Rural Water Supplies Collaborative: Best Ways to Build Social Collaboration

The Water Anchor manages a group called the Rural Water Supplies Collaborative (RWSC) on Scoop, the World Bank’s internal social collaboration platform.1 RWSC is widely admired and has the trappings of success: lots of activity, large group membership, and a group space that is consistently one of the most visited on Scoop. But genuine success? Not yet. This SmartLesson explains how RWSC achieved the success it enjoys, but also why it represents only a baby step in the direction of meaningful social collaboration.

**Background**

RWSC was conceived during the 2010 Water Week in a session co-hosted by the Rural Water Supply Thematic Group and the Global Practice Team for Rural Water Supply. Staff from the Water Anchor, in the Bank’s Sustainable Development Network Vice-Presidency, volunteered to set up and manage the group. The original idea was to create a virtual space to discuss a proposed joint study. The study idea died, but the group space lived on as a forum to expand professional networks and knowledge-sharing on rural water supply issues.

The current goal is to supplement, not supplant, face-to-face networking and live attendance at learning events. Those kinds of personal interaction are fantastic, but the opportunities for them are limited, especially for Country Office staff. Even Headquarters staff can attend relatively few Brown Bag Lunch (BBL) presentations and other learning events due to work pressures and scheduling conflicts. Personal networking over lunch and coffee is alive and well in Washington, but that too is limited. Often those kinds of personal contacts keep people within the silos of their normal work environment. Something else is needed to foster broader contacts.

Virtual networking and learning can complement the traditional approaches. Going virtual makes opportunities available 24/7 to all Bank offices, and encourages staff to let their interests and expertise be known to the rest of the community through written contributions to discussion threads.

With this goal vaguely in mind, RWSC was established in April 2010. Numerous initiatives to build the RWSC community were spectacular failures. For instance, RWSC arranged two big events with food, drink, and computers to demonstrate RWSC and get people to join the group on the spot. Relatively few people attended, and even fewer bothered to look at RWSC.

However, by April 2011, RWSC had the most monthly page views of the 597 Scoop groups, and has consistently rated among the top five groups on this metric since late 2010. At 167 members, RWSC is also one of the larger Scoop groups. Below are the top five lessons we learned about promoting a social collaboration group for a sector community of practice interested in rural water issues.

**Lessons Learned**

1) **Hire a talented social collaboration manager**

The grand myth of social collaboration groups is that they will manage themselves, because members can upload their own materials. That works about as well as never cleaning the office refrigerator because everyone will...
clean up after themselves. RWSC has two managers: one specialized in content, and the other to look after the mechanics of the group’s collaboration. The rural water supply specialist in the Water Anchor manages content by identifying issues, people, projects, and publications that should be brought to the community’s attention. That’s fairly typical for Scoop groups. The distinctive feature of RWSC lies in having a collaboration manager.

The collaboration manager enhances RWSC in three ways. Firstly, the group space has more content, more varied content, and better organized content as a result. Secondly, the social collaboration manager fosters all kinds of outreach activities. Implementing the next two lessons in fact depends on having a social collaboration manager to implement them—the workload is just too great otherwise. Thirdly, beauty counts. The collaboration manager devotes considerable time to the graphic design of the RWSC space and associated materials (e-mails, publications, printed materials, and so on). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the high aesthetic quality of RWSC products. Even the Sustainable Development Network Vice-President sent an e-mail saying how much she liked the newsletter in Figure 1. Surely part of the reason it caught her eye was the visual impact.

The position of social collaboration manager requires talent and dedication rather than formal qualifications and job history. It is an entry-level, part-time position for someone with a great graphic or artistic sense and an aptitude for learning and using software applications. The Water Anchor has hired one collaboration manager for 150 days a year to support its growing number of thematic groups and communities of practice, six of which have Scoop groups.

2) Buy a camcorder and swivel tripod

The video clips and multimedia presentations on RWSC make it stand out and have contributed to the increase in the number of users. Figure 2 next page provides an illustrative example of how these are incorporated into a

Figure 1: Excerpt from the May 2011 RWSC Newsletter

The newsletters are distributed by e-mail. Their purpose is not to provide information, but to entice readers to visit RWSC by clicking on the links. Good graphic design is part of the enticement. Readers particularly like photos.
discussion post. Clicking on the image starts the videotaped interview with Max Hirn, an RWSC member. Other links in the posting go to a videotaped presentation, a Post-Event Presenter (PEP) talk by Max, and a professionally produced film on his work in Liberia on rural water point mapping.

A camcorder makes these short video clips possible (along with a collaboration manager to do most of the work). The first videos were recorded by the Audio-Visual Department during presentations. That is fairly expensive and limits recording to rooms equipped with cameras. A camcorder and tripod cost less than one professional recording, and make it possible to film small and informal presentations on short notice. Now Country Office staff can have access to more of the impromptu networking and knowledge-sharing that goes on in Headquarters. The camcorder also opens up the opportunity to film people’s comments. That really expanded RWSC content. People are much more willing to be filmed in their offices talking about a topic for 5–10 minutes, than to write a post for a blog on the same topic.

A camcorder turns out to be a better technology choice than a flipcam, because the battery life on a camcorder is longer and it can work with a real tripod. In fact, the tripod is critical. To film group discussions and question-and-answer periods, one needs an adjustable height tripod with an arm to swivel the camera toward each person as she or he speaks.

3) Use e-mails to pull people to the site

RWSC sends out a monthly newsletter by e-mail about every six weeks. Unlike a typical newsletter, the purpose is not to inform, but to tease. The idea is not to give people a summary of the RWSC content in the newsletter. Rather, it is to get people onto RWSC in order to have discussions.

Therefore, the newsletter comprises very short paragraphs about new content with a link that takes the reader directly to a discussion, presentation, blog, or other material on

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2 The newsletter employs humor strategically. For example, the newsletter always contains a short paragraph encouraging people to join RWSC, with a link to a cartoon on the space. The security setting is fixed to allow only members to see the cartoon. Dilbert is particularly good for increasing membership.

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Figure 2: The Social Collaboration Manager enables RWSC to have more content, more varied content, and better organized content

The Social Collaboration Manager filmed, edited, and posted to RWSC this interview with a RWSC member visiting from Nairobi. The manager also inserted links to other materials on RWSC on the same topic, including an integrated video and PowerPoint presentation (PEP talk) that she produced.
RWSC. Figure 1 gives an example from the May 2011 newsletter. Each photo of a water supply manager is a link to a short video of him discussing the challenges facing rural water supply. A member can ask a question or make a comment by posting it in the Comment box under each video clip.

A second type of e-mail relates to Learning Events Online (LEOs), which the RWSC managers developed as a supplement to BBLs. A LEO comprises a videotaped presentation or remarks on a topic from several people, along with other relevant materials such as Web sites, blogs, and documents. The video clips and other materials are posted to RWSC, with links and an explanation of the topic distributed in an e-mail. A LEO e-mail resembles the BBL announcements that Bank staff receive several times a day, but with the difference that the presentations and information are immediately available on RWSC. The Question & Answer period and discussion, however, unfold over the period of a week or more, as people post their comments and others respond. Figure 3 shows the top portion of the first LEO, for which the topic was smartphones and water point mapping. This e-mail and LEO led to a large spike in membership, page views, and postings.

4) Make it about the members

Unlike a Web site, RWSC cannot succeed simply by making information available to viewers. The goal is exchange of information: networking, and knowledge-sharing among staff. Therefore, RWSC has to help staff get to know each other: their interests, areas of expertise, and project experience. Also, staff have to come away feeling that information-sharing is positive and worthwhile, that their efforts in this regard will be appreciated and recognized and will have some kind of impact. Without that personal motivation, knowledge-sharing is not going to happen.

RWSC is advancing toward this goal in baby steps. One step has been to show appreciation when people join or comment. A mouse pad is sent to every group member who uploads a picture for his or her profile (which then appears next to all that person’s postings). When members make a major effort, such as writing a blog or participating in a video, they get a flash drive. Those who contribute any kind of posting are rewarded with a pen. This may sound gimmicky, but members do express their thanks and appreciation for these little tokens of recognition.

Figure 3: Excerpt from the e-mail announcing the first LEO, RWSC’s alternative to a BBL.

In addition to the video clip of the “guest speaker,” this LEO (Learning Event Online) included a blog, videotaped remarks by several discussants, and Web sites. All the material was posted on RWSC, with links provided in this e-mail. The LEO caused a significant jump in RWSC membership, page views and posts.
A more recent step has been to change the tone of the newsletter. It now focuses on describing what members are doing on RWSC and elsewhere. The newsletter excerpted in Figure 1 illustrates how this is done. Photos and names feature prominently. The text is short, and the main message is about what members are doing. (For example, Christophe and Motaleb have commented on Ming’s remarks).

RWSC Quick Reads, a briefing notes series, will give further credit to RWSC members for their knowledge-sharing. A Quick Read is a 4-page synopsis of a major discussion that took place on RWSC, produced as a means to summarize the major points and provide links back to the most important information that was shared. Everyone who participated in the original discussion is listed as an author, and the two RWSC members who peer-review the note are also prominently acknowledged.

5) Find good discussion topics

Figuring out what questions and topics will spark responses turns out to be quite difficult. Most discussion topics have fallen flat, in the sense that no one posts any comments.

The spectacular exception was the discussion around water point mapping using mobile phones. This was the subject of the first LEO, which comprised 1 blog and 2 video clips on RWSC. Twenty-one people participated in the discussion. The blog got 9 comments, one of the videos received 21 comments, and the other got 12. Two new discussion threads were started with a total of 7 comments.

Packaging the material on water point mapping as a LEO got people to RWSC, but it was the topic itself that inspired online comments. The secret ingredient in this topic seems to be the obvious utility and widespread applicability of the technology, and that knowledgeable people were available to answer questions through RWSC.3

Other successful discussion threads have not elicited as many postings, but the answers to the questions posed have been thorough and thoughtful. In these cases, the questions all stemmed from face-to-face learning events and “webinars” by Water Anchor and Water and Sanitation Program rural water supply specialists. The presenters specifically asked participants to continue the discussion on RWSC. This served to bring the people most interested in the topic to RWSC. The questions were very specific, a little provocative, and tied to the discussions that had begun during the live events.

Conclusion

The attention and praise given to RWSC have been gratifying. This has been due mostly to the look of the RWSC group space, and the many associated activities such as the e-mails. Social collaboration on RWSC has been good—but uneven—as the last lesson explained.

The next activities will concentrate less on the RWSC space per se, and more on building ties within the community of members. This work will begin with a survey—plus many phone calls—to find out the services that members want from the Water Anchor, the types of learning events and topics that they are interested in, and so forth. What we know for sure now is this: it’s all about the members.

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3 In fact, the LEO “discussants” reported receiving a wave of e-mails. The managers posted an appeal requesting members to use RWSC to ask questions, rather than burdening the discussants with individual queries via e-mail.