Building a public sector knowledge management community of practice – the story of ActKM

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The ACT[2] Knowledge Management Forum was established in 1998 by 8 keen public sector KM enthusiasts who wanted to learn from each other and understand how this new discipline could apply to their agencies. Today ActKM (pronounced 'act KM'), as we are now known, is a community of over 400 people spread across the world and focused on knowledge management issues in the public sector. The following story describes how ActKM developed and what we have learned from the journey so far.

History and Purpose

The idea to develop ActKM was a response to the burgeoning KM literature and case studies that focused entirely on private sector companies. Very little addressed public sector organisations and how they were tackling KM. The literature assumed that the private sector experience could be directly translated to the public sector. We didn't think this was entirely the case. So in late 1998 I met with Kate Muir from Centrelink (Australia's social security agency) to suggest the idea of building a community of practice around KM in the public sector. Kate was the perfect co-founder for the following reasons: she was one of the few people in the Australian Public Service with the term 'knowledge management' in her title, she held a senior position and was an outgoing and vocal proponent of KM. I was, and still am, a KM Consultant and have spent most of my career consulting to public sector agencies. I now work for IBM.

The first meeting consisted of 8 people from Australian Federal Police, ACTEW (a local government utility), Department of Health, Department of Finance and Administration, Department of Immigration and Centrelink. Our first decisions were to rotate the meetings around the members' organisations and we thought it would be useful to have a online discussion forum to discuss KM issues online. Through word of mouth we grew to 60 by December 1999.

We knew that the utility of the community would increase with more members and that this would only occur if our meetings were interesting and the online conversation was useful. Despite this implicit understanding we didn't embark on a membership drive as such. Everyone involved was fully employed and extremely busy. Consequently membership growth has always been organic based primarily on word of mouth recommendations. In retrospect we did put into practice elements of a successful learning community, some deliberately and other just evolved, that had considerable impact on the growth and sustainability of ActKM. These elements are discussed below.

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[2] ACT stands for the Australian Capital Territory. ActKM started in Canberra within the ACT.

Goals and Guiding Principles

Based on my consulting experience and a desire to establish a common framework for the community to interact we developed a simple goal and a set of guiding principles. We included these in our FAQ document and post them to every new member.

The purpose and goal of ActKM is:

> The ACT Knowledge Management Forum (ActKM) is a learning community dedicated to building knowledge about public sector knowledge management. Our ultimate aim is to be a key source of public sector knowledge management knowledge.

In pursuit of this Purpose and Goal the members of the ActKM support the following guiding principles:

- Primacy of Knowledge – Knowledge is the essential resource an organisation must harness to successfully achieve its objectives.

- Drive to Learn – People are born with in innate, lifelong desire and ability to learn, which should be enhanced by all organisations.

- Learning is Social – People learn best from and with one another, and participation in learning communities is vital to their effectiveness, well-being and happiness in any work setting.

The core team

Probably the most significant aspect of the community in terms of providing a support structure was the evolution of a core team who were passionate about KM and kept the community moving forward. The concept of the core team gained clarity early in the community's development but not through shrewd planning. Rather it occurred through an incidental activity that was aimed at developing credibility.

When we consisted of about 50 members (mid 1999) we thought we would benefit from being associated with an already established KM association. The desire was to increase our credibility. After some searching we came across the Knowledge Management Consortium International (KMCI) and decided to become a chapter. This required us to elect an executive board consisting of President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and 2 Executive Board members. We organised elections and all the positions were filled. This elected group became known as the Executive (our core team). Shortly after the elections our relationship with KMCI disintegrated and we went our own way. From the outset we felt uncomfortable with grand titles so we renamed our roles and called ourselves convenors. The term 'the Executive' still exists and refers to the core team.[3]

The role of the Executive is to decide the events and activities we should develop for the members. We meet about once every 2 months, usually over lunch. There are two roles in the Executive that have been vital to ActKM's success: the Secretary (Amanda Lee) who ensures we have speakers for our monthly meetings, organises catering (wine, cheese and bickies), moderates messages on the online discussion forum and schedules meetings of the Executive; and the Community Advocates and Thought Leaders who pose questions, suggest speakers, promote the forum and provide ideas, references and create links between people and organisations.

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[3] As of 2002 the term 'Executive' has been disbanded. We discovered members thought the core group had executive power, which it doesn't, and where hesitant to disagree with ideas suggested by 'the executive.'

Online discussion forum

An online discussion forum has been a feature of ActKM from the very beginning. A significant portion of ActKM's codified intellectual capital resides on our online discussion forum and associated online library. Probably more significantly, however, is that the online forum alerts members to other people who are doing things that interest them. The networks and collaborations that occur outside ActKM are a major benefit of participating in ActKM.

We use Yahoo Groups (previously eGroups) to manage our online discussion. The services Yahoo Groups provide suit us perfectly. It is free, members sign up themselves, they decide how much email they wanted to receive and we have a group calendar that notifies members of events. We also have the ability to invite members to join our group. We have used this feature often to invite thought leaders to join ActKM with the view of increasing the quality of the on-line conversation. This has been an effective strategy and we now have some of the world's KM thought leaders participating in our community.

The online discussion forum was difficult to establish and sustain. In fact in the first 12 months we had to manufacture the online conversation. We rostered the core team to post messages to ensure that there was at least one message going out to the members every week. This activity became less formal over time and eventually became unnecessary once we reached about 100 people.
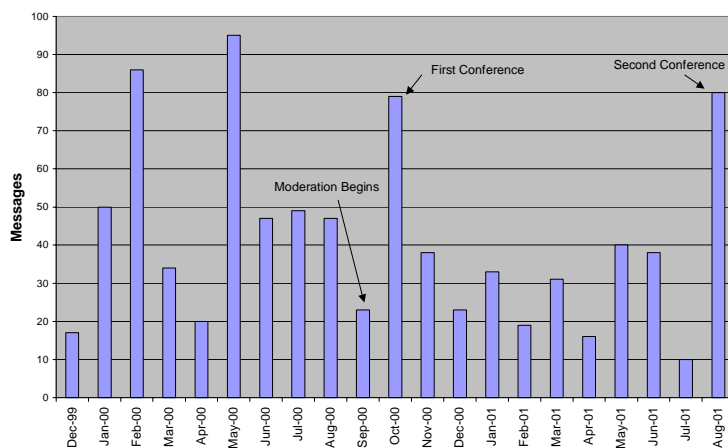

Figure 1: ActKM Online Discussion Traffic Volume

When we started out we didn't moderate the online discussion. This was a mistake for which we paid dearly. In August 2000 a member's auto respond feature (I'm out of the office) malfunctioned generating over 100 messages within a minute. We lost many members that day, particularly those that downloaded their email over a telephone line. From then on we moderate every message (a job done by Amanda and I), which has had the additional benefit of catching those emails designed as a personal response or blatant advertisements. After moderation the traffic volume diminished but quality increased.

Monthly Face-to-Face Meetings

From the very first meeting we knew it was vital to hold face-to-face meetings on a regular basis. We were determined to create an environment, both online and face-to-face, where people created trusting relationships. We knew the online discussion was unsustainable without face-to-face contact. With that end in mind we initially rotated

the face-to-face meeting venue but after the first 6 months we found this approach had a considerable management overhead in finding venues and notifying people when and where the next meeting would be at. At the beginning of 1999 we agreed that we would meet on the first Tuesday of each month. Our meetings start at 5:30pm and typically finish up at 7:30pm. There are always refreshments at the meeting, for which we charge $4, and they are quite informal – sometimes we just gather around a table for a discussion with wine and cheese at hand. On average we have 20-30 people attend each meeting. Uncannily it is nearly a different combination of people at every meeting.

Wherever possible we have public sector KM practitioners talking about the tangible initiatives they have implemented and then we all discuss the lessons learnt. Every now and them we have a vendor describe their offerings but we keep this to a minimum. I believe this focus on public sector practitioners ensures the community maintains credibility and relevance.

We have also noticed that the relationships developed at the meetings affect the conversation that occurs online. When people get to know one another a more relaxed and less adversarial interchange occurs online. Linking face-to-face meetings and the online discussion appears to be a critical success factor in nurturing this type of learning community.

Yearly Conferences

In October 2000 we held our first conference. We charged delegates $220 to attend, which covered the accommodation and catering costs whilst leaving a modest profit for the community to use in other events. This event attracted 70 people. The topics covered were mainly definitional describing various techniques and sub-branches of KM such as knowledge mapping, business intelligence, knowledge strategy and learning histories. The topics were a good reflection of the community's maturity in that we were just starting out on our public sector KM journey.

In August 2001 we repeated the conference and attracted over 100 delegates. It was interesting to note how the conversation changed in 12 months. Whereas 2000 was about definitions, 2001 focussed on case studies where people had implemented initiatives and were ready to discuss their results. In both cases we saw a spike in online discussion associated with the conferences (see Figure 1).

Community Demographics and Growth

Based on email addresses, ActKM has a mix of public, private and academic representation. The 'unknown' component reflects the significant number of anonymous yahoo and like email addresses in the membership.
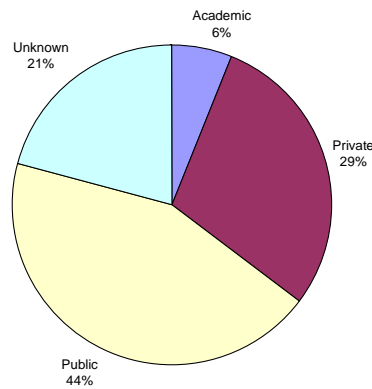
Figure 2: ActKM Demographics

It is important for this group to be predominantly public sector. We haven't done anything specific to create this mix except for keeping the discussion focussed on public sector KM issues. We did, however, make it a rule that the Executive must be comprised of at least 50% public sector representatives.

The growth of ActKM has been consistently increasing. The data illustrated in Figure 3 starts at the point when we began with eGroups. The first 50 members were loaded on the first day of using the system, hence the spike.

People do leave ActKM. We send an automatic message asking leaving members to briefly describe their reasons for leaving. There are two main reasons: there interests have changed or they are feeling overwhelmed with email and are getting rid of some of their listservers they are members of.
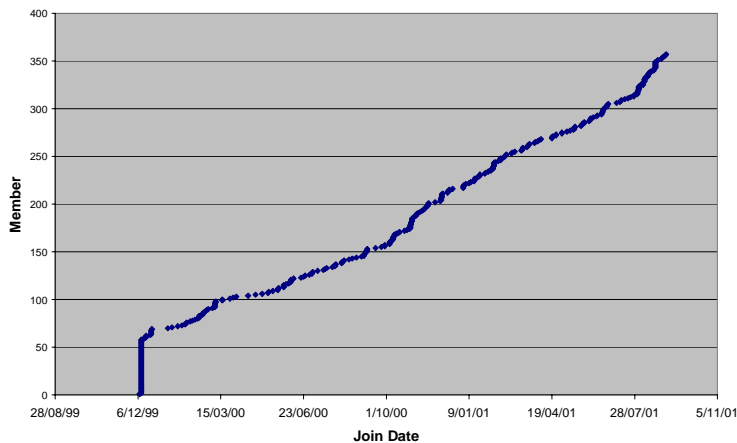

Figure 3: ActKM Growth

What we learnt so far

Based on my experience with ActKM I would provide the following advice to anyone setting out to create a similar learning community:

- Create a core team of passionate and dedicated people from the outset and identify this group to the community. Make the core team voluntary and enable people to move in and out as needed.

- Describe clearly the roles and responsibilities of the core team.

- Establish a regular schedule of meetings so that people know if they turn up to the venue on a particular date and time people will be their discussing the issues of the community.

- Establish an online collaboration environment.

- Develop critical mass of members quickly. If necessary 'pump prime' the online conversation by ensuring thought provoking emails are regularly appearing.

- Invite thought leaders to join the community.

There appears to be still a role for ActKM. Membership is growing and the conversation is increasing in sophistications. The core team is quite prepared to walk away whenever the need dissipates but that doesn't seem to be likely in the near future. If you wish to join ActKM our web address is:
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/act-km