Facilitating the sharing of pools and seas of knowledge through channeling information more effectively

Christine Goodair

Programmes Manager (Substance Misuse)
St George's University of London

This paper covers the presentation 'Facilitating the sharing of pools and of knowledge through channeling information more effectively' by exploring issues relating to sharing knowledge and expertise across multidisciplinary projects. An overview of each project is provided, with a description of their approach to sharing knowledge, with the aim of drawing out key lessons that can be applied in a variety of settings. The projects include two Pan-European Projects: ELISAD Gateway and EU-Madness; and a UK based project, Substance Misuse in the Undergraduate Medical Curriculum.

Keywords

Communication; Information sharing

Setting the scene

The term "information society" or "information age" has been with us since the 1990s. In February 1995 at a European G7 Ministerial Conference on the information society, the Chair concluded, "Progress in information technologies and communication is changing the way we live: how we work and do business, how we educate our children, study and do research, train ourselves, and how we are entertained. The information society is not only affecting the way people interact but it is also requiring the traditional organizational structures to be more flexible, more participatory and more decentralized" (European Commission, 1995).

Since then we have seen the continuing development of the Internet and the emergence of email, social media, and other means of communicating and sharing information locally, nationally and globally. Terms such as "information sharing" and "knowledge exchange" have become commonplace. Information sharing can be defined as the exchange of data/information and knowledge between various organizations, people and technologies, while knowledge exchange is used to describe the processes by which skilled people exchange data, knowledge, and expertise for mutual benefit.

These developments have become normal ways for many of us to communicate and share knowledge and work together across geographic boundaries. These developments have added to, and challenged, traditional resources such as libraries, while providing access to wider resources through information communities, research networks, websites, online forums, discussion groups, and social media.

Opportunities and threats

This ease of communication and access to knowledge provides many opportunities for information sharing but can also present challenges. The main benefit of the information age for collaborative work is ease of access to information. This allows one to manage learning and professional development from a desktop, tablet, or smart phone in order to develop academic partnerships, projects, and business and commercial activities. Generally speaking, the challenges faced include information overload, dilemmas of quantity versus quality, and breaches of privacy or security, both corporate and individual. Over the last decade, the rapid changes in technology have enhanced our communication options from forums to social media to virtual meetings via skype and conference calls. While these options are cost-effective, there are some drawbacks, such as having to deal with information overload while trying to keep up to date, emerging copyright issues for researchers wanting to share their work, and lack of face-to-face meetings.

Drawing upon experiences of working on three collaborative projects, this article will explore the benefits and challenges of information sharing processes. Each of the projects had a principal project manager and a number of partners ranging from 12 to 18. Two projects were pan-European; the other had both European & US input in its early stages but later shifted to England-only.

The earliest project started in 2002 and the last one finished in 2016. Given this time span, each of the projects used a range of information sharing methods, including written memos, letters, and reports; bulletin and newsletters; meetings face-to-face and virtual; presentations; briefings; and more recently, discussion forums, Twitter, and special interest groups on sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

The projects

European Gateway on Alcohol, Drugs and other Addictions

The Gateway was an online database of descriptions and links to over 1000 evaluated European websites from 32 countries on the use and misuse of drugs and other psychoactive substances. The project was set up and run by the European Association of Libraries and Information Services on Alcohol and other Drugs, with funding from the European Commission. Information professionals and subject experts from 18 institutions across Europe selected, classified, and catalogued website resources. The project ran between 2002 and 2007 (Goodair et al., 2005).

Clearly, the number of participants in the project determined its approach to information sharing and communication. The major methods used were training events and meetings. Training for the whole project team was held at the ELISAD annual conference, enabling all to share issues and assist one another. Ongoing communication and information sharing processes were developed. Project management team members took on different roles, such as having one person responsible for producing an internal newsletter who encouraged all to submit reports on work in progress, which proved be a key motivator and reminder to do the work. This person also managed external public relations and assisted the project manager with compiling and submitting reports to the funders, the European Commission. Participants were set up with 'buddies' whose role was to support and help with technical queries via email.

The approaches used enabled partners to share knowledge and seek help and advice from one another, but a real benefit was that they were not used to replace face-to-face communication.

Substance Misuse in the Undergraduate Curriculum

This project was initiated and led by The International Centre for Drug Policy, St. George's, University of London, with an aim of improving substance misuse teaching in undergraduate medicine in English medical schools. The project started in 2005 and was UK-wide with input from the US and Europe. Its first two years focused on developing and publishing the 'Substance Misuse in the Undergraduate Medical Curriculum Guidelines' on integrating alcohol, drugs, and tobacco training in medical undergraduate curricula (International Centre for Drug Policy, 2007). Following further funding from the United Kingdom's Department of Health the project focused, between 2008 and 2011, on supporting the integration and implementing of the guidance in England only. This was done through the funding and appointment of time-limited curriculum coordinators in 19 English medical schools, working with local academic champions to identify the suitability of the current substance misuse teaching and to recommend and support changes to ensure that substance misuse issues are fully covered in line with the national guidelines produced. Another phase currently underway is focusing on developing a network for those teaching in substance misuse and updating the learning resources produced for medical schools.

A national coordinator was appointed to manage the project whose key responsibilities included ensuring a regular and effective flow of communication and information to all involved. This included a National Steering Group, the academic champions' network, and the curriculum coordinators' group. The methods employed for communicating included email, meetings, formal minutes, reports, newsletter, a project website, and an online forum.

The key participants in the project were the curriculum coordinators and the academic champions, and these were spread across England. Communication with and between coordinators was conducted through e-mail, project website, and the coordinators network meetings, where common work issues were discussed and best practice was shared. This was found to be an effective source of support and informal training and means of sharing information. Similarly, the academic champions' network enabled communication and information sharing to take place between the academic champions, the coordinators, and key members of steering group. Email was a more popular form of communication between meetings, while the discussion forum on the project website was used less frequently**.** A key task for the project coordinators was identifying and recommending substance misuse resources for use in teaching and this was done through a social bookmarking group on LinkedIn. A project newsletter was produced and issued quarterly to provide regular updates on the work of the project and was sent to all coordinators, academic champions, and the National Steering Group.

Face-to-face communication and information sharing via email were the main methods employed. Channels used for particular communication functions enabled clear, constructive information sharing and dialogue. The newsletter, reports, minutes, and LinkedIn site enabled the filtering of information relevant to each group of participants.

EU Madness

This project was developed to integrate monitoring and profiling of Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) in Europe in order to prevent health harms and provide resources to update healthcare professionals. The project's objectives, through its 4 integrated work streams, are to monitor, test,

and profile existing and emerging types of NPS for their characteristics and potential health harms. The project comprises a partnership of 12 universities from England, Scotland, Italy, Spain, and Germany. It was started in 2014 and is due to be completed in 2016.

As the most recent project of the three, its prime means of communication were email and social media. Initially, this was an effective means of sharing information and communicating. During the first six months, much was being shared by the project participants through email, but then a discussion about information overload started. An aim of the project is to monitor the use and health harms of novel psychoactive substances and much of the information being shared early on was about published books and academic papers, and it was this that led to overload**.** The question was how the useful information could be shared in a way that would neither overload us nor fill our email inboxes. The project administrator sought participant views which resulted in an aggregated newsletter that brings together all the new and information to be shared together in one place with links to relevant academic papers. Alongside this, Facebook and LinkedIn groups were set up for those wishing to communicate using those methods, but a drop-off in the alerts from these has occurred. The project also provides information to others working in the sector via a membership area of its website and can be followed on Twitter. Face-to-face meetings of all the collaborators are kept to a minimum due to the costs in running them, but they provide a very good means of tackling issues and focusing on particular aspects of the project.

Discussion

For all the projects, communication and effective information sharing were or are crucial keys to success. Assumptions that all are willing to communicate and share information in the same way can create tensions, and it is important to consider whether modern technology really is the best and only way to operate. Lank (2006) explores myths about the role of technology in communication and cites three – "number one: if you are able to communicate electronically, you will not need to meet face-to-face; number two: if you provide technology tools, people will use them; number three: it is useful to capture everything in IT systems" (Lank, 2006, p.103-104).

Looking at the means of sharing information and communication employed by the three projects, we find differences but also commonalities. The differences reflect the different periods in which the projects operate, and the forms of internet communications available to them. It is interesting to note that all employed a newsletter, email, and face-to-face meetings. Each of the projects developed systems based on the needs of project partners and were flexible by recognizing that project participants may require different forms of communication or have different information needs. This is demonstrated by ELISAD and EU Madness projects, in which formal information sharing protocols were necessary for data protection.

The benefits and key observations

Collaborative projects can deliver benefits and learning not only within their field of expertise but also beyond it. For the participants these can include:

- Stimulating ideas through sharing of professional knowledge.
- Developing and enhancing subject knowledge.
- Providing staff development, mentoring & training.
- Developing knowledge and skills in using IT information systems and metadata.
- Developing skills in electronic information retrieval & appreciation of open access

Key points to note in processing and designing information exchange systems are:

- Avoid using remote working, build in opportunities for face-to face activities.
- Use all forms of communication and be clear about the processes for communication and information sharing
- Be inclusive – consult partners
- Review information sharing processes at regular intervals – learn lessons and apply them.
- Design processes/systems for sharing of information
- Make processes fit for purpose and relevant to project outcomes
- Be flexible in systems, recognize that project participants may require differing forms of communication/ information needs
- Have protocols – data protection/ dissemination
- Create a safe space in which to listen, share, explore new ideas, and generate new knowledge
- Use the collective skills, experience and knowledge that exists within the team and employing organizations
- Know your own role, make sure others understand your role and make sure you understand others' roles

Technology and globalization enable us to work with people from all over the world but the key to success is being able to harness the talent in your team, communicate effectively, and appreciate cultural differences and various styles of working.

References

European Commission. (1995, February 26). *Conclusions of G7 Summit Information Society Conference* [Press release]. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_DOC-95-2_en.htm?locale=en

Goodair, C., Moen J., Prepeliczay, S., & Rouault, T. (2005). Collaboration across Europe: Experience from practice. *Libri*, 55(4), 225-230.

International Centre for Drug Policy. (2007). *Substance misuse in the undergraduate curriculum.* Retrieved from: http://www.sgul.ac.uk/images/docs/idcp%20pdfs/Substance%20misuse%20in%20the%20undergrad%20medical%20curiculum/Substance_Misuse_Guidance_Undergraduate_Medical_Curriculum_2007.pdf

Lank, E. (2006). Communicating and sharing information: Dispelling the myths. In *Collaborative advantage: How organizations win by working together* (pp. 103-104). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Contact the author

Christine Goodair BA (Hons) FRSA
Programmes Manager (Substance Misuse)
Population Health Research Institute
6th Floor, Hunter Wing
St George's, University of London,
Cranmer Terrace
London SW17 ORE
cgoodair@sgul.ac.uk