Implementing a Collaboration Platform: Making Behavior Change Part of the Plan

For two global programs—a rural sanitation project and a hand-washing project with the goals of scaling up access to sanitation and increasing hygiene behaviors—how can lessons be shared easily and efficiently with a global team across six countries, including headquarters-based staff? That is what the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) sought to do in 2008 by creating a virtual collaborative workspace, www.learningtoscaleup.org. This SmartLesson documents the challenges of trying to create a cultural shift from communicating primarily via e-mail and phone calls to using a virtual platform. Although the above platform is no longer used, the lessons learned from the experience might help inform other teams seeking to create a platform.

Background

Project Descriptions

In 2007, WSP began working on two large-scale sanitation and hygiene projects: the Global Scaling Up Rural Sanitation Project and the Global Scaling Up Hand-Washing with Soap Project. Because WSP is a decentralized program, staff working in six countries on three continents plus Washington, D.C., were involved in these projects. And, because a key objective of the projects was to test innovative approaches at scale, the need to share and learn was critical for the projects’ success.

Originally conceived as a project, Scaling Up Rural Sanitation is now a key business area for WSP. It also aims to strengthen the supply of sanitation products and services at scale—leading to improved health for people in rural areas. Local and national governments are implementing the program with technical support from WSP. The second initiative, the Global Scaling Up Hand-Washing Project, tested whether innovative promotional approaches to behavior change could generate widespread and sustained improvements in household hygiene and sanitation practices in Peru, Senegal, Tanzania, and Vietnam.

Box 1. Team Charter

The Global Scaling Up Rural Sanitation Project team agrees to:

» Commit to positively reinforce those who share information
» See each other as a member of a learning team
» Take time to help colleagues learn
» Commit to sharing information and tools and to positively reinforce those who share
» Encourage open and continuous dialogue with the goal of being productive
» Promote trust, respect, and friendship
» Commit to personal learning to remain cutting edge
» Feel free to challenge assumptions
» Learn from other, similar initiatives both with our stakeholders and in other fields.

Central to both projects was a learning strategy that outlined how the Scaling Up teams could generate, share, capture, and disseminate knowledge about scaling up and sustaining rural sanitation and hand-washing programs. Because learning was such a central part of the projects, creating a learning culture was critical for success. A learning culture “must be built on trusting relationships, a continuous practice of facilitated conversations, sharing of learning, and a chance to engage in action-learning.” Given this need for the learning culture, the relevance of a collaboration platform became an obvious choice for the team. As part of the learning strategy, a team charter (see Box 1) was drafted to guide learning and foster the learning environment.

The desired outcomes of this learning process were knowledge products that promote advocacy and help implement cost-effective approaches to scaling up sanitation access and hygiene.

To answer the learning questions, relying solely on traditional communication (face-to-face, e-mail, and phone) was challenging. The team communicated primarily using e-mails, phone calls, and audio/video conferences, but the need for a virtual platform, where discussions would be better captured and files could be stored for everyone, became apparent.

The Knowledge Products

In July 2008, two WSP staff members and a member of the Information Technology (IT) team met to discuss possibilities for implementing a collaboration platform. The WSP team members identified the site’s objectives and its desired attributes with the project teams.

Platform Objectives:

- Allow the team to share draft knowledge products and discuss initial thoughts and project challenges.
- Help ensure that knowledge-sharing and capturing take place across all countries, given the time and geographical challenges.

By October 2008, the site, www.learningtoscaleup.org, was launched. The strategy for engaging the team employed several different tactics, with varying degrees of success. These are described in detail below in the lessons section. Although the site was never used at the scale set out by the objectives and has largely been phased out since, many lessons emerged from the experience, which could be of value to teams setting out to create similar platforms.

Lessons Learned

1) A successful collaboration platform for communication requires a behavior change and needs to be planned accordingly.

Switching from a culture of e-mails and phone calls to one where a collaboration platform is the place to go for learning, discussing new ideas, and documenting information is a cultural shift for any organization. It requires a considerable change of staff behavior. As such, implementation of a collaboration platform should be treated as any other initiative or intervention geared toward changing the target audience’s behavior.

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2 Ibid.: 13.
Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity (AMO)

People need to have the ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform the new behavior, which in this case is using the collaborative platform. This is consistent with behavior-change frameworks used by WSP and other organizations, such as Population Services International (PSI). The concept of AMO is used in marketing and social marketing to explain behaviors among target populations. Ability asks if the individual is capable of performing the behavior. Motivation is whether the individual wants to perform it, and opportunity is when the individual has the chance to perform it.

Planning

Before meeting with IT, the Scaling Up project teams were consulted. To increase motivation for the team to use the platform, the features they identified as critical were prioritized. Almost unanimously, staff members reported that discussions and sending documents created a duplication of efforts, because the same documents were being requested repeatedly by multiple people. In addition, having to go back and track down e-mails was an inefficient use of time. Given the initial feedback from the team, we adjusted the learning platform to fulfill both of those needs—a document repository and a space for discussions. Although the learning platform had additional features (news updates on the home page, event calendar, and profiles of users), the site’s main features were demand-driven.

We found that another area to focus on in the pretesting stage is usability. Working with a global team means differing levels of familiarity among the countries and team members with different technology. Some people felt more comfortable than others uploading and sharing files and using discussions. To bolster team members’ ability, a PowerPoint presentation with site instructions, along with a welcome message, was sent to all new registered users. For some of the team, this was a sufficient way of learning, but not for everyone. Moreover, team members had busy schedules, and expecting them to make time to teach themselves the site might not have been realistic for many members of the target audience.

After the site was launched, the Scaling Up project teams were consistently reminded that the site had a comparative advantage over the “old way” of doing things. The messages included minimizing duplication of efforts, clearer organization of files for the team to share, and better capturing of knowledge and lessons. However, communicating the comparative advantage was not enough to motivate enough people’s behavior to change the team norm.

One tactic to increase motivation was to recognize team members who were using the platform to share and learn with colleagues. Team members could send “virtual hugs.” A virtual hug was an icon that showed up on the person’s name when he or she was sent a hug by e-mail notification (see Figure 1). This was meant to positively reinforce those who shared information, which was a key part of the team’s learning charter.

To respond to the multiple ways people learn, a second training strategy—orientation sessions—was added. Phone calls with team members, using a technology that allows for screen sharing, was an effective way to walk users through the site. Unfortunately, in both countries where

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Figure 2: Second Design of www.learningtoscaleup.org

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we tried this, the Internet connection wasn’t fast enough, and we were constantly interrupted.

In 2008, the World Bank was not widely using Adobe Connect, which might have been a better option. By using Adobe Connect, everyone from the country team can train together, or a champion from each country can take the training and then train his or her colleagues.

If champions had been identified in each country and assigned clear roles, team members might have felt more supported. Because the project team for the site was based in Washington, it’s possible the country staff did not have the support they needed because of the different time zones.

People’s decisions about how to behave and whether to change a behavior depend on the social norms around them. The www.learningtoscaleup.org site was launched far ahead of the World Bank’s implementation of Scoop and other social collaboration platforms. Given the timing, the practice of using such platforms was not the norm, and as a result, only early adopters were highly motivated users.

Design

Another key lesson learned was from the actual look and design of the site. The learningtoscaleup.org site had two iterations of design. The initial look was very basic, and many of the team’s initial comments were actually focused on the design of the site and not on its functionality. The second version, which was implemented a few months later, had an improved look and feel (see Figure 2). By the time the second iteration of the site’s design appeared, many of the users were unlikely to come back. Pretesting helps identify unforeseen barriers to use, such as dissatisfaction with design. A key lesson from that experience is to invest in an appealing design up front.

2) Plan and budget for dedicated resources to manage and maintain the site.

The project team included a project manager, a member of the WSP communications team, and an ACS staff member. The entire Scaling Up team provided comments and feedback on an ongoing basis.

The project manager, who was on the Scaling Up team, kept the platform moving ahead, solicited feedback from the Scaling Up team, thought of new ways to motivate the team, trained staff when on mission, and provided critical user feedback based on her own experience with the site. The Web editor, who was part of the WSP communications team, worked closely with the IT team to implement the functionality the team identified as desired, to help prepare training materials, to provide training via phone, and to answer the team’s questions about the site. The same staff member worked with IT to troubleshoot and make site upgrades. The primary contribution from the Administration and Client Support (ACS) staff member was to provide maintenance after the site was launched.

The ACS staff was responsible for:

- Updating the home page message with current events
- Sending out a weekly newsletter with what’s new on the site
- Approving new users and assigning usernames
- Answering questions from the team about the site

Based on this experience, we found it important to lay out the roles and responsibilities clearly for each team member and to make sure each person had sufficient time to accomplish them (see Figure 3).
3) **Endorsement by management can increase use.**

The endorsement of the new behavior by management helps drive use. By modeling the desired behavior, management sets expectations and can help create a new social norm. Social norms are the unofficial rules and behaviors of a group or society. Research into how social norms change has shown the powerful potential that community leaders have to change norms, particularly when the behavior is something that can be openly modeled. Management can also help drive usage by reinforcing the benefits of the platform when the “old” (e-mail) ways are still being used by team members. Also, management can motivate staff to use the platform or perform some of the duties listed in Figure 3 by including these in their results agreements and performance appraisals.

**Conclusion**

Even though the www.learningtoscaleup.org site is not really used anymore except for document retrieval, valuable lessons have emerged from this project. This SmartLesson combines the lessons learned from design, implementation, and maintenance of the site. It also highlights behavior change approaches from the actual projects being implemented by the team. When implementing any new system or process for a team, keep in mind how difficult it is to change behavior, and make sure you have planned accordingly. As part of that planning, make sure you have allocated the proper resources and support.

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