Supporting Thematic Communities:
the Helvetas Experience

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1. Context

The Helvetas approach to knowledge and learning was significantly influenced by development community interest in Knowledge Management (KM) in the early 2000s. A number of development organisations were discussing and investigating the potential of KM (which originated in a private sector context) for development activity. These investigations quickly led to the formation of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community, a vibrant Community of Practice (CoP) that continues to be a source of inspiration and expertise in this area.

Helvetas has participated in KM4Dev since its inception, and has acted as a member of the KM4Dev Core Group (which provides strategic advice and direction to the community) since it was created in 2004[1]. It continues to provide advice and assistance to a number of partners in the areas of KM and learning, strategic planning, and facilitation of virtual and face-to-face events and collaborative processes.

Support for thematic networks, or CoPs, based on our programmatic Working Areas is a significant component of our internal KM efforts. CoP interactions take place in two main ways: virtual and face-to-face. Each is important to the development of the trust and familiarity that are essential to a healthy CoP. An intranet with thematic spaces and email-based discussion lists for each CoP supports the former. For the latter, workshops focused on Working Area themes are organised every 1-2 years. Creation of these thematic communities has been pivotal to the increase in interest and engagement with knowledge and learning within the organisation.

On the basis of these experiences over the best part of a decade, we created the current document, with a view to providing some insights and recommendations from which others will hopefully benefit.

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[1] Aside from playing a facilitating role in several other CoPs such as Water for Food and Global Organic Cotton, Helvetas was also a founding member of the AGUASAN CoP (water and sanitation sector) in the early 1980s, and continues to be a member of the AGUASAN core group.

2. Thematic Communities of Practice within Helvetas

From the first Helvetas Knowledge Sharing Strategy (2002), thematic CoPs have been a central part of its efforts to promote Knowledge Sharing (KS) and learning. In 2003 the first discussion groups were created, which gave Helvetas staff with an interest in a particular thematic area not only an email-based space for dialogue with peers, but also an intranet space where relevant information could be shared among CoP participants.

The online tools associated with these CoPs provided, for the first time, ongoing linkages among approximately 50 staff in Switzerland and 400 staff in Country Programme offices in the 15+ countries within which Helvetas worked.

From their inception, these groups have been purely internal – only those who have a Helvetas intranet account (i.e., in-country staff as well as staff at Head Office and regional offices in Switzerland) can access and participate in these groups. The rationale for this practice was twofold: first, the intranet was designed for staff to share internal documents in addition to publicly accessible material relevant to the different Working Areas; second, there was a recognition that staff often turned to others outside Helvetas to access expertise that was readily available within the organisation. It was believed therefore, that a gap in internal learning and knowledge sharing existed which needed to be filled.

As the CoPs have matured and Helvetas interest in expanding its KS and learning pursuits to more actively include partners has grown, efforts are being made to engage those partners in more comprehensive ways. Whether or not this would mean opening some CoPs to partners or using other information sharing and dialogue spaces, is under discussion as the new Knowledge Sharing strategy is being finalized.

The organisation also recently decided to undertake a strategic review of its IT infrastructure to determine what would best serve its overall needs – including support for thematic groups – while at the same time taking advantage of available external services which will allow us to continue moving forward without being held up waiting for fully functioning new internal systems.

2.1 Experience with thematic communities, 2003-2008

Several exercises have been conducted to monitor and assess Helvetas progress in the KM area, including:

- Baseline study and a Follow-up study conducted in 2002 and 2005 using "The Learning NGO Questionnaire" methodology[2]
- Comprehensive review in 2006 of staff attitudes, beliefs and experiences with KM, particularly with Helvetas CoPs and face-to-face workshops
- Focused online discussion in 2007 of the role of face-to-face workshops (which have been largely focused on the thematic areas of the Helvetas CoPs).

These exercises together provide a good indication of the status of KM and of CoPs within Helvetas from the point of view of Helvetas staff over the period. Further detail on these studies is provided in Annex 1.

The studies indicate not only increasing awareness of the importance of knowledge sharing and learning, but also of the potential of CoPs. Still, it has to be recognized that a community of practice does not come into existence on its own, and certainly not without a process of evolution. Within Helvetas we have found that some CoPs have become dynamic and self-sustaining while others still require further support and development. This is to be expected given the fundamentally social nature of development of any community.

3. Recommendations on Supporting Thematic Communities

The following recommendations are based on Helvetas experience with the establishment and support of both intra- and inter-organisational thematic communities/networks. Rather than offering a formula for CoP creation, they constitute a distillation of our experiences – both positive and negative – which provides some insights into what are complex social processes.

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[2] The methodology was created by Bruce Britton and was described in a 1998 paper which can be found at: http://www.intrac.org/resources_database.php?id=157

3.1 General approach

Ø **Act with humility!**

Communities *cannot* simply be created by force of will or policy. However, opportunities for community-building can be created, and budding communities can be cultivated, as long as there is a critical mass of potential members with sufficiently similar interests.

Ø **Build time into implementation plans**

Unless a thematic community/network already exists, it will take time to fully come into being. This cannot come from 'outside', but must arise from ongoing interactions of members. A true community could arise over a period of months, but it is **much** more likely to take place over several years.

Ø **Recognize the organic nature of communities**

In addition to taking time, the development of communities may be helped or hindered, but it cannot be fully controlled. It is as much a *social process* as an institutional or programmatic one and therefore will proceed according to the social dynamics that develop within it.

Ø **Encourage ownership, not control**

The vibrancy of a community is directly related to the degree to which community members feel a sense of empowerment, and therefore it is crucial than an atmosphere of shared ownership be established early on, and maintained throughout the community's existence.

Ø **Look for, and encourage, champions**

A relatively small percentage of members are actively engaged in communication and information sharing in even the most vibrant communities[3]. Among those, there are selected members who play a catalytic role. Their relatively high levels of activity and enthusiasm for the community can be leveraged by providing them with recognition and

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[3] The rate of active participation (eg. posting of messages or other content) in successful online communities, for example, is typically around 10%. This does not mean that the remaining 90% (known as 'lurkers') do not benefit. On the contrary, many do benefit and carry thoughts and ideas into other contexts and other discussions. Second, the activity level of many members changes over time, so that at some points they will be lurkers and at others active contributors. Some perspectives on levels of participation include: http://www.elatable.com/blog/?p=5, and http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html.

partnering with them on community building activities. They can thereby be critical to building momentum and maintaining energy in the group.

Ø **Begin by creating the space**

Regardless of the technical infrastructure used to support information sharing and communications, the most important element to begin with is to create the social space for a community to flourish. This involves such things as: identifying the right people (especially those with relevant professional interest); having a core group steer the refinement of concepts; allocating dedicated person-time and, if necessary, financial resources in advance, for community facilitation.

Ø **Develop a community role concept**

Although it will presumably change over time, it is particularly important in the context of communities nurtured within a specific institution to have a well-defined niche. What are communities meant to discuss, decide, influence? To what use will their deliberations be put? To whom are they accountable? What added value is expected? These kinds of questions need to be taken up in order to have a clear idea of where the communities are seen to fit with the institution's operations.

3.2 Community facilitation

Ø **Support community self-definition**

Communities within organisations will be pre-identified (at least in broad terms), and will have a pre-defined set of parameters within which they can operate. Notwithstanding these constraints, it is crucial that community members have an opportunity for a well-facilitated process of discussion of core objectives, spheres of activity, modes of operation, expected outputs, etc. This serves the dual function of tapping into available expertise in each field (which, after all, is a major motivation for supporting thematic communities in the first place!), and constituting a process where community members begin to build a shared identity, shared sense of purpose and shared agendas.

Ø **Actively encourage participation**
In any group with a variety of members who have different hierarchical positions, different cultures and different perspectives, broad participation is not likely to occur without taking proactive measures to support it. A good facilitator can create a safe environment for people to interact by: establishing an etiquette (and reiterating this etiquette occasionally if necessary); bilaterally interacting with and encouraging members who either have particular expertise or who appear reluctant to participate; and intervening in a public way when one or more members behave in ways that stifle participation.

Ø **Deepen capacity and broaden ownership**
Ongoing interactions and the sharing of knowledge and information will themselves strengthen communities, but to the extent that one encourages a sharing of facilitation roles – along with support for building capacity to do this effectively – the overall sense of commonality among members in different geographic locations and institutional positions will be significantly increased. The community will also be strengthened as a result.

Ø **Actively link ongoing interactions with periodic ones**
Most communities interact both virtually and face-to-face. The latter provide excellent community building opportunities and can act as engines for renewal of enthusiasm and energy for longer-term work. The key is to use the virtual spaces to prepare collectively for and reflect back on events (this also provides opportunities for engagement for members who do not participate in the face-to-face meetings). If possible, virtual spaces can also be used to enable remote participation, which can be greatly valued, though it requires focused support.

Ø **Support multilingual interaction**
Where there are significant issues of language, it can be highly beneficial to support members' providing inputs in their first language, or in one of several languages with which they might be proficient. In such cases, periodic summaries in several languages can help members who cannot easily communicate directly to share their ideas.

Ø **Create value-added content**

Many knowledge sharing and networking initiatives provide facilities for sharing information such as documents, video, audio, etc., but an additional source of expertise is the dialogues with which community members are engaged. A great wealth of insight, ideas, references, etc., is shared in this way. In particular, when a specific challenge or issue is addressed (whether it is prompted by a member's question to the group or by a scheduled dialogue), a summary of the various interventions could be provided, which would thereby encapsulate the key ideas in an accessible way for future reference.

Ø **Support community-driven information management**

There is often a temptation to create highly structured information management tools, but this often leads to systems which make information sharing and retrieval more – rather than less – difficult for community members. Where there is a need for systematic information sharing, it is advisable to engage community members – either collectively or through a small representative group – directly in determining how the core information they would like to manage should be organised. Community tagging, or at least community development of a taxonomy, can not only provide more robust structures, but it can also serve as a vehicle for enhancing group buy-in to the use of information management systems provided.

3.3 Linkages outside communities

Ø **Expand to relevant partners**

In many cases, especially where thematic groups are nurtured from within institutional boundaries, communities begin as closed, accessible only to staff members. This can be critical in the early stages to building a level of comfort where members feel they can participate without fear of negative exposure. However, no institution can claim to know all there is to know in a given area, and a great deal of knowledge sharing, building of multistakeholder dialogues, harmonisation of perspectives, etc., can be supported by opening community participation beyond a single organisation. The precise timing and process to do this is something that

is best taken up on a case-by-case basis, but in the absence of a critical need for confidentiality, it will almost always be a positive move.

Ø **Review institutional context**

Again, assuming a community is supported within a single institutional context, and its role within that context was initially articulated, it is important to periodically review that role, to determine whether the knowledge sharing, learning and other goals initially set for the community have been achieved or partly achieved, and to determine whether or not the role could be profitably modified or enhanced.

Ø **Explore expanded role**

Some of the most valuable aspects of a Community of Practice are: its ability to bring people together who have common interests and complementary areas of expertise; to act as an arena for focused interactions, and; to help people work together to innovate and renew their individual and collective knowledge. In some cases, this wellspring of expertise and cutting-edge knowledge could also play a powerful role as an actor in policymaking arenas. It could be greatly beneficial to development activity if such opportunities were identified and communities with relevant expertise and reputation were supported as appropriate to play this kind of larger role.

Annex 1. Knowledge Management and CoP Study and Survey Results

A1.1 The Learning NGO studies (2002, 2005)

The Baseline and Follow-up studies focused on the following key functions of organisational learning, as identified by Britton (1998):

- Creating a Supportive Culture
- Gathering Internal Experience
- Accessing External Learning
- Communication Systems
- Mechanisms for Drawing Conclusions
- Developing an Organisational Memory
- Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy
- Applying the Learning

A comparison of results from the studies in 2002 and 2005 revealed a perceived improvement within Helvetas in all eight of the abovementioned functions, with the most significant improvements in the Developing an Organisational Memory (45%), Communication Systems (36%) and Gathering Internal Experience (24%) components.
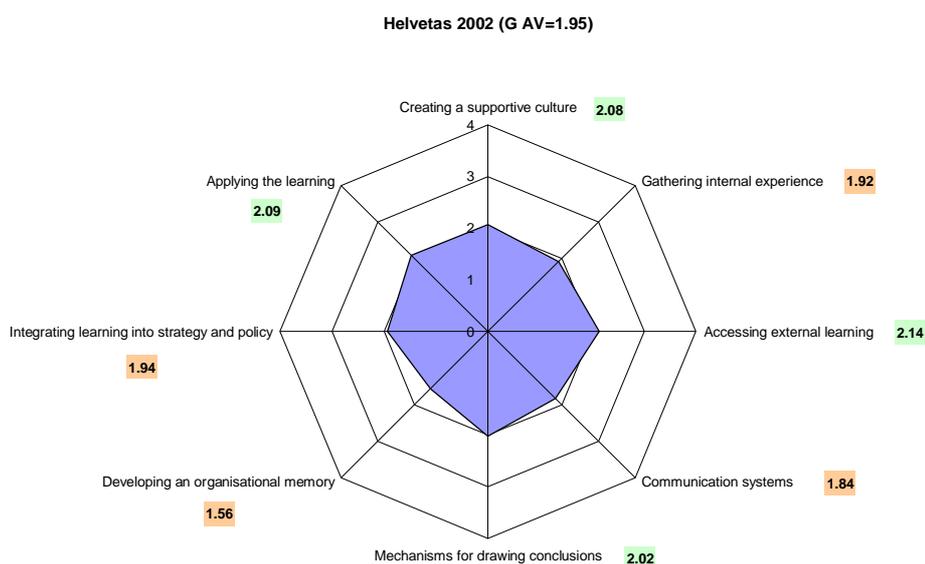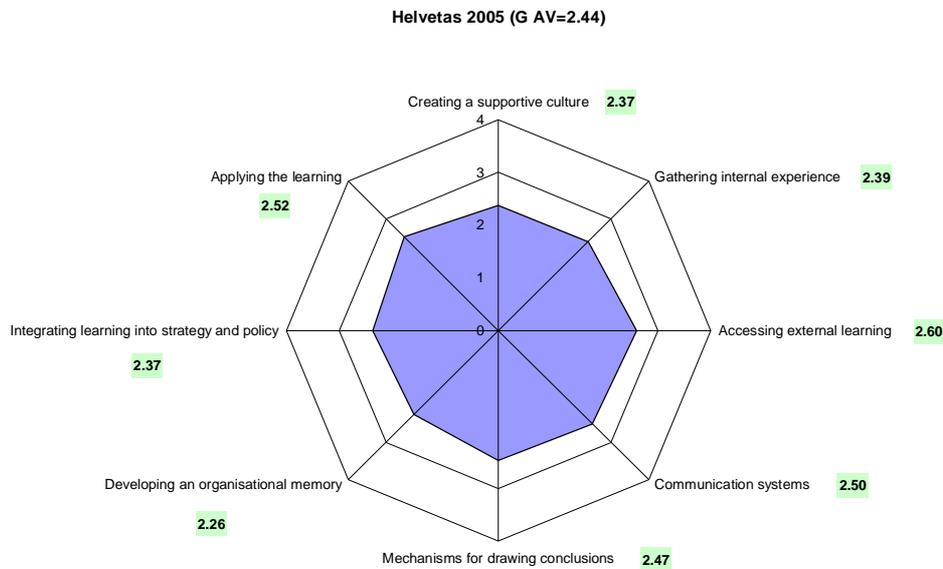

Figure 1. Learning NGO Results 2002

Figure 2. Learning NGO Results 2005

It is likely that the biggest changes were most influenced by the rapid enhancement of email connectivity and the building of the Helvetas Intranet and related virtual spaces for its CoPs over the period. To a lesser extent (because only a limited number of staff could participate directly), the introduction of face-to-face workshops supporting thematic groups (and which have been held every 18 months or so) also helped to strengthen interest and engagement in KM and CoPs on the part of Helvetas staff.

A1.2 Helvetas-wide KM survey (2006)

In late 2006 an online survey and analysis was conducted on staff attitudes and beliefs around KM, particularly of CoPs and the periodic face-to-face workshops organized around thematic issues. The survey generated a large response (over a third of all staff worldwide fully completed the 40-50-minute survey), and led to the following observations:

- The vast majority of respondents indicated support *and* understanding of KM and its importance to the organisation's work
- Approximately 30% of respondents believed that CoPs within Helvetas were already beneficial in a number of ways, including:

- driving thematic strategies
- helping solve problems quickly
- diffusing best practices
- increasing innovation opportunities
- building organisational memory
- contributing to development of professional skills
- helping staff keep up to date

- An additional 60% of respondents agreed that CoPs within Helvetas had the potential to be beneficial in the above ways

Thus, the survey suggests that within a relatively short period of time (at that point the online dialogue spaces had existed for roughly three years), support for and understanding of KM had successfully diffused throughout Helvetas. It also suggests that at least as far as CoPs are concerned, there was an expectation of greater benefits in future than had been realized to that point.

This is consistent with the view that CoPs are organic entities which do not come into being by creating infrastructure or policy alone, but do so only by processes of evolution which are socially driven. In some cases within Helvetas this has happened relatively quickly, in others it has been a slower and more uneven process.

A1.3 Online discussion concerning face-to-face workshops (2007)

Helvetas thinking about the role of CoPs in the context of virtual and face-to-face interactions was revisited in an online dialogue in mid-2007 about the existing and potential roles of face-to-face workshops in supporting KS, CoPs and Helvetas strategic direction more generally.

There was a broad consensus that periodic face-to-face workshops were beneficial to the organisation in various ways, including:

- Contributing to improved programmatic direction
- Promoting an increased sense of common purpose
- Creating opportunities for innovations in one country to be shared with others
- Development of individual staff capacity

A number of these benefits also contribute to – and are in turn enhanced by – the existence of ongoing online CoP dialogues, but it was recognised that more could be done to link workshops with each other and to link thematic workshops with the corresponding CoP dialogues. The 2009-2012 Helvetas Knowledge Sharing Strategy includes an emphasis on pursuing this goal.