CHSRF FCRSS
Canadian Health Services Research **Foundation**
Fondation canadienne de la recherche sur les services de santé

Network Notes II
Knowledge Networks

Knowledge networks consist of groups of experts from diverse fields of practice working together on a common issue. In the context of the foundation's mandate, knowledge networks create communities of health service policy makers, managers, and researchers dedicated to strengthening their collective knowledge base and implementing change. Against the backdrop of a commitment to evidence-based decision-making, the foundation has embarked on the creation of several theme-based knowledge networks. What follows are some insights that may be useful for anyone interested in developing a knowledge network or in sustaining and nurturing an already existing one.

Setting Goals

When developing a knowledge network, it is important to outline realistic short- and long-term goals regarding its growth and sustainability. Clearly define the purpose of the knowledge network; the individuals who should be involved and who the network will be serving; and the role each member will play in the process. Clarity and precision about what your knowledge network is setting out to do is pivotal to its success: your goals will provide you with direction, assist in the recruitment of appropriate members, and aid in the evaluation process. As the knowledge network develops, do not be afraid to revisit or even modify your objectives. The evolution of a knowledge network is not necessarily linear or constant; therefore, your goals will also likely take on a fluid nature, shifting from one emphasis to another. In short, goals give knowledge networks a foundation but should not restrict growth.

Mixing Apples and Oranges

Knowledge networks bring together experts from diverse communities to respond to a particular issue or need. In the context of the foundation, knowledge networks engage stakeholders from policy, management, and research around specific theme areas. While these individuals unite on a specific issue, they often come from very different backgrounds. Each group brings particular attitudes, habits, and preferences to the table — some of which are diametrically opposed. In order to encourage an effective knowledge network, it is important to foster opportunities, such as face-to-face exchanges, that allow for the development of a shared vocabulary and a common understanding of often disparate objectives, practices, and experiences. The initiation and co-ordination of a knowledge network must take into account the distinct features of each group and leverage the diversity of members to achieve the overall goals and objectives. A successful knowledge network aims to dissolve conventional boundaries, offering leading experts a milieu to merge and collaborate in order to implement positive change.

Flexible Governance

Knowledge networks are born in response to a strategic challenge or need that has been explicitly defined and resourced. Trying to manage knowledge networks is a risky venture, as a knowledge network requires a flexible approach in its creation and ongoing sustainability. Yet, while considerable room must be left for informal interactions and activities among members, some level of management, support, and structure is necessary to build an effective system.

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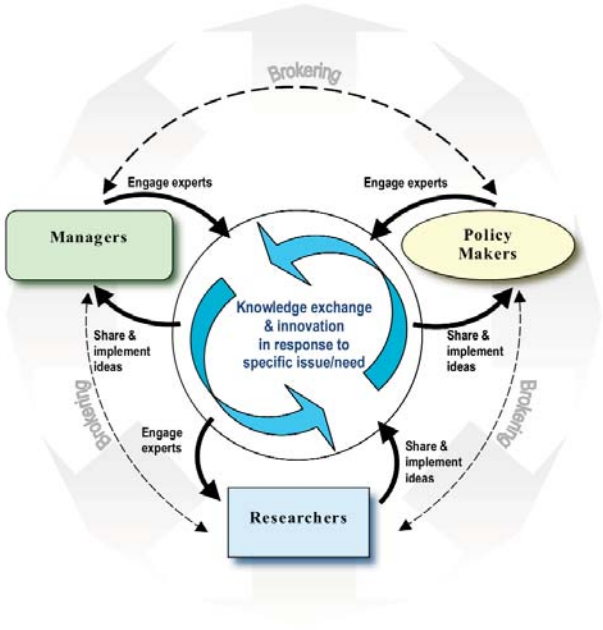
Knowledge networks can have many forms of governance structures, co-ordination, and communication. The key indicator of success is that the network effectively responds to a specific issue and integrates the expertise of its members. There need to be some concrete guidelines and terms of reference that set out clear objectives, roles, and responsibilities of members, benefits of membership, and a defined purpose for the existence of the knowledge network. These guidelines should be set by the members, rather than dictated by a hierarchy. They need to be somewhat flexible to respond to the shifting needs of members and the environment. This leads to a virtually organic governance structure that cannot be managed like a traditional organization, but nonetheless does require guidance and leadership.



Theme-based knowledge networks at the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation link together health system managers, policy makers, and researchers in response to a particular issue or need.

Identify Network Champions

Knowledge networks can be fragile; they depend on a core of active and committed members. A successful knowledge network fosters an environment where champions can be inspired to assume leadership roles. Network champions generally have a natural talent to motivate people and facilitate interaction among members. They can also add credibility to the knowledge network if they are recognized experts in their field. Champions can represent the views of the distinct groups within the knowledge network (such as policy makers, researchers, managers, etc.). Moreover, they can assume prominent roles within the knowledge network and be used as catalysts to join forces with other networks. To build a successful knowledge network, it is suggested that you have a few champions who give impetus to the network and provide intellectual leadership. The presence of such champions is an important aspect in maintaining interest and involvement.

People Need a Reason to Play

Membership in a knowledge network comes with a responsibility to contribute time and expertise. In turn, members should clearly understand the benefits. Perceived value can come by creating opportunities where members have access to privileged information, innovation, and collaborative experience through workshops, special events, newsletters/summaries of relevant information, and so on. In short, ensuring that the knowledge network's activities are purposeful, collaborative, and engaging will often be the biggest reward for network members.

It is also vital to encourage members to contribute to the knowledge network, to apply their contributions, and to recognize them for their work. Recognition may involve simple moral rewards or personal gratification to enhance the satisfaction and reputation of members contributing to the knowledge network. Ultimately, a knowledge network should foster a feeling of belonging, as well as a sense of privilege, among members. The bottom line is that people need a reason to play that involves some kind of return for their investment of time, effort, and knowledge.

Partnership

It is important to establish a solid and durable infrastructure that supports the development of a knowledge network. A network cannot be developed without stable financing that takes into account long-term maintenance costs (for example, travel, access to information, ongoing communication, etc.). Unpredictable funding can sometimes become the Achilles heel of knowledge networks; creating solid partnerships is generally the most effective way to overcome these challenges. Knowledge networks can reap both intellectual and financial benefits from partnerships as these alliances can reduce duplication and destructive competition, enhance mutual learning, increase access to new audiences, decrease the administrative costs involved in managing a network, and foster ongoing collaboration.

Technology's Role in a Knowledge Network

Knowledge networks are developed, sustained, and nurtured by individuals. A successful knowledge network depends on bi-directional face-to-face communication, which cannot be substituted by any other form of communication. This type of interaction is essential because it allows members to build trust, develop a shared vocabulary, and create a common framework. While technology offers a great tool to facilitate this type of interaction, it cannot effectively replace the interpersonal connections that can only be established in a face-to-face environment. When used appropriately, technology can be the connective tissue that enables members to stay informed and up-to-date between face-to-face encounters. It can also enable geographically dispersed professionals to enhance learning and collaboration on an ongoing basis. It is important to remember, however, that technological tools should only be developed once members have identified a need for them, ensuring members, not technology, are at the heart of a network.

Build on Existing Foundations

Knowledge networks are hard to create from scratch; they cannot be spontaneously imposed, but need to be nurtured over time. When initiating a knowledge network, start by conducting an environmental scan to learn about what already exists, what resources are at your disposal, and what niche needs to be filled. It is helpful to identify existing communities or informal networks to help drive the initial stages of a knowledge network. Look to communities where the willingness and desire to exchange already exist and where a shared commitment to a particular issue has already emerged. At the membership level, build on knowledge and relationships already present. Identify what knowledge each expert brings to the table and create ways to cultivate relationships based on trust, respect, and collaboration. In short, building on existing foundations will give you a jump start on your knowledge network and will affirm its importance and relevance to the topic.

Evaluation

Like any investment, knowledge networks need to be evaluated on their functionality, relevance, and impact. Evaluation processes should be set against the network's objectives and designed to measure aspects such as the quality of communication, the amount of activity, the perception of benefits, the level of collaboration, and the intensity of knowledge exchange. A thorough evaluation process will not only allow a knowledge network to critically understand its own operations, but will also be essential to ensure the network is adequately equipped to look forward and to make necessary adjustments for future success.

Resources

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