Evaluation of World Bank Sector Fora, FY02

The Challenge
The World Bank constantly looks for ways to help staff carry out the Bank’s development mission. Staff learning programs aim to make the Bank a world-class learning organization where learning is closely linked to better business results. Such programs offer staff opportunities to broaden their understanding of the organization; network with people from different units; and improve individual, team and institutional quality of work.

World Bank Intervention
As part of the World Bank’s learning agenda, all Networks hold events called Sector Fora. The general goal of a Sector Forum is to bring together staff from headquarters and regions, as well as clients and partners, in events that attempt to enhance learning through a series of planned activities.

During FY02, five Bank Networks organized Sector Fora: Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development (ESSD), Human Development Network (HDN), Operations Policy and Country Services (OPCS), Poverty Reduction and Economic Management (PREM) and Private Sector and Infrastructure (PSI). Four Networks held one Forum and PSI held five separate Fora for each of its divisions. Event durations ranged from two days to one week. The number of participants ranged from 157 to 625 per event, for a total of 3,212 participants. The direct costs of Sector Fora events in FY02 accounted for 3.4 percent of the total learning budget. However, when staff time and other costs are factored in, this proportion increased to between 7.4 percent and 20.8 percent.

Underlying Assumptions
Through planned activities and networking opportunities, Sector Fora events are intended to enhance Bank staff learning. Specific assumptions are that:

- Staff based in the field and in headquarters participate together in high-quality learning events to raise awareness and increase understanding about their Sector’s strategic and corporate agenda.
- By using knowledge acquired from learning, staff will improve on-the-job performance.
- Staff’s behavioral changes caused by learning will lead to overall institutional change in the Bank.

Evaluation Methods and Instruments
The World Bank Institution Evaluation Group (IEG), at the request of the Learning Board, undertook an evaluation to determine the impact and effectiveness of the Sector Fora events as learning tools. The study addressed four research questions:

- What common Sector Fora objectives can be used to classify these World Bank learning events?
- What are the primary reasons that World Bank managers send staff to attend Sector Fora?
- How has Sector Fora attendance affected staff job performance, as measured by Overall Performance Evaluation (OPE) ratings?
- What is the nature and role of networking in Sector Fora?

To answer these four research questions, the evaluation used both qualitative and quantitative methods:

To identify the key objectives that Sectors believe are important for their Fora activities; a list of common objectives was composed, reviewed by senior staff and sent to the designated learning coordinator in each Sector for review and commentary. Eight common Sector Fora objectives were rated on a scale from 1, meaning not important, to 10, meaning very important. Questions as to why World Bank Sector managers send staff to
Sector Fora events were posed in survey form and were sent via email to 154 sector managers throughout the Bank. The manager questionnaire was composed of both closed- and open-ended questions.

To measure the effects of Sector Fora attendance on job performance, a quasi-experimental research design was developed. The research design examined OPE scores before and after attending the FY02 Sector Fora for matched-pair groups of Sector Fora participants and non-participants serving as counterfactuals. To control for self-selection the statistical method used propensity-score matching and compared only individuals with similar initial characteristics affecting the participation decision.

To evaluate the nature and role of networking at Sector Fora, focus groups and interviews were conducted with both participants and non-participants of the Sector Fora. These qualitative data were subsequently content analyzed. The study assessed two dimensions: networking patterns and networking objectives. Network patterns reflect with whom the networking occurs. Two patterns were identified: homogeneous, where interaction occurs with people of similar characteristics and heterogeneous, where interaction takes place with people of different backgrounds. The second dimension – networking objectives – assesses whether the networking was instrumental, meaning involving work-related issues or expressive, mainly for personal reasons. These two dimensions create a classification of four different types of networking (Figure 1).

### Participants and Response Rates

The list of common objectives was sent to each network for final review by its Learning Coordinator. OPCS and PSI included an additional reviewer.

To study the reasons why managers expend resources to send staff to Sector Fora, 134 Sector Managers were surveyed3 of which 61 responded, yielding an adjusted response rate of 45.5 percent. All managers were GH level or above. Seventy-five percent were male, a result consistent with overall Bank distribution in the GH grade category. Regional affiliations were relatively evenly distributed across regions. Network affiliations, however, were represented unequally: More than half of the respondents identified PSI as their network. This limitation should be considered when evaluating the respondents’ assessments of the value of Sector Fora and the reasons for sending participants to the Sector Fora.

Regarding job performance, FY02 OPE scores from 7,352 staff were obtained—2,158 for staff who participated in Sector Fora, and 5,194 for staff who did not participate. FY03 OPE scores were obtained from 1,688 Fora participants and 5,714 non-participants.

The nature and role of networking was assessed through six focus group sessions with 26 staff, seven from headquarters and 19 from country offices. Each session lasted approximately two hours. The comparison group with eight participants consisted of staff who did not attend a Sector Forum in FY02: six from headquarters and two from the Bank’s Dominican Republic office.

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3. Originally, the questionnaire was sent to 154 Sector managers, but 20 of them were ineligible because they had left the Bank or were unreachable, thus resulting in a final group of 134.
Evaluation Results

1. The dominant Fora objectives are learning- and mission-related.

The eight common objectives for Sector Fora fell into two main categories: learning-related and mission-related.

The highest-rated objective, sharing experiences and best practices, qualifies as learning-related. The objective rated second, gathering staff to share and develop a unified mission, appears to relate more to teambuilding. This objective expresses the idea that Fora will help instill a common understanding of missions and result in a more cohesive team effort. The third-rated objective, identifying problems facing the network and developing problem-solving strategies, also qualifies as mission-related.

The eight common objectives were relevant for all Networks.

2. Managers saw Sector Fora as opportunities for both team building and staff training.

According to respondent managers, the main reasons to approve staff participation in Sector Fora were to:

- better establish Sector priorities and build a sense of cohesion among Sector families (teambuilding);
- keep staff abreast of the latest developments and trends, thereby enhancing professional and technical skills;
- provide staff with the opportunity to solve implementation issues;
- give staff a venue to discuss and exchange ideas;
- give staff opportunities to discuss Sector organization in relation to Bank policies and procedures; and
- encourage face-to-face networking between headquarters and Country Office colleagues (Box 1).

In FY02, managers reported approving 1,477 headquarters staff and 655 country office staff to take part in Sector Fora. The three FY02 Sector Fora that managers approved most staff to attend were those held by ESD, HDN and OPCS.

Managers valued the Sector Fora mostly for their learning and networking potential, concluding that work performance improved as a result of Sector Fora participation. In addition, when asked to take a cost-benefit perspective, managers responded very favorably, saying that the cost is reduced because the Sector Fora are usually preceded or succeeded by other learning events or Sector events.

3. Sector Fora attendance had no measurable effect on job performance.

Only participants from PSI had higher post-Forum OPE scores than non-participants and only in the behavioral area of knowledge and

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Box 1. Content analysis of managers’ qualitative responses revealed strong positive attitudes about the value of learning that took place at Sector Fora.

When asked why they approved staff participation in Sector Fora, managers mentioned providing staff with the opportunity to

“learn from inside and outside the Bank.”

Some respondents emphasized networking as a benefit:

“What was the most important was the informal learning from other colleagues and their experiences as well as networking with others. actual training/activities are average, but the “side-talks” are what are really helpful, for example to talk about similar projects you are doing, get cross support for it, etc.”

“The advantage is improvising. You start speaking with people and then all of a sudden you meet someone who you have something in common with and then all of a sudden you develop a contact.”

Other managers spoke about their expectations of enhancing staff’s individual professional and technical skills:

“Take their experiences and bring what they learn to the clients and to their work. Also, at Sector Week, they can start seeing the development of new products/services and apply it to their work.”
learning sharing. These results give little support to the hypothesis that Sector Fora attendance has an effect on work performance as measured by OPE scores.

Focus groups with both participants and non-participants in Sector Fora, however, reveal that networking is valued as a means of improving work performance. Participants who attended the Sector Fora reported that networking at Sector Fora helps them establish new and strengthen existing work teams, thereby enhancing overall performance. By comparison, non-participants reported that networking outside the Sector Fora is difficult. Participants did not indicate that organizational learning occurred as a result of Sector Fora attendance.

4. Staff viewed Sector Fora networking opportunities as means of enhancing both their job performance and their ability for teamwork.

All participants reported engaging in networking activities at Sector Fora FY02. Sector Fora provided more opportunities for informal networking than occur during normal work days, and networking is perceived as the most important value of Sector Fora. The networking pattern most commonly reported was emergent rather than intentional. Most connections emerge out of the formally prescribed training sessions' follow-up outside of the sessions.

Heterogeneous networking for work-related reasons is the most common networking type at Fora (highlighted in Figure 1). Most participants attend Sector Fora to build relationships and to strengthen their work teams. As one participant described: “It is good to meet with country office staff that you don’t normally get to see on a day-to-day basis.”

Headquarters staff are more successful than Country Office staff in terms of networking and attending formal sessions as well as in networking outside the Sector Fora. Country Office staff reported having too little time at Sector Fora for informal networking because of too many formal sessions, too much structure and too little time set aside for group interaction during the formal sessions. Networking is especially important for Country Office staff, however, because it provides them with a unique opportunity to get to know headquarters staff.

Implications and Conclusions

Based on the evaluation findings, this study highlighted the following points on staff learning:

- Sector Fora are valuable for their contribution to staff learning. This is clear to managers who commit resources and see the Sector Fora as important for their training value. It is also clear to participants, who argue strongly that Sector Fora are valuable for their conduciveness to networking as a form of informal learning. Sector Fora have no impact on job performance as measured by OPE scores.

- Given the high regard for Sector Fora as training events, it may be prudent to retain Sector Fora and at the same time follow up on participants suggestions for improvement by allocating more time for networking and by paying particular attention to informal learning opportunities for Country Office staff.

Acknowledgment

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The Institute Evaluation Group (IEG) works with WBI’s Leadership Team and with the World Bank’s Learning Board to design, implement, and report evaluation results for staff, client, and joint learning events. IEG also offers distance learning and face-to-face training in program evaluation. WBI Evaluation Briefs report on these evaluation results.

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