Digital pathways:
Online information and social media for sharing knowledge

This case study examines the digital pathways set up by the State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability (SPARC) programme for managing and sharing knowledge. The study team tested the hypothesis "Through its use of digital pathways SPARC facilitates the use and uptake of governance reform related information within SPARC, between states and through national/federal institutions" by reviewing relevant documents and web statistics, interviewing staff and stakeholders, and online surveys.

SPARC's digital pathways

SPARC works across many states in Nigeria in an environment that makes the exchange of information difficult. The programme set up digital pathways to overcome physical constraints to capturing and sharing knowledge within and beyond SPARC.

The Fountain, SPARC’s secure web-based intranet, holds SPARC and other governance documents, a diary, contact details for staff and key stakeholders, news items and other programme information. Information held in the Fountain helps programme coordination and is the foundation stone of knowledge sharing within SPARC. The Fountain was the model for the Nigeria Governors’ Forum (NGF) Hub, a system designed by SPARC for states to share information to support the NGF in developing a State Peer Review Mechanism (SPRM). The SPARC website provides information about SPARC and hosts the online version of the SPARC Resource Centre – a repository of quality assured, key SPARC products – which is also available as a pocket guide and CD. The SPARC Facebook newsletter has over 5,500 followers, over half of them in Nigeria.

Have digital pathways been productive?

The study finds that overall knowledge management (KM) digital pathways have been successful. The Fountain is an effective tool to capture and share information between SPARC offices. Two-thirds of staff surveyed use the Fountain either daily or every other day. Use by state-level programmes, state and federal partners is limited.

The Resource Centre has created an appetite for online tools such as the Human Resource Suite and Public Financial Management Database. An unanticipated effect was to improve quality control of documents for general release. Abuja KM led in putting in place protocols for sharing resources,
helping knowledge to grow and build. For example, discussion forums in the Fountain have not been taken up and although SPARC offices have their own area of the SPARC website they seldom update them. Nevertheless, knowledge emerging from SPARC knowledge hotspots, such as updatable human resources and planning guides, is increasingly being made available through SPARC digital pathways, especially the Resource Centre.

Challenges

Theoretically, much of the information in the Fountain should self-collect and self-disseminate. In practice, ensuring information was shared required persistent central coordination. The challenge with inviting external partners to use the Fountain is that some staff are not comfortable sharing what may be sensitive information. The permissions to restrict access to certain materials are not easy to use.

Attitudes to information ownership present challenges for the NGF Hub. There are big gaps in the information available. Other challenges are variable quality and confusing navigation.

The capacity to use digital services varies greatly among government offices in Nigeria. SPARC’s mix of print and digital technologies is a way that SPARC attempts to overcome this challenge.

SPARC’s intranet and website, conceived initially to meet the immediate needs of the programme, are hosted, maintained and backed up in the UK. Support will not continue after the programme ends. Partnerships, such as between SPARC and Eldis to disseminate resources in the SPARC Resource Centre, could address the challenge of sustainability.

Findings

Organisational context and relevant content affect the success or otherwise of a pathway. SPARC staff use the Fountain because it supports efficient programme administration and is effective for sharing information among SPARC offices. In many cases, the Fountain has helped to avoid duplication of effort. The Fountain and Resource Centre maintain project knowledge, making it easy for the consultants who do much of SPARC’s work to access information, find resources for their work and share resources with others. As SPARC has expanded to cover more states, and insecurity in the north has limited engagement on the ground, digital pathways have become more important. The NGF Hub, unlike the Fountain, has few users because of unwillingness to share information and limited central capacity.

SPARC’s digital pathways tend to focus on capturing knowledge and making it available rather than on ensuring their quality, providing training and promoting use. The Resource Centre is widely used within SPARC but not as widely used by external stakeholders.

Lessons for the future

- Organisational context influences the success or otherwise of a digital pathway
- Digital pathways maintain programme knowledge
- Relevant quality content and user-friendliness are key issues.

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