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## STORY

# How to get a knowledge management strategy off the ground in West Africa

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This story tells of the process to develop a knowledge management strategy in the regional office of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Dakar, Senegal, over the 2011-2014 period. Efforts to develop a KM strategy were based on colleagues, culture, change and communication. The approach is now being rolled out in other African regional offices.

Keywords: knowledge management, organizational change, international organizations, UNESCO

### Introduction

This is a story about what it took to implement a knowledge management (KM) strategy in UNESCO's Regional Office, located in Dakar, Senegal. It is the largest UNESCO Office in Africa, having a two-fold mandate as the Regional Bureau for Education covering all sub-Saharan African countries, and as a cluster office representing UNESCO in seven West African countries. Action areas include education, culture, social and human sciences, natural sciences, and communication and information. It is a personal account describing the importance of adopting and adapting KM initiatives and practices to suit a specific organizational context and culture with little tradition for systematized information management and knowledge sharing. It also reflects on how KM initiatives can be powerful in pushing forward a readiness for openness and change in an office, thus creating a fertile ground for future organizational developments.

When I joined the office in mid-2011, I quickly learned that KM was not a priority on the busy agendas of my some 60 new colleagues, including international professionals, local staff, and consultants. It was not because they did not wanted to engage; rather, it was due to a lack of a common understanding of KM, and perhaps more importantly, what was in it for them. So I had to create a sense of urgency, convincing them that improvements to internal knowledge flows and organizational learning would be useful in their day-to-day work, and foster the efficiency and visibility necessary in a time of dwindling resources and greater demands for transparency.

## Setting the scene

The story evolves around four keywords: colleagues, culture, change and communication. **Colleagues** because it is all about getting them involved. You need them, right from the director to the clerk. Their motivation to engage in information and knowledge sharing determines the success of your initiative. You have to showcase the added value of KM within an organization. I used a combined approach, presenting to staff on KM experiences in other organizations, and engaging with individual staff members to discover how KM could benefit their specific work assignments.

**Culture** because understanding an organizational culture is the first step in challenging it. In an office, organizational culture is determined by the larger organization, local customs, and the unique stories of individual staff members. I was encouraged by the collegial atmosphere with regular social events, while challenged by colleagues working in silos and a lack of teamwork across the office.

**Change** because it is easy to start KM initiatives, but it is much more challenging and time consuming to manage the change processes necessary for their success. A lack of leadership continues to be the main bottleneck in implementing KM strategies. Such strategies, even when carefully planned, require continuous convincing to change the status quo. Complacency is common.

**Communication** because it creates an opportunity for building the trust among colleagues necessary for the creation of a knowledge sharing environment. Trust is largely determined by whether colleagues show consistency and are reliable in their interactions. Relationship building is not static; trust can come and go. Therefore, communication and dialogue play a key role in engaging colleagues and creating a sense of collective ownership of a change process. Communicating the results, experiences and KM champions is also important and motivating, not only within the office, but throughout the larger organization.

## Getting started for some quick wins

I did not start from scratch. The office had carried out a knowledge audit in 2009. The audit was comprised of two parts: a questionnaire to all staff, and interviews with section chiefs. It confirmed that the office was just starting its KM journey, and concluded that knowledge was primarily tacit and typically shared through social interaction. Explicit knowledge was rarely shared between staff members.

According to the audit, 55% believed that the office environment was not conducive to the storage of information and knowledge. Furthermore, 78% said that the environment did not encourage information sharing. The audit report concluded that efforts should primarily aim to improve knowledge sharing, and to a lesser extent, facilitate storage of information. Interestingly, administrative personnel and programme assistants expressed keen interest in the office's activities and greater recognition of their contribution. The audit also underlined the need to systematize and improve external communication.

Building on this analysis, my first priority was to engage with colleagues. To learn more about the needs, expectations, and changes since the knowledge audit, I knocked on doors, held lunch meetings, and chatted with colleagues. I spoke with section chiefs, assistants, and clerks. In these informal conversations, I inquired about their habits in terms of sharing tacit and explicit knowledge, their ideas for improving the current internal and external information flows, specific processes that could be improved, and their knowledge and use of IT tools. I wanted to identify initiatives that would provide immediate benefits in the day-to-day work of my colleagues.

In my research, I learned that several initiatives had been initiated following the audit, mainly an intranet and a file-sharing server. Unfortunately, there was virtually no impact, as staff had not engaged. Trimestral staff meetings were the principal means for exchanging information among staff, as well as trimestral review meetings for programme specialists. Several 'quality circles' (knowledge sharing sessions) on specific issues had been organized and were appreciated.

These conversations were essential - firstly, to get to know my new colleagues and start building a relationship of trust and engagement; secondly, to confirm that the situation outlined in the knowledge audit remained relevant; and thirdly, to underline the need to show results. Quickly, three key requirements emerged:

1. Improve internal information sharing (who is doing what, where and why)
2. Increase the visibility of knowledge sharing activities both internally and externally
3. Promote greater recognition of staff expertise and experiences

This was my call. Over the next six months, our KM team (an assistant, a national officer, and myself) took on the following initiatives:

**Improve internal information and knowledge sharing**

1. We launched a weekly internal e-newsletter with basic information, including an editorial by the Director outlining the priorities of the week, events, missions, administrative matters, news about staff, menu of the cafeteria, etc. I opted for this low-tech solution rather than pursuing the existing intranet, as the majority of colleagues were not motivated to use it. The newsletter was "pushed" to colleagues every Monday morning, which served its purpose of

improving the information flow among colleagues. The newsletter was produced by an assistant, and continues to this date. It has become an integral part of the office life - there is no longer a need to run after information anymore as colleagues provide information when necessary.

2. We established a records management system and classification structure for filing paper and electronic documents. I started by engaging the assistants as they primarily completed filing. They realized that the filing system would facilitate their work. As one of them said,

> *Now my boss doesn't have to call me during the weekend or when I'm on holiday because he cannot find a document, I just tell him that all is in the filing system.*

Creating this kind of ownership was key to the adaptation of the new system, which created a bottom-up approach, where assistants subsequently urged their bosses to get involved. A recent survey (March 2014) showed that 87% of the respondents (40% of the office staff) use the common filing system. We also made great efforts in sorting out old documents, and establishing a new archival system for paper documents. More than 150 linear meters were sorted out with the help of external archivists. We found everything from testaments to divorce certificates, and other personal papers, and these out-of-place documents were used as story telling in several staff meetings to underline the importance and urgency of records management.

**Increase visibility of activities for facilitating information and knowledge sharing**

3. We developed a new website, which was instrumental in improving the visibility of the office, both internally in the organization and externally to stakeholders. Most importantly, we started to publish news articles on colleagues' programmes, activities, interviews, and photo reportages. Rather than requesting colleagues to write articles (an additional task), the KM unit offered to write the news articles. In a couple of months, the number of news articles jumped from 1-2 per month to 20. In the beginning we had to run after information, but quickly, many colleagues began to reach out to the KM unit. A total of 250 articles and 20 videos were published in 2012 and 2013. The website traffic increased by 400% (number of pages viewed) over the same period. Articles were cross-referenced on websites at Headquarters, featured in our new e-alerts, and posted on social media.

**Ensure greater recognition of staff expertise and experiences**

4. We decided to pursue the knowledge sharing sessions already initiated. Once or twice a month, colleagues volunteered to share their knowledge on a specific project, country, or an issue of general interest (e.g. motivation and conflict resolution). A total of 28 sessions were organized in 2012 and 2013. All colleagues, regardless of position, were invited to join. Sometimes we invited external partners to join these informal knowledge sessions. There was no protocol, just a moderator to make the session flow. We didn't take notes, but shared the presentation with all staff afterwards. As colleagues were encouraged to learn, reflect and share tacit knowledge, they considered this kind of informal exchange important. An average of 1/3 to half of all staff usually attended. The great majority of presenters were programme

specialists, but interestingly, assistants eagerly attended, as they said it gave perspectives on their work. For some specialists, it was a way to convey issues they were passionate about; for others, it was about recognition, or delving into a topic they wanted to know more about. Today, the KM team has standing offers for upcoming sessions. We tried to turn the knowledge sharing session into brown-bag lunches, but that did not work in the local context where lunch is a proper meal.

5. We launched a peer learning initiative, promoting skills sharing for and by colleagues. We started off by conducting a survey of training needs and training offers, and then we matched them. For example, there was a need for excel training and three programme specialists offered to prepare four training sessions. As a result, eight colleagues were trained in excel. We also ran a series of sessions conducted by programme assistants on procedures for contracts, workshop organization, and missions. This was organizational learning at no cost. In 2012 and 2013, 13 peer learning sessions were organized with an average of 10 participants (again, participation was voluntary). Training support materials, if any, were made available to all staff.

6. Finally we created induction and exit procedures to ensure that new staff were well briefed and departing staff shared their experiences. Upon my arrival, I discovered several welcome kits prepared by bilateral and multilateral development partners, but they were insufficient. An introduction to the office, its programme, and work methods was also needed, but could only be obtained through briefings with other staff members.

I worked with the HR assistant to establish an induction protocol for new international staff. We also established an exit procedure, which ensured that a knowledge transfer form is part of the check-out process, as well as an exit interview (in addition to the hand-over note). This provided another opportunity for colleagues to share their expertise and experiences. To limit the number of meetings, the exit interview focused only on regular staff. Our experience is that not all departing staff (about 30%) like to participate in an exit interview, therefore the process is voluntary, however, staff that took part appreciated the opportunity to convey achievements, challenges and lessons learned.

## Lessons learned

These six initiatives have had a definitive impact on how the office operates, and have placed information and knowledge sharing on colleagues' agendas. Nearly three years later, the initiatives are still in place and have become part of the current office culture. Here are some examples of what we learned in the process:

### Continuous leadership: get the buy-in from the director of the office

It was absolutely crucial that we had the continuous top management support to endorse KM initiatives and encourage the participation of colleagues. It is important to show leadership and engage with colleagues, but be careful not to take on their work. One challenge that I faced was the expectation among some colleagues that the KM unit would implement proposed knowledge sharing initiatives, for example, implementing a new procedure, or moderating a community of practice/discussion forum. Create a sense of ownership by having colleagues identify the problems/challenges themselves, and discuss their motivation for improving the situation. Put yourself in the place of others, consider what they may gain or lose in the process, and be ready to adapt or abandon initiatives along the way. It is about prioritizing initiatives to show impact and utility, and about creating a fertile ground to build on - step by step.

**Patience and perseverance: change takes time**
In my experience, some 25% of staff adapt quickly, 50% adapt when they see that it works, and the final 25% adapt eventually or not at all. It is a continuous process. It is important to note that the 25% of early adapters are knowledge champions and should be celebrated for their role as much as possible (e.g. official recognition by senior management which we did through the Director's weekly editorial, notice in performance reports, etc.). We also made efforts to communicate on progress made (both within the office and the larger organization), and organized several sessions to table KM issues promoting a sense of urgency, and showing examples of the need for greater transparency, accountability and engagement through social media.

**Accept and work with cultural differences**
Be aware of how cultural norms influence the interaction among colleagues, power relations, and knowledge flow within an office. The notion of respect, for example, impacts the way colleagues relate to each other. In West Africa, younger colleagues often cannot disagree openly with older colleagues or refer to them by their first name. The oral tradition of this region also influences work methods and relationships, favoring the sharing of tacit knowledge rather than explicit knowledge. It is important to acknowledge this reality and select KM initiatives that are conducive in such a context (hence our focus on informal open dialogue sessions). At the same time, I have deliberately tried to promote a more informal tone and engage colleagues across the office, which I believe is important when breaking silo-work habits and adapting to more collaborative ways of working.

**Capitalize on the profile of the knowledge management specialist**
People working with knowledge management often wear several hats, be it monitoring and evaluation, communication, coordination, etc. In my case, I benefitted from linking our KM initiative to my other function (external communication), which helped me to engage colleagues through increased visibility of their programmes. It provided quick and tangible results of information sharing, which I believe facilitated my task when launching other initiatives.

## The prospects

My story reflects the importance of promoting a sense of urgency while adapting initiatives to the particular KM maturity level of the organization and office and cultural specificities. It also cites the necessity for a dedicated person or team to lead the required change processes and the integration of KM practices into existing work processes (external communication, human resources, etc.) for long-term impact and sustainability. For many development organizations, integrating KM practices into daily routines remains a challenge; however, it is essential in facilitating a successful office environment. In my experience, internal KM processes and considerations as to how internal information and knowledge are created, used, communicated and stored do not receive the attention they deserve. This leads to inefficiency.

The current crisis in funding and political support to the development sector accentuates the urgency of improving internal collaboration and processes. Knowledge management and knowledge sharing are intertwined with organizational development and organizational learning and hence critical to improve efficiency and results. As a KM enriched organization matures, its core functions and processes are increasingly exposed. This level of organizational exploration requires high-level vision and political support, dedicated human resources, and an open-minded community.

My office has experienced a positive upward shift in its KM maturity. A concrete example is the implementation of a new service centre for which I'm currently in charge. The service centre pools together all programme assistants to foster more collaboration across the office, improved transparency, and monitoring of tasks. It is facilitated through an online task manager available on the new intranet of the office. The new system has a clear function, and has been adapted by programme staff and assistants without any resistance (we organized one collective training/dialogue session in addition to on-demand training sessions). This demonstrates an openness and change readiness among colleagues, which I see as a result of our efforts in recent years (recalling the reluctance to use the intranet established prior to my arrival).

The KM experience of the office is also being promoted within the larger organization and we are currently building on it, leading a project to facilitate and guide similar KM initiatives in our sub-regional offices across Africa through a network of focal points. We continue to work along the four Cs: get the buy-in from colleagues; understand and work through the culture of the specific context; get some quick wins in the start of the change process to accentuate the value of the KM initiative; and, do not forget to communicate throughout the process.

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