are managed and motivated.

- **Can you build space for responding to opportunities into your planning and budgeting?** For example can you negotiate some unallocated budget for responding to new ideas and opportunities? Could you include flexibility within job descriptions and teams to enable you to respond to opportunities? It is difficult to respond to such opportunities if everyone is 100% committed to existing project deliverables and no one has any spare capacity.

Building flexibility and capacity for innovation into job descriptions is most likely to be possible if you are able to develop a good relationship with donors and senior management that is based on outcomes not activities.

- **How can you keep up to date with important developments that might affect your work?**
An advisory board with diverse backgrounds can help signal new trends and opportunities. Participation in related networks is also important means of keeping up to date.

Practices to uphold this on an ongoing basis:

- Working with peers and in partnership in an open and discursive way can help generate innovative ideas, whereas working in a franchise or sub-contracting way with partners does not encourage this.

- Professional development of staff, in particular space /permission to think and experiment, both in terms of their subject area (e.g. health) **and** in their role as a knowledge worker. Some innovative companies in the private sector such as Dell or 3M allow their staff time to pursue activities of their own choosing or initiative.[8]

- Regular debate about the work keeping some focus on the bigger picture (see Characteristic 1) and the impact you are having rather than being entirely output or task oriented is important, openness to and engagement with new ideas wherever they come from is also valuable here, even if they can't all be implemented immediately

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8   Australian Institute for Commercialisation and Queensland Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (2009) Innovation Toolbox Strategy
http://www.innovationtoolbox.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/0five/strategy.pdf

Conclusion

As outlined in the introduction, those seeking to undertake information intermediary work are likely to face a number of specific challenges both macro and micro that are inherent to the nature of the work. This paper has aimed to highlight some of those challenges and outline some characteristics of organisations that may be able to deal with them in order to achieve their objectives.

There may seem to be a lot of repetition in the description of the different characteristics and how they are upheld. This reflects their inter-relatedness and should come as relief because setting up a few key ways of working could help achieve many of the characteristics.

Essentially this paper argues that a successful information intermediary organisation is one that keeps an eye on the bigger picture while getting on with the day job, creates a reflective workforce that seeks and acts on feedback from others, gives it staff freedom to experiment and create, recognises that its work is dependent on a complex set of relationships and makes the effort to develop them, sees itself as a system that is able to strengthen its own capacity and adapt to change.

Tools mentioned

Outcome mapping: is a project progress measurement system that was designed by the grant-making organisation IDRC. It takes a learning-based and use-driven view of evaluation guided by principles of participation and iterative learning, encouraging evaluative thinking throughout the program cycle by all program team members.

Theory of change: defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks-interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or precondition is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change/change framework, which is a graphic representation of the change process.
http://www.theoryofchange.org/background/basics.html

Problem tree analysis: is an approach to exploring a problem or issue, it helps to surface different understandings between stakeholders and helps to identify cause and effect around an issue.
http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Tools/Toolkits/Communication/Problem_tree.html

SWOT analysis : Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats. Usually used in quite a superficial way but can be very useful if undertaken in more depth and issues are turned into actions to protect strengths,

Logframe: may be briefly defined as a planning matrix including the basic aspects of an institutional project, a policy, a plan, a program or a specific intervention project. It is widely used by development co-operation donors as part of funding applications.

Competencies: the idea of competencies is increasingly used in domains of management and education. Definitions are contested, its use in this paper is in line with the following definitions. "A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context (p4 OECD, 200five). A widely used definition in staff management is "A set of behaviors that encompasses skills, knowledge, abilities, and personal attributes that, taken together, are critical to successful work accomplishment. Competencies may be defined organizationally or on an individual basis."

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