



KM REVIEW

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Best practices, case studies and strategy

In a large organization with many regional centers, there are great benefits in sharing knowledge and good practices between those in similar roles. Here, Claire Chaundy describes how the BBC's Nations & Regions division established an innovative and successful program to connect staff from more than 50 local centers.

CREATING A GOOD PRACTICE CENTER AT THE BBC

Using a physical space to promote knowledge sharing

By Claire Chaundy, BBC



Claire Chaundy is a good practice consultant with the BBC's central KM team, with whom she has worked since 2001. She designed and now delivers the BBC's first KM curriculum, which includes workshops on good practice sharing for teams, establishing communities of practice and personal networking.

The fifth anniversary of the establishment of the BBC's central knowledge management team seems a good time to share some lessons learned so far. In this article we'll provide a brief overview of current KM activity at the BBC and then focus on a case study describing how Nations & Regions, the largest division in the BBC, has used a physical space to promote knowledge sharing.

KM at the BBC

KM activity at the BBC is split into three distinct areas: social tools, skills training and strategic support.

1. *Social tools*: involves the introduction, development and support of social computing tools, including a central bulletin board, expertise and interest group directory and more recently, wiki and blogging software. The aim is to let staff work collaboratively, network and share knowledge irrespective of their physical location.
2. *Skills training*: involves the provision of regular free workshops which all staff can attend, plus individual advice and coaching on all subjects covered by the workshops.

3. *Strategic support*: involves providing advice and support to managers and leaders wishing to introduce KM initiatives. This varies from supporting one-off strategic projects to ongoing initiatives.

Establishing good practice leaders

Nations & Regions (N&R) is the largest division in the BBC. It currently employs nearly 7,000 staff, about 27 percent of the BBC's entire workforce. Teams are based across the UK in more than 50 main centers, including 40 local radio stations across England, six dedicated radio services for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and a number of regional television centers.

During the summer of 2001 the KM team was approached by a representative of N&R's board to help develop a divisional good practice sharing plan. An increasing number of locally organized good practice events were being held by N&R staff across the UK and N&R felt some strategic direction would help maximize their impact.

By January 2002 a plan was agreed that involved the nomination of four Good Practice Leaders (GPLs), one each for Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the English regions. The GPLs would spend one day per week delivering strategically important good practice sharing projects nominated by N&R senior management and promote good practice sharing in their local area.

We provided a two-day workshop for them in

The British Broadcasting Corporation

is the national publicly funded broadcaster of the UK. The BBC operates television channels, radio networks and online news services. It employs over 27,000 staff and has a revenue of US\$6.8 billion.

KEYPOINTS

- Gathering communities of staff who perform the same role can provide far greater awareness of – and economies in – good practice throughout an organization.
- A crucial factor in the success of a good practice centre is the creation of an innovative and exciting physical space and a strong brand identity.
- For an initiative to achieve credibility and goodwill among staff, it should be speaking their language rather than KM jargon. Staff need to immediately feel that it is really for them and relates to their work.

April 2002 which introduced basic KM concepts, discussed how to identify the knowledge component of N&R activity and planned next steps for their strategic projects. When Rachael Lewis joined us in September 2002 she supported the GPLs exclusively. She explains, “The KM team had learned that we’d need to provide very hands-on support to begin with before we could step back and adopt a more consultancy-based approach.”

Effective communication was vital as Lewis and the GPLs were located across the UK. They held weekly phone conferences and monthly face-to-face meetings in rotating locations. Since then the GPLs have supported the establishment of various communities of practice across N&R and used KM techniques like peer assists to support their own local projects.

Envisioning a good practice center

Shortly after the GPLs were established, a change in approach to certain training activities meant that N&R’s Bristol Training Centre would become available. Key stakeholders from N&R and BBC Training & Development met in August 2002 to discuss how to evolve the use of the space. It was an exciting opportunity as it provided the chance to establish cost-effective in-house facilities for KM activities organized strategically by the GPLs and autonomously by N&R staff.

Gerald Hine-Haycock, head of the Bristol Training Centre, approached us for input soon after these initial discussions began. He explains, “Our hope was that using the center to gather communities of staff who perform the same role would provide far greater awareness of – and economies in – good practice around the country. In addition there was the value of people meeting those who do almost exactly the same job. We felt this should happen in a creative, exciting and safe atmosphere where participants would feel happy to share their experiences and be inspired to enhance working practices.”

The proposal to evolve the Bristol center into a fully fledged good practice center for journalism in its widest sense was accepted. The center reopened in September 2003 as the SON&R Centre (SON&R is short for Sharing Opportunities across Nations & Regions). To date, 3,500 staff have used SON&R and it was full for 50 weeks during its first year.

An indication of the unique nature of SON&R has been reflected recently in international attention for what SON&R is trying to achieve. “We have had visitors from America, France, Australia and Norway. A recent presentation to 70 broadcasters at the 2004

European Broadcasting Union forum in Birmingham resulted in many requests for information and examples of the kind of events we run,” says Hine-Haycock.

Leadership buy-in is often seen as the key to the acceptance of KM. Rachael Lewis recently asked Pat Loughrey (Director of Nations & Regions) why he invested in SON&R. Reflecting on that conversation, she says, “He wanted to help staff improve their storytelling skills across all platforms. He also wanted to do more to promote the introduction of new technologies and ways of working. He saw the SON&R proposal as the most pragmatic and creative way to support staff with developing these skills.”

This shows how critical it is for KM teams to encourage and monitor organizational readiness when promoting KM. Loughrey was already reaching his own conclusions about the importance of KM in supporting long-term strategy when he received the SON&R proposal and had already experienced value through the work of the GPLs. In addition, the proposal itself responded to growing “spontaneous” interest in KM from staff at the coal face.

The SON&R Centre: how it works

The SON&R Centre has three rooms, the largest of which can accommodate up to 35 participants. Events run between two and five days and are free to attend. Participants’ home departments pay travel and accommodation costs. This enables managers to demonstrate that they see value in an individual attending. In turn, individuals make the most of the opportunity and appreciate the local budget spent to support their attendance.

Events are focused on specific job roles, TV or radio programs or skills. All have been instrumental in establishing communities of practice across N&R. As Pat Loughrey says, “People doing similar jobs meet – perhaps for the first time – to review each other’s output, swap ideas and inspire each other. Events include masterclasses, inspirational speakers from inside and outside the BBC and suggestions for future strategy and direction. One of our crucial aims is to share conclusions with the widest possible audience.”

- Role-based specific sessions have brought together sports journalists, district reporters, weekend producers, assistant editors, football commentators, religious producers, broadcast assistants, weather presenters – the list goes on – all of whom don't normally meet to share good practice and innovate. Program-based sessions have included bringing together staff who work on the evening news or the Politics Show. Skills-based sessions have focused on storytelling for radio, journalism for film-makers, and online news writing.

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A key element is that for many events participants meet on the evening before the event. This provides an opportunity to meet each other and their facilitators, to network and build relationships. They also bring examples of output which the facilitator listens to or watches overnight and includes at relevant points during the session.

One manager from N&R said, “Our staff have been going to SON&R and coming back very inspired. They like the environment, they love the idea that they are a bit ahead of the game and it makes them feel good that they can give ideas to other people and that people are ready to accept their ideas. They feel that they are valued.”

Facilitators gain as much from the sessions as the participants, both in terms of personal development and in helping to encourage the

flow of knowledge. David Clayton (Editor, Radio Norfolk) has facilitated sessions at SON&R since it opened and says, “The simple act of sharing knowledge and practices bolsters confidence. You're delighted when something you do attracts the praise of your peers who you wouldn't have known prior to meeting at SON&R. And you're really relieved to find that there's a collective problem and it's not just you. More than a few delegates have actually said words to the effect that: ‘Suddenly I don't feel so lonely any more!’ You can start finding solutions together. The atmosphere of sharing good practice is wholly different from having a succession of people downloading facts and knowledge at you.”

Clayton is now a strong evangelist for KM back in his day job and says, “Since I've been back at my editor's desk, it's quite clear that there's a huge benefit from getting more people together more frequently from different stations. We've swapped editors, borrowed presenters and cross-fertilized broadcast assistants!”

Developing a physical space and brand

A crucial factor in SON&R's success is the nature of the physical space and its brand identity. Lessons learned from other areas of the BBC were fed into the redevelopment work. Center head Gerald Hine-Haycock simultaneously worked hard to establish a clear identity for SON&R through its brand and marketing – but within a tiny budget of under UK£10,000.

He feels this was critical. “The center is an experience,” he explains. “When people walk in they are surprised to find no desks, no phones, no PCs. The technology is cutting edge. From the outset people feel special to be invited.” A testament to his work is the speed with which the center was embraced by N&R staff. “Within a couple of months of opening people were talking about SON&R as part of their everyday language. I strongly believe this is due to our attention to detail – plus constantly reiterating our aims and methods,” he says.

Another key is his use of language. Phrases like “knowledge management” and “peer review” do not appear in any SON&R communications or publicity. Instead the language is rooted in the values of staff and focuses on audiences, journalism, creativity and innovation. SON&R wouldn't have achieved credibility and goodwill among N&R staff if they hadn't perceived it as something that was really for them and relates to their work. KM jargon would have put them off entirely.

Case study: “Front of house” staff

With 50 main centers across the UK, Nations & Regions staff who work in reception areas meet thousands of members of the public every year. In March 2003 over 30 “front of house” staff came together for the first time including receptionists, security and information center personnel. Some were BBC staff, others were from external service partners.

Before the event 10 participants spent a day on internal job swaps and a further 10 visited other organizations, such as the Eden Project. The aim was to discover internal and external good practice and to report back to the wider group. Additional good practice ideas were generated at the event itself and have since been adopted, such as creating a ‘Front of House Guide.’ A key outcome was that a core group would meet regularly to coordinate community activities.

A further session, with more job swaps and external visits, was repeated in October 2004 to great success. This time it was sponsored by SON&R. Sara Hickman (Facilities Operations Manager for BBC English Regions) said, “There was a great sense of sharing taking place as well as uniting. People left knowing they shared similar problems, they are not alone and that there is a community out there that can help solve their problems.”

Strategic leadership

Two key groups now co-ordinate the direction of the SON&R Centre. The Executive Group meets several times a year to ensure overall N&R strategy informs SON&R's activities and reflects divisional priorities. In addition a User Group meets six times a year, consisting of representatives from across N&R who feed ideas for activities and events up to the Executive Group for prioritization.

With its agenda being driven so strategically and its presence providing such a strong focus for knowledge sharing, a natural progression during 2004 was to integrate the activities of the original four GPLs with SON&R. However, local good practice champions across the division continue to promote activities in their own areas and are crucial in helping communities of practice to flourish.

In this context, Pat Loughrey's role as sponsor has been to strike a balance between being hands-on and hand-off. As Rachael Lewis says, "He provides strategic leadership and focus. He believes part of SON&R's success is the simplicity of the idea and is committed to keeping it that way by ensuring the focus remains on good practice activities. However he also gives clear ownership of SON&R to staff."

What would we do differently?

The concept of using a physical space to promote KM can be replicated and we've discussed some key success factors that might help you to do this. But what would we do differently if starting from scratch?

Gerald Hine-Haycock suggests even more focus on session content. He recommends having a "creative producer" from the outset to look after the commission, design and content of workshops at SON&R and to advise facilitators on how to improve their events. He also suggests enlisting subject matter experts. For example, he is bringing in someone to co-ordinate and advise on TV production skills. His last suggestion is to create a space that can enable events can be run simultaneously. This enables you to maximize your use of the space and is something that is quite challenging with the present layout of SON&R.

Loughrey reflects on the importance of the atmosphere and design of the space, reinforced by clear, strong branding. He's adamant that if the physical space had continued to be called the "Bristol Training Centre" it wouldn't have signified any change in focus or tone to staff. He also feels that leadership with passion and commitment is crucial. His final suggestion is to carefully consider how much space you really need. He would definitely have used a bigger space as SON&R sometimes struggles to cope with demand.

Key lessons learned

What worked:

- Building a brand identity that resonates with staff
- Creating a "wow" factor to make the experience different from the minute you arrive
- Making the center free at point of use but associating participants with the patronage of local managers
- Providing lots of informal bonding time for participants
- Using staff to facilitate coupled with expert speakers
- Ensuring meaningful sponsorship and strategic direction


What the BBC would do differently next time:

- Have a creative producer on board from day one
- Use subject matter experts to focus on specific areas
- Use a bigger space with a layout that enables more than one event to be run at once

From the central KM team's point of view, Rachael Lewis supports the notion that the strong branding and sense of ownership in N&R have been the key success factors for SON&R. She says, "Key learning for me has been around the differences between SON&R's divisional approach and our earlier work with the GPLs that focused on individual projects or communities. A physical space, designated staff, a strong brand and supportive leadership made the impact and value added to the business much higher. I would recommend this approach with other divisions."

Challenges for the future

Our work with N&R has been a fascinating part of the "strategic support" aspect of our work. "We've always worked on the principle that we'll fully support divisions wishing to promote knowledge sharing in a strategic, top-down way but on the proviso that we build their capability and gradually reduce our support to an ad hoc basis. We feel we've achieved that with N&R," concludes Lewis.

The challenge for us now is to continually improve how we promote and monitor organizational readiness for KM. A clear strategy for spotting those teams, department and divisions that are at a tipping point will help us to make the most of opportunities to help the BBC evolve its KM activities. Behind the scenes we've been developing a robust stakeholder and contact management plan. We are also refining our KM self-assessment tools, both to help us when advising staff and to continue to empower managers to start their own KM initiatives. 

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