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Special focus

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The evolution of KM in Finland

ActKM

Building a public sector CoP

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While interest in knowledge management is growing rapidly among public sector organisations, the majority of KM literature continues to focus almost exclusively on the experiences of commercial organisations.

Shawn Callahan recounts how the ActKM community of practice developed in response to this deficiency, and outlines the organisation's guiding principles and goals.



Building a public sector CoP



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The Act¹ Knowledge Management Forum was established in 1998 by eight keen public sector KM enthusiasts who wanted to learn from each other and to develop a clearer understanding how this new discipline could apply to their particular agencies. Today ActKM, as we are now known, is a community of over 400 people spread across the world and focused on knowledge management issues in the public sector. The following story describes how ActKM developed, and what we have learnt from the journey so far.

History and purpose

The idea to develop ActKM came in response to the burgeoning KM literature and case studies that focused entirely on private sector companies. Very little research addressed public sector organisations and how they were tackling KM. The literature assumed that the private sector experience could be directly translated to the public sector, but we didn't think this was entirely the case.

In late 1998 I met with Kate Muir from Centrelink (Australia's social security agency) to suggest the idea of building a community of practice around KM in the public sector. Muir was the perfect co-founder for the following reasons: she was one of the few

people in the Australian public sector with the term 'knowledge management' in her title; she held a senior position; and, she was an outgoing and vocal proponent of KM. I myself am a KM consultant and have spent most of my career consulting to public sector agencies.

The first meeting involved eight people, from the Australian Federal Police, ACTEW (a local government utility), the Department of Health, the Department of Finance and Administration, the Department of Immigration, and Centrelink. Our first decision was to rotate meetings around the members' organisations, and we thought it would be useful to have an online forum to allow the continuation of discussion online. Purely through word of mouth, we were 60-strong by December 1999.

We knew that the value of the community would increase as its membership grew, and that this would only occur if our meetings were interesting and the online conversation useful. Despite this implicit understanding, we did not embark on a membership drive as such. Everyone involved was fully employed and extremely busy. Consequently, membership growth has always been organic, based primarily on recommendations from existing participants. In retrospect, however, we did put into practice

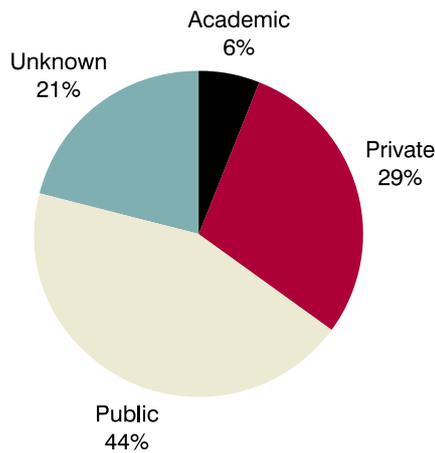


Figure 1 – ActKM demographics

elements of a successful learning community – some deliberately while others simply evolved naturally – that had considerable impact on the growth and sustainability of ActKM. These elements are discussed below.

Goals and guiding principles

Based on my consulting experience and a desire to establish a common framework for the community to interact, we developed a simple goal and a set of guiding principles. We included these in our FAQ document and also post them to every new member.

The purpose and goal of ActKM is as follows: “The ACT Knowledge Management Forum is a learning community dedicated to building knowledge about public sector knowledge management. Our ultimate aim is to be a key source of public sector KM knowledge.”

In pursuit of this goal the members of ActKM support the following guiding principles:

- Primacy of knowledge – knowledge is the essential resource an organisation must harness to successfully achieve its objectives;
- Drive to learn – people are born with an innate, lifelong desire and ability to learn, which should be enhanced by all organisations;
- Learning is social – people learn best from and with one another, and participation in learning communities is vital to their effectiveness, wellbeing and happiness in any work setting.

The core team

Probably the most significant aspect of the community in terms of providing a support structure was the evolution of a core team that was passionate about KM and kept the community moving forward. The concept of the core team gained clarity early in the community’s development, but not through shrewd planning. Rather it

occurred through incidental activity aimed at developing credibility. When we reached about 50 members (mid-1999), we thought we would benefit from partnering with an established KM association. The aim was to increase our credibility. After some searching we came across the Knowledge Management Consortium

International (KMCI) and decided to become a chapter. This required us to elect an executive board consisting of a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer and two executive board members. We organised elections, and all these positions were filled. This elected group became known as the executive (our core team).

Shortly after the elections, however, our relationship with the KMCI disintegrated and we went our own way. From the outset we felt uncomfortable with grand titles so we renamed our roles and collectively called ourselves convenors. The term ‘executive’ survived for a while, referring to the core team, but as of this year this too has been disbanded. We discovered members thought the core group had executive power, which it doesn’t, and were consequently hesitant to disagree with ideas suggested by the executive

The role of the core team is to decide the events and activities we should develop for members. We meet about once every two months, usually over lunch. There are two roles in particular within the core team that have been vital to ActKM’s success: the secretary (Amanda Lee) who ensures we have speakers for our monthly meetings, organises catering, moderates messages on the online discussion forum and schedules meetings for the core team; and the community advocates and thought leaders, who pose questions, suggest speakers, promote the forum, provide ideas and references, and create links between people and organisations.

Online discussion forum

An online discussion forum has been a feature of ActKM from the very beginning. A significant portion of ActKM’s codified intellectual capital resides on our online discussion forum and associated online library. More significantly, however, the online forum alerts members to other

people who are doing things that interest them. The networks and collaborations that occur outside ActKM are a major benefit of participating in the community.

We use Yahoo! Groups (previously eGroups) to manage our online discussion. The services Yahoo! Groups provides suit us perfectly. It is free, members sign up themselves, they decide how much e-mail they want to receive and we have a group calendar that notifies members of events. We also have the ability to invite members to join our group. We have often used this feature to invite thought leaders to join ActKM with a view to increasing the quality of the online conversation. This has been an effective strategy and we now have some of the world’s leading KM practitioners participating in our community.

The online discussion forum was difficult to establish and sustain. In fact, in the first 12 months we had to manufacture the online conversation. We arranged for the core team to post messages to ensure that there was at least one message going out to the members every week. This activity became less formal over time and eventually became unnecessary once we reached about 100 people.

When we started out we didn’t moderate the online discussion. This was a mistake for which we paid dearly. In August 2000, a member’s auto-respond feature (‘I’m out of the office’) malfunctioned, generating over 100 messages within a minute. We lost many members that day, particularly those that downloaded their e-mail over a telephone line. From that point on we decided to moderate every message (a job done by the secretary and myself), which has had the additional benefit of catching those e-mails designed as a personal response or as a blatant advertisement. After moderation, the traffic volume diminished but quality increased.

Monthly face-to-face meetings

From the very first meeting we knew it was vital to hold face-to-face meetings on a regular basis. We were determined to create an environment, both online and face-to-face, where people created relationships. We knew the online discussion was unsustainable without face-to-face contact. With this in mind we initially rotated the face-to-face meeting venue, but after the first six months we found this approach had a considerable management overhead in finding venues and notifying people when and where the next meeting would be. At the beginning of 1999 we agreed that we would meet on the first Tuesday of each month. Our meetings start at 5:30pm and typically finish at about 7:30pm. There are always refreshments at each meeting, for

which we charge \$4, and the meetings themselves are quite informal – sometimes we just gather around a table for a discussion with wine and cheese at hand. On average 20-30 members attend each meeting, nearly always with a different combination of people.

Whenever possible, we have public sector KM practitioners talking about the tangible initiatives they have implemented. We then discuss the lessons learnt. Every now and then we have a vendor describe their offering, but we keep this to a minimum. I believe this focus on public sector practitioners ensures the community maintains credibility and relevance.

We have also noticed that the relationships developed at the meetings affect the conversations that occur online. When people get to know one another, a more relaxed and less adversarial interchange follows online. Linking face-to-face meetings and the online discussion appears to be a critical success factor in nurturing this type of learning community.

Annual conferences

In October 2000 we held our first conference. We charged delegates \$220 to attend, which covered the room hire and catering costs while leaving a modest profit for the community to use in other events. This conference attracted 70 people. The topics covered focused primarily on definitions, describing various techniques and sub-branches of KM such as knowledge mapping, business intelligence, knowledge strategy and learning histories. The topics were a good reflection of the community's maturity in that we were just starting out on our public sector KM journey.

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In August 2001 we repeated the conference and attracted over 100 delegates. It was interesting to note how the conversation had changed in 12 months. Whereas the 2000 event was all about definitions, 2001 focused on case studies, where people had implemented initiatives and were ready to discuss their results. In both cases we saw a spike in online discussion associated with the conferences.

Community demographics and growth

Based on e-mail addresses, ActKM has a mix of public, private and academic representation. The 'unknown' component reflects the significant number of anonymous Yahoo!/Hotmail-type e-mail addresses in the membership.

It is important that this group is predominantly public sector. We haven't done anything specific to create this mix except for keeping the discussion focused on public sector KM issues. We did, however, make it a rule that the core team must be comprised of at least 50 per cent public sector representatives.

The growth of ActKM has consistently increased. The data illustrated in *figure 2* starts at the point when we began with eGroups. The first 50 members were loaded

on the first day of using the system, hence the vertical growth.

People do leave ActKM. We send an automatic message asking leaving members to briefly describe their reasons for leaving. There are two main reasons we have recorded: their interests have changed or they are feeling overwhelmed with e-mail and are cutting down on the number of listservers they are members of.

What we learnt so far

Based on my experience with ActKM I would provide the following advice to anyone setting out to create a similar learning community:

- Create a core team of passionate and dedicated people from the outset and make this group known to the community. Make the core team voluntary and enable people to move in and out as needed;
- Clearly describe the roles and responsibilities of the core team;
- Establish a regular schedule of meetings so that people know that if they turn up to the venue on a particular date and time, people will be there discussing the issues raised by the community;
- Establish an online collaboration environment;
- Develop a critical mass of members quickly. If necessary 'pump prime' the online conversation by ensuring that thought provoking e-mails appear regularly;
- Invite thought leaders to join the community;

ActKM continues to fulfil a clear role. Membership is growing and the conversation is increasing in sophistication. The core team is quite prepared to walk away whenever the need for our community dissipates, but that doesn't seem likely in the near future. If you wish to join ActKM, visit us at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/act-km>. ■

Reference

1. Act stands for the Australian Capital Territory. ActKM started in Canberra within the ACT

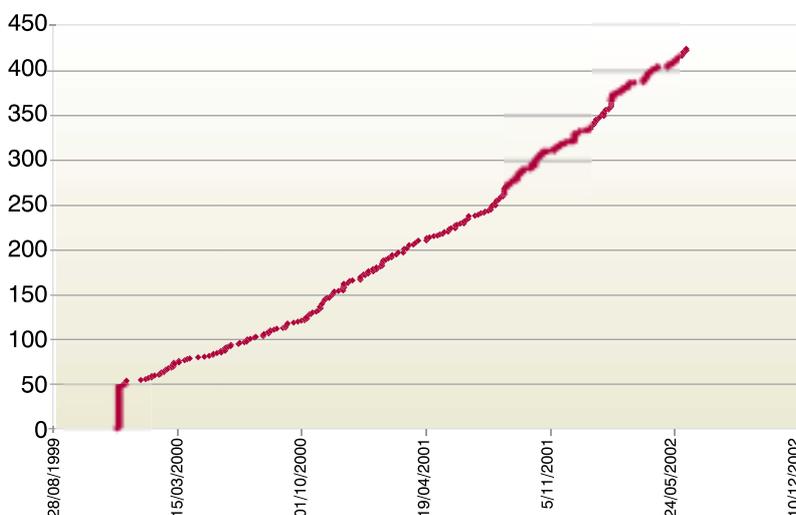


Figure 2 – ActKM growth