
Knowledge management in peer networks

Disclaimer

This briefing is a summary of various resources. You should not take the information provided here as a given: the concepts and theories we found useful may or may not apply to your network. We also acknowledge that similar theories and concepts appear in systems change, community organising and social change literature.

If you find yourself disagreeing with or questioning some of the points in this briefing, please make a note of it, as there will be an opportunity to discuss during our online session.

How to use this resource

Reading this document front-to-back may be a bit of an information overload. It might be easier to dip in and out of it according to your interests and current network issues. If you would rather read the whole thing one go - that's also great!

This resource aims to:

- Provide background for the next session on 13th September
- Support you in learning about knowledge management in peer networks

Below is a table of contents that will help you navigate this briefing. Each section gives an overview of the topic and then poses some questions that you may want to think about in relation to your own network.

We hope you find this useful, happy reading!

Table of Contents

1 Definitions: What is knowledge management?	3
1.1 Types of knowledge	3
1.2 Processes of knowledge management	3
2 Why knowledge management in peer networks?	4
2.1 Knowledge networks	5
3 Examples of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing	6
4 How does it work?	7
4.1 Models for collaboration	8
4.2 Techniques for knowledge management	9
4.3 Underlying conditions for knowledge sharing to work	9
5 Troubleshooting: possible challenges and solutions	10
6 Conclusion	11
7 Further resources	11

1 Definitions: What is knowledge management?

“Knowledge management is the process of creating, sharing, using and managing the knowledge and information within an organisation”¹, community, or network.

Knowledge management is a very extensive discipline with many applications and sub-fields. For the purposes of this briefing, we’ll keep the theory light and only refer to a few key concepts. However if you would like to find out more, we recommend [Introduction to Knowledge Management](#) and / or [The Future of Knowledge Management](#).

To better understand what knowledge management means in practice, we’ll now look at (a) what types of knowledge exist, and (b) the processes involved in managing the knowledge.

1.1 Types of knowledge

In knowledge management we can generally talk about three types of knowledge:

- **Explicit knowledge:** usually recorded or codified in some way. It can be captured through reviewing reports, manuals etc., identifying expertise in a group of people, identifying gaps and recording these in a systematic way.
- **Tacit knowledge** is about understanding how to do things. This type of knowledge is created by doing, personal trial, error, reflection and revision. It is hard to articulate in ‘how tos’, so it is usually facilitated through shared processes e.g. working together, mentoring, as well as being transmitted through written content.
- **Implicit knowledge** comes from an individual’s contextual surroundings. It is shaped by and shapes collective values, normative behaviours, roles, customs, expectations of events... Understanding this type of knowledge can help with cross-cultural engagement and for influencing purposes e.g. using a particular stakeholder’s terminology.

1.2 Processes of knowledge management

Four key processes of knowledge management as outlined by [Randy Emelo](#) are:

1. **Understanding who the knowledge sources are.** This could be done through social network analysis or social mapping.
What knowledge is needed and where is it held?
2. **Measuring where, when and how knowledge flows.** Ideally, we would like knowledge to flow rapidly and freely from expert sources directly to the people who need it, with little lag-time and few obstructions. Monitoring the conditions under

¹ Girard, John P.; Girard, JoAnn L. (2015). [“Defining knowledge management: Toward an applied compendium”](#)

which this happens is crucial to understanding your peer network and the value it brings to its members.

3. **Getting knowledge to flow more rapidly and freely.** Once you understand how knowledge flows, you might want to make some changes to the structure, activities or dynamics within your network so that knowledge can flow better.
4. **Reinforcing knowledge with supportive relationships.** Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum: it is exchanged between people. Therefore, it would be nearly impossible for successful knowledge management to take place without taking into account the relationship, trust and dynamics that exist between people.

Q1: It is likely that you already manage knowledge in some way within your peer network. Can you think of an example?

2 Why knowledge management in peer networks?

“I once read that shared knowledge is power lost. But in a world that so desperately needs collaboration, shared knowledge can pave the way for greater action.”

from [Knowledge is Half the Power](#), Interaction Institute for Social Change

Sharing experiences, tips and information is usually an everyday occurrence in peer networks - so why bother with knowledge management? Doesn't knowledge get passed on and created by people in peer networks quite naturally already?

To an extent, this is true. Where a peer network is functioning well, it should follow that its members will be able to tap into their collective knowledge smoothly. But when it comes to deeper-level knowledge sharing e.g. measuring and monitoring knowledge exchanges and creation, or turning more implicit forms of knowledge into products and services for members, the benefits of conscious knowledge management may be more obvious. Simply put - knowledge sharing and creation is a lot easier when knowledge management systems are in place.

[Ruggles and Holtshouse \(1999\)](#) provide a helpful overview of the key 'uses' of knowledge management:

- Generating new knowledge
- Accessing valuable knowledge from outside sources
- Using accessible knowledge in decision making
- Embedding knowledge in processes, products and/or services
- Representing knowledge in documents, databases, and software

- Facilitating knowledge growth through culture and incentives
- Transferring existing knowledge into other parts of the organization
- Measuring the value of knowledge assets and/or impact of knowledge management

The processes outlined above reflect into tangible benefits at many different levels. The table below outlines some of the key benefits for individuals, their organisation and the peer network as a whole.

Individuals	Organisations	Networks
Helps people do their jobs and save time through better decision making and problem solving	Helps drive strategy	Develops professional skills
Builds a sense of community bonds	Solves problems quickly	Promotes peer-to-peer mentoring
Helps people to keep up to date	Diffuses best practices	Facilitates more effective networking and collaboration
Provides challenges and opportunities to contribute	Improves knowledge embedded in products and services	Develops a professional code of ethics that members can adhere to
	Cross-fertilizes ideas and increases opportunities for innovation	Develops a common language
	Enables organisations to better stay ahead of the competition	
	Builds organisational memory	

Table 1: Benefits of knowledge management in peer networks
Adapted from [Introduction to Knowledge Management](#)

2.1 Knowledge networks

Knowledge management is perhaps most familiar as a practice to those networks whose main purpose is that of sharing, aggregating and creating new knowledge. These are known as **knowledge networks**. Their purpose and activities are centred on learning. They focus on augmenting the personal capacity of individuals or groups in a particular area of skill, expertise, vocation, avocation or knowledge.²

They carry out three main activities:

1. Collaborative research and information exchange: systematic investigation of the target issue or problem

² Anklam, P. (2007) *Net Work - A practical guide to creating and sustaining networks at work and in the world*

2. Engaging with stakeholders: moving the research into policy and action, through improved communications and interaction with those who are in a position to put the research to use.
3. Network management: setting up and running the operating structure necessary to build the relationships among the participants in order to strengthen the research, communications and engagement processes of individual members and of the network as a whole.

An example of this type of network is the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). With lower levels of funding and an increasingly complex set of regional, national and global governing bodies, FSC functions as a federated network of national affiliates.

Q2: What benefits do your network members get out of sharing and creating new knowledge?

Q2.1: Do you consider your network to be a knowledge network?

3 Examples of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing

Below are a few examples to give you a flavour of what effective knowledge sharing and creation looks like in practice.

The Honey Bee Network

The Honey Bee Network was born in response to the tendency of academia to extract information from the grassroots or community level without ensuring that the information made it back into the hands and minds of practitioners. One example is that of a farmer who, after co-authoring a piece of peer-reviewed research on soil health, was then unable to access it due to academic protocols.

Dr. Gupta co-founded the Honey Bee Network on the core principle that in order for a knowledge system to become sustainable and create more widespread value, it must be authentic, accountable and fair. That meant that it was important to acknowledge the sources of knowledge. Furthermore, it was important to connect both knowledge and knowledge providers. Over the last 25 years or so, the Network has created a database of traditional knowledge and grassroots innovations, in seven different Indian languages, documenting and documenting more than 1 million ideas and practices.

[Read more](#)

Knowledge networks for UK social enterprises

Social enterprises, like any businesses, need the right support. But because they place a social or environmental mission at the heart of their work, mainstream business support cannot always meet their specific needs. This is why knowledge management and the

sharing of ideas and information is so important – especially if the sector is to continue growing.

From masterclasses, to consultancy services, to the production of toolkits, peer networking among social enterprises has proved to be invaluable for all those involved, as well as creating joint knowledge that will be available for future use.

[Read more](#)

REFUGE restrooms

REFUGE restrooms (formerly Safe2pee) is a web application that seeks to provide safe restroom access for transgender, intersex, and gender nonconforming individuals. Users can search for restrooms by proximity to a search location, add new restroom listings, as well as comment and rate existing listings. The many contributions are compiled into Google mash-up maps that offer critical and often timely information for those in need of a toilet. In this way, the knowledge of each individual, when aggregated, becomes part of an even more powerful base of knowledge that everyone can use. The information gained from running the app is now also serving advocacy efforts.

[Read more](#)

New Economy Organisers Network

NEON has three key goals:

- connect people, organisations and movements
- focus our movements on key battles
- build the leaders and organisations we need to win.

To do this, they run trainings, lead a network of organisers and work on a range of cross-cutting programmes. Recently, they have collated a range of helpful resources for groups and organisations and created a toolkit out of it. This is a great example of the intangible connections, peer-to-peer skillshares and tip-sharing being codified into a tangible set of resources.

[Read more](#)

Q3: Can you think of examples of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and joint knowledge creation in your network?

4 How does it work?

We've looked at the reasons why we should be consciously sharing, managing and creating joint knowledge in peer networks, and we have seen how this works in practice. But how does this actually happen? What needs to be in place for knowledge-sharing and creation to happen? The section below explores first some practical **models for collaboration**, and the **techniques** we might use within these models. We then dig deeper into some of the **underlying conditions** that might help create a productive knowledge network.

4.1 Models for collaboration

What forms can knowledge management take in peer networks? The table below summarises some of the ways collaboration for knowledge sharing can take place. These are not mutually exclusive, and indeed often multiple of these models take place together to form a 'hybrid' form of collaboration.

Model	Description
Internal knowledge management networks	<p>Exists within an organisation.</p> <p>The network purpose is to maximise the application of individual knowledge to meet organisational objectives.</p>
Strategic alliances	<p>Common in the private sector.</p> <p>Long-term, purposeful arrangements that allow organisations to gain or sustain competitive advantage using those who are outside the network.</p> <p>Share 'real value' e.g. money, time, influence</p>
Communities of practice	<p>Primary purpose is to build capacity.</p> <p>Participation may wax and wane depending on the level of interest.</p> <p>CoPs attract participants willing to share expertise in exchange for gaining skills.</p>
Networks of experts	<p>Bring together people more than organisations. The invitation to join is based on expertise in a particular area.</p>
Information networks	<p>Provide access to information supplied by network members, sometimes organised thematically.</p> <p>Passive in nature, users must come to the network - physically or electronically - to benefit from the work of the network.</p>
Formal knowledge networks	<p>Tend to have a narrow focus, generally cross-sectoral and cross-regional.</p> <p>More outward-looking than communities of practice.</p> <p>Productive and seeking to impact decision-makers.</p>

Adapted from [Strategic intentions: managing knowledge networks for sustainable development](#)

4.2 Techniques for knowledge management

What do these models actually 'do'? What activities do they implement in order to effectively accumulate and mobilise knowledge? Below is a breakdown adapted from a helpful article: [Knowledge Management's Social Dimension](#).

Accumulating knowledge

- Knowledge creation: learning by doing
- Knowledge acquisition: internalizing external knowledge
- Knowledge retention: minimizing the loss of proprietary knowledge

Mobilising knowledge

- Knowledge identification: uncovering opportunities for knowledge sharing
- Knowledge outflow: motivating potential senders of knowledge to share it
- Knowledge transmission: building effective and efficient channels for the transfer of knowledge
- Knowledge inflow: motivating potential receivers to accept and use the incoming knowledge

4.3 Underlying conditions for knowledge sharing to work

While it is helpful to understand the different models and processes of knowledge sharing, at the heart of each knowledge network are people working together, learning from each other and implementing that learning. So what are some of the things that help create a conducive environment for this to happen?

- **Trust:** Particularly when it comes to tacit knowledge (knowing 'how to' do things), trust is key in ensuring people feel comfortable sharing (possibly sensitive) information with each other.
- **Epistemic justice:** "Expertise" is a loaded word, that often privileges those who already hold power to impose their viewpoint or knowledge on others. Insisting on epistemic justice is key to creating a healthy knowledge flow. [Curtis Ogden](#) suggests. *"insist that there be real diversity in the room to start with and to stay curious and honest about whether people are simply reinforcing the status quo and systems they say they want to change at the expense of real progress."*
- **A healthy 'knowledge ecology':** Network members need the freedom to engage in multiple collaborative learning experiences. As well as having structured chances for

knowledge sharing and learning, there should be enough slack and space for network members to step up and trial their own way of sharing and creating new knowledge.

Q4.1: What methods or models do you use to share knowledge? Can you think of examples of peer networks you know of that use one or more of the models above?

Q4.2: Do you use these techniques in your network, and if so, what do they look like in practice?

Q4.3: Do you agree with the conditions for knowledge sharing? Is there anything we have missed or you feel is missing?

5 Troubleshooting: possible challenges and solutions

“Mutual learning is only possible when all participants are willing to be wrong ... willing to learn, to explore new ideas, to go off the map, out of the known, and together grope in the shadowy corners of new ideas, new plans, new territories.”

Nora Bateson [Small Arcs of Larger Circles](#)

Even when all the necessary pre-conditions are in place for a healthy ‘knowledge ecology’ to flourish, and all peer network members trust each other, problems can arise and knowledge can be ‘blocked’ at certain points in the network, or people may not feel they are benefitting fully from it. Here are some of the challenges you might run up against, and some proposed solutions:

- **Lack of time** is a recurring issue in any type of network activity. This is often because peer networking is viewed as a task that sits outside of a person’s ‘day job’. Unfortunately we cannot create more time (yet!), so we have to make difficult decisions about how existing time is spent. [Patti Anklam](#) suggests considering what the Return on Investment is on involvement with the peer network: how much time will you save thanks to tips or recommendations received from fellow network members? What will be the impact on the quality of your work due to involvement?
- **Task-based vs. knowledge-based work:** Different types of interactions take place in a peer network. Some are more task-based (e.g. making a to-do list; jointly writing a report) whilst others are more knowledge-based (e.g. discussing which governance structures are best suited to an organisation; sharing tips on how best to recruit network managers). Tensions may arise between the two, particularly with competing

priorities and tight deadlines. Often it helps to plan in more and less structured times for these different types of interactions, and for network members to be aware of these and their purpose.

- **Lack of trust / fear of competition** can be an obstacle to conducive sharing of knowledge. If peers are to share potentially sensitive information with each other, however valuable for others, they will not do so if they feel they are putting their own or their organisation's work at risk. It is helpful to remember that network building is a process, and that even if people do not feel comfortable sharing this type of information at present, this does not mean that they will never do. Think about how you could foster a greater sense of trust in your peer network - to this end, [Chapter 8 in June Holley's book The Network Weaver's Handbook](#) is very helpful!

Q5: What are some of the problems you have faced when sharing and creating joint knowledge in your peer network? How did you address them?

6 Conclusion

Thanks for reading this briefing - we hope it was useful to you and that you have found some of these concepts helpful for informing your own work. We looked at:

- Defining knowledge management in peer networks
- Case studies
- How does knowledge actually get shared and created in peer networks?
- Troubleshooting: challenges and solutions for a healthy knowledge flow

We look forward to discussing this more in depth with you on 13th September!

7 Further resources

- [NHS Knowledge Management practices](#)
A toolkit from the Department of Health outlining the different activities the NHS carries out in order to effectively manage and mobilise the huge amount of knowledge within the organisation.
- [NHS knowledge management toolkit: extended](#)
- [Knowledge management tools and techniques: helping you access the right knowledge at the right time](#)
- [Knowledge networks guidelines for assessment](#)

- [June Holley - Chapter 8 p. 146 - 167](#)

