

## **Study tours as a knowledge sharing mechanism and a networking opportunity in the development sector. The example of a Local Economic Development study tour in South Africa**

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In 2005, a week-long Local Economic Development study tour took place in South Africa. The tour was organized by a German and a South African development organization. Some 14 participants attended, all facilitators for different municipalities and development organizations in South Africa and Lesotho. I joined them to monitor the processes of networking, both within the group and with the officers of projects visited. Another objective was to identify and document good and bad networking practices.

This story describes my experiences on the tour and shows the possibilities of networking as an example of practical knowledge sharing, in this case for local economic development in South Africa via organized study tours.

*Teaching and imparting of knowledge make sense in an unchanging environment...But if there is one truth about modern man it is that he lives in an environment that is continually changing. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn...how to adapt and change...who has learned that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.*

(Carl Rogers 1961)

### **Networking: a key to professionalization**

South Africa, the 'Rainbow Nation', offers a wide range of development possibilities in the cultural, the political and the economic sector. No other African country has evolved so enormously and powerfully during the last years. Even so, many chances still seem to go unused or even unnoticed though the opportunities exist. Plenty of them remain untapped as if they are invisible. Why is this so?

One of the reasons is the insufficient networking amongst people in South Africa, which inter alia may have its roots in the South African political history: In particular, the Apartheid system segregated most aspects of South African life along racial lines, so that a deep divide made inter-cultural communication between black, coloured, Indian and white people extremely challenging. Since these times, communication structures have changed, bearing significant fruits in professional circuits. As a result, networking structures as an instrument of knowledge management are proving to be one of the keys for further professional improvement. Indeed, sharing knowledge via regional, national or international networking means that skills from different persons on different places accumulate to a common

knowledge package with a more generic character, which can be used for many different occasions.

Let us take the example of networking during a recent Local Economic Development (LED) study tour to identify how this important field can be further developed in a multi-cultural country like South Africa by using concrete and practical knowledge management techniques.

### **Identifying common challenges and solutions**

During a recent study tour, a diverse group of project officers and facilitators visited six LED projects in the South African provinces of Mpumalanga and KwaZulu Natal. All of the projects are very different in nature and objectives, so it was both inspiring and interesting for the participants to detect similar structures regarding the process of establishing, raising and guiding a LED-project successfully, such as the consideration of marketing and merchandising, or aspects concerning organizational structures and management.

Commonly, in the projects visited, communication structures are often deficient and, as a result, product merchandising and marketing are not seriously taken into account. A fairly surprising observation, considering that precisely these particular points of business management seem to embody a critical success factor in the case of these projects, clearly separating the bad from the good practices. Almost all of the projects offer products of high quality but when there are no clearly identified target groups and private business partners, or when the product is not even known to possible customers, the chance for effective market entrance or increasing sales is marginalized. As such, the common problems do not seem rooted in the projects' objectives, but rather in their lack of smart economic design, and their lack of communication between project owners and other stakeholders such as municipalities and possible business partners. These challenges are further enhanced by vast unemployment and poverty in the general area of the projects' operations.

However, the adverse effects of these challenges can be partially combated by more clearly structured work place design and task allocation. When employees are clear about their responsibilities, it is easier for them to explore and understand more effective ways of achieving their goals as a part of the production chain. Developing such understanding can be achieved through targeted training, or through inter-organizational exchange amongst peers. All in all, linking to well-working national and international networks is critical for any organization to stay informed about news or changes regarding their workplace, and responding to these accordingly.

### **Communication strategy**

A good practice in this context is the Umjindi Jewelry Project in Barberton, an initiative to train young people as goldsmiths. The company is well prepared to receive visitors and offers



1<sup>st</sup> year of apprenticeship in the Umjindi Jewelry Project: learning how to draw and design a piece of jewelry.

an excellent guided tour. This opens up the gate to tourism as an additional source of income and also presents the project to potential business partners or other interested persons in a professional manner. Furthermore, the project has access to both governmental and private sponsors. The organization of the three-year apprentice programme is clearly structured, which is reflected even in the office set-up. There is a hybrid mixture of trainees: black and white,

female and male trainees working together. This stimulates a balanced internal communication structure, further setting the tone for positive communications beyond the project with external stakeholders such as peers, municipalities or different countries.

### **Merchandising strategy**



The Umjindi Jewelry Project capitalizes effectively on its merchandising potential. The coffee shop draws visitors, and the curio shop offers local artists the possibility to exhibit or sell their products. Both shops are well managed and offer two or three additional employment opportunities, whilst generating additional income for the project to sustain itself.

‘These are the results of our project!’  
Working well and talking about it on a tour  
through the project rooms.

## **Achieving sustainable development**

### **A three-step approach**

Although the Umjindi project represents only one example of good practice in terms of LED, the question remains what happens with the trainees whose apprenticeship is completed. While some get the chance to work as trainer within the project, and some get job offers from one of the partners, this is just a small percentage.

We identify three steps in this development process: first, starting an enterprise; second, training of staff and apprenticeships, and third, taking care of the trainees after completion of their apprenticeship. The Umjindi project illustrates that all three steps need equal attention in South African businesses to contribute to sustainable development; and a continuous link to national and international networks could be a help, especially in terms of achieving step three: moving on to paid employment.

### **Two aspects of networking**

A project can do well through successful networking if two factors are addressed. First, defining a *communication structure*, whereby people meet each other and talk about their specific experiences, delineated by sufficient time as well as (physical) space through which people can meet, communicate and share their experiences. An Internet forum can address this need, being cost-efficient and easily arranged (for instance the South African Network for Consultants <http://www.led.co.za>). Another medium, although generally less interactive, is a professional magazine. A study tour such as the one described above however provides temporary room for the same actions, but adds the immediate experience of visiting places of interest – in this case, the LED-projects – and building a network while learning from each others’ experiences.

The second factor, defining an *implementation structure*, involves integrating shared experiences into one’s own practice. Lessons learnt from knowledge sharing forums, such as study tours, have to be documented in a more generic, reusable format, enabling their

application in different contexts. Networking can only be a successful instrument towards sustainable development if this second factor is integrated into the project life cycle. As such, a project works towards an iterative circuit of knowledge management, in which internal and external knowledge feed each other in a permanent transformation process (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).

### **Walking the talk**

The LED Study Tour implemented the first level by providing a space for exchange and learning, and encouraged participants to consider the second level for their own development practice. While the first day of the tour had a fairly theoretical focus, involving introductions,



‘Meta plan’:  
the issues and results of the  
tour

context setting and expectations, the following four days mainly emphasized practice-orientated training in LED by visiting relevant projects. Every day was concluded with a debriefing session, in which the attendants summarized their impressions about the projects, reflecting on good and bad practices in the context of LED. Also, an After Action Review of the study tour took place, in which all participants listed their lessons learned, the good practices and bad practices as seen on the tour. This was compiled into a ‘meta plan’ and shared on a CD with all collected information and experiences of the tour. Further, two articles were disseminated via newsletters to inform other interested people about the tour.

### **Moving knowledge forward**

In this way, the processes of reflection via networking between participants and the persons in charge of the projects visited was advanced. Thematic dialogues and group discussions can be the first level of knowledge sharing and translate implicit knowledge of one participant into explicit knowledge of the others. Documenting these experiences and the lessons learnt can help take this knowledge to a second level, allowing other interested parties to access the knowledge – and learn from the knowledge sharing processes applied as well. Even so, clear, concise and transparent documentation is the step that is missing in many cases throughout the development circuit. By adding just that step to study tours and other such exchange initiatives, important information can be captured, making it possible for others within an institution or company to duplicate relevant working processes and improve their development practices.

In conclusion, some of the most important aspects for a sustainable networking process are personal dialogues and thematic group discussions on the one hand, and documentation (thorough storage and information management) on the other. In most of the cases explored during this study tour, it can be generally said that the latter needs far more attention, while the former works well.

Even so, there is always room for improvement. This could be achieved by placing more of an emphasis not only on intercultural, but also on intracultural communication. That means that South Africans, irrespective of their cultural origin or skin colour, should advance their formal communication networks and should try even more to implement the modernity of the South

African Constitution, which underlines the equality of communication between men and women and all different South African cultures.

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