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Topic - Improving internal communication: working better together

Creating an organizational culture for working better together
Submitted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)[1]

1.   The UNECE is a small regional organization of two-hundred staff within the global United Nations Secretariat. Its work covers a geographical area of fifty-six countries that include North America, Europe and Central Asia. It aims to promote pan-European cooperation in order to strengthen the economies of countries in the region. It does this by bringing countries together to share experiences and agree on technical standards and guidelines for trade, transport, statistics, energy, the environment, housing, and other areas that impact the economy.
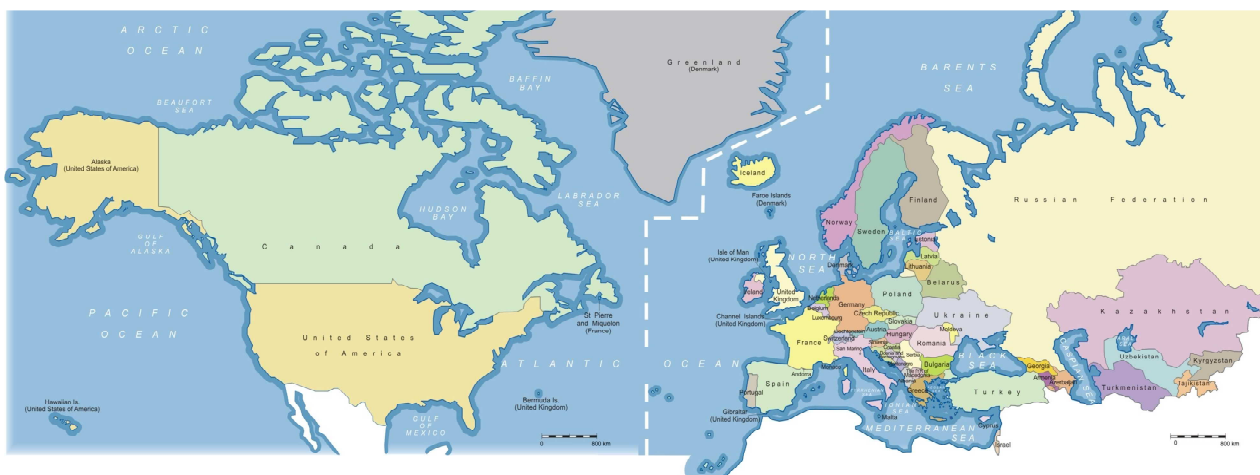

Figure 1: Map of the UNECE region

2.   Created in 1947, the UNECE has more than sixty years of history as an organization. This, combined with a specialised work force and a bureaucratic operating environment, has created a complex workplace culture. Disparate programs work to satisfy the needs of member countries, but as each program has distinct goals and clients, separate silos that are externally focused have formed.

3.   Like many organizations, the UNECE has been considering strategies for improving communication and collaboration across the barriers of organizational structure. Could Web 2.0 applications provide valid solutions? The UNECE already has some experience in this area. It is using an enterprise wiki system to work with external expert groups. However, a survey conducted in January 2009 indicates the use of this technology is not widespread and its potential for facilitating communication within the organization is not being realised.

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Enterprise 2.0

4.   'Web 2.0' is a term to describe a new wave of internet technologies that allows users to do more than just access information online – they can add, change or influence web content. Examples of Web 2.0 applications include wikis, blogs, photo and video sharing websites, social networking websites, folksonomies (user generated taxonomies), mashups and virtual worlds. These applications have created a new channel for media, marketing and communication professionals, but they are also proving valuable *within* organizations. Businesses are using them to increase communication and collaboration between employees, improve productivity and manage knowledge, a phenomena called 'Enterprise 2.0'.

5.   Enterprise 2.0 is a term first coined by Andrew McAfee, then Professor at Harvard Business School, who defines it as: "***Enterprise 2.0** is the use of emergent social software platforms within companies, or between companies and their partners or customers.*" (27 May 2006).

Examples of Enterprise 2.0

- internal blogs and wikis
- Enterprise tagging (the tagging of web pages with keywords by staff within an enterprise, which is then used for discovering information through search or browse)
- Research and development departments' use of websites such as Innocentive (www.innocentive.com) to find solutions to problems that have been difficult to solve.

Not examples **of Enterprise 2.0**

- Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr, MySpace, etc. These are for individuals on the Web, not companies. Some companies use sites like YouTube for viral and stealth marketing, but these activities should be considered *outside* the definition of Enterprise 2.0.
- Most corporate Intranets.
- Groupware and information portals. Groupware and portals seem to be less interactive and emergent than the Web 2.0 technologies now being used effectively within organizations.
- Email and 'classic' instant messaging, because transmissions aren't globally visible or persistent.

Internal communication has its challenges

6.   Communication serves several important functions within an organization. It is used to manage people through instructions and commands; it can motivate staff by clarifying roles and providing feedback on performance; and perhaps most importantly, communication provides information for decision-making (Robbins, 2005, p.299). The flow of communication within an organization is influenced by its structure, physical location, management attitudes, cultural diversity and communication systems and processes. Research suggests there are three types of observable boundaries for communication within an organization: those between work units; geographical locations; and social groupings (gender, position, language spoken, etc.) (Kleinbaum et al, 2008). For an organization to work effectively there must be mechanisms to communicate across these boundaries and employees need the motivation to do so.

7.   It is a challenge for any organization to create a culture that encourages effective communication across these real or perceived boundaries. Rewarding desired communication behaviors and providing incentives can motivate managers and staff to develop a culture of collaboration, which in turn leads to a more effective organization.

8.   Benefits from collaboration include saving time and money, increasing quality, innovating and facilitating access to subject-matter experts (Coleman and Levine, 2008, p.19). The emergence of inexpensive collaboration tools has stimulated action and many organizations are using these tools to work more efficiently. Knowledge management systems that once imposed rigid information structures and strict workflows are being replaced by more flexible tools, such as wikis, blogs and social networks. This recognizes that although many organizations are structured hierarchically, with clear formal communication and reporting lines, informal communication is an important way to achieve work goals. The establishment of relationships that span organizational boundaries can occur through networking meetings, mutual contacts and social activities. Enterprise 2.0 applications provide a virtual meeting place for staff to build stronger working relationships and discover information about other work areas that may otherwise be hidden.

The problem with email and electronic files

9.   The advent of desktop computing has provided clear benefits, but it has also created problems for modern organizations. Telephone and face-to-face discussions remain important means for individual and group communication, but email has also become a primary method for communicating with others, particularly across time zones. As email visibility is restricted to the senders and receivers of the message, the content remains hidden within personal inboxes and problems with organizational recordkeeping and knowledge management have inevitably arisen.

10.   The challenge of maintaining corporate knowledge has become increasingly difficult as central registries have been closed and it is left up to individuals to maintain a mixture of paper and electronic records. Unless there is a clearly defined framework, placing responsibility for recordkeeping at the individual level leads to inconsistent practices. Communication of knowledge is an added burden to individual responsibilities and often receives a low priority as other demands take precedence. In an attempt to address these problems, it is common for organizations to implement a number of different management information systems, making it difficult to extract reports and get the data needed for decision-making

Potential for using Enterprise 2.0 tools within the UNECE

11.   Research, including a survey of staff, has revealed that several Web 2.0 applications are already in place within the UNECE, and that they are proving useful for communicating and working with external clients. As these tools become more popular in the outside world, it is likely that demands will increase. As there has been no widespread communication about these tools to date, it is likely that many staff are unaware that Web 2.0 tools are available to them and do not realize the possibilities for enhancing the way they work. Finding uses for wikis, blogs and social networks for communicating within the organization could be an effective way to familiarize staff and demonstrate the benefits of these tools, while at the same time improving the efficiency of business processes, strengthening professional networks and revealing opportunities for collaboration between different areas.

12.   A survey of UNECE staff on this topic attracted fifty-three responses, representing approximately one quarter of the organization. Questions were asked on their experience with wikis, blogs and social networks, their perception of communication within the organization, and attitudes to technology adoption.

13.   The survey revealed valuable information about staff perception of internal communication. More than half of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of information they receive about other work areas in the UNECE. When asked about satisfaction with communication within their section, division and across the whole organization, it is clear that satisfaction levels decrease as the scope of the communication widens. More than 40% of respondents rated

communication across the UNECE as poor, suggesting that opportunities to improve internal communication are worth pursuing.

14.   The UNECE faces certain challenges in communicating effectively within the organization. The work of each program area is highly technical and focused on the needs of different external clients. However, the end client is the same for all divisions – the 56 member countries of the UNECE – and the organization has been criticized in the past for not being able to find enough synergies between different programs. Another factor impacting on internal communication is the current physical office environment. With staff of the organization being spread widely across a large building and each person being located in a private office, the flow of communication is limited to emails, telephone calls, meetings and chance encounters in the corridors. This is not an environment conducive to information sharing and collaboration.

> *"Companies often embrace words like innovation and collaboration, but their workplaces say something else."*
>
> (Rosen, 2007, p.59)

15.   Despite these challenges, it is apparent that the UNECE is currently in a good position to adopt Web 2.0 tools to improve productivity. Support from the United Nations Secretary-General is clearly defined in the new ICT strategy and there is political pressure to increase collaboration from UNECE member states. The organization has the technical infrastructure and tools in place, but may have to redeploy and re-skill staff to get the resources needed to support the systems and manage change. The results of the survey conducted suggest that UNECE staff are ready to embrace new Web technologies. Almost all of the respondents were aware of the tools and more than half of those are already using them. There were many valuable suggestions for how wikis, blogs and social networks could be used by the UNECE, indicating that staff have been thinking about this and see gaps where such tools can make a difference.

Overcoming risks and challenges to improve internal communication

16.   Effective internal communication is a business issue rather than a technological one. Staff must be motivated to communicate with each other and have the right skills and attitudes for communicating effectively. Technology provides a set of tools to facilitate communication, but this is only one component. Strong leadership is needed to create a culture of information sharing and collaboration.

17.   As a communication enabler, Web 2.0 tools have the potential to provide a good return on investment as they are relatively inexpensive to implement and the maintenance of content is devolved to the user community. However, there are also downsides and risks to be considered. Issues include choosing the appropriate tools, determining policy and management of the systems and dealing with misleading information. There are also risks associated with *not* adopting Web 2.0 tools. In most organizations it is likely these tools are already in use at some level, as is the case for the UNECE. Without support at a corporate level, their use can grow unabated, leading to different and unsupported systems that cannot communicate with one another.

18.   Regardless of which Web 2.0 tools an organization decides to embrace, there are common implementation issues that will need to be addressed. According to Matt Greely (n.d.), founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of brightidea.com, there are five factors needed for successful implementation of Web 2.0 in the workplace:

1.   **Senior management support**: develop a business case for the introduction of Web 2.0 and identify a senior manager to champion the cause.

2. **Communications**: there needs to be mechanisms for letting staff know about the tools and how to use them. Education and training in their application should be provided.
3. **Culture:** it may be necessary to change the workplace culture to accommodate new tools. This should be acknowledged by managers and staff and strategies established.
4. **Incentives:** cultural change and adoption can be encouraged through rewards and recognition for using the tools.
5. **Infrastructure:** the implementation of Web 2.0 tools should be appropriate for the organization's infrastructure and business goals.

19.   A guide on Enterprise 2.0 implementation by Newman and Thomas informs that as an evolutionary process, these tools should be adopted at an organization's "own pace" (2009, p.17). A suggested approach is to select one or two applications as a starting point. Potential applications within the UNECE include:

- **Mission report wiki** - collating mission reports in a single place where they are searchable and can be tagged with keywords in order to easily identify all reports on a particular country, issue or by a particular person.
- **Admin-wiki** - document administrative processes and maintain the information efficiently. Important information is currently sent via email, which means that new employees may not have the information and it is difficult for anyone to be certain they have the latest instructions. A single, central place for information compiled collaboratively by relevant people across the UNECE would increase staff efficiency.
- **Working group wikis** – a wiki for each cross-organizational working group, such as for Directors' meetings, the Information and Communication Technology Management Group (ICTMG), and the Web Working Group (WWG). A wiki could be the basis for the group to share documents and information while allowing other staff to see the current status of the groups' work.
- **Internship wiki** – a place to keep all information relating to the recruitment and management of interns within the UNECE.
- **Executive Secretary blog** – to provide regular communications from the head of our organization on his current priorities and opinions.
- **ISU blog** – the staff of our Information Systems Unit could keep the rest of the organization up-to-date on the latest technologies and tips for using them effectively
- **Public information blog** – information on UNECE marketing events, publications and products.
- **UNECE Staff Directory** - use social networking software to create a staff directory. Employees can update their own details directly, addressing the problem with keeping centrally controlled directories up-to-date. Contact details, skills and other work related information could be included.

Conclusions

20.   Wikis, blogs, social networks and other Web 2.0 tools can provide measurable productivity improvements for organizations. As the tools become more robust, a positive return on investment is more likely. For non-profit organizations, the investment required is usually in terms of staff time and/or professional consultancies, rather than software licensing and hardware costs.

21.   The value of these tools is being demonstrated in a range of organizations and the use of them within the UNECE is growing. The question remains: do these tools require a culture receptive to change and does the UNECE have such a culture? Enterprise 2.0 expert, Rob Paterson, suggests that for an organization to master the use of new Web 2.0 tools, it needs a culture that is not "all about control and top down" (11 August 2008). The type of culture that exists within the UNECE is

difficult to measure in such terms, but given the number of existing implementations of wikis that were revealed through this research, the UNECE does have a culture flexible enough to allow these applications to grow and demonstrate their worth.

22.   Many Web 2.0 applications, such as blogging and social networks, rely on their users being comfortable with a degree of informality. This may have been a challenge for the UNECE in the past, given its long history as an organization. However, with natural attrition and a number of staff joining the organization from outside, attitudes may be changing.

> *"Think about the generation of teenagers that are growing up with all these new technologies. For them, it's such a natural fit that it's hard to imagine a workplace without blogs, instant messaging and social networks"*
>
> (Newman and Thomas, 2009, p.17)

23.   It is said that successful Enterprise 2.0 implementations rely on the tools gaining ground from the bottom, up. However, there is need for guidance from management on which tools are going to be implemented and what is outside the bounds of appropriate use. Without this, there could be a proliferation of different tools that don't talk to each other, and the possibilities to use them for improving internal communication will be lost.

24.   The next steps for the UNECE should be to make a commitment to improving internal communication, to take advantage of modern ICTs and to develop a culture of collaboration. The vital ingredient will be strong leadership to manage change effectively.

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