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Chartered Institute of
Library and Information
Professionals

Information Management Case Study

Local Government Communities of Practice

1   Overview

The local government sector in England and Wales has been motivated to improve service delivery by a number of recent agendas, among them drives for efficiency and self-regulation.

The Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA)[1], in their capacity of driving improvement across the sector, has responded to these demands with a knowledge and information management strategy, connecting resources and individuals across the sector. The IM/KM strategy featured a programme of communities of practice (CoPs), which has established networks of practitioners facing similar challenges and experiences so that members can learn from each other.

This was largely achieved through regular training events and the development of a purpose-designed virtual collaboration platform (www.communities.idea.gov.uk), which integrates a number of web 2.0 tools into a common workspace. Low barriers to entry, simplicity and ease of use were the key criteria in the design of the platform, which was launched in September 2006 as a pilot project and went fully operational in December 2007.

2   Background

2.1   About local government (England & Wales)

Local government in England and Wales employs a vast workforce of 2.1 million people across 410 local authorities. Each authority is working to deliver the same 700 services to their residents. The distributed nature of the sector is unfortunately conducive to 'silo-ed' working; many local authorities function as stand-alone organisations, isolated from their counterparts across the country that are facing parallel tasks and challenges.

3   Developing a collaborative environment

The IDeA Communities of Practice platform was developed early in 2006 as part of the wider knowledge & information management strategy review commissioned by the IDeA from Collabor8now Ltd. The purpose of the platform was to encourage connections between people and organisations working in the local government sector and to improve the way they work through capturing and sharing know-how.

Versatility and expandability were priorities in the development process. The platform was designed to support any number of individual communities of practice

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[1] Now integrated into the Local Government Association (LGA)

and enables groups of officers to communicate and collaborate with each other on issues of common interest or purpose. Each community can be available to the public (meaning that anyone signed up to the platform could join with a click of a mouse button) or private (users request to join and the facilitator moderates their membership).

Another important issue was accessibility, as the platform needed to be usable by officers across local government using divergent technology (both in terms of internet connection speed and browser capability). The platform's primary focus was not, therefore, to be fully featured from the start, but to evolve in functionality in response to its users.

The functionality of the environment was designed to foster the communities of practice in the following ways:

- Connecting people to people through shared interests, problems and experience

- Taking a community based approach to knowledge- and information-sharing that incorporates a conversational dynamic consistent with social media and web 2.0 principles

- Creating fluid knowledge bases where good practice can be developed by the community, as opposed to having static downloadable content produced by single 'experts'

- Providing a space for ideas to be nurtured and projects to be completed collaboratively

- Increasing the value of existing networks by providing an online space where community members can interact when not physically meeting

4   Measuring Success

The Communities of Practice platform has had a tremendous level of take-up since its launch in September 2006. At its peak there were over 95,000 users and 1025 communities with representation from all councils in the UK. Collaborative initiatives and shared information continues to drive service improvements and best practice across the sector.

5   Outcomes

The Communities of Practice platform continues to attract new members and new CoP working spaces. There is plenty of activity; new users are continually joining and posting content or responses. Many of the communities are being used to swap signposting information: links to publications, news and upcoming events.

There is clearly an appetite in the local government sector to try new things and for people working in the sector to connect and learn from each other. Whether or not the individual users are there with the blessing of their employers and managers is not known.

Within the larger context of the self-regulation agenda, the IM/KM strategy as a whole and the CoP platform continue to increase the sector's capacity for self-improvement.

Further developments in the technology and broader reach of the programme (including more trained facilitators) will continue to expand the impact of the communities of practice. As the programme and the online platform have been designed to foster and encourage innovation, more participants will further develop new uses and applications for the community model.

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