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PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS FOR WATER, SANITATION AND HEALTH

Share and share alike: a checklist for potential networkers

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THIS PAPER IS aimed at practitioners, researchers, academics, any of us who are or are likely to become users and members of a network. Those of us in this position need to ask ourselves if we fully understand what networks are for, what they mean and where their value lies? In the rush to be part of the latest network, are we sure we know why we are joining and what the likely benefits will be for us? This paper examines what is meant by 'networking', describing some of the basic types of networks, reviews the critical steps involved in networking, and draws on lessons learned from co-ordinating networks to help potential networkers decide which networks to subscribe to. It draws predominantly on WEDC's networking experience as project manager for the Global Applied Research Network (GARNET).

Networking is a much used recent term that describes an age-old activity: people meeting to exchange information, knowledge and skills which are of mutual benefit. Common usage implies widely divergent meanings - to some it refers to exchanging business cards and talking informally at conferences, for others it is a formal mechanism by which opportunities within a given field can be tapped and exploited. Networking can mean all things to all people - a fact that may have diminished its value as a tool for education and communication.

This lack of clarity is compounded when examining the many ways in which the concept has been defined. Plucknett et al (1990) define networks according to criteria which include participants, purposes and mechanisms. Starkey (1997) suggests networking includes, 'any group of individuals or organisations who, on a voluntary basis, exchange information or undertake joint activities and who organise themselves in such a way that their individual autonomy remains intact'. Borba (1999) argues that networking focuses 'on organised interaction between members with a common interest who look for an added value to their activities'.

Despite this divergence, certain common features are recognisable. Typically, networks include *associations* (formal/informal; individuals/institutions), who share a *common goal or purpose* (open-ended/task specific and/or time bound); and who *contribute resources or time in two-way exchange or communication*.

Networking typologies

There are three basic typologies of networks:

- **Information exchange networks** ***rely on the sharing of information between members and a co-ordinator, and are normally either passive or active. With the former, information is sent to all network members, with minimal dual communication. Active information exchange networks attempt to collate comprehensive information from members and are based on a healthy two-way exchange of information, views and practice. The rise of information communication technologies such as electronic mail, the Internet, and CD-ROMs has transformed the experiences of this type of network.***
- Consultation networks *rely on face to face meetings of members in order to share information and ideas, normally through periodic workshops or conferences. Such networks can be established quickly and are unencumbered by the bureaucracy and hierarchical structures that can hinder the effectiveness of other networks.*
- *Collaboration networks* conduct activities that are jointly planned and implemented. Typically, they share resources, participate in design and planning and work together. In developing countries, these offer the greatest opportunities for building the capacity of personnel, and are favoured by the stakeholders in the research process. However, not all networks necessarily evolve into collaborative ventures, since the degree of co-ordination and management required makes this type of network relatively rare.

Why is networking popular?

With the proliferation of networking activities in recent years, it is not surprising that networks come and go. Not all manage to get off the ground in the first place; others enjoy an initial rush of enthusiasm followed by a gradual dwindling of interest and membership; those which endure over time, show growth and development in both levels of activity and interest, and in maintaining and increasing membership. The reasons why some networks succeed while others become moribund are identified in later sections of this paper, serving as criteria by which potential networkers can judge the value of any particular network.

The apparent popularity of networking can be explained by examining the benefits that it offers to the sector's key stakeholders. Funders, practitioners and users gain significantly from networking and have an incentive to nurture and encourage its development. Funders advocate the use of networks as a way of facilitating dissemination across country and regional boundaries and permitting resource sharing which may deliver cost savings. Practitioners

support networks because they reduce professional isolation and deliver insights into the discipline which may otherwise be lost. Users gain from higher quality and targeted information sharing.

What is GARNET and how has it developed over time?

GARNET is a network of researchers, academics and fieldworkers interested in promoting current and proposed applied research in the water supply and sanitation sector through informal, low-cost and decentralized networking links. GARNET is structured around topic networks (TNCs based on themes), local networks (LNCs based on regions) and a Global Network Centre (GNC) i.e. WEDC. Although operational aspects of the initiative have developed and changed over time, the conceptual basis to GARNET has remained largely unaltered:

- 1991: Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) identified applied research as one of seven priority issues to be addressed by its working groups.
- 1993-95: GARNET's activities expanded:
  - to promote networking in the sector;
  - to act as a focal point for applied research;
  - to collate and publicize existing WSSCC output and to act as a clearing house for enquiries;
  - to promote increased levels of support for applied research;
  - to liaise with other groups acting under mandate from the Council.
- 1995-97:consolidation of progress made with topic networks, decentralizing the operations of the GNC to more locally appropriate units (i.e., LNC's), and strengthening electronic forms of networking.
- 1997-2000: to address key recommendations arising from 1998 evaluation of GARNET, and consolidating the electronic networking activities of the network, which have taken greater prominence.
- 2000- : emphasis on synthesis of sectoral knowledge, cross-fertilization of experience between networks and language constituencies and the continued development of electronic means of information exchange.

GARNET's reputation in the sector has continued to grow as a credible and effective networking operation. It was noticeable that the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) Secretariat tabled a paper on networking lessons learned for the Montreal 2000 co-ordinators meeting with a view to mainstreaming GARNET experiences across WSSCC activities. In the Iguacu Action Programme, GARNET is listed as one of nine Manila Action Programme (MAP) activities to be selected as a priority for WSSCC mandated follow-up. The current Council emphasis on advocacy, communications and media is firmly anchored on networking experiences.

Lessons learned

Some of the key issues which have been found to be critical in the development and sustenance of network operations and which in turn can provide key learning experiences for networkers, include the importance of an incentive structure, decentralisation, use of information technology, evaluation, messages and contributions, quality control, monitoring activity and response times. From each of these, a checklist of questions has been devised to assist potential networkers.

Incentive structure

Without participation by individuals, networks become moribund and fail. There needs to be an effective incentive structure that triggers and fosters this. During the period of managing GARNET, this issue is the one that has exposed the most lessons to be learned, and these are summarised as follows:

- Tangible outcomes from joining networks need to be clearly stated and quickly delivered in order to convince members of the value arising from the effort of participation so that they become self-sufficient;
- Regular user surveys and feedback is one way of ensuring that network incentives and participation remain adequate;
- In order to enable consistent inputs and high quality outputs, network co-ordination needs to be funded, (unless the network remit and that of the voluntary coodinator's institution correspond closely.

Networker's checklist 1: incentive structure

- what I will get out of this that I do not already get from another source?
- what impact will it have to my work and knowledge levels?
- are the benefits of joining clear and explicit?
- will I be consulted by network facilitators?
- what is the commitment and funding of co-ordinators?

Decentralisation process

In 1996, GARNET decentralised its networking structure, primarily through the establishment of 'local' centres in developing countries, to enhance the relevance of research networking locally and to broaden the language of operation beyond English.

Experiences with decentralisation and self-sustaining centres have been mixed; in some cases networking activities last only as long as the seed funding allows with no local sources of funding raised. Seed funding can be insufficient to initiate networking activities or local funds may not be secured for knowledge management and information dissemination, which has only recently become a sector priority. In some cases, a culture of networking was already well established, in others it was not, hence the difficulty in developing a momentum to networking activities.

Networker's checklist 2: decentralisation
- can I participate locally?
- what is known about the co-ordinator/ co-ordinating institution?
- is there a clear list of network outputs and outcomes?

Use of information technology

New forms of information communication technologies (ICTs) (such as electronic mail and websites) provide many opportunities for extending and transforming networking operations, in terms of speed, immediacy and costs. GARNET has been no exception, and has developed electronic networking interfaces via a website (www.lboro.ac.uk/garnet) and electronic discussion fora or listservers. However, lessons learned through GARNET suggest the importance of providing hard copy options for information exchange between members, such as case study documents or newsletters. On-line discussion poses a greater problem, which can be addressed by the provision of parallel face to face workshops or seminars. This was successfully pioneered during the first phase of the OneWorld Water Think Tank electronic conference series, of which GARNET was a co-founding partner.

Networker's checklist 3: use of IT
- does the degree of reliance on ICTs correspond to the facilities at my disposal?
- are hard copies of outputs readily available?
- are there face to face alternatives to online debates?

Evaluation

Little published work exists on how to evaluate networks. Consequently many evaluations lack the rigour required to ensure a thorough analysis of strengths and weaknesses.

In general, network operations are much easier to monitor and evaluate than network impact, where difficulties of causality are commonplace. In the past, GARNET has conducted a series of 'mini-evaluations' on specific topics (such as listserver use) and one major evaluation in 1998. The purpose of this exercise was to assess the extent to which GARNET was achieving its stated objectives, leading to a reorientation of network activities and priorities. Issues identified included:

- operational and structural difficulties with the network;
- the importance of incentives for networking and user perceptions;
- marketing opportunities that arise from such a periodic exercise.

It is clear that mini-evaluations need to continue as a way of regularly checking network performance and user satisfaction. They also provide user feedback that helps to promote and market the initiative. Additionally, a programme of both mini and more substantive evaluations is suggested, at three to five year intervals.

Networker's checklist 4: evaluation
- are examples of previous evaluations available?
- how regularly are these undertaken?
- what are the scope and outcomes of the evaluations?

Messages to/from network members

Regular contact with members is an integral part of developing a culture of networking and communication, as frequent exchanges from the network co-ordinator will demonstrate to members a degree of concern with, and ongoing proactive maintenance of, the initiative. This is of particular importance in the initial development of the network, when momentum needs to be established. However, the frequency of contact is a finely balanced equation. High volumes of network messages will lead to information overload while low volume leads to loss of interest by members. In conventional hard copy exchange networks, the co-ordinator has some control over the volume of information that is released (newsletter publication etc). With electronic networks, this role is more critical and contentious depending on whether unfettered on-line access is provided (accomodating every member's idiosyncratic concerns) or whether messages are 'moderated' leading to the possible charge of censorship. In its electronic fora, GARNET has dealt with this issue by moderating, but only for relevance of topic.

Co-ordinator interventions that explicitly address the information needs of target audiences, regular stimulus of network members and synthesis of exchanged information are key lessons learned from the operation of GARNET. An example of such a successful activity has been GARNET's 're-broadcasting' of relevant, collated research material from a range of reputable sector agencies, packaged for listservers or networks according to theme.

Networker's checklist 5: messages
- how many messages are exchanged on electronic fora?
- do network messages address my information needs (e.g. synthesising exchanged information?)
- are member contributions moderated and if so, using what criteria?

Quality control

Irrespective of the magnitude of information exchange, good quality, timely information should be a key priority in all network operations. The dilemma facing many networks is how to assure quality without restricting network dynamics.

Prescribing or delimiting response fields in information exchanges is one mechanism to address this difficulty, such as initiating a debate on a relevant network topic within a framework of agreed, key questions. Such an approach has the added benefit of facilitating synthesis and analysis of information exchanges, as there is a degree of standardisation in responses.

In more structured forms of on-line networking debate (i.e., electronic conferences): messages can be reviewed prior to exchange for relevance, learning, innovation, etc. Such a procedure is not widely practised, as it requires what can be a prohibitive peer review mechanism and the negative impact on networking dynamics may be significant.

Networker's checklist 6: quality control
- what quality control mechanisms of contributions are employed?
- is it appropriate to the particular form of networking (info exchange, debate, e-conference)?

Monitoring data

In an effort to provide a baseline by which to measure networking levels, GARNET GNC introduced various types of monitoring systems, some quantitative (e.g. analysis of response times to information requests), others qualitative (e.g. surveying user experience). These systems, and the data drawn from them, have been used in various ways beyond simple monitoring of operations, most notably for publicity, marketing and reporting functions. These systems are not particularly innovative or sophisticated but they provide adequate indicators of the health or otherwise of the initiative.

Networker's checklist 7: monitoring data
- are details and results from monitoring networking activities readily available?
- do they include any of the following: analysis (preferably longitudinal) of listserver contributions, response times, user profiles and feedback?
- what do these results say about the network?

Discussion/conclusions

Experience as network coordinators has shown that an effective network is far from straightforward to initiate and manage. Consequently the potential networker needs a strategy to help them choose which networks will provide the greatest cost-benefits and value to them as members. The alternative is easy to do: to subscribe to countless networks that appear to be related to a particular area of interest, but which in practice, provide little support, new ideas and contact opportunities. The main areas in which lessons have been learned about the practical day to day operation of a network have provided useful checklists of questions which networkers need to ask of any network that they are considering joining. It may not always be easy to find the answers to these questions, but responsible network coordinators should be willing to address these issues, if asked.

- There is a profusion of WS&S networking initiatives, which might benefit from some degree of rationalisation. Failing this, a greater degree of co-operation and collaboration between them would avoid some of the significant duplication of effort, and lack of clarity to the end user. In addition, there is a need for an information-brokering role to point sector professionals to networks and their specialist areas of interest. Individual network coordinators need to make clear statements about the scope and purpose of any particular network, and to provide some evidence about the proven benefits of membership. A new network should detail intended benefits and what indicators and measurement of impact are in place to monitor initial success (Checklists 1, 4 and 7).
- The impact of decentralisation has proved to be mixed. Certain benefits accrue to networkers through message moderation and quality control, network stimulation, and impact evaluation and monitoring, are lost if networks rely solely on the interest and enthusiasm of members. Information (research) networks need to provide timely, authoritative and readable research digests and syntheses, openly accessible and at little or no cost. Additionally, such networks should provide two-way channels for knowledge providers to confer with knowledge users, who can help them re-focus research proposals, methods or outputs (Checklists 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7).
- 'The increased use of Internet (web/e-mail) and decision support structures (on-line/telephone help desks) has the potential to provide 'just-in-time' information services, thereby complementing more traditional methods and forms of disseminating and networking knowledge. The emphasis given to both dissemination pathway types should correspond with what is known about networkers' information needs and access to information (Checklists 3, 4 and 7).
- It may be possible to appropriately package research/knowledge and to stream it in the general direction of target audiences for networks; the trouble is there is no certain way of judging whether or not any impact has been achieved. Networkers can encourage these types of activities by supporting those networks who are making some attempts at impact assessment (Checklists 4 and 7).

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