



Chapter XXII

Cultivating a Public Sector Knowledge Management Community of Practice

Shawn Callahan

IBM Cynefin Centre for Organizational Complexity, Australia

ABSTRACT

ActKM is a Community of Practice for people interested in public sector Knowledge Management. Having begun in 1998, the community now numbers more than 550 members and is nurtured and maintained predominantly, but not exclusively, online. Utilising the Cynefin sense-making framework (Snowden, 2002a), this chapter analyses the ActKM community and provides a practical account of its history, purpose, guiding principles, goals, characteristics and dynamics. The chapter concludes with a summary of the lessons learned from the ActKM experience that others might find useful in cultivating a vibrant Community of Practice of this type.

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, a handful of people interested in the topic of public sector Knowledge Management (KM) met to discuss how they might learn from one another. By 2003, this group had grown to become a community of more than 550 people. On a daily basis, members of this community participate in an online

discussion forum, with some members meeting face-to-face on the first Tuesday of each month in Canberra, Australia. Now called ActKM (pronounced 'act KM'), this Community of Practice (CoP) continues to thrive and enhance its members.

This chapter describes the factors that have led to the success of ActKM. To ensure that a variety of perspectives is considered, the characteristics and dynamics of ActKM are examined in terms of Snowden's (2002a) Cynefin sense-making framework. The chapter: (i) provides a brief history and account of the purpose of ActKM, (ii) describes its characteristics and dynamics and (iii) concludes with generalised lessons learned from the ActKM experience that others might find useful in cultivating a medium-sized (primarily online) CoP.

HISTORY AND PURPOSE

The idea of developing ActKM arose in response to the burgeoning KM literature, including numerous case studies, that focused entirely on private sector companies. At this time, research rarely addressed the question of how public sector organizations were dealing with KM. Indeed, the literature of the time seemed to assume that the experiences, problems and solutions of the private sector could be directly transposed to the public sector.

Some practitioners in the field, including the present author, were sceptical that this was the case. In search of expertise from the public sector, a meeting was held with Kate Muir of Centrelink (Australia's social security agency) in late 1998. The idea was to build a CoP focused on KM in the public sector. Kate was the perfect person to act as co-founder of such a community. She was a senior and respected manager in the Australian public service and was a prominent and effective proponent of KM. Indeed, she was one of the few people in the Australian public service to include the term 'Knowledge Management' in her title. Kate's background and expertise complemented the interests and background of the author, a KM consultant with IBM who has spent most of his career consulting with public sector agencies.

In the summer of 1999, the first meeting of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Knowledge Management Forum was convened (this name later being changed, in 2001, to 'ActKM' to remove the reference to a single geographical location). In attendance were eight people from the following public sector agencies: Australian Federal Police, ACTEW (a local government utility), Department of Health, Department of Finance and Administration, Department of Immigration and Centrelink. The first two decisions of the group were that meetings would be rotated among the members' various organizations and that it would be useful to establish an online discussion forum. Through word of mouth, ActKM grew to 60 members by December 1999.

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