

Baseline study on Knowledge Sharing in the ILO

A baseline organization-wide study on knowledge sharing was launched in July 2007. The exercise consisted of an on-line questionnaire to be filled out by staff. The purpose of doing this baseline study is to find out what the ILO does well and where there are weaknesses in order to better focus resources and efforts. The survey tool can be used in the future to measure progress. All the data collected will be disaggregated by sector, department or work unit (in addition to other factors). It measured 8 dimensions of knowledge sharing as follows:

Creating a supportive culture

If knowledge sharing is to be a genuinely organisation-wide endeavour, it must become part of the organisation's culture - the set of basic values, ideologies and assumptions which guide and fashion the norms of desirable individual and group behaviour of its members. This requires both a positive attitude to learning, a commitment by everyone to contribute to the process and a willingness to legitimise learning by providing adequate resources.

Gathering internal experience

The process of gathering experience needs to be one based on sharing and exchange. This requires awareness inside the organisation of what it does and the impact of what it does - a clear role for monitoring, review and evaluation. There are particular 'paper' mechanisms which can be used for this which may include: evaluation studies, annual reports, documentary information systems, policy documents strategic plans and research reports. Other 'non-paper' mechanisms include meetings, workshops, debriefing and other forms of informal contact.

Accessing external learning

There are two major sources of organizational learning: what the organisation does and what others do. It is not enough to be clear about what the organisation itself is achieving, it must actively seek out learning from elsewhere. This requires a genuine openness and willingness to share its own learning (which means being willing to share the learning from failure as well as success). Organizations may learn a lot from looking at 'best practice' in a wide range of organisations in the corporate, public, and even the multilateral and bilateral agency sectors as well as the NGO world.

Communication systems

Communication systems - both formal and informal are the circulatory system for learning. Systems must be designed in such a way that they are not so "heavy" that information and learning sink without trace or so "light" that they evaporate. At the heavy end, there are reports (which are often so focused that they do not encourage a lateral transfer of knowledge - you have to be a dedicated seeker of *specific* lessons to read them) and training courses (which can be a useful way of distilling lessons learned). At the light

end, there are informal conversations which may have little lasting effect unless they are shared more widely or documented in some way. Internal email networks are beginning to play a useful role in filling the gap between heavy and light communication systems - individuals will pass on ideas and contacts by email where before they would not have considered writing a note or going to talk to a colleague. Team meetings, presentations, in-house workshops, briefing sessions and even in-house newsletters can all play a part in sharing information and learning between individuals, teams and sections.

Mechanisms for drawing conclusions

The process of drawing conclusions and identifying lessons learned is the main characteristic which differentiates organisational learning from simple information exchange. Drawing conclusions converts information to knowledge and then knowledge to useable wisdom. Drawing conclusions is a process which needs to be seen as the responsibility of the whole organisation and should, ideally, happen as near to the experience as possible.

Developing an organisational memory

Remembering is a crucial element of organisational learning. Although it is true to say that organisations cannot learn, it is reasonable to say that organisations can forget. If learning is locked inside the heads of individuals, the organisation becomes very vulnerable if those individuals leave or forget! A learning organisation needs mechanisms which enable an individual's memory to be 'down-loaded' into an information system so that everyone can continue to access that person's experience and their analysis of that experience long after the individual has moved on to other organisations.

Integrating learning into strategy and policy

One way of building lessons learned into the fabric of an organisation is to develop policy and procedures which reflect organisational learning. This provides the organization with a framework for decision-making and resource allocation which is grounded in the organisation's own experience and that of other agencies. If policy-development is seen as a participative learning process in itself, this strengthens the process of integration and builds commitment for implementation.

Applying the learning

The ultimate test of learning is the ability to apply what has been learned. Only when learning is applied in the work setting can it be said that a continuous learning cycle has been created.

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