

# Launching Networks – Start-up Guide

## Aim and purpose of this paper:

This paper is made for network coordinators who are in a particular situation. The role as a SDC **network coordinator** is generally combined with the function as **focal point**: Two different but interlinked key functions with respective goals. The key function of the focal point is about distilling experience in order to contribute to the policy dialogue of the respective thematic domain. The key function of a network coordinator is (1) to support experience sharing, coaching and mutual learning (thematic expertise, methods, etc.) and (2) to disseminate lessons learnt within the network. These two key functions go along with two fundamentally different dynamics in networks: Organisation driven (top-down / from core to periphery or vice versa) and member driven: bottom-up / interactive among members).

Network coordinators work under a thematically responsible person with a more or less well established practice of mutual communication, delegation of decision power, and budgeting. Members of the thematic or normative network are in a first phase mainly SDC staff of various divisions and sections, Headquarter and COOF, nominated or designated by a mandate of the SDC Directorate.

This paper intends to support network coordinators in the first steps of setting up the network. Seven core issues for the phase of launching a network are presented and discussed.

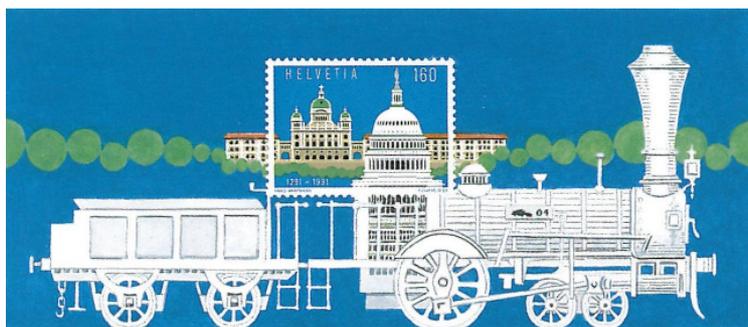
We know about the dilemma between the how-to-do-tips (recipe book) and the fact that launching a network must be an open process that needs steering and not simply mechanical decision making and administration.

Please note that this paper is not about technical issues such as setting up a webpage, etc; these are issues that need to be checked in detail at a later stage.

## Seven core issues when launching a network:

1. Assure utilisation focused goal and objectives
2. Creating ownership within the organisation needs energy
3. Set up a clear organisational structure and define key-roles, responsibilities and rules of the game
4. Check language and communication issues
5. Check what already exists before starting new activities
6. Create motivation: Go for a modest action plan and a first product with immediate benefit for all concerned
7. Balance polarities

This paper presents these seven core issues one by one, knowing that there is no strict logical order in time. Setting up a network needs an iterative process: Changing one element leads to adapting others as well.



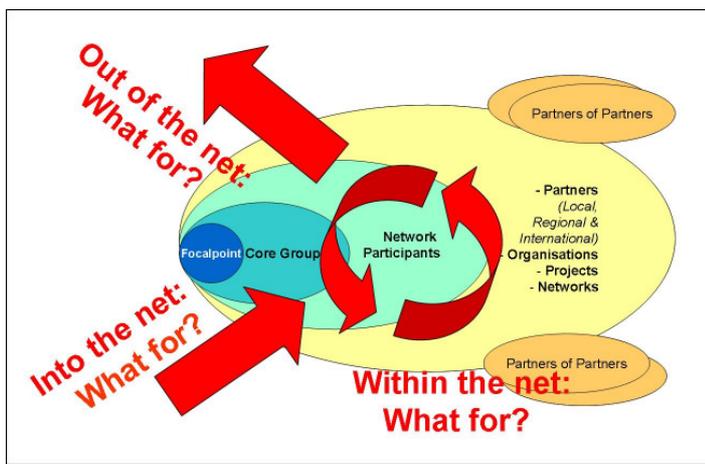
Networking means having a look beyond the boundary of your organisation. At times reality "outside" reveals new horizons or surprising experience in an unexpected context.

## 1. Assure utilisation focused goals and objectives

Who intends to make what use of the network and what for? In what form? When? Be very specific about the utilisation focus of all network processes and products.

Make a stakeholder analysis of the network, starting from the focal point, via the core group to the network members, their partners, their partners' clients, through to affiliate organisations. What are they interested in? What is their intended use? What does a potential benefit consist in? What for can they use a product (document, lesson learnt, new insights, etc.)? Who knows the different situations well enough to be in a position to answer the above questions?

Differentiate clearly between the **mandate** (of the organisation) and the **motivation** of the participants and their expectations. What are the goals for the central level of the organisation (e.g. contributions for a policy dialogue – with whom)? – What are the goals for the network members (e.g. thematic and methodical fitness – in what situations)? – What are the goals for the network members' partners (e.g. quality management – what type of)?



Verify all hypotheses created in a core group with the "real voices" of network members.

Make clear what is included / excluded in the goals and objectives of the network.

Basically there are three directions of knowledge sharing:

**Into the net:** information (newsletter), support (facilitation, mediation);

**Within the net:** (mutual) sharing, coaching, learning;

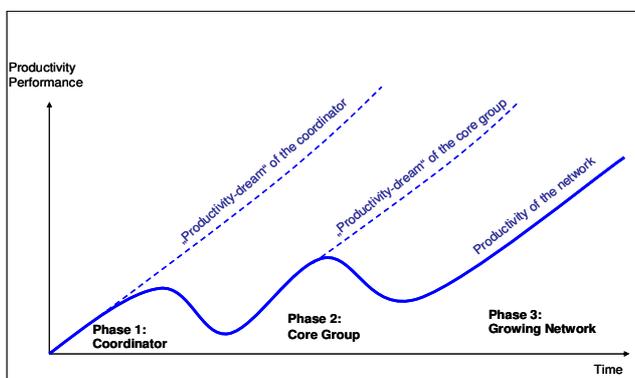
**Out of the net:** experience, lessons learnt, contributions for policy dialog.

## 2. Creating ownership within the organisation needs energy

Involve as soon as possible selected network members in a core group. Check for criteria such as professionalism, diversity of experience, and availability for regular meetings.

A network needs broad ownership. The focal point is acting as the coordinator of the network. S/he is supported by a core group to design the network building process.

To start working in the core group: Check all core group's members' motivations, expectations, visions, hopes and fears regarding the network. Take all information and doubts serious. Be aware, that in the beginning you will need time to form a team. This is group dynamics: Roles and communication standards get defined. The clarification processes you have gone through yourself as a coordinator you shall have to cross again with the core group. Your insights will be enriched, corrected, changed.

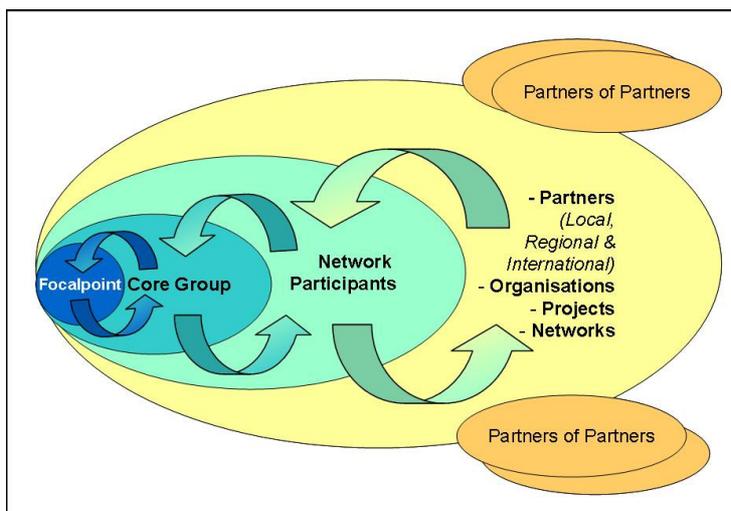


In a next phase, when you go for a wider sharing of the first results and plans with network members in further spheres of the organisation, a similar "drawback" will happen again. Let's be clear: It is not a drawback, it is group dynamics, a learning process. New members need time to acquaint themselves with what is already here, to find their place in the structure, to place their views and wishes, and express proposals for adjusting the network to their needs.

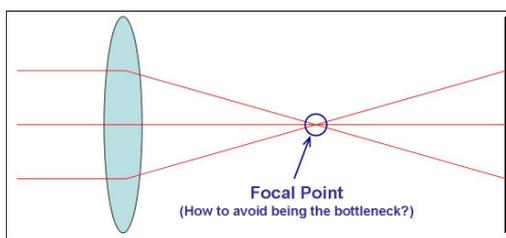
### 3. Set up a clear organisational structure and define key-roles, responsibilities and rules of the game

Visualize your network. Here is a possible structure. Your network might need another visual representation. Define it in the core group.

Who has what **role** in the network? Usually, a network has following roles: a coordinator, a facilitator, thematic / geographical focal persons (or experts), a secretary, (active) members, (passive) lurkers. A network has partner organisations and knows about clients or partners of their partner organisations. There might be a need for thematic or methodical backstopping at central or regional level.



Who is interested in what processes and outcomes? What is the expected benefit, the value added? Check the utilisation focus. Who is expected to contribute what (based on the respective job description)?

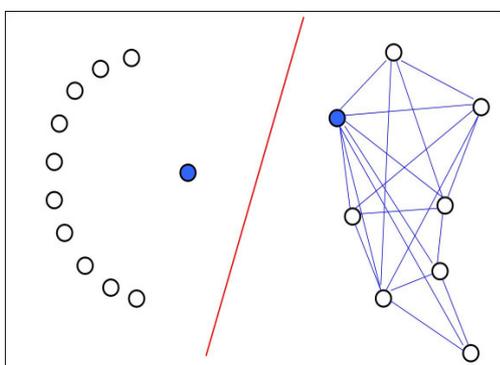


The coordinator of the network is somehow (at) the focal point – informed about everything, but not responsible for everything. The coordinator is responsible for the rules of the game: Make clear what is the function and the expected outcome of the network – and what is definitely not.

### 4. Check language and communication issues

Check the language capacity of the network members. Who is fluent in English in a way to dare to express him-/ herself? What other languages need to be declared as official languages for the network (French, Spanish, Russian, others)?

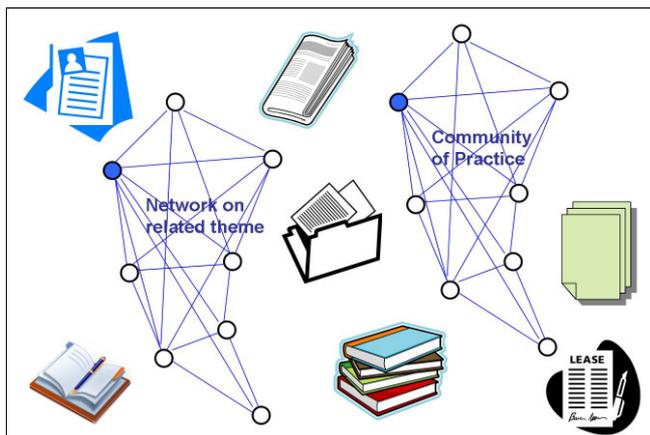
What about translations? What will be translated: documents, workshop papers, discussions, and summary of discussions (need / nice to have)? What translation service is appropriate (human or web-based)? Does the language situation "dictate" a regionalisation of the network (regional focal points and a global focal point)? Check: "Who needs what and what for?" before making decisions. Check the quality, costs and expected benefits of the translation service and bring it to a reasonable level within the budget frame.



Check the language patterns! Make sure people communicate (abstract) concepts / theories and anecdotes / stories. Assure facilitation for "normal times" (webpage, meetings of the core group, ...) and for "moments forts" (annual workshops, platform discussions, ...) both for face-to-face and e-communication.

Communicate results (processes, output, outcome and impact) inside and outside the network to foster benefit for members and assure visibility and legitimacy of the network.

## 5. Check what already exists before starting new activities



Be aware at any point of development that there have been programmes and activities before. Do not repeat what others already have done.

Identify sources of information and consult the existing documentation and websites. Contact knowledgeable people within and around your organisation. Listen to stories of success and failure.

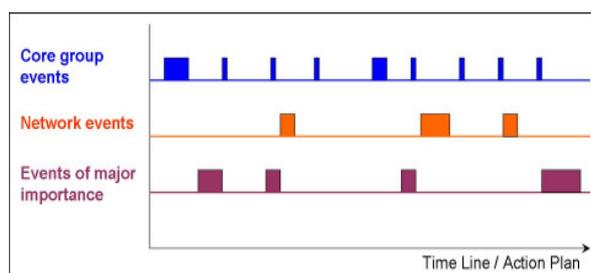
What communities of practice / networks exist in the thematic domain of your network? What strengths and weaknesses do these communities have? What processes did they launch? What results did they achieve? How is

this documented? What are their lessons learnt?

Define thematic boundaries and inter-linkages with other (SDC) networks.

How do partner organisations deal with the respective thematic domain? What can be learnt from them? What kind of cooperation makes sense? What synergies can you expect?

## 6. Create motivation: Go for a modest action plan and a first product with immediate benefit for all concerned



Set a quality standard with your first annual action plan. Plan limited activities and perform them well. Be aware that the network needs time and energy for social processes.

Plan priority activities according to the identified goals and according to the set agenda and dates at higher organisational, national and international level that are relevant for the network!

Go for a fast first product with immediate use (benefit) for the majority of the network members. Make network members experience that together they are stronger / wiser / more knowledgeable than alone (e.g. discussion, workshop, list of available documents).

Avoid "Tsunamis": Diffuse only "mature" information within the network. Time is scarce everywhere; do not flood your network with e-mails.

Create a space in your network for members to introduce themselves. Be creative, imaginative and attractive with the form you do it. Use simple information technology that is at the level of network members. Try to avoid possible digital divide effects.

Be aware that knowledge sharing only happens with a balance of offer and demand: attractive information on one hand and vivid questions and curiosity on the other. Stimulate both: offer and demand. Get professional support from facilitators within or outside the network.

## 7. Balance polarities

Keep polarities in a good balance. Act as a mediator whenever needed.

<b>Interest</b> of the organisation (mandate)	⚖️	<b>Interest</b> of members (motivation)
<b>Vision</b> (mid/long term orientation)	⚖️	<b>Action</b> (launching the process now)
Value of <b>existing</b> assets	⚖️	<b>New</b> networking processes
<b>Face to face</b> meetings	⚖️	<b>Virtual</b> communication on the Web
<b>Costs</b> (for organisation / concerned)	⚖️	<b>Benefits</b> (for organisation / concerned)
<b>Concepts</b> , theories and policies	⚖️	<b>Stories</b> , anecdotes, and illustrations
<b>Offer</b> (information, experience, coaching)	⚖️	<b>Demand</b> (questions, coaching requests)

### Success factors for launching thematic and formal networks

(Source: km think-table, 20.11.08: collected from a group story telling / collegial coaching)

- **Create broad visions and ownership:** Invite partners from the beginning; involve them in the design of the processes. Invite outsiders in order to bring other perspectives, views and ideas into the network.
- **Create curiosity:** Encourage people to “look beyond the fence”. Make the network an attractive place, different to others; give unconventional ideas their place (in web and f2f activities). Build some kind of uniqueness for experience sharing and learning.
- **Create motivation:** Have members bringing in their stories (“a moment in my professional life I experienced learning”), making others curious (e.g. run a 20-second-per-slide show for members to tell their stories).
- **Keep it simple:** Set a clear link of learning opportunities to challenges or tasks in every day's work. Members bring in ideas, ask questions and contribute to others' questions (“the answer is behind the door, open it!”).
- **Assure facilitation:** Facilitation is a key function in thematic networks. Build facilitation capacities at HQ and regional level. Allow regional sharing; allow regional or national focal points.
- **Offer a frame and set clear rules!** The organisation may invest in the formal set-up of the networks; clear rules for discussion and decision making stand for dynamics and quality of interaction and learning.
- **Trust in people:** Trust within the knowledge network is essential. Trust is not necessarily built on personal interaction only, but may also originate from a friends suggestion.
- **Respect context:** Knowledge management in a network is not a “competition of who knows best”, but a mutual respect of what everyone knows.
- **Organise face to face contacts:** For creating learning dynamics in the context of international networks, face to face contacts are crucial, however sporadic they may be. This gives the necessary human energy to the topic and KM activities/ processes.
- **Challenge the senior management:** It has to show its commitment to knowledge management through networks proactively, not only by agreeing that knowledge management is useful in itself. Contribute to a KM friendly organisational culture and climate.

Check the website <http://www.communityofpractice.ch> ("Launching networks") for relevant documents about networking experience.

Agridea, Lindau, December 9, 2008; EBO