

Human Services



The Challenge

The human services field is fueled by knowledge. Insights into how human service programs work and why practices succeed or fail rests in the experience of exceptional practitioners. Systematically organizing agency staff to leverage knowledge remains a challenge, though. How can an agency make the best use of the knowledge that its employees possess?

By Diana D. Woolis and Susan Restler

The Solution

Online collaboration, specifically Communities of Practice, is one solution. By taking full advantage of the “socialness” of the Internet and its propensity to build communities, public human service administrators can change the nature of human service work.

But what are Communities of Practice? They are groups of people who come together around common interests and expertise. In a human service agency, they can consist of case managers, program providers, policy staff, experts, advocates, researchers, clients, trainers, and partner agencies. Through the use of the Internet, they create, share, and apply knowledge within and across the boundaries of teams, departments, and even entire agencies. Communities of Practice can accelerate program improvement and policy adaptation, and will allow innovative ideas and best practices to emerge more rapidly than ever before contemplated.

The public sector is a complex and highly decentralized sector. Our ability to capitalize on the contributions of practitioners has been severely limited by factors such as geography, time, and money. The private sector has come to understand that these obstacles are surmountable with the Internet. Such companies as Xerox and DaimlerChrysler, as well as the World Bank, have discovered that technology is not enough, and that cultivating communities of practice is the keystone of an effective knowl-

edge strategy. It is time for the public sector to discover the same.

Internet-based technological developments are facilitating ever easier, faster, and wider connections among people and “knowledge objects,” e.g., documents, web sites, news feeds, and audio and video files. Applications that support these connections are becoming commonplace. But it is online collaboration, specifically online Communities of Practice, that should really rock our world.

Communities of Practice and Polilogues

Communities of Practice is a term most associated with the researcher, Etienne Wenger. He speaks of groups of people who come together either to work together or to work separately but on a similar task(s). Their motive in connecting is to help themselves by helping one another through an exchange of some kind. When a Community of Practice lives on the Internet in what we term a polilogue, (poli as in many; logue as in dialogue, meaning discourse—many citizen, multiple form discourse), geography, time, and, to some degree, money, become irrelevant. Not only can individuals in different locations and time zones point one another toward useful experts and “knowledge objects” but they can exchange ideas and information and actually work together. In other words, they can create a virtual community.

Because the community exists in the digital world, the work of its members is recorded. More than simply linkage, this recording allows the preservation and growth of both individual and organizational knowledge, skills, and

Individual Benefits of Communities of Practice

Tap into existing expertise
Be better informed
Leverage lessons learned
Adopt best practices

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expertise. Rather than relying on individuals' institutional memory or hard-copy handbooks on what makes one institution or program successful, this information can be preserved, exchanged, debated and revised, and further disseminated continuously via the Internet. Communities of Practice are emerging in all sectors to build rich and trusted virtual collaborative workspaces. Nowhere is their relevance and value greater than in human service applications.

We all know that administrators and staff who did not know one another existed but who face similar or related policy and program challenges can

connect via the Internet. Will they make the time to do so is a natural question given limited time and perhaps limited access to technology. But online collaboration should not be viewed the same as a listserv or a chat room. This is not about blogging or searching a relevant database for an arti-

cle or piece of data. The essence of online collaboration is the shared work. Community members are looking for ideas and input for specific challenges they face and decisions they need to make. Online collaboration shouldn't be viewed as additional work but as a different way of doing work for program practitioners and, by extension, for policymakers.

Collaboration typically consists of meetings; the development and exchange of documents; individual and group discussions; training of experts; and the development of prototype forms, programs, and processes. Currently, these tasks are accomplished and recorded independently by e-mail, postal mail, face-to-face meetings, and conferences. Keeping the large volume of generated knowledge about any single topic organized can be overwhelming. Multiply the topics and the collaboration participants, and you have a level of complexity that is sure to slow progress. By contrast, working in an online collaboration space puts all these knowledge objects in one space, in context, and at one's fingertips.

The greatest impact of online collaboration is likely to be on the pace and nature of real innovation. Innovation does not happen in the splendid isolation of ivory towers or think tanks. Innovation comes from practitioners adapting current knowledge to new problems in the process of doing their work. Sometimes a series of adaptations legitimately constitutes innovation. Sometimes the challenge of a clear problem stimulates a genuinely new idea of how to address it. Innovation can spring from the head of one individual but more often it is the result of collaboration and iteration around a problem. And the more diverse the group, from a skills and experience point of view, the richer the idea or solution is likely to be.

This is where web sites and searchable databases fall short. They are useful when you need a piece of information but these venues only broadcast information to us. They do not let us customize data for our own purposes, or store data in a way that has meaning to us. They are not communities that we feel we belong to and they do not include us in ways that add value to the data.

Organizational Benefits of Communities of Practice

Improve collaboration across boundaries

Develop domain expertise

Make better decisions

Reduce training costs

Stimulate innovation

Implementing the Solution

To be the significant conceptual and actual advance that we believe it is, online collaboration must be well aligned with organizational objectives and looked at as an evolution of organizational and even sector culture. To start:

- Pick a real problem;
- Cast the net broadly for people who could contribute to the work;
- Have the group itself shape the community's goals and guidelines;
- Give the community smart, unobtrusive "facilitation" support to keep the workspace clean and the communication among participants clear; and
- Capture and organize the record of the collaboration so that it can be used not only in support of the specific work but agglomerated with other relevant data for mining and analysis.

Online collaboration is affordable.


That is part of the beauty of the Internet, especially for the human service sector. You don't have to buy giant expensive systems, and you don't need a staff of technology experts. You will need an application (of which there are many). But, besides that, if you have access to the Internet, and can create a Microsoft Word document, cut and paste, and use Google, you can start your online community.

The New Gold Standard for Performance

Obviously it takes much more than hardware, software, and administrative support to create a vital and innovative community. The quality of the collaborators and the value they perceive in the work will dictate the value of the outcome. The diversity and breadth of the inputs will be critical factors.

While widening the circle of knowledge workers will fuel innovation, it also will cause us to shake off some of

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our old ideas about relationship hierarchies and access to information. Can we see how funders and agencies can collaborate constructively? Or, perhaps even more jarring, can we imagine true collaboration between agencies and clients? Collaboration teams—their makeup and their commitment to the work—are the key determinants of the quality of innovation we will see in the human service sector. To succeed, we will have to embrace the sharing of information. If we do, the changes in how we identify and cultivate best practices, and our effectiveness in doing so, will be substantial, if not remarkable. Can you imagine that? 

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