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## Building Networks of Practice

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# Building Networks of Practice

## **Abstract**

{Excerpt} Extensive media coverage of applications such as FaceBook, MySpace, and LinkedIn suggests that networks are a new phenomenon. They are not: the first network was born the day people decided to create organizational structures to serve common interests—that is, at the dawn of mankind. However, the last 10–20 years have witnessed rapid intensification and evolution of networking activities, driven of course by information and communication technologies as well as globalization. These make it possible for individuals to exchange data, information, and knowledge; work collaboratively; and share their views much more quickly and widely than ever before. Thus, less and less of an organization’s knowledge resides within its formal boundaries or communities of practice.

Knowledge cannot be separated from the networks that create, use, and transform it. In parallel, networks now play significant roles in how individuals, groups, organizations, and related systems operate. They will be even more important tomorrow. Since we can no longer assume that closely knit groups are the building blocks of human activity—or treat these as discrete units of analysis—we need to recognize and interface with less-bounded organizations, from non-local communities to links among websites. We should make certain that knowledge harvested in the external environment is integrated with what exists within, especially in dynamic fields where innovation stems from inter-organizational knowledge sharing and learning. Therefore, the structure and composition of nodes and ties, and how these affect norms and determine usefulness, must become key concerns. This makes the study of networks of practice a prime interest for both researchers and practitioners.

## **Keywords**

Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

## **Comments**

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# Building Networks of Practice

by Olivier Serrat

Organizational boundaries have been stretched, morphed, and redesigned to a degree unimaginable ten years ago. Networks of practice have come of age. The learning organization pays attention to their forms and functions, evolves principles of engagement, circumscribes and promotes success factors, and monitors and evaluates performance with knowledge performance metrics.

## Background

Extensive media coverage of applications such as FaceBook, MySpace, and LinkedIn suggests that networks are a new phenomenon. They are not: the first network was born the day people decided to create organizational structures to serve common interests—that is, at the dawn of mankind. However, the last 10–20 years have witnessed rapid intensification and evolution of networking activities, driven of course by information and communication technologies as well as globalization. These make it possible for individuals to exchange data, information, and knowledge; work collaboratively; and share their views much more quickly and widely than ever before. Thus, less and less of an organization’s knowledge resides within its formal boundaries or communities of practice.



## Rationale

Knowledge cannot be separated from the networks that create, use, and transform it. In parallel, networks now play significant roles in how individuals, groups, organizations, and related systems operate. They will be even more important tomorrow. Since we can no longer assume that closely knit groups are the building blocks of human activity—or treat these as discrete units of analysis—we need to recognize and interface with less-bounded organizations, from non-local communities to links among websites. We should make certain that knowledge harvested in the external environment is integrated with what exists within, especially in dynamic fields where innovation stems from inter-organizational knowledge sharing and learning. Therefore, the structure and composition of nodes and ties,<sup>1</sup> and how these affect norms and determine usefulness, must become key concerns. This makes the study of networks of practice a prime interest for both researchers and practitioners.

## Networks of Practice

John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid originated the concept of networks of practice. The notion is related to the work on communities of practice of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger,

<sup>1</sup> Nodes are individuals, groups, or organizations within networks. Ties are the relationships between them.

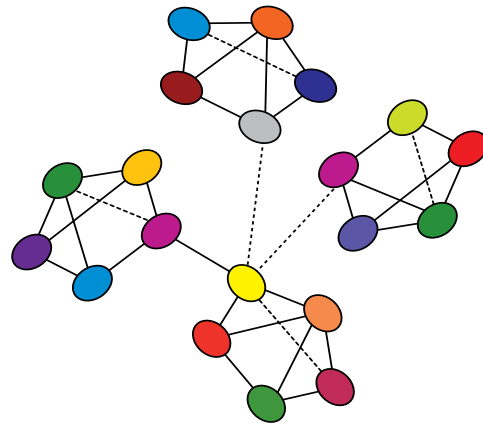
and refers to the overall set of informal, emergent networks that facilitate information exchange toward practice-related goals. These networks range from communities of practice where learning occurs to electronic networks of practice (often referred to as virtual or electronic communities).<sup>2</sup> They differ from work groups created through formal organizational mandate with regard to control mechanisms,<sup>3</sup> composition and participation,<sup>4</sup> and expectations about participation.<sup>5</sup> The underlying implication is that, to be competitive, organizations should promote participation in both traditional communities of practice and networks of practice and stimulate interactions between the two.

### Building Networks of Practice for Collaborative Advantage<sup>6</sup>

Networks are ordinarily founded on the collaborative hypothesis that we can accomplish more by working together than by working alone. Successful networking delivers collaborative advantage, viz., something that could not have been achieved without the collaboration. In other words, if the underlying premise is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, a significant benefit of participating in a knowledge network is that each of the parts also becomes stronger. The rewards can include (i) a better sense of belonging, ownership, and understanding; (ii) improved outcomes that would not otherwise be attained; and (iii) higher performance and productivity. To draw such benefits, the learning organization pays attention to the forms and functions of networks, evolves principles of engagement, circumscribes and promotes success factors, and monitors and evaluates operations with knowledge performance metrics.

- **The Forms of Networks.** Understanding what knowledge products and services a network offers does not necessarily shed light on how or why it does it. These questions have more to do with its structure. Box 1 delineates the principal features of a network's internal and external environment.

**Figure: Nodes and Ties in Networks of Practice**



Source: Author

<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the distinction between formality and informality can be tenuous. Some organizations have cultivated communities of practice to integrate them into their strategies (which might test the loyalties of members). If communities of practice are a localized and specialized subset of networks of practice, typically consisting of like-minded individuals who coordinate, communicate, and reciprocate in a shared domain in face-to-face situations and to a high degree on implicit knowledge, they can be considered to lie at one end of a continuum of network forms. At the other lie electronic networks of practice, the members of which may never know one another or meet face-to-face and display relatively little reciprocity (they generally communicate through electronic mailing lists, bulletin boards, newsletters, or web logs).

<sup>3</sup> In formal work groups such as project teams, control mechanisms customarily involve organizational hierarchies, mandated rules, contractual obligations, and both cash and noncash awards.

<sup>4</sup> The composition of networks of practice may range from a few individuals to very large, open electronic communities numbering thousands of participants. In the latter case, no formal restrictions are placed on membership. In contrast, the members of work groups are formally designated and assigned.

<sup>5</sup> In work groups, participation is determined jointly. Members are expected to commit to a common purpose and reach agreement on specific performance targets and indicators, a working approach, and mutual accountability. In communities of practice, participation is also determined jointly but individuals seek knowledge identified experts. In electronic networks of practice, participation is determined individually; knowledge seekers have no control over who responds to their queries. In turn, knowledge contributors have no assurances that the knowledge seekers will understand the answers they gave or reciprocate the favor.

<sup>6</sup> This section draws heavily on resources of the Overseas Development Institute and other organizations. Their insights are acknowledged with thanks in each instance.

### **Box 1: The Forms of Networks**

- **Functions.** What roles and functions does the network carry out, i.e., filtering, amplifying, investing and providing, convening, community-building, and/or learning and facilitating?
- **Governance.** What are the behaviors and processes in place within the network that govern its short and long-term functioning?
- **Localization and Scope.** Where are the network and its members located both physically and thematically?
- **Membership.** Who are the network's members and how are they related to each other?
- **Capacity and Skill.** Does the network, including its members, have the capacity and skills necessary to carry out its functions?
- **Resources.** Does the network have access to the inputs necessary to its functioning?
- **Communications.** Does the network have appropriate communication strategies to carry out its functions, thus amplifying messages outwardly or sharing messages and information within the institution?
- **External Environment.** What are the external influences affecting the network?
- **Strategic and Adaptive Capacity.** Is the network capable of managing changes and shocks in its internal and external environment? Can it manage those changes on its own or does it depend on others, e.g., partners, networks, donors?

Source: Adapted from Ben Ramalingam, Enrique Mendizabal, and Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop. 2008. *Strengthening Humanitarian Networks: Applying the Network Functions Approach*. ODI Background Note. Overseas Development Institute. Available: [www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/2008/humanitarian-network-functions-approach.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/2008/humanitarian-network-functions-approach.pdf)

- **The Functions of Networks.** Networks bring together organizational and individual entities that remain geographically separated and institutionally distinct. Driven by technological innovation and globalization, the last ten years have seen a profound transformation in the wide-ranging functions that they play. Yet, surprisingly little attention has been paid to what these are, and to the strategic development and management implications from that. Box 2 intimates that networks can fulfill six, nonexclusive functions.<sup>7</sup> (The six can be further segregated into supra-functions, namely, agency or support.)<sup>8</sup>

### **Box 2. The Functions of Networks**

- **Filtering.** Organizing and managing information that is worth paying attention to.
- **Amplifying.** Taking new, little-known, or little-understood ideas, giving them weight, and making them more widely understood.
- **Investing and Providing.** Offering a means to give members the resources they need to carry out their main activities.
- **Convening.** Bringing together different, distinct people or groups of people.
- **Community-Building.** Promoting and sustaining the values and standards of individuals or organizations.
- **Learning and Facilitating.** Helping members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively.

Source: Adapted from Ben Ramalingam, Enrique Mendizabal, and Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop. 2008. *Strengthening Humanitarian Networks: Applying the Network Functions Approach*. ODI Background Note. Overseas Development Institute. Available: [www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/2008/humanitarian-network-functions-approach.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/2008/humanitarian-network-functions-approach.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Networks can carry out one or more of these functions simultaneously—and many activities would fall under more than one category—but one must also recognize that there are important trade-offs between them. Each function requires specific capacities and skills, resources, and systems: overlooking trade-offs can drive networks away from their original roles.

<sup>8</sup> An agency bears responsibility for pursuing a particular change in policy or practice. A supporting role is one in which agency itself remains with the members: the organization exists to support them. In reality, of course, networks endeavor to conduct both functions to at least some degree.

- **Steps to Applying the Network Functions Approach.** The six functions of networks can be examined in a structured, step-by-step process to confirm, rethink, or reshape the work of an existing network. Box 3 lists six steps to help those facilitating, acting within, or supporting networks reflect on their activities and frame them in a more structured and strategic fashion. The steps can clarify thinking, hone strategies, sharpen activities, and ultimately improve performance, thus delivering greater value. (The approach can also be used to guide the design of a new network.)

### Box 3: Steps to Applying the Network Functions Approach

- **Step 1.** Analyze the relevance of the network’s vision and mission.
- **Step 2.** Map existing and planned activities against the six functions.
- **Step 3.** Identify the current and planned balance of effort across the six functions.
- **Step 4.** For each function, identify how the network’s role is balanced between “agency” or “support”.
- **Step 5.** Rate efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Step 6.** Reflect on the vision and mission.

Source: Developed from Ben Ramalingam, Enrique Mendizabal, and Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop. 2008. *Strengthening Humanitarian Networks: Applying the Network Functions Approach*. ODI Background Note. Overseas Development Institute. Available: [www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/2008/humanitarian-network-functions-approach.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/2008/humanitarian-network-functions-approach.pdf)

- **Principles of Engagement.** Networks are not magic bullets. They can do what they were designed to do, but to adopt new functions they need long-term investments. Box 4 suggests principles that decision-makers should consider to build them further. Box 5 identifies some keys to success.

### Box 4: Supporting Networks: Ten Principles

- Networks are complex. There are no templates for success and one should expect setbacks.
- Work with networks to agree on their functional balance and support that balance.
- Interventions to develop a network cannot be conceptualized as projects driven by a "logical framework"—other approaches such as outcome mapping can provide a better alternative.
- Support networks to function as networks with and through their members rather than to deliver specific services that could be delivered by their members or other types of organizations.
- Do not treat networks as traditional nongovernment or civil society organizations, and do not allow funds to undermine community-building functions.
- When networks carry out a funding role, ensure they have the necessary skills and that other functions are not affected.
- Network support timeframes should take into consideration the different stages of network development.
- Provide appropriate support for the network and its members to develop the right competencies and skills to collaborate.
- A culture of knowledge and learning is a cornerstone of network development.
- Sustainability should be judged against the need of the members of the network.

Source: Adapted from Enrique Mendizabal. 2008. *Supporting Networks: Ten Principles*. ODI Opinion. Overseas Development Institute. Available: [www.odi.org.uk/publications/opinions/105-enrique-mendizabal-supporting-networks.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/opinions/105-enrique-mendizabal-supporting-networks.pdf)

**Box 5. What Networks Need to Do: Some Keys to Success**

- **Clear Governance Agreements.** Networks need clear governance agreements to set objectives, identify functions, define membership structures, make decisions, and resolve conflicts.
- **Strength in Numbers.** The larger the numbers involved the greater the political weight that will be given to networks.
- **Representativeness.** Representativeness is one key source of legitimacy and thereby influence.
- **Quality of Evidence.** The quality of knowledge products and services affects both the credibility and legitimacy of arguments.
- **Packaging of Evidence.** Good packaging of knowledge products is central to effective communication.
- **Persistence.** Influence often requires sustained pressure over a long period.
- **Membership of Key Individuals.** The membership of influential figures in the policy arena will strengthen networks.
- **Making Use of Informal Links.** Informal links are critical to achieving many network objectives.
- **Complementing Official Structures.** By their nature, networks add most value when they complement, rather than duplicate, official structures.
- **Good Use of Information and Communications Technology and Other Networking Opportunities.** Information and communications technologies are opening up great potential for knowledge networking.

Source: Adapted from Julius Court and Enrique Mendizabal. 2005. *Networks and Policy Influence in International Development*. Euforic E-newsletter. Available: [www.euforic.org/docs/200505241513335135.pdf](http://www.euforic.org/docs/200505241513335135.pdf)

- **Tools for Monitoring and Evaluation.** Just like any other system, networks stand to benefit from feedback. Put simply, they need to be evaluated from two perspectives: the effectiveness of the network (doing the right thing) and the efficiency of the network (doing things right). Techniques that lend themselves to monitoring and evaluation of networks include SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats); results-based management; logical framework analysis; outcome mapping; and appreciative inquiry. Since networks are about relationships, it is also pertinent to leverage evaluation methods from the human resources field. Table 1 presents a simple network assessment tool based on the four common design principles of structure, context, support infrastructure, and delivery. Table 2 lists several criteria by means of which knowledge sharing programs and activities might be assessed. Table 3 suggests metrics with which to measure the use of the collaboration platforms that electronic and other networks often rely on. Boxes 6–7 illustrate a sample process for network assessment and a sample interview protocol.

**Table 1: Network Assessment Tool**

	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
The network has a clear purpose and direction.			
The network has a realistic timetable for delivery.			
The network members understand and are committed to improvement.			
The network is widely inclusive both in the range of disciplines involved and their seniority.			
Network members demonstrate trust, respect, and mutual support.			
Network members are supported by their host organizations.			
Members access and use technology appropriately to support their networking activities.			



	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
There are clear channels of communication between team members.			
Network members share their learning with others.			
Network members ask each other for support and receive it.			
The network delivers success and demonstrates it.			

Source: Adapted from Department of Health of the United Kingdom. 2009. *Designing Networks for Collaborative Advantage*. Available: [www.csip.org.uk/silo/files/networks-for--collaborative-advantage.pdf](http://www.csip.org.uk/silo/files/networks-for--collaborative-advantage.pdf)

**Table 2: Evaluation Framework for Knowledge Sharing Programs and Activities—Criteria, Indicators, and Evidence**

Criteria	Indicators (illustrative)	Evidence (illustrative)
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs and activities anchored in corporate and country priorities</li> <li>• Programs and activities built on ADB comparative advantage</li> <li>• Institutional support aligned with knowledge-sharing strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge-sharing strategic objectives including client and audience, well defined and linked to corporate, country, sector, and thematic strategies, and core business processes</li> </ul>
Quality and Timeliness of Knowledge Products and Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggregated knowledge is tailored and timed to client needs, clearly presented, technically sound, and state-of-the-art</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff, client, and expert reviews and surveys</li> <li>• ADB content management processes</li> </ul>
Accessibility and Reach of Tacit and Codified Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intended users/clients have ready access to up-to-date knowledge and expertise needed to do their jobs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissemination tracking, usability testing, usage monitoring of published and on-line knowledge and information and knowledge services</li> <li>• Staff, client participation in knowledge sharing events</li> <li>• Staff, client feedback surveys, focus groups, reviews</li> </ul>
Utility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge products and knowledge-sharing activities incorporated into core business processes</li> <li>• Shared knowledge adapted and applied by clients in policies, programs, and institutional developments</li> <li>• Lessons learned and good practices captured and feedback to ADB and client</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge strategy articulated in country partnership strategies and operations</li> <li>• Knowledge products and activities built into staff and client (team) learning activities</li> <li>• Staff and client feedback surveys</li> <li>• Program and activity self-assessments</li> <li>• Self- and independent assessments of knowledge sharing process in country assistance programs, and lending and nonlending services</li> </ul>



Criteria	Indicators (illustrative)	Evidence (illustrative)
Likely Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bank and client knowledge bases and capacities enhanced</li> <li>Targeted improvements in ADB portfolio performance</li> <li>Interim and longer-term development objectives achieved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing knowledge assessments</li> <li>Self- and independent assessments of program and activity outcomes relative to stated objectives</li> </ul>
Cost Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Programs and activities carried out without more resources than necessary to achieve objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tracking and benchmarking of the costs of programs or activities</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from 2003. The World Bank. *Sharing Knowledge: Innovations and Remaining Challenges*. Washington, D.C. Available: [http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoclib.nsf/DocUNIDViewForJavaSearch/F3A114765B80EB1585256DBB006AFB1E/\\$file/knowledge\\_evaluation.pdf](http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoclib.nsf/DocUNIDViewForJavaSearch/F3A114765B80EB1585256DBB006AFB1E/$file/knowledge_evaluation.pdf)

**Table 3: Knowledge Performance Metrics by Knowledge Management Tool**

Knowledge Management Initiative	System Measure	Output Measure	Outcome Measure
Best Practice Directory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of downloads</li> <li>Dwell time</li> <li>Usability survey</li> <li>Number of users</li> <li>Total number of contributions</li> <li>Contribution rate over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usefulness survey</li> <li>Anecdotes</li> <li>User ratings of contribution value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time, money, or personnel time saved by implementing best practice</li> <li>Number of groups certified in the use of the best practice</li> <li>Rate of change in operating costs</li> </ul>
Lessons Learned Database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of downloads</li> <li>Dwell time</li> <li>Usability survey</li> <li>Number of users</li> <li>Total number of contributions</li> <li>Contribution rate over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time to solve problems</li> <li>Usefulness survey</li> <li>Anecdotes</li> <li>User ratings of contribution value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time, money, or personnel time saved by applying lessons learned from others</li> <li>Rate of change in operating costs</li> </ul>
Communities of Practice or Special Interest Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of contributions</li> <li>Frequency of update</li> <li>Number of members</li> <li>Ratio of the number of members to the number of contributors (conversion rate)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of apprentices mentored by colleagues</li> <li>Number of problems solved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Savings or improvement in organizational quality and efficiency</li> <li>Captured organizational memory</li> <li>Attrition rate of community members versus nonmember cohort</li> </ul>

<b>Knowledge Management Initiative</b>	<b>System Measure</b>	<b>Output Measure</b>	<b>Outcome Measure</b>
Expert or Expertise Directory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of site accesses</li> <li>• Frequency of use</li> <li>• Number of contributions</li> <li>• Contribution/update rate over time</li> <li>• Navigation path analysis</li> <li>• Number of help desk calls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time to solve problems</li> <li>• Number of problems solved</li> <li>• Time to find expert</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Savings or improvement in organizational quality and efficiency</li> <li>• Time, money, or personnel time saved by leveraging expert knowledge or expertise database</li> </ul>
Portal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Searching precision and recall</li> <li>• Dwell time</li> <li>• Latency</li> <li>• Usability survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common awareness within teams</li> <li>• Time spent gathering information</li> <li>• Time spent analyzing information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time, money, or personnel time saved as a result of portal use</li> <li>• Reduced training time or learning curve as a result of single access to multiple information sources</li> <li>• Customer satisfaction (based on the value of self service or improved ability for employees to respond to customer needs)</li> </ul>
Lead Tracking System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of contributions</li> <li>• Frequency of update</li> <li>• Number of users</li> <li>• Frequency of use</li> <li>• Navigation path analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of successful leads</li> <li>• Number of new customers and value from these customers</li> <li>• Value of new work from existing customers</li> <li>• Proposal response times</li> <li>• Proposal win rates</li> <li>• Percentage of business developers who report finding value in the use of the system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revenue and overhead costs</li> <li>• Customer demographics</li> <li>• Cost and time to produce proposals</li> <li>• Alignment of programs with strategic plans</li> </ul>

Knowledge Management Initiative	System Measure	Output Measure	Outcome Measure
Collaborative Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Latency during collaborative process</li> <li>• Number of users</li> <li>• Number of patents/trademarks produced</li> <li>• Number of articles published plus number of conference presentations per employee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of programs or projects collaborated on</li> <li>• Time lost due to program delays</li> <li>• Number of new products developed</li> <li>• Value of sales from products created in the last 3–5 years (a measure of innovation)</li> <li>• Average learning curve per employee</li> <li>• Proposal response times</li> <li>• Proposal win rates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced cost of product development, acquisition, or maintenance</li> <li>• Reduction in the number of program delays</li> <li>• Faster response to proposals</li> <li>• Reduced learning curve for new employees</li> </ul>
Yellow Pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of users</li> <li>• Frequency of use</li> <li>• Latency</li> <li>• Searching precision and recall</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time to find people</li> <li>• Time to solve problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time, money, or personnel time saved as a result of the use of Yellow Pages</li> <li>• Savings or improvement in organizational quality and efficiency</li> </ul>
e-Learning Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Latency</li> <li>• Number of users</li> <li>• Number of courses taken per user</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Savings or improvement in organizational quality and efficiency</li> <li>• Improved employee satisfaction</li> <li>• Reduced cost of training</li> <li>• Reduced learning curve for new employees</li> </ul>

Source: 2001. U.S. Department of the Navy. *Metrics Guide for Knowledge Management Initiatives*. Available: [www.susanhanley.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/metricsguide.pdf](http://www.susanhanley.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/metricsguide.pdf)

### Box 6: Sample Process for Network Assessment

- **Member Consultation.** Preliminary information on the reason for the assessment (is it self directed or conducted by an external consultant; is it being done at the request of members; or coordinators; or donors?); discussion with members on what the goals and objectives of the assessment should be; request for relevant documentation.
- **Documentation Review.** The method in which the network creates proposals and reports to its donors. How minutes of network meetings and conference calls are conducted. How contracts with members, describing activities to be undertaken as part of receiving funding for participating in the network. This includes workshop reports, MOUs and governance agreements.
- **Interview Protocol with Individual Members.** A sample interview protocol is appended. Questions are framed to elicit from members signs of changes in research capacity; relationships with decision-makers, with other network members; and other changes resulting from their participation in the network.
- **Interview Protocol with People/Organizations Identified as those the Network is Seeking to Influence.** A sample interview protocol is appended. Questions are framed to elicit indications of whether the network's knowledge products and services were relevant to the needs of those people/organizations; how they engaged with the network.
- **Network Meeting Plenary Session Discussion: Locating Energy for Change.** An Appreciative Inquiry approach orients the assessment process towards positive experiences: what is working, what has provided excitement, enrichment, information to one's action—the premise being that when one focuses on the sources of energy within a group of individuals, the problems become less challenging, or less important. At a network meeting, in plenary, members are asked to share their thoughts and stories: (i) Describe the best experience you had with the network: when did you feel most excited about the network; when did you feel you accomplished something valuable as a result of being part of the network? (ii) What did you value the most about the network?
- **Draft Review of Assessment and Recommendations.** This should be circulated to all members for comment, verification of findings.
- **Assessment Report**
- **Work Plan for Response to Recommendations.** The report should not be the end of the assessment. Part of the assessment process should include the development of the work plan for the next phase of the network.

Source: Adapted from International Institute for Sustainable Development. 2004. *Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment*. Canada. Available: [www.iisd.org/pdf/2004/networks\\_guidelines\\_for\\_assessment.pdf](http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2004/networks_guidelines_for_assessment.pdf)

### Box 7: Sample Interview Protocol with Network Members

#### A. Network Effectiveness

What did you hope to accomplish through the network? Prompts:

- To increase understanding: Identification of a priority issue for your country/region; contribution to research on a priority issue?
- To have influence: on national (or international) policy agenda?
- To build relationships: create a broader coalition of interest and support for priority issue?
- Others

What did you hope to gain by participating in the network? Prompts:

- To gain access to other experts, to information?
- To increase influence and reputation of your own organization nationally, internationally?
- Others

What did you want to contribute to the network? Prompts:

- Your knowledge and expertise?
- Access to your own communications vehicles?
- Others

Who did you most want to influence through participating in the network? Prompts:

- Local decision-makers in different sectors?
- Your own organization?
- Other network members?
- Others outside the network?

What do you think has changed as an outcome of your participation in the network? Prompts:

- In your own research?
- In your interactions with local decision-makers?
- In your relationships with other network members?
- In levels of awareness and understanding nationally and internationally of the issues the network is addressing?
- Others

### **B. Network Efficiency**

What is working well in the network and should be continued? What did not work well and should be improved or discontinued? Prompts:

- Interaction with members (internal communications)?
- Use of the network's website (external communications)?

Did you have good support from your own institution for your work in the network? How did you integrate your network work into the rest of your institution's work?

Were the systems and procedures of the network satisfactory? Prompts:

- Contracts?
- Financial support?
- Correspondence, listserv, meetings?
- Interaction with coordinators?

Source: Adapted from 2004. International Institute for Sustainable Development. *Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment*. Canada. Available: [www.iisd.org/pdf/2004/networks\\_guidelines\\_for\\_assessment.pdf](http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2004/networks_guidelines_for_assessment.pdf)

### **Box 8: Sample Interview Protocol for Those the Network Seeks to Influence**

Is the person familiar with the network or with individual members of the network?

- What is their perception of the network's role or contribution to the issues on which it is working?
- What has the network accomplished or produced that the person thinks stands out? (prompt for workshops, conference presentations, research reports, e-mail lists, websites, etc.)

What were the major processes or agendas that the network was or should have been active in to promote their knowledge and advice?

- What knowledge products and services has the network developed that related specifically to those processes and agendas?
- What value has the network added to the debate?

Was the network's knowledge timely?

- Was the network too far ahead of the agenda?
- Was the information relevant to issues of immediate importance to its constituents?
- Has the decision-maker more/better information/intelligence than he or she had before?

Does the network have a good understanding of who its "constituents" are?

- Who are the key people who should receive their information?
- Who are the "connectors," who in turn could influence key people?
- Has the network built relationships with the right people?

What communications strategies did the network use?

- How did the person being interviewed find out about the network; how has he or she received key research products; were they e-mailed to him or her; did they receive notification from a listserv or a secondary source; how do they use the network's website, etc.

Were the research products in a format useful to the person?

Was the content credible, reliable?

Is this an issue on which the network is recognized as expert?

Where is the network positioned vis-à-vis other actors in this field?

- Was there a non-network publication or organization that they found particularly useful; how does it compare to the network?
- Has the network identified an appropriate niche for itself?

Source: Adapted from International Institute for Sustainable Development. 2004. *Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment*. Canada. Available: [www.iisd.org/pdf/2004/networks\\_guidelines\\_for\\_assessment.pdf](http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2004/networks_guidelines_for_assessment.pdf)

## Summing Up

Networks are an important alternative for individuals, groups, organization trying to influence practice. (Indeed, some prophesy that they will become the pre-eminent collaboration mechanism. Certainly, the new information and communication technologies are well suited to support, develop, and even strengthen them.) However, surprisingly little has been written on their strategic development and management, and even less is known about how capacity can be built. Still, rich seams of investigation relate to their forms and functions, key elements of which relate to the external context in which networks are set out and the interests of their members. Work in these areas provides a natural entry point for thinking about the resources, capacities, and skills that networks can offer or might need to develop. Moreover, since networks exist for a purpose, there surely is interest also in their use of evidence to influence practice, and ways to improve that. Lastly, more research is needed on simple but effective means to evaluate performance.

## Further Reading

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