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Human resources management, knowledge sharing and organizational learning

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This Brief reports the results of a study that explored the role of human resources policies and practices in fostering knowledge sharing and organizational learning. The study examined six centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and six organizations that are considered to be leaders in the field of knowledge sharing and organizational learning. Five of these were public or non-governmental and the sixth was a private corporation. All the organizations studied (including the CGIAR centres) are promoting knowledge sharing and organizational learning to some extent, generally in the context of broader organizational change. Some have comprehensive, integrated approaches to organizational change, but most efforts tend to be small-scale, even ad hoc. It is sometimes assumed that CGIAR centres are behind other research and development organizations in knowledge sharing and organizational learning, but our findings indicate that, while most of the centres in the study lack comprehensive strategies, some are actively pursuing promising initiatives from which others can learn. Three key factors seem to influence the success of efforts to foster organizational change through knowledge sharing and organizational learning:

- public support from top leaders for such initiatives;
- an explicit recognition of the way in which the organization's business strategies are reinforced by knowledge sharing and organizational learning; and
- effective internal communication policies and practices that support knowledge sharing and organizational learning.

The Brief closes with twelve suggestions for CGIAR managers who wish to engage the human resource management function of their centres for more effective knowledge sharing and organizational learning as well as broader organizational change.

Introduction

The study was undertaken jointly by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) Knowledge Sharing (KS) Project and the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative with the objective of improving understanding of the links between human resources policies and practices and a broad set of progressive management approaches that include organizational learning and KS. The study reviewed human resources policies and practices in 12 organizations, six within and six outside the CGIAR, and identified fruitful avenues for improving knowledge sharing and organizational learning throughout the CGIAR system.

Study approach

The study was exploratory in two senses. Firstly, it explored a management area that is relatively new to the CGIAR, and second, it was based on information provided by only a small number of organizations. The six CGIAR centres were: the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and the WorldFish Center. The six non-CGIAR organizations included five international development agencies: Bellanet, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the World

Bank; and one private sector corporation, which requested anonymity.

Bellanet is housed within the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and its mission is to promote knowledge management and organizational learning in international development organizations. Bellanet aims to support effective development practice by sharing its expertise in information and communication technologies as well as its skills in facilitating organizational learning and the sharing of knowledge.

Six of the eight heads of the human resources units or Directors of CGIAR centres were invited to participate in the study and six responded positively. The six non-CGIAR organizations were invited to participate in the study because of their reputation as actively promoting KS and organizational learning. One goal of the study was to determine how far CGIAR centres lag behind the leaders in this field. The study had hoped to include comparisons with more private firms, but this was not possible due to a lack of response. Most of the non-CGIAR organizations were international development organizations that have working contact with the CGIAR.

In each of the 12 cases, one or more persons were interviewed by telephone. Individuals were selected because of their intimate knowledgeable of the area under study. Three kinds of corporate documents were also reviewed: a) human resources policies and procedures; b) documents describing efforts to improve KS and organizational learning; and c) statements of organizations' vision, mission, values and strategies. Some of these were obtained from web sites and some from the interviewees.

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The study findings are reported in relation to the six human resources management dimensions identified in Figure 1.

Leadership and strategy

The success of efforts to promote knowledge sharing, organizational learning, innovation and teamwork depends on having the support of senior management. In some organizations (e.g. BMZ, CIDA, SDC and the World Bank), the directors have championed KS and organizational learning for a number of years, and the practices are firmly entrenched in day-to-day operations. Indeed, the mission, vision and strategy of both IWMI and the World Bank are explicitly and directly linked to KS and organizational learning. IWMI's mission statement is clear: 'By 2008, IWMI will be a world-class impact, performance, and service oriented Knowledge Center, specializing in research on Water, Food and Environment'.

The Bellanet Secretariat enjoys sufficient top-level support and autonomy within IDRC to be able to innovate in its internal management practices. In many organizations, and in the CGIAR in general, a slow evolution is becoming evident, moving from an exclusive focus on outputs (e.g. publications) towards inclusion of learning from peers and partners, sharing information and investing time in disseminating lessons learned.

The strategy documents and mission statements of all 15 CGIAR centres include language that supports and encourages knowledge sharing – referring to innovation, reliance on networks, partnerships and collaboration, generating and disseminating knowledge and technology, sharing knowledge, information exchange and capacity building to position the centres and their partners for success. However, language alone is insufficient. An explicit and operational knowledge management strategy is needed if efforts to become a learning organization are to have an impact on organizational performance.

Organization and culture

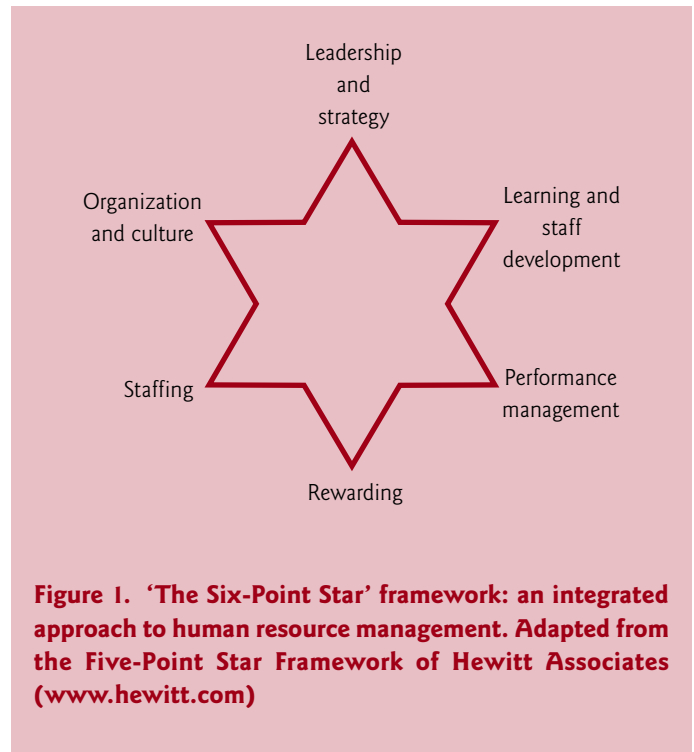
Several aspects of organization and culture were found to influence KS and organizational learning.

Changing roles of human resources units: In all participating organizations, the human resources unit is evolving from performing a purely administrative role to serving a strategic function for senior management. Professional human resources expertise is helping organizations to meet their goals.

Communities of practice: A community of practice is made up of a group of practitioners who share common interests in a specified discipline or area and volunteer to work together. These communities create tools, documents and processes and share a common vocabulary and ways of working (Rumizen, 2002.) In the Engineering Division of the private business studied, 200 communities of practice have been established during the past 6 years in an effort to promote innovation.

Knowledge fairs and marketplaces: These are used by IWMI and SDC to promote sharing of knowledge in both research and administrative areas. The exchange of information fosters collaboration and promotes deeper and broader understanding of what others do. In addition, colleagues are encouraged to talk to each other about their work.

Yellow pages and staff directories: Several organizations have installed on-line staff directories to encourage staff to take advantage of in-house



expertise. The directories give information about the institutional experience, competencies and areas of expertise of individuals.

Organizational culture: When CIAT carried out a 'culture study' (with support from the CGIAR Gender and Diversity Program), one of the main conclusions was that internal communications were poor. CIAT has now looked at the internal communications policies and practices in several well-run organizations and found that each has a sound, formal, internal communications strategy that includes a good induction process for all new staff members.

Staffing

Specialized roles: One of the six CGIAR centres and four of the external organizations have created a 'Chief Knowledge Officer' who reports to the Chief Executive Officer or Director General. This person is responsible for organizing internal consultation among divisions and providing solutions to problems related to knowledge sharing. They undertake knowledge management initiatives and work closely with human resources units to embed KS programs into the policies and practices of the organization.

Recruitment: Personnel selection forms used by the private company in recruitment and performance evaluation list 12 required competencies. Four of these (communication, business acumen, change and innovation) are directly related to knowledge sharing and organizational learning.

IPGRI has begun to screen prospective employees for specific behavioural competencies that support knowledge sharing alongside more traditional technical competencies. Job profiles and interview questions are based on both technical and 'soft' skills. The process has been well received by selection panels, since it provides a systematic way to assess candidates objectively and it aids equitable treatment of gender and diversity.

Learning and staff development

Training courses: Options for delivering training courses to internal staff include hiring outside firms to provide training on-site, sending staff out to take a course, e-learning modules and requesting a seasoned researcher to provide technical training in a specialized area. Induction and orientation programs for new staff are held at ILRI, IPGRI, IWMI, SDC, the World Bank and the private sector corporation. At ILRI, staff apply for training funds based on their development plan. At IWMI, staff training is implemented through a systematic training needs analysis. Annual training calendars covering research and writing skills, mentoring and coaching are prepared.

Leadership development: Several organizations provide managers with training opportunities or leadership development programs that cover aspects of knowledge management, communication and organizational learning. These equip managers with the approaches and tools they need to improve their leadership and managerial skills. CIAT, IPGRI, IWMI and the WorldFish Center all participate in the 'First Level Leadership Development' course recently developed by the Strategic Advisory Service for Human Resources – a CGIAR human resources service providing strategy and consultation to centres that fund the program. The course includes a core unit that describes the competencies that all managers need to acquire. IWMI, SDC, the World Bank and the private sector corporation invest resources in leadership development programs. For example, the program at IWMI is headed directly by the Director General and has four main elements: a) individual development; b) structured mentoring; c) training; and d) performance monitoring and feedback.

Support for teams: Teams at the World Bank are supported by 'learning coaches', who help with process issues and problem solving. This formal system enhances team productivity and promotes continuous learning at many levels within the Bank. Organizations are becoming more diverse in terms of language, culture, gender and country of origin. The CGIAR Gender and Diversity Program offers an online course for high performance research teams, which helps promote integration among staff of diverse origins and fills the gap created by limited resources, talent and funding and the desire for fast results.

Mentoring: This involves pairing experienced individuals with less experienced ones. Both mentor and 'mentee' benefit from the arrangement and learn from each other and, as a result, the organization is enriched. CIFOR and IWMI have participated in the mentoring initiative sponsored by the Gender and Diversity Program, and ILRI will participate in the same program in 2005. However, at one organization, the program did not flourish because developing staff relations and sharing knowledge were perceived to take valuable time away from research.

Organizational learning: At SDC, learning is promoted at all organizational levels and individuals are expected to take responsibility for developing competencies related to their jobs. Unit managers have to identify and secure the competencies they need themselves as well as providing coaching to improve staff competencies, promoting good practices and disseminating lessons learned.

Peer assists: These are useful for someone embarking on a new project and are widely used at Bellanet. The person invites colleagues with relevant expertise or experience to a meeting, tells them what the project is about and invites their feedback and advice on how to start the project

and any lessons learned from previous similar projects. Peer assist helps get projects off the ground more efficiently and shortens the learning curve. Users of peer assists feel that such meetings have high initial transaction costs but save time in the long run.

Review, evaluation and lessons learned: BMZ has implemented after-action reviews where, after a major event, those involved in its planning meet to review and document lessons learned. These can then be used to improve future events.

Procedures for retiring or departing staff: BMZ has developed a 'knowledge bridge' to fill the gap that occurs when people retire. This honours retiring staff at a meeting, at which they also respond to questions posed by their colleagues.

Handover procedures: BMZ uses 'handover procedures' to benefit new appointees and promote institutional learning. These emphasise the need to compile high quality and relevant information for new appointees, which, if possible, include two-way questions, answers and discussion and/or detailed handover notes.

Performance management

Most of the organizations studied still focus on evaluating individual performance and struggle with the challenge of how to evaluate team performance. The private sector organization, the World Bank and IWMI all use a technique known as '360-degree' evaluation, which promotes good management and leadership and encourages feedback on managers' performance. The feedback identifies which new skills the managers need to develop, and these are supported by training courses. One of the key goals of 360-degree feedback at the World Bank is to create an environment for learning and knowledge sharing. The technique encourages positive behaviour, such as modelling a blame-free environment that is conducive to learning, sharing knowledge and information, using mistakes as learning opportunities and rewarding knowledge creation and sharing. At BMZ, supervisors use the technique to find out if their staff have the information they need to do their jobs properly.

Rewarding

Employee motivation at the World Bank includes on-the-spot monetary awards and an annual team award, presented by the President. The private sector corporation also hosts a team recognition ceremony once a year, while CIDA gives annual team and 'mentor of the year' awards.

Conclusions and recommendations

Research and development organizations – both within and outside the CGIAR – are using KS and organizational learning to improve their overall performance. The World Bank and the private sector company have been working in this area for between 5 and 7 years and their initiatives are well institutionalized. Other organizations, such as BMZ, IWMI and SDC, have been working on KS and organizational learning for shorter periods (2 or 3 years) and their initiatives are less well consolidated. In most of the organizations, the human resources units have supported KS and organizational learning, but have not led these organizational change efforts.

Most interviewees in the study believe that human resources policies can contribute significantly to learning and change at the institutional level by fostering KS. However, they note that a number of additional factors are required. They believe that top-management commitment to organizational performance improvement through KS and organizational learning is essential.

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Not all CGIAR centres lag behind. There are many valuable experiences within the CGIAR that could help other international agricultural research centres whose senior management would like to see their organizations advance in these areas.

Two basic patterns to improving KS and organizational learning were observed in the cases studied. One is a comprehensive, integrated, organization-wide approach; the other is a smaller-scale, incremental approach (Rumizen, 2002). The success of any initiative – whether small-scale and incremental or large-scale and integrated – depends on three main factors: a) top leadership support; b) a strong internal communications strategy; and c) a clear and explicit link between KS/organizational learning and the business strategy of the organization.

Based on this study, it is recommended that CGIAR managers who wish to promote and mainstream KS and organizational learning in their centres engage some or all of the following strategies:

- clearly state that KS, organizational learning and performance improvement are key organizational goals;
- develop a strong internal communications strategy that encourages and supports KS and organizational learning;
- make explicit the ways in which KS and organizational learning are expected to contribute to the business strategy;
- identify and involve the human resources unit as a strategic partner in change initiatives;
- develop formal ways to capture and preserve the knowledge of departing staff members;
- provide strong staff and leadership development programs;
- ensure that formal recruiting procedures (such as profiles and interview guides) include KS and organizational learning alongside the other key corporate competencies;
- articulate value statements that indicate what is important in the organization and that promote KS and organizational learning (such as teamwork, collaboration, integrity);
- revise performance review procedures to include criteria that signal the importance of and support KS and organizational learning;
- establish strong orientation and induction programs for incoming staff that emphasize the organization's vision, mission and values;
- promote the development of specific KS and organizational learning skills and practices in areas such as facilitation of group decision making, peer assists, after-action review, lessons learned and handover procedures; and
- periodically review organizational culture to identify opportunities for promoting KS, organizational learning and related initiatives to promote institutional change and performance improvement.

Knowledge sharing and organizational learning are just two of the activities of a comprehensive knowledge management strategy that must be aligned with overall goals if organizational performance is to be improved.

Further reading

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