



OED REACH

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Sharing Knowledge: Innovations and Remaining Challenges

Based on *Sharing Knowledge: Innovations and Remaining Challenges*.

- The Bank's commitment to a comprehensive knowledge initiative was timely and appropriate. It has sparked much innovation that has provided staff, clients, and partners with faster and easier access to Bank knowledge.
- But the new knowledge sharing activities have not been tightly linked to the Bank's core lending and non-lending processes. As a result, their impact on clients has been limited.
- The Bank, now entering the seventh year of its knowledge initiative, needs to move deliberately to embed knowledge sharing in its core business processes and manage its knowledge services for results.

Background

In 1996, the World Bank made a commitment to develop a world-class knowledge management system and to improve and expand the sharing of development knowledge with clients and partners. The aim was to improve the quality of Bank operations and enhance the capacity of clients to achieve development results. Since FY97, the Bank has spent some \$220 million for Corporate, Network, and Regional knowledge sharing activities and over \$60 million for its three main global knowledge initiatives—the Development Gateway, Global Development Learning Network (GDLN), and Global Development Network (GDN).

This evaluation assesses the relevance of the initiative and the effectiveness of activities undertaken to achieve its objectives. Overall, it finds that the Bank has made more progress in establishing the architecture to support its knowledge initiative than in creating the work processes and the governance arrangements for carrying it out. As a result, the strategic intent of making knowledge sharing a way of doing business and empowering clients has been only partially realized.

Main findings

The Bank did the right thing in introducing a comprehensive knowledge initiative.

The initiative proposed, appropriately, a comprehensive strategy to bring about internal and external change. Responsive to rapid changes in information technology, the strategy has become increasingly relevant in the intervening years to changes in international development practices and the Bank's own agenda.

Bank knowledge has become faster and easier to access.

The Bank has made good progress in building new knowledge sharing tools and activities. Both staff and clients welcome the improved accessibility and timeliness of Bank knowledge, and the Bank's greater openness to collaboration and knowledge sharing.

But weak links to operations limit the effectiveness of new knowledge sharing activities.

The Bank's new activities have consisted primarily of knowledge aggregation and sharing—but these processes alone do not guarantee that the shared knowledge will be adopted, adapted, and applied. For that to happen, knowledge sharing has to be embedded in work processes. But the new activities have not been well integrated into the Bank's core lending and non-lending processes. Staff and clients do not, therefore, view the activities as sufficiently relevant to their operational work.

The main **internal** knowledge sharing innovations—thematic groups, advisory services, and expanded Web site use—do not provide enough operational support. Thematic groups do not provide sufficient direct support to task teams. And half the requests addressed by advisory services come from outside the Bank and are simply for references to data and publications accessible elsewhere.

Bank **external** knowledge sharing with clients has shown strong examples of innovation in lending and non-lending activities. But only 20 percent of the current CASs are explicit about their knowledge objectives and strategies. Moreover, only one-third of operational staff interviewed for this evaluation think that the initiative has changed the way projects are designed and supervised.

Progress in launching the three **global knowledge initiatives** reviewed—the Development Gateway, the Global Development Learning Network, and the Global Development Network—has been rapid, and the Bank's leadership has been significant in mobilizing the participation of partners. But four challenges remain to be met to ensure the success of the initiatives: (1) ensuring their continuing utility in a rapidly changing technology and development environment; (2) achieving the financial sustainability of the programs and their regional/country-level partners; (3) consolidating governance and oversight arrangements; and (4) defining and managing the Bank's evolving role as each program matures.

As a result, the new internal and external activities have had limited impact on Bank client countries. Improvements in clients' access to Bank knowledge can be ascribed primarily to more open disclosure rules and increased use of Internet and e-mail dissemination. Clients surveyed find dissemination of Bank knowledge inadequate at the country level, beyond central

government personnel and a narrow circle of other people. They urge more use of local expertise to improve the adaptation of Bank knowledge to country conditions. And they emphasize that more effective help in building sustainable institutional capacity for acquiring and using knowledge is key to successful leveraging of knowledge for development.

Inadequate oversight and incentives are major impediments.

High-level leadership in the Bank has stimulated implementation of the knowledge initiative. But management has not adequately defined the roles and responsibilities of Corporate, Network, and Regional units for making knowledge sharing a way of doing business. Knowledge sharing objectives are poorly defined and difficult to evaluate. Self- and independent evaluation of knowledge sharing activities is much less systematic than assessments of other Bank processes.

Recommendations

The Bank, now entering the seventh year of the knowledge initiative, needs to move deliberately to embed knowledge sharing into core operational processes and manage its knowledge services for results. To more fully realize the knowledge initiative's potential to enhance Bank operations and empower clients to meet their development goals, three sets of actions are needed:

1. Management should define clear responsibilities and accountabilities of Corporate, Network, and Regional units for integrating knowledge sharing into the Bank's core business processes; ensure that incentives are aligned with responsibilities, especially at the task manager level; and establish a strategic approach to Bank participation in existing and any new global knowledge initiatives.
2. Network and Regional units should tightly link their knowledge sharing activities to lending and non-lending processes. For this, Networks should set clear objectives for anchor, thematic group, and advisory services' support of operational teams, and Regional/country units should make explicit the knowledge objectives and strategies of CASs and projects.
3. Outcome objectives and supporting performance indicators should be set and procedures established for monitoring and evaluating Bank knowledge sharing programs and activities.